

## Winemaker Profile: Alex Holman



Jim and Eliza Rickards have been growing wine grapes in Alexander Valley for more than thirty years. Owners of 45 acres of vineyards, including some 100-year-old Zinfandel vines, they were happily selling their grapes to some of the finest wineries in Sonoma County for most of those years. Bitten by the winemaking bug at last, they started making a small amount of wine in 1991, and were forced by the bumper crops of 2005 and 2006 to make even more (because there was too much fruit to sell all of it).

Jim had enough years in the business to know when he needed a professional winemaker for his new winery enterprise and fortunately, he knew just the man he wanted for the job. The only problem was that that man, Alex Holman, was already working at another winery in the area. Jim waited until the time was right, and in 2008 Alex came on board as winemaker for J. Rickards.



ALEX HOLMAN

Alex's route to becoming a full-fledged winemaker was not a straight, four-lane highway. First of all, he was a city boy, born and raised in San Francisco with two generations of medical doctors in his family. Then there were detours into the military followed by physical therapy training at California State University at Fresno which morphed into a chemistry degree instead. The chemistry degree got him into the agricultural business when he took a job as an analytical chemist (Director of Research and Development) for a biochemical plant in Fresno that manufactured liquid fertilizers.

During this time, Alex started experimenting with making his own beer and also using peaches, nectarines and "anything else that would ferment" to make homemade wines. He didn't care for the constant smell of rotten eggs (sulfur) that permeated his job, and he couldn't see a profitable future in the beer business, so he went back to school, while still working his day job, and took a degree in enology from Fresno State.

So now Alex was closer to his goal of making wine as his profession. Still working as R & D Director, he began sending out his résumé to wineries, but found there was a lingering prejudice against wannabe winemakers from the Central Valley, a region not known for the quality of its wines, unlike Napa and Sonoma where Alex was sending his résumés. But Alex did find work at Golden State Vintners in the Central Valley, where he was hired as lab manager/enologist, definitely a step in the right direction.

After two years there, he felt he was getting a good feel for the business of making wine. His experience and his background in science bolstered his credentials, and he made the move to Sonoma County in early 2003, a move hastened by his finding the love of his life, now wife Annie, on a visit to Marin County. By August he was working at the small, highly regarded Paul Hobbs Winery in Forestville, where he set up a state-of-the-art laboratory for the operation.

Alex soon moved to a better job as enologist and assistant winemaker at Dry Creek Vineyards, one of Sonoma County's flagship wineries. Here he learned every aspect of the winemaking art (he was already a master of its science), and here he met Jim Rickards, because Jim sold grapes to Dry Creek Vineyards. The two men took a liking to each other, and when Alex was ready to make the move to full-fledged winemaker, Jim was looking for just that person. With one year at J. Rickards under his belt, Alex has made two of his own wines so far, and will be the guiding hand in the aging and blending of red wines that Jim made earlier. So once again, wine lovers have an opportunity to get in on the ground floor and visit a Sonoma County winery to taste its wines before it becomes a cult favorite. Alex's style is to make wines with relatively low alcohol (13.5 -14.5 %) and with a low oak profile, i.e., barrel aging in lightly-toasted, fairly neutral oak. This style will result in a more Burgundian character for his wines than the all-too-common California "fruit bomb" kind of wines. Alex feels he can do this because he is working only with mature vineyards that Jim has farmed for many years, and with grape varieties that are known to be winners in the soil and climate of Alexander Valley.

At the winery, you can taste Alex's 2008 Sauvignon Blanc and his unique and delicious late harvest Sauvignon Blanc, a botrytis dessert wine called Twilight. Zinfandel, a Cabernet Sauvignon blend and Petite Sirah are also on offer. Pay attention to the Petite Sirah – it's outstanding, and Alex plans to make a Malbec that he thinks will make converts out of Merlot lovers.

When you visit the winery, you will almost certainly be tasting wine with either Jim or Alex in a low-key, one-on-one situation. They have stories to tell and wine wisdom to share, and you could hardly find more education, entertainment and just plain excellent wine.

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