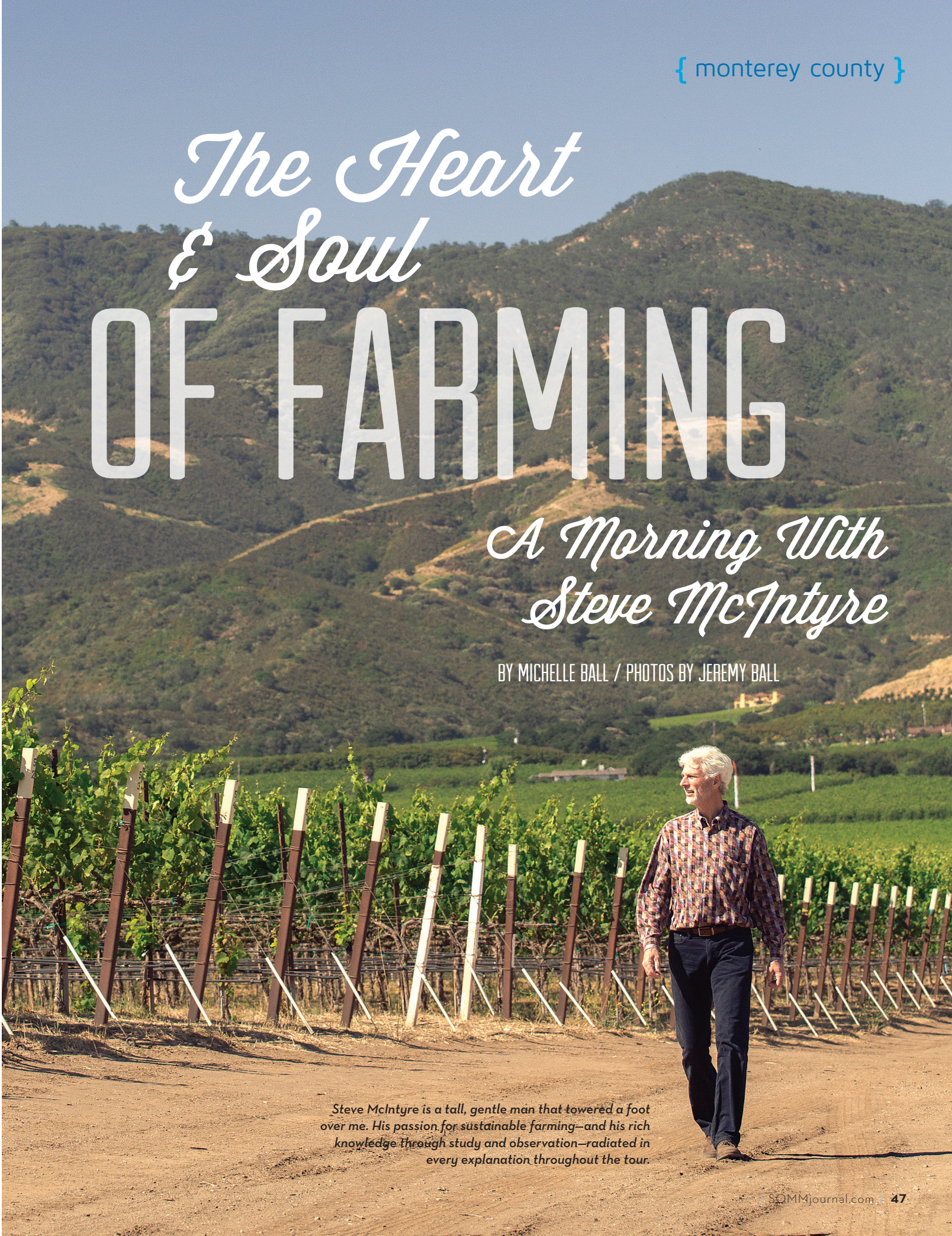
The Heart & Soul OF FARMING

A Morning With Steve McIntyre

BY MICHELLE BALL / PHOTOS BY JEREMY BALL



Steve McIntyre is a tall, gentle man that towered a foot over me. His passion for sustainable farming—and his rich knowledge through study and observation—radiated in every explanation throughout the tour.

The Santa Lucia Highlands AVA (SLH) is one of the world's most highly acclaimed regions for producing Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. Yet, these world-class wines come from an unexpected place. Heading north along Highway 101, we pulled off at the Starbucks in Gonzales, California—a sleepy farming community—to meet with Steve McIntyre of McIntyre Vineyards. Driving on tractor roads past the row crops of the Salinas Valley (which is responsible for the second largest farming economy in the world), I couldn't help but notice the irony. World-class wines are always made in the vineyard, but those vineyards aren't always surrounded by Michelin-starred restaurants and B&Bs. To that point, McIntyre and many other wineries in the SLH have tasting rooms located in tourist-rich Carmel and Monterey, about an hour's drive from the vineyards. After about 15 minutes, we pulled into McIntyre's estate vineyard tucked up against the foothills facing east.

McIntyre purchased the 80-acre parcel, which was previously the abandoned McFarland vineyard, in 1987. At the time, he was Assistant Winemaker at Hahn's Smith & Hook in Monterey County. McIntyre is a tall, soft-spoken yet incredibly passionate man who, by the end of the day, gave me a world of insight into sustainable farming, the region and the history of the appellation. Although McIntyre started out in the cellar, he and his wife, Kimberly, established a farming company, Monterey Pacific, which over the years has been responsible for planting and/or farming 25 percent of the appellation, in addition to properties they farm outside of the SLH throughout Monterey County.

Looking at the new Calera planting we see McIntyre's "proof" of weed control. This area had been tilled to prepare the land for the new vines. The volunteer cover crop has grown in, but in addition we see numerous hearty weeds, especially mustard, which was barely present in the established vines prior to mowing.

