

John Locke: Wine buyer, wine educator, winemaker: His life is a wish come true

[By Ann Parker](#)

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John Locke is the wine director for Soif and La Posta (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)



A summer in France changed John Locke's life. "I caught the wine bug," he admits happily. "It was an idyllic French experience -- and I found my love of food and wine."

After that summer abroad, Locke returned to college, then worked for five years with a Washington, D.C., law firm after graduation. But the wine seed had been planted.

"I wanted to move to California," he said. "I had this vague notion I wanted to be in the wine business, something I knew nothing about."

Locke did, however, have a particular appreciation for one winery: "I loved Bonny Doon Vineyard -- the wines, the sensibility and sense of humor behind them. And winemaker Randall Grahm is mega-smart and funny."

In 1990, John says, "I gave away my suits and moved to California, where I eventually begged Patrice Boyle, at the time Bonny Doon Vineyard's general manager for a job. She said no' twice but eventually relented." His first job there was as a "cellar rat," someone who does odd jobs around a winery.

Locke soon graduated to being Bonny Doon Vineyard's assistant winemaker, then public relations director and senior creative director. During his 16 years at the winery, he left and went traveling for 15 months -- "I went temporarily insane," he laughs -- including making wine near Mumbai, India, and trekking in Vietnam, Greece and Turkey.

After leaving Bonny Doon, Locke became wine director for Soif wine store and restaurant in downtown Santa Cruz in January 2008. Founded by Bonny Doon Vineyard veterans Boyle, Hugh Weiler and Ted Pearson, Soif carries up to 400 wines.

John teaches wine classes, conducts tastings and works behind the wine bar two nights a week. "And tasting kick-ass wines isn't a bad part of the job," he grins. "I'm a fan of wines with a reason for being."

Locke achieved a dream in June 2008, when he started a wine business called Birichino with partner and fellow former "Dooner" employee Alex Krause. "Specifically, to resurrect Bonny Doon Vineyard's Malvasia Bianca wine." Until recently, Birichino wines could be purchased only in Canada, United Kingdom, Russia and Sweden -- but last week the partners received their California license. It will be available locally "very soon," says John.

Locke had to have help buying his first bottle of wine, a classic Sauternes -- he was 13. "It was a 1971 d'Yquem, for my parents' 25th anniversary. I still remember that color."

John Locke

Born: Nov. 10, 1963,
in Grand Rapids, Michigan

As a child he wanted to be:

'An astronaut or a pilot.'

Partner of four years: Pam Mitchell

Pets: Two basset hounds, Flash and Bisbee; two cats, Jasper and Maggie

Education: Economics degree, Kalamazoo College

Came to Santa Cruz: October 1990

Some favorite wine regions: Loire Valley, Alsace, Burgundy, Rhone Valley

His 'desert island scenario' wine choice: 'Sancerre: it's crisp, clean, large and crystalline'

Wine-buying tip: 'Have a relationship with people like us at Soif, either the store or wine bar'

Meaning of 'Birichino': In Italian, coquettish or mischievous

For details about Birichino:

birichinovino.com, 901-7797 (John)

or 419-1294 (Alex)

Soif Wine Bar & Merchants: 105 Walnut Ave., Santa Cruz, 423-2020