

# Hang time: Kenny Likitprakong makes the leap from skateboard to vineyard

During the 2003 Zinfandel Advocates & Producers festival at Fort Mason, winemaker Gary Branham was approached by a slight person, looking a bit ragged and disheveled, who asked to purchase his grapes. The owner of Branham Estate Wines was rendered speechless. "He looked so young ..." Branham says. "When you're asked by a kid if he could buy your grapes, you say maybe. Someday." That slight kid turned out to be a 27-year-old man with a long name and even longer dreams. He was Kenny Likitprakong, and though he had just founded his wine company a year earlier, he was asking to buy some of the most select Zinfandel grapes from the high-elevation Rockpile appellation in Sonoma County.

Likitprakong's palate, preferences and business practices are anything but conventional. His umbrella company, the Hobo Wine Co., makes and markets a distinctly nontraditional series of wines. Likitprakong, now 31, may be of Thai ancestry (his father is Thai, his mother is Jewish) but he grew up in Healdsburg, "soaking up wine fumes at Domaine St. George," the winery owned by his great-uncle Supasit Mahaguna.

Mahaguna once produced the distilled Thai liquor Mekong, but in 1973 he bought a small Italian winery called Cambiaso, renaming it in tribute to the French wines he loved. Likitprakong's father, Somchai, was studying in New York in the '70s when he was summoned to the family business in California. In the Chinese patriarchal system (the Likitprakongs were originally immigrants from China), you don't say no.

Kenny Likitprakong exudes the American free spirit, idealizing Woody Guthrie and the iconography of the hobo. It is best witnessed in the two passions - skateboarding and snowboarding - that he picked up by high school, when he spent all his free time careening down slopes and half-pipes. Yet being a winemaker was his last choice as a profession, a fallback after most other paths - doctor, filmmaker, professional skateboarder - had been knocked out.

Still, those inspirations infused his winemaking with a philosophical focus that's rare in the industry. His wines follow a lean flavor profile unfamiliar to many Americans - his Banyan Wines line of white varietals, for example, are crafted to complement Thai food. He is also persistent, especially when he finds grapes he likes.

"I must have asked him 10 times (to buy his grapes) before he said yes," Likitprakong says now, four years after tasting Branham's Rockpile Zin at ZAP. Branham didn't have any Zin to sell him in 2003, but by the time he did, he had become acquainted with Likitprakong and found him talented and trustworthy - not to mention dogged.

The following year, Branham gave Likitprakong a key to his Rockpile ranch, one of several perched atop the ridges west of Lake Sonoma, to check out the vineyard. Likitprakong took his young family up the mountain to Rockpile, where they pitched a tent, camped out for a few days and fell in love with the space. So Branham sold him grapes from about an acre of Rockpile vineyards. Likitprakong added the Rockpile Zin to his Hobo line of wines, which had been created in 2002. Ever since, he has farmed that parcel of Zin, and makes it into an austere, restrained wine with an almost racy edge. Its style is far from the usual high-fruit, big-bang American mouthful.

"I was never worried he would ruin the grapes," Branham says. "He's going with what he thinks is good and what's right. He's not going for the big Parker and Spectator score."

In 2006, Likitprakong introduced yet another line of wines called Folk Machine. The 2006 Folk Machine Central Coast Pinot Noir garnered 2 1/2 stars from The Chronicle, the only \$20 Pinot on a list of wines that started in the \$30s and shot quickly upward.

Folk Machine's current release, a red blend called the Long Drive, has a label with a desolate gray-toned image of starlings on telephone polls - a scene, Likitprakong explains, viewed from the low ground of a hobo's camp. As with all Folk Machine labels, it contains no text on the front; you turn to the back to find the brand and each wine's nickname. On a white blend called Tuk Tuk Nation, the image was of a Bangkok taxi (or tuk tuk).

"I wanted people to look up on the shelf and buy the wine by what they see. If they don't like it, it's fine," said Likitprakong.

The 200 cases he made of the 2006 Folk Machine Pinot were quickly snatched up. Likitprakong had determined that Folk Machine would make no guarantees about repeating a varietal year after year. Each bottling would be a live-in-the-moment, you-may-not-get-it-again release.

He is also resolute about selling wines at prices that even a hobo could afford. "I started Hobo and Banyan Wines myself with just \$10,000 from my parents," he says. As he writes on his Web site: "Of the two ways to make wine, with and without money, the first should probably be the only, but a few of us slip through the cracks and do it on the skinny. No winery, no vineyards, no truck, no warehouse, no employees ... nothing."

Clearly, Likitprakong lives to take risks. He likes to think of himself as making wines for other skateboarders. "I want to run my wine company like a skateboard company," he says, without the sort of corporate values that strip wine of its individuality to make it work on the mass market.

Before making daring moves as a wine producer, Likitprakong hedged his bets with a more conventional effort - if it can be called that - establishing Banyan Wines, his white-wine label, in partnership with his father in 2002. The banyan tree is a large tropical tree believed to be divine in many Asian cultures, and the plan was that Somchai Likitprakong would market the portfolio to Thai restaurants.

