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## Lambert Bridge Crosses the Rubicon

By Linda Murphy  
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A former winemaker colleague of mine was fond of saying, "Nothing happens quickly in the wine business except mistakes."

Lambert Bridge Winery in the Dry Creek Valley of northwestern Sonoma County is proof of that – not because of any mistakes it might have made, but because the producer demonstrates just how long it can take to turn a moribund winery into one bursting with life and success.

I am particularly impressed with Lambert Bridge's 2006 Cabernet Sauvignons and 2007 Zinfandels; these are sensational wines, antidotes to the overripe, high-alcohol, all power/nothing pretty wines so many California producers continue to make (although that tide seems to be turning). Lambert Bridge Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Viognier, Merlot and the Crane Creek Cuvee red blend are also fine – and by "fine" I don't mean that as "good enough," but instead, refined and elegant.

To put Lambert Bridge's wines, made by Jill Davis beginning with the 2006 vintage, into context, one must take a look at the winery's history.

New Jersey residents Ray and Patti Chambers acquired Lambert Bridge Winery in 1993, after founder Jerry Lambert closed the facility in 1992. He lost a lawsuit against drinks giant Seagram, his sales and distribution partner, and a divorce didn't help his financial situation. I was working as a lowly member of Seagram's PR department at the time of the court decision against Lambert, and I had friends who lost their jobs when Jerry closed up shop.

The Chambers' purchase of Lambert Bridge came with no case goods in stock, no functioning distribution chain, no grape contracts for the upcoming vintage, and vineyards that needed work on the 110-acre property on West Dry Creek Road. They brought in winemaker Julia Iantosca to restart things. She called growers with whom she had worked as the winemaker at William Wheeler Winery, and her relationships allowed her to buy enough fruit for the next vintage, and several thereafter. At that time, red Bordeaux varietal wines were Lambert Bridge's focus, and by 2000 or so, it was emphasizing Merlot – the trendy wine at the time -- and the benefits of blending various vineyard lots to get more complex, complete wines, as opposed to producing them from single vineyards.

At this time, my path crossed Lambert Bridge again, when I was contracted to write its new press kit materials. At the time, Ray and Patti Chambers did not want to be part of the story. They insisted on staying in the background. In fact, I've never met them nor talked to them. Then, and now, they wish to remain behind the scenes.

Ray Chambers made his money in real estate development and leveraged buyouts, working with financier William E. Simon. He has been many high-powered things, among them part-owner of the NBA's New Jersey Nets and NHL's New Jersey Devils. The Chambers have headed major philanthropic efforts to improve the lives of the residents of New Jersey, particularly in Ray's hometown of Newark, and he is the United Nations Special Envoy on Malaria.

The couple spends plenty of quiet time in Sonoma County, immersed in the community and contributors of more than \$1 million to Healthcare Foundation of Northern Sonoma County, a non-profit that funds capital improvements at Healdsburg General Hospital, and two health centers that provide medical and dental care to migrant workers and their families.

Lambert Bridge's managing partner, Greg Wilcox, is an tireless fundraiser for such causes, and can often be found working in the tasting room. His sweetheart St. Bernard, Bernadette, a 10-month-old "puppy" at what I guess to be around 150 pounds, rested against my leg as I tasted the current releases with Davis on a stormy day, with a crackling fire in the tasting room's stone fireplace.

Davis made wine for Beringer Vineyards and William Hill Winery in Napa Valley, and Buena Vista Vineyards in Sonoma County, before joining Lambert Bridge Winery in 2005. Davis firmly believes that Lambert Bridge, and Sonoma County, can produce wines – particularly Cabernet Sauvignon – that are as good as any from Napa Valley. She's already done that, using purchased grapes and those from Lambert Bridge's northern Santa Rosa vineyard to make two beautiful Cabernet Sauvignons – a Sonoma County bottling (\$80) and a Limited Selection Sonoma County (\$110).

Each is remarkably balanced and elegant, yet Davis sees even better wines ahead. This spring, the Chambers, under Davis' direction, will plant a Cabernet vineyard on a mountainous ledge above Sonoma Valley, near the Monte Rosso Vineyard made famous by Louis Martini.

"The site has everything a great Cab vineyard should have: volcanic rock, well-drained soils and a southwest exposure," Davis said. "At 1,100 feet, it's well above the fog line, with cooling breezes and a small diurnal swing. With conscientious management, this vineyard should produce small vines and small, intense berries."

"Superb vineyards make good wine in Sonoma, and there are superb sites here, with excellent soil, aspect, climate and water supply. But you have to work harder than in the other (Napa) valley. Look at last year's grape prices: Napa's top dollar paid for one ton of Cabernet grapes was \$27,000; Sonoma's top price was \$6,454. It's more than a matter of choosing to do it right; you have to have the financial means to do it. You can't take shortcuts."

In hiring Davis, the Chambers committed to not cutting a single corner. Her most prized winemaking tool is a Le Trieur sorter-shaker system, which can cost more than \$100,000 when fully equipped. It allows for three levels of sorting out unripe berries, stems, raisins and MOG (matter other than grapes) from healthy grapes, sending only pristine ones to the fermenter.

"We don't want to see grape clusters in the sorting, we want to see individual grapes," she said. "This level of sorting makes a huge difference in quality. Only the good stuff gets to the fermenter."

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Davis has carte blanche to buy French oak barrels, small fermenters to handle vineyard lots separately, and in the vineyards, to drop crop, remove the "wings" from individual clusters (because the berries on these wings don't develop ripe tannins) and make the picking date decisions. Fermentations are conducted using gentle pump-overs, and there is no extended maceration (a method many winemakers use to extract every last bit of color, flavor and tannin by leaving the wine in contact with the grape skins for several days.) All this, Davis said, "Allows us to make wines with polish, elegance, balance and finesse."

Her Zinfandels from 2007 – a Dry Creek Valley blend (\$39) and a vineyard-designated Forchini Vineyard Dry Creek Valley (\$50) – are well-mannered and remarkably vibrant. They have all the exuberant wild-berry and black spice aromas and flavors one could want, yet they're keenly balanced and low (for Zin) in alcohol, at 14.3 percent and 14.4 percent, respectively.

Granted, Lambert Bridge wines are expensive and not for everyone's pocketbook. Yet for those who see Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons as the only ones worth splurging on, and those who purchase high-end Zinfandels from the likes of Ravenswood, Ridge and Rosenblum, Lambert Bridge Zins offer elegant alternatives.