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A House of Zinfandel Reborn

Brothers Jake and Scot Bilbro revitalize Sonoma's Limerick Lane

Posted: Jan 28, 2015 10:30am ET

When Jake and Scot Bilbro took over Limerick Lane winery and vineyard in 2011, it seemed an ideal match. The estate has a rich history of producing outstanding Zinfandel, and the brothers Bilbro grew up in the Sonoma County wine business with their dad, Chris Bilbro, at Marietta Cellars.

Buying Limerick Lane, Jake said, was an opportunity of a lifetime. Located in the far northeast corner of Russian River Valley, the vineyard was first planted in 1910 and 10 acres of the original vines are still producing. There are 26 acres total, mostly Zin with a little Syrah, all of it dry-farmed. Both brothers oversee the vineyards while Scot, 34, handles most of the winemaking and Jake, 37, sells the wine.

"I think Scot and I are getting a better feel for the vineyards," Jake said. "2012 was only our second vintage, start to finish, and obviously 2011 wasn't the most normal vintage." (2011 was a cool, wet and eccentric weather year, for the record.)

If the 2012 Zinfandels I've tasted are any indication, the Bilbros are quick studies. All four wines are outstanding and offer a distinctive sense of place. My complete reviews will be published soon, but for now here's a quick preview.

Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2012 (\$32) has great focus, depth and opulent flavors of cherry, herbes de Provence and cracked white pepper. About 1,400 cases were made, so you might be able to snatch a bottle or two. Production was less than 150 cases on each of the other three.

Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley 1910 Block 2012 (\$48) is a burly red with just enough polish to keep it real and eclectic notes of blackberry, spice cake and smoky beef. Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley Rocky Knoll 2012 (\$45) balances a briary intensity with style and polish. Limerick Lane 1023 Russian River Valley 2012 (\$56) is a stunner. A blend of Zinfandel, Syrah and Grenache, it is rich and focused, with exotic aromas of smoky wild berry, chunky dark chocolate and Asian spice.

The biggest learning curve, Jake said, was coming to terms with the sheer size of Zins produced by the vineyards. "We're picking at a much lower pH than we ever thought we would. They're not small wines," he said.

The wines range from 14.8 to 15.3 percent in alcohol by volume, which isn't out of line for Zinfandel. "We can't just follow the level of alcohol [when picking]," Jake said. "The wines are so big they'd be out of balance."

While Limerick Lane's production is a modest 3,500 cases a year, the brothers have another, far larger project on their hands. They bought Marietta Cellars from their father in 2012 and together oversee its 75,000-case production. It's hard to find a better value than the widely available Marietta Old Vine Red, a non-vintage wine that's now on Lot No. 61.



Brothers Jake (left) and Scot Bilbro have teamed up to turn around Limerick Lane.

Tim Fish

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This is so well deserved. Congrats to the Bilbro's!

Daniel Sherer — Windsor, CA, USA — January 28, 2015 11:21am ET

Interesting article, Tim. Always enjoy learning and hearing about family ventures in the wine industry. Often it translates to dedication, focus and creativity. Looking forward to securing a bottle (or two) of the Limerick Lane Russian River Valley 2012, sounds like my preference in a Zin. Especially the herbs and cracked white pepper. I also enjoy, depending on my mood swing, the over-the-top Zins that pour like hydraulic oil but have the packed flavors and body to stand up to hearty meals and a good cigar at the end.

Ruben Kendrick — Houston, TX — January 31, 2015 6:14pm ET

Great article Tim and good to see family efforts succeed. I just ordered some of the 2012 Russian River Valley. Can't wait to try.

John Dart — Sarasota, FL — February 2, 2015 7:48pm ET

The 2011s are terrific, so I can't wait to try the 2012s I have on order.

Jeffrey P Bloom — Vienna, VA — February 2, 2015 10:53pm ET

I drank the Limerick Lane wines for years and watched the gradual decline. Visiting the winery two weeks ago and tasting through the line-up. I was shocked and thrilled by the change. Excellent across the board. I'm looking forward to following the progression, particularly with the old vine zins. Bravo to the Bilbro brothers!

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