



"THE WORLDS BEST UNDISCOVERED BRAND" MONTECITO COUPLE'S LABEL DELIVERS STELLAR WINE

As I make my way through the private gated community, and up the driveway that snakes through Kimsey Vineyard, the wind begins to pick up in earnest. It's 3 pm, and the breeze, in its crescendo, is making the vines sway in the bright afternoon sun. This is a regular phenomenon, it turns out -- a daily show by Mother Nature. And it's a key ingredient, I'll soon come to learn, in Kimsey's recipe for success.

"This is like an island to me," Bill Kimsey tells me as we meet in the small barn, located across from a sparkling pond. We're about to taste through a few of his namesake wines.

"This may well be the world's best undiscovered brand," adds winemaker Matt Dees, who's about to sip with us, as he begins to pull the corks.

Kimsey Vineyard is a very personal pet project for Bill and Nancy Kimsey, Montecito residents who launched their eponymous brand in 2008. Their vintner dreams had been several years in the making, with wine estates in Italy and Australia having already garnered serious consideration. But in the early 2000s, Santa Barbara county came into focus when the couple moved back to Southern California from London. It was a new chapter, following retirement for Kimsey from the accounting firm Ernst & Young: his 32-year career with them has culminated with his role as their global CEO.

The 45-acre plot in the Santa Ynez Valley that would soon bear their name was overrun by weeds when they won it at auction in 2005. But, with the insight of local experts, most notably the renowned agriculturalist Jeff Newton, the Kimseys soon realized that in this undulating stretch of land in the southwestern corner of Ballard Canyon, existed great potential. This is where canyon breezes and cold winds from nearby Sta. Rita Hills converge. It's where soils -- a unique combination of gravel below and clay on top -- drains incredibly well. And it's where dazzling sunlight reigns supreme.



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With the right natural elements in place, just more than 22 acres of vines were planted in 2008. The focus was on high density -- 2,800 vines per acre, six feet between rows and about two feet between the vines. And the plants are close to the ground so that the grapes reap the benefits of radiant heat -- the sun's light bouncing off the dirt. Three years later, the vineyard's first viable crop -- Rhone grapes like syrah, grenache, roussanne, and viognier -- was sold off to neighbor producers. The first Kimsey wines entered the marketplace in 2012.

"Less is more," Dees insists. It's a winemaker's sincere mantra -- a commitment to minimal intervention so that the grapes and their wine, not the people behind them, shine. But truth be told, talent has been an important part of the Kimsey success story. Dees is considered a wunderkind among the new generation of Santa Barbara winemakers. And his viticultural partner, farmer Ruben Solorzano, is known as "the grape whisperer" in local wine circles. The remarkable proof of their collaboration is in the wines, of course, which we are now beginning to taste and discuss in earnest.

Kimsey White Blend (\$60): The 2015 we taste is a 60-40 roussanne -viognier blend that is silky and fresh -- "sunshine and low yields that year create textural decadence," Dees notes. The current 2018 vintage (\$60), which we taste next, marks that addition of grenache blanc to this wine, enhancing complexity and zest. The three wines are aged separately in uber-neutral barrels, and they're bottle young after blending to preserve vibrancy. Dees tells me that each of these three grapes can be "awkward in their own way," which makes blending them "so inspiring." This is, indeed, one of the best white wines I've had in years.

Kimsey Grenache Rosé 2020 (\$29): The super pale salmon hue on this wine is elegant, and the flavors of watermelon rind, grapefruit, and flowers make this a refreshing, splashy quaff. There's a hint of salinity and red fruit nuances, and the finish is remarkably clean. Dees says this one could age nicely for four to five years. I say, buy it and drink it now -- a top-tier Santa Barbara rosé.

Kimsey Grenache (\$60): Dees talks about the "marriage of fruit and tannins" as we savor this wine. Barrels that are at least five years old are used to age it for 16 months, to eliminate oak influence. The nose on the 2016 vintage is vibrant, with plenty of red and blue fruit notes. As we taste the 2017, there's more earthiness, more grip, and a more prominent extraction that comes not from winemaker manipulation but, rather, the natural maturity of the vineyard. The texture on this wine is spectacular, the way that the aromatics lift as it sits in the glass are almost magical and the purple-driven flavors of flowers and dark berries are fantastic. Probably my favorite wine of the afternoon, highly recommended.

Kimsey Syrah (\$60): The 2015 vintage of this wine marked "the beginning of the modern era at Kimsey Vineyard," Dees tells us, and the realization that this vineyard is, in his words, "hallowed ground." Those natural assets -- sun and wind -- play a key role here in creating a wine that's powerful yet fresh, robust yet elegant, dense yet pretty. Seven clones of syrah converge here -- "an odd collection of misfits," Dees call them. Each clone offers something unique in the way of flavor, acidity, texture, and tannin, and when they are picked simultaneously and then blended, they create complexity that delivers with every sip. A stunner.

Kimsey's wines consistently enjoy scores well into the 90's from the critics. Club members get first dibs on releases each autumn and spring, and there are two clubs -- six- and 12-bottle shipments, with various perks, like discounts and private event invites -- to choose from. The wines are also sold online at kimseyvineyard.com.