

RANDY HESTER *of* C.L. BUTAUD TALKS TEXAS WINE

For most people, making wine in the Napa Valley would be the dream. Most people aren't Texans.

Brooke and Randy Hester are. They left their home turf for Napa in 2006 with a ten year plan. Randy was going to learn wine production at the highest level. When he had command of those skills, the couple would return to the Lone Star State with an eye toward making world class wines from Texas fruit.

Randy wasted little time getting prepared. While taking viticulture and oenology classes, he worked under wine luminaries like Andy Erickson, Michel Rolland, Mike Kirby, and Helen Keplinger. He was mentored by James Hall. He received on the job learning at producers that included Colgin Cellars, Caldwell Vineyard, Realm Cellars, and Marciano Estate. To round out his wine exposure, Brooke and Randy launched their own California boutique label called Lightning Wines in 2011.



Randy Hester /// Photo by Salihah Saadiq

By 2014 their vision was focused. The duo purchased Texas Tempranillo that harvest and made their first wines for the brand named for Randy's great-grandfather, C. L. Butaud. The Hesters finalized their plan by moving home to Austin in 2017. Since then they have continued to ramp up quality and please the palates of anyone trying the wines. We were one of those folks wowed a few months ago, and were ecstatic to grab Randy Hester for this conversation.

WHAT SPURRED YOU TO MOVE INTO WINE PRODUCTION?

Randy Hester: It was the whole idea of creating. I wanted to create this thing that brings so many people so much joy. Wine enhances good times. Making wine could be my little contribution to the world. I make wine from my heart. These bottles go out to people all over the country and other places in the world. I'm on their tables. Something I've created is helping them having a good time with their friends and families. That's the essence of why I do what I do.



Brooke & Randy Hester // Courtesy of C.L. Butaud



Courtesy of C.L. Butaud

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU WENT TO NAPA WITH A DEFINITE GAME PLAN.

RH: One hundred percent, yeah. That's something important for people to know about our wines. We left our home here in Texas with a ten year goal of returning. We thought of Napa Valley then as sort of the Harvard of American winemaking. It's close to U.C.-Davis. You have graduates of the wine programs of Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo and Fresno State in the business there. There are a lot of highly educated oenology and viticulture folks who congregate in Napa Valley. We thought we'd go to the spot, and learn the business at a high level. Then we'd bring that knowledge back home to Texas. That had never



Courtesy of C.L.Butaud

“I remain a student of wine. I want to push boundaries, while staying within the traditions of winemaking. I can do that from an educated approach now.”

-Randy Hester

YOU WORKED UNDER SOME OF THE HUGE NAMES IN WINEMAKING THERE. WERE THERE ANY PEOPLE WHO INFLUENCED YOU MORE THAN OTHERS?

RH: I took something from every place I worked, but my original mentor wasn't someone with whom I worked. It was a man who employed my wife. James Hall at Patz & Hall helped me when I was a green kid out of Texas working at Cakebread cleaning drains. James Hall was the guy telling me which moves were great, what I should do next, and that sort of thing. He advised me to get some lab experience. I was already going to school and working, but James guided me a lot.

I did take something from every place I went. At each step of the way I could tell you what I learned from everyone. I love that. Today I'm able to take all of those high level learnings and make them my own. I'm also passing along that knowledge to folks who work with us. That's such a great feeling!

I remain a student of wine. I'm continuing to learn. I want to learn. I want to push boundaries, while staying within the traditions of winemaking. I can do that from an educated approach now. I can come at that with perspective from science, experience, and imagination. I hope that the people who came before me can look at what I'm doing and be proud. I hope that they are happy seeing me go in this direction.

WHAT WAS THE REACTION OF PEOPLE AROUND YOU IN NAPA WHEN YOU MADE KNOWN YOUR INTENTIONS TO LEAVE THERE AND RETURN TO TEXAS?

RH: (Laughs) The whole time we were there we had to tell people that we were on a ten year plan. We made it clear that we would eventually be going home. No one believed us. We bought our first Texas Tempranillo fruit in 2014, while we were still in Napa. We didn't leave until 2017. People could not accept that I was making wine in Texas in 2014. It was almost like they thought it was a new idea. We would reinforce that we were making wine from Texas because we were going home to Texas!

People acted surprised when they realized we were serious. When we were finally about to make the move, people genuinely wanted to make sure we were certain about our plans. I told my last boss that I couldn't work for him anymore. My work ethic made me want to make sure that I completely cared for him. I needed to concentrate on my project, but I wanted him covered well, too. He asked me if I was serious. Then when the next harvest was approaching, he called me again just to make sure about my plans.

I had to do it. At that point I had a California brand that was blossoming, and we were one year away from starting the Texas project. I got a lot of different reactions about our plans. Most of them were grounded in disbelief.