Under Banyan, Likitprakong crafts Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Viognier and white blends that sell for around \$15. They pair easily with food, especially fragrant, high-glutamate and boldly flavored foods, such as those in Thai cuisine. Priced to sell by the glass for \$6 or \$7 in Thai restaurants, they are not obviously sweet or cloying, and they work because of a strong acid component and tightly controlled sugar levels. Twenty-five percent of his wine production is in Gewurztraminer, clearly the workhorse wine of his repertoire.

With Banyan providing cash flow, Likitprakong was able to unleash his more poetic sensibilities as he turned to reds: Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and several blends. They brim with youthful fruit flavors but reveal the discipline of a seasoned winemaker. None of them sells for more than \$35.

Likitprakong likes cool temperatures in both growing conditions and fermentation, and he usually blends grapes from many different parcels. "I'm kinda about a lot of little lots to make wine," he says. Although he demonstrates the same patience in blending that he once did deliberately tracing figures on his skateboard, he makes his most daring loops in marketing. "I told my distributors that if they wanted to sell Folk Machine, they had to sell without expecting the same thing next vintage. We don't promise any continuity." Such a move is something few wineries are able to do, unless they're as small, nimble and opportunistic as Likitprakong's operation. "I wanted to have an outlet for my ideas and take my own

financial risks," he says.

Throughout Likitprakong's Healdsburg childhood, his Thai father and Jewish mother instilled in him the ambition to be a physician. Even as he skateboarded and snowboarded obsessively in junior and high school, he set his eyes on becoming a doctor. He couldn't wait to leave the winery life behind; he swore never to make wine.

While snowboarding in 1992, he hit his head on a tree and suffered a severe concussion. That and a subsequent spine injury knocked creative sense into him. "From that moment on he no longer had those dreams of being a doctor," says Landon Dowlen, his best friend, fellow skateboarder and designer of Likitprakong's labels. Life was short, Likitprakong learned.

"When my adviser told me I would have to teach to make a living as a poet, I fled," he says. He ended up studying enology and viticulture at UC Davis, where his creative energies could be diverted into winemaking.

"Once it started going that route, everyone saw it as his calling," says Dowlen. Some of Likitprakong's happiest moments at Davis were spent on the campus' organic farm. There he made a wine he called Cote de Fumier - which roughly translates as "banks of manure."

Afterward, he searched for jobs as a grape grower, "but all the available jobs were for winemaker," he says. He ended up at Hallcrest Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where he made some important connections with growers, enabling him to start Banyan during his time at Hallcrest. To this day, he buys Gewurztraminer, Riesling and Pinot Noir from farmers he knows on the Central Coast.

At Hallcrest, he also befriended Rick Moshin, a Pinot Noir aficionado who custom-made his wines at Hallcrest. In 2005, he built Moshin Vineyards in Healdsburg and named Likitprakong winemaker. In one fast move, Likitprakong had looped back to where he began: in Sonoma, soaking up wine fumes.

On a sunny day last fall during harvest, Likitprakong is gleefully unaware of his vagabond-like appearance - something of a norm for him, he acknowledges. His sweatshirt is torn, his trouser edges are ragged and a baseball cap is planted on his head. He leaps on and off the small forklift, every bit the skateboarder, as he sifts through grape bunches.

At the winery, he pulls himself into the centrifuge cylindrical press like a gymnast and cleans it out. He is not only a hands-on winemaker, he is a body-on winemaker, and he looks for all the world like any number of the interns at Moshin, except he wears more juice than they do. During crush, Likitprakong is a study in purple, splashed with and etched in grape juice.

As the trucks arrive from the Central Coast, Dry Creek, Alexander Valley and Rockpile, as well as from Moshin's own vineyards, Likitprakong works long hours, traversing Sonoma County, driving between some 50 vineyards. His smallest harvest produces less than a total of half a ton; his largest, 4 1/2 tons. The exception is the 14 1/2 tons of Gewurztraminer from Monterey County for the Banyan label. Gary Branham says Likitprakong is "already doing more avant-garde things than most people do in their whole careers." Likitprakong is currently also importing a wine from France, La Clochard. It is a Mourvedre-based blend with grapes blended from Gigondas and other Rhone villages, but declassified as a vin de table. "He's not afraid to try anything," Branham says. "He's going with what he thinks is good and what's right."

Likitprakong says his 1 acre of Brahnam's Rockpile site is his favorite vineyard because the grapes, which are about 15 years old, have had to struggle on their exposed 1,500-foot-high slope. It takes an hour of slow driving to trudge up dirt roads to get to his plot. "They're far away so they're a little neglected, and that neglect is good," he says.

With judicious blending of some new clones (including Primitivo) and some Petite Sirah, Hobo's 2006 Rockpile Zin already shows remarkable grace during a year-end tasting, despite the shock of having been bottled just three weeks previous.

Like Likitprakong himself, it is young but ready, with enough fruit tannins to hold for years. Like him, it coiled with promise.