



Jeff Gaffner in Green Acres, one of two vineyards owned by the Sangiacomo family that the winemaker uses in his Saxon Brown bottlings.

# VINEYARD MASTER

*Saxon Brown's Jeff Gaffner exemplifies the modern winemaker, joined at the hip with his vines*

**BY AARON ROMANO**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSAMYN HARRIS

For Jeff Gaffner, winemaking is storytelling. And his best stories are driven by a relationship with the vineyards. “A vineyard can tell you a lot if you pay attention,” he says, beaming as he explains how the leaves will start to cup and the vines droop when they’re nearing harvest. From the first bud-break to the last harvested cluster, Gaffner takes photos and videos, paying close attention to a vineyard’s evolution. “I like to know what the grapes went through before arriving at the winery,” he says. “And every year, the longer I’m in the vineyard, I should become a better storyteller.”





Gaffner examines a sample of Pinot Noir must drawn from the fermentor. At this stage, the wine is about halfway through the process of fermentation.

Gaffner, 55, is a soft-spoken and eloquent raconteur. His brand, Saxon Brown, is a model of site-specific vineyard success, with dozens of outstanding ratings. He recently added a second label, Etre, which exclusively produces unoaked Chardonnay from the Sonoma Coast. Gaffner is also a highly regarded consultant for Ram's Gate and Black Kite in Sonoma, as well as Napa's Xtant and Stephanie. Yet he remains humble; wine is personal for him, and he wants to care for it, from planting to harvest. He shuns fanfare. It's not about him; it's about the wine. Before meeting with any potential client, he asks, "Why do you think the world needs one more winery, and why do you think it needs to be you?"

Gaffner's own tale starts with Saxon Brown, the brand he christened after Jack London's willful heroine in the novel *The Valley of the Moon*. As a child growing up in Sonoma Valley, he was enamored with the character, who leaves behind her working-class life in search of land to call her own. Gaffner identified as a male version of Saxon Brown, a rags-to-riches type who persevered. Gaffner's father was a polio victim from the Midwest with a seventh-grade education, and Gaffner, who is dyslexic, worked part-time at a hardwood store and lumberyard while trying to figure out what truly interested him. He always thought that if he ever had a daughter he'd name her Saxon Brown. After fathering two sons, he decided to give the name to his wine label.

In 1963, at age 3, he arrived in Sonoma via Wisconsin, where his father had been a farmer with aspirations for a new life in California. "He and my grandfather ran the farm [in Wisconsin] out of their shirt pocket," recalls Gaffner. As a kid, during the late '60s early '70s, Gaffner was paid 35 cents a box for picking Green Hungarian grapes, but never considered a life in wine. He took classes at community colleges in both Santa Rosa and Napa when he could afford to, and when his money ran out, he would go back to working.

In the summer of 1981, Gaffner heard that Chateau St. Jean was hiring for harvest and bottling help. Assistant winemaker Don Van Staaveren called and asked Gaffner

how soon he could start. "Well I just got home," replied Gaffner. "I can take a shower and be there in 20 minutes."

Hired on as part of a night crew, responsible for dragging hoses and cleaning tanks, Gaffner was able to do a little bit of everything, from vineyard work to inoculating for malolactic fermentation. "Most cellar guys would just do their work and not ask questions, but I was interested in finding out why we were doing the things we were doing," recalls Gaffner. The winemaking team adopted an adventurous attitude, attempting everything from sparkling wine to late-harvest dessert-style bottlings. "There was a culture of try it, figure it out. And it was the perfect place for my young, curious mind."

After his first harvest, curiosity led him to take wine extension classes through the University of California, Davis, and the following year he started a small grapegrowing company, leasing a couple of vineyards outside Glen Ellen. It was at this time that Gaffner began to develop a connection with the vines. He asked everyone he knew for guidance, even offering to prune vines for a neighbor free of charge in order to learn the technique. "Pruning was my first aha moment," says Gaffner. He recalls learning that you don't just prune for one year, but for the future: "There's some



Gaffner produces wines for Saxon Brown, Black Kite and Etre at the Punchdown Cellars facility in Santa Rosa. Other bottlings in his portfolio are made at Ram's Gate, in Sonoma, and Laird, in Napa.



beauty in that process, trimming not just for new growth, but training the vine. I used to put my headphones on and prune for hours, and I still do to this day. It's very therapeutic."

Gaffner's hard work and inquisitiveness landed him a job in the lab at St. Jean. "It was exciting for me, because after years of asking questions, I finally got to find out what the wizard was up to," he says, noting how he learned "backwards," from the lab to the vineyard. He worked at St. Jean for 15 years, rising to enologist before leaving in 1997 to become operations manager for Benziger. It was during his time there that Gaffner created Saxon Brown. "I started Saxon Brown with a shoestring and two prayers," he says. He bartered his way into a few tons of Pinot Noir and Zinfandel for his first harvest and produced an initial run of 210 cases; today the brand has grown to about 2,500 cases and focuses on site-specific Zinfandel, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

For Gaffner, one of the biggest takeaways from St. Jean was the importance of producing vineyard-designated wines. Fittingly, Saxon Brown has 14 different releases from different vineyards. His projects draw grapes from 50 different vineyards, as far as Anderson Valley in the north to Santa Lucia Highlands 250 miles to the south, encompassing Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Syrah and Cabernet. Memory, he says, is his greatest asset when it comes to cataloging all the information he takes in. "I can still remember how many gallons of juice were in each tank for every harvest at St. Jean."

