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making wine with maynard

THE FRONT MAN OF TOOL IS GETTING HIS HANDS DIRTY MAKING ART YOU CAN DRINK.

Writer Nadia Saccardo Photography Tim Cadiente

"WEIRD DUST DEVILS AND SCORPIONS," IS HOW MAYNARD JAMES KEENAN SUMS UP ARIZONA WINES. THERE'S AN OFFBEAT POETRY TO HIS DESCRIPTION THAT SEEMS SLIGHTLY OUT OF PLACE IN THE FAMOUSLY QUAFFY WINE WORLD. IT'S A WORLD THAT KEENAN HAS BEEN IMMERSSED IN FOR 15 YEARS AS THE OWNER OF CADUCEUS CELLARS, A WINERY OVERLOOKING THE VERDE VALLEY IN JEROME, NORTHERN ARIZONA. AND BY ALL ACCOUNTS HE'S VERY HAPPY TO BE THERE.

Most of the world knows Keenan as the front man of Perfect Circle, Puscifer and Tool: he was the guy on stage in the body paint, or the Mohawk, or the GI fatigues, or the space suit (depending on which era of Tool's 22-year career you're plugged into). Now, the same guy is on his knees in the dirt making wine in a sleepy part of the States. There's an offbeat poetry to that too.

"When I actually had a good bottle of wine all the pieces fell into place," Keenan says softly down the line from L.A. "I've come to basically accept my limitations. I know pretty much that I'm not going to make the NBA, probably not

going to make the NFL. But wine making – that always seemed like it required head. You focus all your senses and you pay attention, and you learn from the masters. You need to understand what's happening as your wine's fermenting and understand where it's coming from. From the start I found the process very interesting. I think it paralleled some other artistic process that has resonated with me."

In the mid-'90s Keenan founded Caduceus Cellars, partnered up with winemaker and ecologist Eric Glomski, and broke ground on Merkin Vineyards. Even though viticulture has existed in Arizona since the 16th century, the environment is largely untapped. Keenan describes it as "frontier" wine making, and things haven't always gone smoothly at Caduceus. On top of the planting, harvesting, pruning, fermenting, bottling and all that jazz, there are midsummer monsoons, bunch rot, racoons, frost, skunks and water rights to negotiate. Keenan has been planting-blind a lot of the time, while getting to know the land and its idiosyncrasies. Fifteen years on the risk is starting to pay off. He has since founded another local winery: Arizona Stronghold.

Keenan was never interested in L.A., or the Napa Valley, which seems custom-made for a rock star with a wine habit. The idea of growing grapes down the road from other wineries was boring. "I felt like California's grapes had already been done," he says. "It was like, maybe I could make that wine, but so do several other hundreds of thousands of people. What else you got?" So when Puscifer drummer Tim Alexander took him to Jerome something clicked. The volcanic soil, the craggy slopes, the 'harsh yet mystical' landscape... and the fact that no-one else was really there.

Arizona might immediately bring to mind dead cacti and dust storms, but merkin Vineyards sees snow in winter. Next to Colorado it's the highest elevation farming in the U.S. (at 1460 metres): Keenan compares it to Mendoza in Argentina, which is famed for its Malbec (a varietal that "doesn't set off an alarm" in him). It's Sangiovese, Tempranillo and Aglianico that get him talking. "We've seen success with a lot of Italian varietals," he explains. "Malvasia Bianca seems to be the right grape, every time we try it's undeniable. The Sav Blanc is hit and miss, the Pinot Grigio is more hit, less miss, but the Malvasia is the one. >>>

We're seeing success with Syrahs, Grenache and Mourvèdre, but the weather ends up interrupting them. When we actually grow the Syrah and grow the Grenache the results are great, but I just don't know that these varietals really want to be in Arizona." His first processing on the Arizona site was bottled on April 10, 2007. It was called Nagual del Judith, named after his mother.

In the film *Blood Into Wine*, which documents the process of setting up Caduceus Cellars, Keenan consistently pegs himself the novice. "It's going to take me a decade or two to catch up with all the hot air I'm throwing around," he says. While he might not be the top-shelf winemaker he hopes to be... yet, Keenan knows about the stuff. Touring and travelling has put some of the world's best drops into his glass, but he doesn't just drink it, he studies it.

On a recent trip to Italy he visited 16 different winemakers in six days, and he's particularly interested in Australian producers, especially those around South Australia's Barossa Valley. "My initial attraction to Australian wines started roughly 15 years ago when I started getting into wine," he explains. "Aussie wines can be big and bold, but there's still complexity. Like everything, when something becomes popular people go with the loudest noise, but they miss the subtleties. That's the beauty of the mainstays in Australia. Makers like Henchke and Penfolds and some of the more subtle wines under the TorBruch label. Those are my first loves." He's itching to visit Australia's smaller makers, and was recently wowed by a Grenache from Ochota Barrels: "They're picking a little earlier, they're a little more austere and restrained and subtle and elegant; rather than hitting you in the head. I really want to get down there and see who else is making those choices."

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Patton Oswalt: "You're not worried that your winery (Caduceus) almost sounds like douche?"

Keenan: "You can't have wine without douchebags."

Keenan is a rock star who wants to sit quietly in the dirt and grow wine – and the irony clearly isn't lost on him. Patton Oswalt, Tim and Eric, and Milla Jovovich, all show up in *Blood Into Wine* to point this out, rile him up and – in doing so – turn what is both the biggest drawcard to Caduceus as a business, and the main threat to its reputation as a serious winemaker, on its head (while marketing the place at the same time). It's really clever, and just happens to be highly entertaining, which has always been Keenan's deal.

As a musician, Keenan constantly said his status didn't qualify him to tell people what to do. "As an artist I'm very resistant to the idea of being a public servant, and it being my responsibility to educate, because I'm not really qualified to do any of those things," he says in *Blood Into Wine*. As a wine geek, however, he loves to talk shop. So where does he suggest a wine novice should start? "Americans grow up eating red licorice and drinking Mountain Dew and I feel like there's a transition everyone has to go through, which I went through," he says. "First-timers tend to go big and bombastic and fruity, but I'd suggest staying in the middle, tried and true, some form of Grenache, whether it's Australian Grenache or otherwise. It can be heavy, but it doesn't have to be and you can have it with almost anything, it's a nice place to start."

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WINE MAKING ALWAYS SEEMED LIKE IT REQUIRED HEAD. YOU FOCUS ALL YOUR SENSES AND YOU LEARN FROM THE MASTERS. YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HAPPENING AS YOUR WINE'S FERMENTING. FROM THE START I FOUND THE PROCESS VERY INTERESTING. I THINK IT PARALLELED SOME OTHER ARTISTIC PROCESS THAT RESONATED WITH ME.