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New Funk Zone tasting room is familiar – and familial

Gabe Saglie

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You could say making awesome wines is nothing new for Blair Fox. But his newest label 'Fox Wine Co.' does allow him something he's not done before: to share winemaking duties with his wife, Sarah.

"Yup, it's everything I thought it would be," says Sarah with a laugh. "We work together great."

"She's always been a part of what I do," adds Blair. "But the new label is definitely all about family."

I met with the couple this week inside their newest digs - a sleek, urban tasting room in Santa Barbara's flourishing Funk Zone. Wine starting pouring here just last Friday, and the public response - buoyed by a holiday weekend - has been enthusiastic. As we're chatting, for example, a couple from Chicago planning a wedding in Pismo Beach had made the pilgrimage here just to taste the newest wines from one of their favorite producers (and seeing the Fox from the label in person was nothing short of a celebrity sighting).

Blair and Sarah Fox have been together for 21 years, ever since they met by the lockers at Santa Barbara High School. They followed each other to UC Davis, where she studied art history and he learned how to make wine. "I'd sit in a lot on his enology and viticulture classes," recalls Sarah.

The winemaking style that would soon becoming synonymous with Blair Fox - unctuous, luscious, balanced wines with an overt focus on terroir expression - propelled him to early successes as winemaker for Sunstone Winery in 1999 and with stints in France and Australia. He was hired to lead the Rhone wine program at Fess Parker in 2003 (Blair is an unabashed fan of syrah) and was promoted as head winemaker for the Parkers' 100,000-case annual production in 2005, a role he holds to this day. He won the industry's prestigious Andre Tchelistcheff Winemaker of the Year Award in 2008.

Winemaking became even more personal for Blair in 2005, when his eponymous project, Blair Fox Cellars, hit the marketplace. And Sarah has always been an integral part of this business, which produces high-end, small-lot, vineyard-specific Rhone wines and opened a popular tasting room in Los Olivos in 2010.

“As Santa Barbara natives, we’d been looking for a place to possibly open up down here for a few years,” says Sarah. And the Funk Zone came calling. More specifically, The Santa Barbara Art Foundry, a studio for metal craftsmen and multimedia artists that vetted several local winemakers to share their trade space before asking the Blairs to join their scene.

On aesthetics alone, the new Fox Wine Co. tasting room, which Sarah designed, is a perfect Funk Zone fit. Separated from the rest of the foundry by an indoor chain link fence, it’s industrially inspired, and beautiful metal motifs abound. It’s open, bright and slick. And it helps create a unique destination in downtown Santa Barbara where art - both sculpted and fermented - share a special space.

In the glass, the new line of wines fits the neighborhood, too. “In Los Olivos, people come to find and buy and drink wine,” says Blair. But the Funk Zone sees “a lot of local tourism,” he adds, and draws a more eclectic clientele. So these wines are unassuming by design “fresh, approachable and more affordable. “And there’s a femininity and elegance to them,” adds Blair with a smile, nodding toward his bride.

In fact, winemaking duties are pretty evenly split here, with Sarah taking on the wines that can always benefit from a softer touch. Her 2012 Sauvignon Blanc (\$23), sourced from warmer Ballard Canyon vineyards, is alive, bright and fresh. The 2012 Chardonnay (\$25), already one of the fastest movers in the tasting room, blends Sta. Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley fruit and exudes minerality and crispness.

I thoroughly enjoyed Sarah’s 2012 Pinot Noir (\$27) - this is a supple, velvety, Burgundy-inspired wine that balances earth and berry beautifully. Sarah’s palate prefers pinot, so this wine is personal. And it shows.

Blair’s handiwork is evident in the bigger reds, like the 2011 Bin 805 Red Blend (\$25), a mix of mourvedre, grenache, syrah and cinsault; it’s layered and complex and teeming with flavors like dark berry and mocha. And the 2010 Syrah (\$27), which was aged in French oak for more than two years, balances muscle and finesse with rich and earthy flavors.

Fox Wine Co., with a yearly production of some 1,000 cases and an exclusive focus on Santa Barbara County grape sources, also produces two reserve wines: a pinot noir (\$48) from Buona Terra Vineyard in Sta. Rita Hills and a knockout 2009 Grenache (\$32) from Camp 4 Vineyard in Santa Ynez.

As we sip and chat, our conversation keeps circling back to family, and I realize that family is as big an element in this project as anything else. Sarah mentions how their two daughters, 9-year-old Rylee Dare and 6-year-old Haylee Rose, both of whom have Blair Fox Cellars wines named after them, love working in the winery with their parents, and Blair remarks how proud they are of their mother’s new role. He also touts the new label’s artsy design, the handiwork of Sarah’s sister, Laurie Anderson, an award-winning graphic designer based in Colorado. And Sarah confers periodically with her niece, Brittany Siegel, the tasting room’s manager.

A family affair, indeed.

Fox Wine Co. offers two wine club options: three wines or six wines delivered to your front door three times a year, and both come with perks like free tastings, special discounts and exclusive event invites. While the Foundry is open seven days a week, the Fox Wine Co. tasting room is open Thursday through

Monday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. And coming soon: wines by the glass at the tasting bar. Check out www.foxwineco.com.

And One More Thing -

Fess Parker Winery has just released the latest renditions of the Frontier Red (\$12) - a blend of seven grapes, including syrah, merlot and Grenache, and Parker Station Pinot Noir (\$15), which draws fruit from Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties. At these price points, these are no-brainer buys, especially because they go so well with any holiday fare. The Frontier Red is all about dark fruit, with smoky and chocolaty overtones, while the Parker Station is lively, bouncy and bright, with cherries and red currants aplenty. These two wines account for a whopping one-third of the annual Fess Parker wine production, and they are best sellers for good reason. An amazing pair of value wines from Blair Fox and his team.

Wine lover Gabe Saglie is senior editor for www.travelzoo.com. His column appears every other week in the Food section. Email him at gabesaglie@yahoo.com.