

A man and a woman are smiling and taking a selfie in a vineyard. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue jacket, and the woman is on the right, wearing a dark top. They are both looking at the camera. The background shows rows of grapevines in a field under a bright sky.

After an unlikely start in love, Napa couple explores the Valley's winemaking roots

Jonah and Sara Beer take a selfie at Bishop Creek.

Courtesy Pilcrow Wines



Courtesy Pilcrow Wines

The “pilcrow” is the typesetters name for the symbol indicating the end of a paragraph.

New winery goes old school

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There are lots of ways to create a partnership in the wine business. A feather-ruffling misunderstanding that leads to marriage isn't normally one of them. But then Sara and Jonah Beer aren't your normal couple.

Depending on whom you ask, the winery dinner in southern California where the Beers met either was or was not supposed to take place. In 2002, Jonah Beer was working for Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. He thought the dinner planned by a wine sales representative in Los Angeles named “Sara” had been cancelled—and was less than gracious to her on the phone about having to fly down to L.A. last-minute to attend it. When he met this Sara person face-to-face, however, Jonah

wisely decided that a smoothing of the feathers was in order.

Love and marriage soon followed.

Thirteen years later, the wine industry veterans are a happily married Napa couple. Their long relationship to wine, cabernet sauvignon in particular, recently prompted them to take things in a new direction by making their own.

The Beers' fledgling brand, Pilcrow Wines, will debut this spring with an elegant Mt. Veeder cabernet that is equal parts high-elevation viticulture and old-school winemaking—with some 18th century typeface history inked into the project for good measure. From



The view from the upper block of the Pym Rae vineyard.

Courtesy Pilcrow Wines

a creative standpoint, this thoughtful, aesthetically pleasing wine manages to say a lot about the Beers' relationship to wine and each other.

"I think for Jonah and me, we've always been fascinated by the history in Napa Valley and what the pioneers in the '60s, '70s, and '80s were doing in terms of cabernet," Sara Beer said, seated on a couch in their comfortable, art-adorned home. "We really wanted to explore that ourselves. Our focus in wine has always been about site, about working with wines that communicate site, and also wines that are maybe a little bit 'quieter' and more age-worthy—and then really putting that into practice."

Each in their early 40s, the couple has built impressive Napa Valley résumés: Jonah through 13 years and counting as the general manager of Frog's Leap Winery in Rutherford, and as Stag's Leap Cellars' sales and marketing director before that; and Sara for launching her own import-distribution company, True North Wine Merchants, along with a lengthy former tenure at St. Helena's Duckhorn Vineyards, where she ran all California wholesale.

Both Beers are Midwesterners,

albeit with different upbringings where wine appreciation was concerned.

For Sara, growing up in Chicago with European parents meant exposure to wine at the dinner table. After graduating from Georgetown University, she came to California in the late '90s for a sales position with a popular Los Angeles catering company and, as she described it, "fell in love with the wine business through visits to Santa Barbara County."

She found her way to a respected wine and spirits distributor in Los Angeles, where she excelled as a fine wine sales rep and was named salesperson of the year in her first year on the job, something that had never happened at the prestigious company. That experience would set the stage for her successful run at Duckhorn.

Jonah comes from what he calls a "tee totaling" Mennonite family in northern Indiana. Working his way through Purdue University, he was hired by a cigar store that happened to receive copies of Wine Spectator magazine. He became intrigued by the crossover cultures of wine and cigars and made educational trips to fine wine shops in Indianapolis to learn more.

When the magazine featured Cask 23 cabernet sauvignon on its cover in 1996, he resolved to track down this legendary Stag's Leap wine. It took a road trip to Chicago, where a retailer could only offer him the winery's 1992 "SLV" bottling—for a college student's small fortune of \$54. But it did the trick, epiphany-wise.

"I opened that bottle of wine," he recalled, "and that was it, man. It was like, 'Alright, there's something way different about this. This is not like anything I've ever had.'"

After Purdue, he cancelled his plan for law school and headed west to Napa Valley. In the spring of 1998, he knocked on Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' door and soon had a job washing glasses in the tasting room. A mere three years later, he had ascended to the director level at Warren Winiarski's acclaimed winery. "That '92 SLV changed the trajectory of my life," he said. "It changed everything."

For both Beers, the beginnings of their careers in the late '90s and early 2000s coincided with the end of an era for Napa Valley cabernet as they had come to know it.

"You've got to remember," Jonah pointed out, "when we came into

this business, we got in at the last slot before the really big shift began to happen in size and weight and profile of Napa Valley cabernet in the early to mid-90s."

He referred to the Stag's Leap wines of that time, along with Heitz Cellars, Chateau Montelena, and Mayacamas Vineyards. These estates still thrive today, but he and Sara believe their profile was somewhat eclipsed two decades ago by the wineries making a "bigger and rounder and riper and richer" style of cabernet to appease a newly-empowered, scores-loving press. He noted wistfully that it was "sort of that last moment" of classic Napa Valley red wines made with a certain elegance and longevity in mind.

"It was kind of our genesis with Pilcrow. Not to suggest that there was anything wrong with that new style of winemaking," he said. "It just wasn't what drew us here."

Searching for something both original and fitting to name their wine brand, the Beers landed upon the ¶ symbol, called a "pilcrow" in typesetting, the history of which is a combination of hobby and obsession for the couple. In its current usage,



the pilcrow simply denotes a new paragraph, but over much of the 600-year history of typeface design the symbol “indicated to the reader that the author was about to change perspective or offer a new point of view on the same topic,” as Jonah wrote in an email. “Or it meant that the author was about to start a new chapter of the same story.”

