

No vineyard? No winery? No problem for Sean Minor

[BY MIKE DUNNE](#)

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Sean Minor MIKE DUNNE

If not for the vineyard photo covering one wall, visitors to Sean Minor's Sacramento office would have no clue they just had walked into the world headquarters of one of the California wine trade's more offbeat success stories.

Minor's small and tasteful second-floor quarters are tucked into the back of Pavilions Office Park along Fair Oaks Boulevard just east of Howe Avenue, without a fermentation tank or a forklift in sight.

Minor owns no winery, tends no vineyard, yet his name stands for character and value in wines in every stretch of the country but Alaska, the only state where they aren't distributed.

Minor released his first 2,500 cases of wine in 2006. This year, he expects to roll out some 150,000 cases. He doesn't do it alone, but his crew is astonishingly thin. His wife Nicole helps. He has a seasoned winemaker in Will Bucklin in Sonoma County. He has two sales people and three office assistants.

And he has a bunch of energy, traveling some 120 days a year to preside over winemaker dinners and to pour tastes for restaurateurs and retailers, personal touches he sees as crucial for cultivating loyalty to his brand in today's highly competitive wine market. He also spends countless hours tasting and pondering samples of wine from up to 200 lots each vintage to help make blending decisions.

Minor is what is known in the business as a negociant, initially buying tanks of wine here and there, blending them to please his palate, then bottling them under his own brand. That's the traditional approach of negociants, but nowadays Minor also recruits farmers to provide him with grapes for his wines.

His first brand was Four Bears. He relishes telling the story behind the name. The Minors have four children – three sons (Nick, Jack, Charlie) and a daughter (Elle). Early on in their business venture, the couple would convene at their kitchen table to taste various lots of wine, play around with potential blends and talk about what they liked and didn't like. At one point, 4-year-old Elle likened the approach to Goldilocks searching for just the right bed, chair and bowl of porridge in the home of three bears. Thus was the label Four Bears conceived. ("Sean Minor" is the brand he goes by today, but "4B" is branded on the labels of his line of everyday wines customarily priced \$14 to \$16.)

He makes wines in two other marketing tiers – the Sean Minor "signature series," generally mainstream varietals from highly regarded appellations, usually priced \$22 to \$25, and small-production varietals under stand-alone names like "Point North" and "H. Mynors," at \$22.

From the outset, and regardless of tier, Minor's mantra has been steady – "make wines that exceed expectations."

To secure a more steady and reliable source of raw material for his wines, Minor these days depends less on the bulk-wine market and more on long-term contracts with growers whose sites and practices help assure him of the value and character he wants.

After three decades in the trade, he knows where to go for the fruit he wants – Napa Valley and Paso Robles for cabernet sauvignon; the Central Coast, Sonoma Coast and Oregon for pinot noir; Monterey and Sonoma for chardonnay; and so on.

Stylistically, he's big on clarity and force of fruit in his wines, with substantial mouthfeel and enough acidity for the wines to be versatile at the table. A propelling goal in the styling of his wines is to make them suitable for wine-by-the-glass programs in restaurants – fitting to sip on their own or to pair with food. He applies wood judiciously, generally no more than 20 percent new oak, usually French but sometimes American. "There's a lot going on from the front of the palate to the back," Minor says.

Despite his customarily modest prices, he doesn't cut corners. The frank and alert Sean Minor 2016 California Sauvignon Blanc (\$14) was partially barrel fermented to enhance its richness, while grapes for the layered, charming and exceptionally definitive Sean Minor 2016 Central Coast Pinot Noir (\$16) were cold-soaked for three days initially, then during fermentation the juice was punched-down two or three times per day to give the wine's strawberry and peppermint highlights an earthy underpinning.

Other outstanding buys in his current portfolio include the forthright yet elegant Sean Minor 2015 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25), an exceptional bargain for the appellation and the varietal; the concentrated, balanced and persistent Sean Minor 2016 Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon (\$16); and the animated, spicy and complex Sean Minor 2015 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$22).

By and large, Minor sticks to mainstream varietals at modest prices from established California regions, but he breaks from that mold for three current releases – his most costly and most raucous wine, the Sean Minor 2015 Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Roberts Road Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$48); the faithful and lilted Point North 2014 Oregon Pinot Noir (\$22), a blend of fruit from the Willamette and Umpqua valleys; and the fresh, juicy and exceptionally complex Sean Minor 2014

North Coast Nicole Marie Blend (\$22), based half on merlot but also including petite sirah, petit verdot and zinfandel from several appellations, including Mendocino and Lake counties.

Minor came to be a vintner by the side door, through sales and management rather than by farming grapes or making wine. A descendant of a Kansas wheat-growing family, he drifted west in his youth to earn a degree in finance at Arizona State University in Tempe, where he also met Nicole.

His introduction to the wine trade began soon after when he went to work in sales at Beaulieu Vineyard in Napa Valley. His fondness for the business so intensified as he joined the winery's tasting panel and conducted dinners to promote its wines that he began to take classes in viticulture and enology at UC Davis.

He subsequently moved to Oregon's Willamette Valley, first to manage King Estate Winery – where he met Bucklin – and then Benton Lane Winery.

The family moved to Sacramento in 2001 so he could become chief operating officer for Renwood Winery in Amador County, where during his four-year tenure production rose from 30,000 cases annually to 90,000.

He left Renwood in 2005 to establish Sean Minor Wines, releasing his first wines the next year. He hasn't missed having a brick-and-mortar winery, preferring to invest capital and earnings in long-term contracts with prized grape growers and leased space in four wineries that stretch from Oregon to San Luis Obispo County.

Business boomed early on, doubling to 5,000 cases in his second year on the market, but then the recession hit and he braced himself for a downturn. It didn't materialize. Quite the contrary. Distributors fretful of a slump in wine sales began to stock up on less-expensive wines, and Minor was ready to accommodate them. "As the economy went down, a lot of wholesalers were looking for wines like these – wines that provided big delivery for the buck," Minor recalls.

The recession also helped him secure more grapes from Napa Valley, where growers cut prices to move their customarily dear fruit. "There were great opportunities for fruit over there," Minor says.

While consumers continue to look for bargains in wine, prices for grapes have resumed climbing, especially in Napa Valley, complicating Minor's quest for choice fruit. Thus, his venturing more into Monterey County, Lake County and elsewhere, as well as his return to Oregon, for grapes that yield wines with the value and constitution he wants to continue to provide.

Minor shies from singling out his favorite wine in his lineup. The Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon remains the brand's flagship wine, he says, but he's tickled by the praise and potential for his expanded portfolio of pinot noir. "I'm pretty proud of everything we make. They've all been successful on the sales side," says Minor.

Wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne's selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. He can be reached at dmichaeldunne@gmail.com.