WHAT WAS YOUR VISION FOR C.L. BUTAUD?

RH: It was all about coming home and creating the highest quality wine that's ever been created in Texas. We wanted to bring the strongest wine



Courtesy of C.L. Butaud

traditions home to a place that hasn't been known for making high end wines. We knew what the climate was like here, particularly in the Lubbock area where all our fruit is grown. The High Plains climate is on par with so many great wine growing regions of the world. We recognized what goes into the business of selling wine in Texas to proud Texans, who will buy it, buy it, and buy it. What was more important was that we saw the potential of these vineyard sites. We could see the potential of that terroir.

We wanted to make wines from there that could stand on tables in the world's stage. We thought by going to Napa and becoming highly educated and experienced in the wine business there, we could bring that home. We could then present an elegant approach to Texas wine. That was the vision when we started, and is still the vision today. We are focused on quality, not case count growth. We want to raise the bar each vintage. We are working with better and better growers. They know better now what we want to bring to the table. They're partners with us in that journey. They see things the way we see them.

We want to reach people who travel the world, who know good food and wine, and give them a product from Texas of which they can be proud.

IS THE VITICULTURE IN THE HIGH PLAINS MARKEDLY DIFFERENT THAN A PLACE LIKE NAPA?

RH: It's not all that different. It's all based on science. Every wine region in the world deals with weather issues, whether that's increasing temperatures, hailstorms, late freezes and frosts, or drought. The vines are basically the same plant around the globe. There are regional challenges here. I think the major difference here is that we are young at it. The application of modern viticulture practices is newer here than in more established regions of the world. That's the big difference to me.



Courtesy of C.L. Butaud



Courtesy of C.L. Butaud

WHAT ATTRACTS YOU TO A SPECIFIC VINEYARD?

RH: It's all about the initial conversation. When I hear the focus of a vineyard owner being the health of their soil, site, and fruit, I've hit on something. I look for that language. I like to have a conversation to learn about a grower's mindset. I want to know about their viticulture knowledge and experience. I want to know if their idea of a "high quality crop" meshes with mine. I don't want to hear about increasing yields. That doesn't work in wine. High quality fruit to me means color, aromatics, texture, and flavor. I'm attracted to the grower who wants to grow those grapes.

DID YOU MAKE THE MOVE TO TEXAS ALREADY KNOWING WHAT VARIETALS YOU WANTED TO MAKE?

RH: I knew for sure that we would plant our flag on Tempranillo. We did a lot of research, tasting, and digging around. We tasted as many Texas wines from the High Plains as we could find. Tempranillo was always a standout. Big red wine is still sort of the standard. Wine moves slow. Changing wine would be like changing tennis or golf. Things move pretty slowly. Tempranillo always seemed to be that big red wine that worked well here. It also checked the boxes for elegance. It's a wine you can age. So it was going to be a must for us.

From there we were generally open to coastal Mediterranean varieties, but were uncertain which direction we'd go. We started looking ten years ago. The picture is becoming clearer now. We're seeing more varieties show themselves at a consistently high quality level year after year. I'm on the search for Rhône and Spanish varieties. I don't drink a lot of Italian wines. I'd never worked with any Italian varieties. My thought was to establish ourselves with Tempranillo. After a couple of years I could get the first Rose' going. That would allow us to release that wine and the Tempranillo around the same time. Then we could find more reds and the whites that would do well here and were available.

That availability issue was important because I was the new guy from California in town. I'd like to work with Grenache Blanc, for example. There's not a lot of it here. The problem is that it doesn't always survive the High Plains winters. It's too cold for too long there. The vines die. Natural selection takes place. I'll probably never work with it. Picpoul, Albariño, and other varieties can survive the heat and the extreme winters of the High Plains. If I can find growers of those varieties with mindsets for high quality fruit, I can go down that road. I can experiment. I can put some technical winemaking on it.

I always have a thought in mind. Would I serve this wine to you? Would I serve it to a wine expert who knows food and wine? Would I serve it to the people I worked for in Napa? Would I serve it to Brooke's bosses in Napa? That's how I think about this.



YOU MENTIONED BEING A MOM AND POP. WHAT ROLES DOES MOM (BROOKE HESTER) HOLD IN THE BUSINESS?

RH: Brooke is a Certified Public Accountant. She had been working in the oil and gas industry here in Texas. When we moved to California, she became the Chief Financial Officer at Patz & Hall. She's stayed in beverage ever since. Now she's the CFO for Garrison Brothers, a bourbon producer. When she's not working for Garrison, she wears a lot of hats for C. L. Butaud. She handles our finance and accounting. She does our contracts. In her day job she is involved in Human Resources. We have now have employees of our own, which is bizarre to say. She gets involved with that aspect of the business. She works on our insurance and does our compliance work. We're still small enough where we both do almost everything here together. Brooke is an owner. This business is as much hers as it is mine. Her efforts have made us who we are.