On their inaugural label, with the pilcrow logo prominently featured, the Beers chose the typeface created by the 18th century English type founder William Caslon. They plan to use different typefaces for future Pilcrow vintages. “The more I spent time reading books about typeface design and the designers behind them,” Jonah explained, “the more I realized that there’s actually a lot in common with what we’re trying to say about wine and winemaking versus typeface design.”

For the Beers, then, a pilcrow got some Caslon styling and became Pilcrow, the wine they hope will contribute a chapter to the Napa Valley cabernet story of the last half-century.

Just to arrive at this humble starting point, with exactly 203 cases of Mt. Veeder cabernet sauvignon in



bottle, they relied on a number of friends in their network. The Mayacamas template of low-pH, high-acid red wine produced since the late 1960s by Bob Travers was a stylistic goal for the Beers, but it took some doing to locate the right source of grapes.

“We talked to a lot of people,” Jonah said, “and so many of them kept pointing to Mt. Veeder as a great place for this style of wine that it zeroed us in on that spot.”

Enter Elton Slone, the President and CEO of Robert Craig Winery in Napa. Over drinks one evening in the spring of 2014, Slone offered his old friends some surplus cabernet from Pym Rae, a pristine vineyard at the very top of the Mt. Veeder AVA. “That vineyard has nerve,” he told them.

The property was owned by the family of actor-comedian Robin Williams and farmed by Robert Craig’s team (it has since been sold). Craig specializes in wines from Howell Mountain, where, according to Jonah, “they’re getting what they want, which is bigger, denser mountain fruit.”

He and Sara already had their eyes on Mt. Veeder cabernet that was “a bit more violet and leaned out—perfect for what we were shooting for.” Gladly accepting Slone’s offer, the Beers made the first two Pilcrow vintages, 2014 and ’15, from Pym Rae.

In a separate conversation about Mt. Veeder, Sander Scheer, Director of Vineyard Operations for The Hess Collection Winery, shared his view that viticultural success at elevated locations like Pym Rae, as well as some of the higher-elevation Hess Collection sites he’s managed for the last 10 years, can and does translate to a more restrained style. With longer, cooler growing seasons, he

believes that “the wines are going to change, and the fruit composition is going to be different.”

Taking temporary refuge from the January rains, Scheer pointed to a Mt. Veeder AVA map outside his office at the picturesque winery on Redwood Road. “We’re one of the cooler AVAs in the Valley,” he said. “We’re perched right up above San Pablo Bay, so we’re able to have that extended season. We’re hanging cabernet out there until the end of October. Flavors benefit from that, for sure.”

At an elevation of about 1,800 feet, Pym Rae’s fruit matures at the slow, beneficial pace noted by Scheer. For the Beers’ purposes, it made for a different type of cabernet sauvignon, a high-toned, lower-alcohol, throwback version of the grape. Connoisseurs of 1970s Mayacamas and 1980s Chateau Montelena should take note.

For all of Jonah’s input—not to mention the hours he spent reading and studying the history of typeface design to animate the Pilcrow brand—Sara is the vintner in the family. As a first-time winemaker, she relied on her friend and winemaking mentor Marco DiGiulio at Bin to Bottle, the custom crush facility in south Napa where she makes Pilcrow. DiGiulio’s assistant, Toshi Wakayama, took the lead in guiding her through the first couple of vintages.

Sara explained that when she and Jonah decided to make their own wine, “the point was definitely to surround ourselves with really great winemaking advisors. With Marco and his team, we had decades of experience around us, and Bin to Bottle has been an incredible support, from soup to nuts.”

Her husband observed that “Toshi’s been the guy who’s

Sara in the Pym Rae vineyard.

Courtesy Pilcrow Wines

probably most enjoyed this process.” He watched as Sara charmed Wakayama with her old-soul approach to cabernet, though the winemaker sometimes scratched his head because “he’s not from the ‘old school.’ He hadn’t seen wine ever made that way.”

In addition to wearing the vintner hat, Sara, the former whiz kid of L.A. wholesale, is an experienced distributor and wine marketer. Come the cabernet’s release in April, it will be her job to sell a good portion of the 203 cases to her wholesale contacts in California. It’s not an enormous amount of wine, but, as she pointed out, “it’s not zero.”

She’ll execute the plan through her distribution company, True North. Pilcrow is one of only seven brands in her portfolio, which will allow her to focus on landing it in the right accounts. Sara thinks of certain key retailers and restaurant sommeliers as “brand ambassadors for us, in that they are a really important part of the messaging for something new like this.”

One of the first buyers to have a look at the 2014 Pilcrow was Eduardo Dingler. Originally from Torreón, a city in north-central Mexico’s wine country, Dingler is the sommelier at Morimoto in Napa and also the corporate beverage director for the restaurant’s parent company.

Back in their Napa living room, Sara summed up that she and Jonah plan to offer buyers like Dingler “a fully fleshed-out wine brand with a lot of soul and story to it.”

“I think that through the thoughtful way Pilcrow is made, and also the packaging, the story, and talking about the art of typesetting, it’s almost more than wine that we’re bringing up. This craving that people have for hand-crafted wine and hand-crafted things, people are craving products with a point of view.”

“When you go out there and tell those authentic stories,” she added, “people just light up, you know? They really want to be connected to something in wine. And I think that this wine has a great foundation to it.”

From Jonah and Sara Beer’s point of view, Pilcrow has thus far been a personal labor of love. Until April, at least, when they begin to share it with everyone else.