During harvest, Gaffner often plays the winemaking version of musical chairs, moving from Punchdown Cellars in Santa Rosa—where he makes Saxon Brown, Black Kite and Etre—to Ram's Gate



Gaffner produces Saxon Brown Pinot Noir from the small Hayfield Block of Durell Vineyard, located on the border of Sonoma Valley and Carneros. The winemaker's successes with the site drew his attention to the impact of wind on grapes, which he calls a "wind signature."

in Sonoma, and then to Laird in Napa, where Xtant and Stephanie are produced. With all his moving around, he jokes about his knack for taking naps. "I have a tendency to want to chase every

berry into the winery," he chuckles. "So during night picks, I'll find a tree to sleep under, and then grab some coffee on my way to the winery after the sun comes up."

Gaffner doesn't employ assistants, preferring to stay tightly connected to his wine. "The more I walk the vineyards, the greater feel I have for what was going on," says. He uses the 2015 harvest as an example of the importance of knowing a vineyard. "After consecutive drought years and large crops, we knew the vines were going to be challenged from the get-go." Gaffner recalls noticing the cover crops and topsoils drying out before the heat had arrived, and blossoms sticking together during flower, which lead to low yields and tiny clusters. "Watching the dance of the fruit, every year it's a little different, but it's also one of the most fascinating parts of my job. It's like watching a child grow."

## SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM JEFF GAFFNER

### SAXON BROWN

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
92	Chardonnay Carneros Sangiacomo Vineyard Green Acres Hill 2013	\$58
92	Chardonnay Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella's Vineyard 2013	\$58
91	Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard 2013	\$68
90	Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Roberts Road Vineyard 2013	\$58

### BLACK KITE

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
91	Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard 2013	\$60
90	Pinot Noir Anderson Valley Redwoods' Edge 2013	\$60

### RAM'S GATE

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
95	Chardonnay Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2013	\$68
94	Chardonnay Carneros Sangiacomo Vineyards Green Acres 2013	\$62

### XTANT

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
93	Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Lewelling Vineyards 2010	\$175

### STEPHANIE

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
90	Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2012	\$75

### ETRE

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
93	Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2013	\$28



His relationship with his vines goes beyond the soil, leaves and fruit: He has recently begun to pay special attention to wind patterns. Wind does more than just cool the site, he says. Areas with regular afternoon wind transform the vineyard into a phase of suspended animation, where the leaves will shut down to keep moisture from evaporating, thus suspending photosynthesis. "But [during this time] the berry is still concentrating sugars," he says, speaking fervently about the slight thickening of the skin, which

helps catch specific aromatic traits like violet, lavender and dried blossom. "I'm fascinated by that," he adds with a satisfied smile. High-wind sites have what Gaffner calls a specific "wind signature." "I heard about the mistral in the Rhône, but didn't really think much about wind until I starting using fruit from windy sites, like Durell, Parmalee-Hill and Rosella's. Now I seek out especially windy sites and try to capture that signature quality."

For Gaffner, winemaking isn't about being a magician in the

cellar; it's about understanding the subtleties that make each vineyard site special before the grapes arrive. "You can't force the vineyard to do something it doesn't want to do," he says, recalling seeing vineyard managers add potassium to the soil in Chardonnay vineyards because of perceived deficiencies. Gaffner noticed that the pHs in wines from those vineyards were increasing, and believed the way the vines looked may have been more of a function of wind and soil, rather than potassium. With that in mind, they decided to increase the organic material. As a result, the vines have looked healthier, and he has been able to pick at lower Brix and achieve a better balance of pH and acidity. "It's my job to acquire as much information as it gives and then make the best wine possible." He leans in, as if to divulge Mother Nature's secrets. "A grape doesn't know it's meant to be a wine."

When it comes to Gaffner's winemaking style, he prefers multiple punch-downs before fermentation. "I want to extract without the solvent of alcohol," he says, noting that alcohol can break down skins and seeds, and lead to astringency. "But I tend to under-extract rather than over-extract. I think wines should seduce you, not hit you." His Saxon Brown Pinot Noirs exemplify this philosophy, balancing ripeness with graceful delicacy. Likewise, his 2013 Etre Chardonnay is fermented in stainless-steel tanks, but with the lees, which add complexity and a touch of richness to the abundant fruit, carried by fresh acidity.

Year after year, Gaffner has increased volume for Saxon Brown, taking on additional small lots, including his first Grenache. His fixation on telling a story with wine through vineyards continues to develop. Gaffner claims that each vineyard has a personality you get to know the longer you work with it, from its growing and chemistry traits to its fermentation personality. "I have to do things as a winemaker to wrap my head around all of that and portray the narrative with each changing year," he says. "And that's what makes wine an art instead of a science. If winemaking was a recipe, it would be boring." □

## "A GRAPE DOESN'T KNOW IT'S MEANT TO BE A WINE."

—JEFF GAFFNER



Gaffner and his girlfriend and business partner, Tracey Walker, work on Saxon Brown together, he focused on making the wines, she overseeing customer service, shipping, compliance and wine club membership.