Courtesy of C.L.Butaud

WHAT HOSPITALITY OPTIONS DO YOU OFFER?

RH: We have a tasting room here in Austin. We opened it during Covid, so there's a nice outdoor space. That was a huge plus during those times. When it's a hundred degrees here in Austin, tasting outside is a bit harder. We do have a cool indoor space. Half our seating is inside and half is out. There are different ways to taste our wines. We do seated, guided tastings. We sit down with our guests and go through a flight. We can educate you on the wines. I love doing that. It's much more civilized than the old "belly up to the bar, where's my next pour" tastings of old. We offer a grownup experience.

I also do private winemaker tastings. We have a lot of ticketed events throughout the year. We also have visiting winemakers, friends of ours, who pop up at the tasting room. Everyone we've had so far has been

from California. It's funny. A wine tourist may only go to California or another wine region once a year or once very two or three years. So a winery doesn't see the same people that often. I may see the same good customers twice a month. I started wondering how I could keep those people stimulated. I want our experience to be cool weekend after weekend. Bringing in these friends from other wineries was one way to do that. It introduces our guests to these small producers they've never seen or heard about.

We also spotlight some local chefs. Some of these guys have restaurants that are booked out months in advance. We have some nice relationships with these folks. They'll come here and prepare dishes. It may be something they're working on for the restaurant. One chef asked us if he could come try out a new concept he was considering. Hell, yeah! We get the first shot at a new theme? Yes! Another guy who goes crabbing in the Gulf with his daughter came by and we did a crab boil. It was amazing. So we're playing a lot of different hospitality angles. We want people to make memories here.





Courtesy of C.L. Butaud

HOW CAN MY READERS PURCHASE C.L. BUTAUD WINES?

RH: The [website](#) is always open. It's like the red light district, always open. All the wines are on there. We also have a wine club. It's been really big for us. We do a number of limited production wines. We have core items that I make each year, but we also make smaller production wines. I might make a single vineyard Grenache, with most of that fruit intended for a blend of some sort.

We do have a lot of customers from around the country who first learned of us through our old California brand. It's kind of unique for a Texas winery to have a national following. That's very exciting for us. We cover shipping for our wine club. Club members can do some extra shopping in addition to their club allocation. Those extra wines will also be shipped for free. It's like they lived here in Austin and came by the tasting room to pick them up.

YOU MENTIONED THE CALIFORNIA BRAND. ARE YOU STILL DOING THAT?

RH: No, no. We had some thoughts about doing so, but by our second year releasing wines here in Texas, it was very clear we were on a roll. We were already at the case count we had back in Napa with that brand. It made sense to taper down the investment in the California label, and start to ramp up inventory for C. L. Butaud. We sold the remaining wines of the California brand. We also converted wine club members of that brand who had interest over to C. L. Butaud. Many of them came over to our Texas wines.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION YOU HEAR ABOUT TEXAS WINE?

RH: People are surprised we grow grapes. I guess if you're making wine in any state except California, Oregon, or Washington, you hear that. I think every state in the country has vineyards at this point. Texas has a cavalier reputation. Many people just can't visualize wine being grown here. That's an initial hurdle of hesitancy we have to jump over.

We are one hundred percent Texas fruit. I'm all in. That was the whole goal. It's super important that we fully support Texas viticulture. When people drink the wines, and they're reminded that the wine was grown and made here, many are dumbfounded. They'll say, "Are you for real?" That's one of my favorite reactions. I want people to do a double take and ask me if I'm sure it was from Texas. When we get that feedback, I know I'm doing my job well. That helps me want to perform even better. "You can do that here?" I like hearing that.



Courtesy of C.L. Butaud

We bet that happens a lot. We were intrigued with our first bottles. Park any preconceived notions. These are wines that can stand on your table.

Carl Sandburg once said, "Texas is a blend of valor and swagger." Perhaps that's a part of Texas terroir. Without doubt it's in the DNA of Brooke and Randy Hester. Both left nice jobs and promising careers in Napa to return to their home state. Just like they said

they'd do. They're proud of the Lone Star State and eager to foster a tradition of fine winemaking there.

Since putting down roots in Austin six years ago, C. L. Butaud Wines has received critical and customer acclaim. They weathered Covid and came out the other side unscathed. Randy's focus now is to maintain quality at the highest level while working ever closer with grape growers in the High Plains who share his mindset. They're just getting started.

A big part of wine is exploration. Few people are satisfied with drinking the same wines every night. How familiar are you with wines from the High Plains? We would venture that C. L. Butaud would be a great place to start your education. The website is linked below for your enrollment. We bet you find a favorite from the heart of Texas.

C.L. BUTAUD WINES



[View Article Online](#)