

Someone's in the Wine Cellar

Don't Walk There. Run There!

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**
Special to CASA

JIM CLENDENEN HAS BEEN ONE OF SANTA BARBARA'S PREMIER WINE MAKERS FOR DECADES. He

has likewise shown up in some major wine magazine reviews as one of the finest winemakers in America, and as *Wein Gourmet* once noted, *Winemaker of the World*. Is he really that good? You bet! Our Urban Wine trail just got better, because one of best winemakers around has just set up shop in downtown Santa Barbara with a wine tasting room at 813 Anacapa Street, next to the Wine Cask. (More on Doug Margerum's tasting room at 813 Anacapa in next month's column.)

Jim is a delightful character, overflowing with crazy stories from his life in the wine business. His love affair with wine began in 1974, when he toured Europe with his girlfriend in a rented VW van. They traveled, slept, and ate out of the back of that van, as they went from Switzerland, to Bordeaux, around the Mediterranean, and then up to Germany. Back in the day, you could get a good bottle of twenty year-old wine for three or four dollars. That was a lot on their budget, but the wine became a centerpiece of the camp cookout meals.



Jim Clendenen

Returning to UCSB, where he eventually took a degree in Pre-Law, he remained keenly interested in wine. While visiting his parents in Los Angeles, he wandered into The Beverly Hills Wine Merchant. There, he met the owner, Dennis Overstreet, and Jason Brandt Lewis, a notable wine critic. He picked up a bottle of 1964 Chateau Talbot, Saint-Julien for \$9.99. And he was hooked. Jim spent the next two weeks hanging out at the wine shop, talking, tasting, and learning everything that he could. The Law would

have to wait. So, he went to Burgundy to work the harvest. And then he worked the harvest in Australia. Then came America and his fame as a winemaker at Zaca Mesa.

In 1982, he began Au Bon Climat with Adam Tolmach. His early wines show the influence of the Burgundian and Australian winemakers. He works with moderately ripe fruit, as opposed to the California norm of using nearly over-ripe fruit. This makes the wine rich, ready to drink, but still capable of being laid down for years with good results. His skill is amazing. His Pinot Noirs are filled with rich, dark, plummy fruit, magical spiciness,

and hints of vanilla. The Chardonnays are filled with the pineapple and tropical fruits that are typical of the local grapes, but they also have notes of almonds, hazelnuts, and butter. These can be laid down for a decade or more, which is highly unusual for American Chardonnays. His 1999 Hildegard, a blend of Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, sent us over the moon. It tasted of apples, almonds, chocolate cake, and for a moment, bacon.

The tasting room is right downtown. This is the only place that you can taste so wide a variety of Jim's wine. There are thousands of cases in the warehouse that are making their way into town. Sometimes there are only two or three cases of that something special that they found. While we were interviewing him, Jim was laughing about two cases of 1988 Semillon that they had *discovered* that morning. So, don't walk there... run there!

Au Bon Climat Tasting Room is located at 813 Anacapa St and is open daily from noon to 6pm. Reach them at (805) 895-4084.



Amanda and Richard Payatt combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.