Sustainability & Weed Control

Observing the original block of Pinot Noir on the property, planted in 1972, I was surprised to see the vigor of the old vines. Having been involved in biodynamic, organic and sustainable farming practices, McIntyre understands that the health of the vineyard is truly important for longevity and has gleaned a great deal of knowledge through decades of observation. The vineyard supports a volunteer cover crop, made up of mainly native grasses that propagate and provide protection against erosion in the winter months. When the vines wake up from dormancy in the spring, the tall cover crop acts as a windbreak for the fragile new growth and subsequently raises the ambient air temperature in the canopies, which helps with fruit set.

Rather than tilling the cover crop back into the soil in late spring, to avoid water competition between the growing vines and "weeds," McIntyre waits patiently. "By not mowing until later, you discourage the broad-leaf weeds," he says referring to obnoxious weeds like mallow and mustard. "Broad leaf seeds need sunlight for germination so by not mowing it, we've taken out the sunlight." This controls the more problematic weeds and provides a place for beneficial insects. Perennial grasses stay in place until the seeds have matured, thereby fulfilling their lifecycle, and then are *mowed* rather than tilled. Since these grasses are drought and daylight obligate, an evolutionary trait that has enabled them to survive dry California summers, they won't grow back until the winter months when the days are shorter and the rain more prevalent.

Not only does this approach make sense for weed control, it also helps to support the colonies of beneficial bacteria, mycorrhizal fungi, which benefit the vines by converting minerals to nutrients that the plants can use. "Here was the proof in the pudding," said McIntyre. He referred to study that had taken place in Monterey County years ago by Kendra Baumgartner, from the University of California at Davis. She conducted a five-year experiment to identify effective vineyard farming practices. The study observed increased compaction over time from cultivation (or tilling) of the cover crops and noticeably larger populations of mycorrhizal bacteria in cover crops that were not tilled. Since the grasses are dormant, not dead, the mycorrhizae live on their roots; tilling would disturb this symbiotic relationship. In addition, tilling essentially kills the plant, releasing methane, a greenhouse gas 30 times more reactive than carbon dioxide (CO_2).

What about the legumes, like sweet pea, which are often planted in cover crops for nitrogen? "You don't really need them in this system because we're removing very little nitrogen every year. But where we need nitrogen, we use compost," said McIntyre. The compost is strewn next to the vines using a compost spreader without disturbing the cover crop.

It's no surprise that McIntyre was one of the founding members of the Central Coast SIP (Sustainability in Practice) Certification Program (*see more about this program on page 104*). He has worked diligently since to ensure that all McIntyre wines are SIP-certified, which not only takes into account the practices in the vineyard, but also those in the winery and the economic sustainability of its employees.

The Winery

With great attention to detail in the vineyard, it's no wonder that McIntyre adopts a minimalist approach when it comes to winemaking. Although the winery was founded in 2005, he has always been

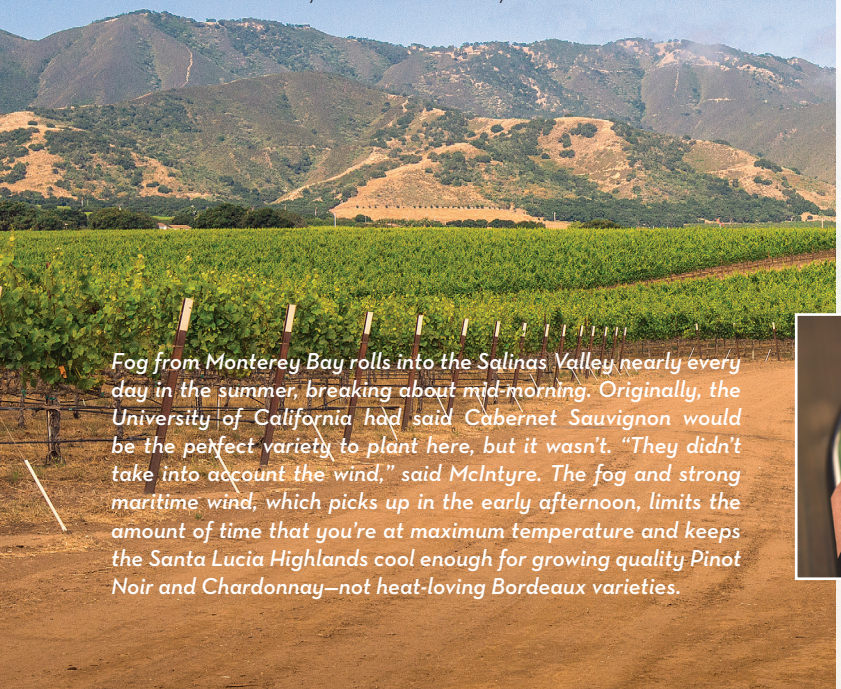
making wine. "I just wasn't selling it commercially," he laughs, "and then in 2005 we hired a person to help us with sales and marketing, and then we had to be serious."

Since McIntyre had his hands full managing not just his vineyard but dozens of others also, they brought in winemaker Byron Kosuge in 2007. McIntyre and Kosuge had worked on a project together for Monterey Wine Company and had developed a similar approach. "We're minimalists; we both agree that we don't induce ML, add bacteria or yeast, we're not in oak long and we utilize a minimum amount of new French oak. So it's all about the grape. You won't find a lot of processing notes; stylistically it's about the grape," McIntyre explained.

Having both a background in winemaking and grape growing gives McIntyre a unique perspective and appreciation for the craft. "When young people ask me, 'I don't know which one to do,' I always say you really have to do both." He believes strongly in an integrated approach: "If you're a grape grower and you don't understand why pH is important to a winemaker, you're not going to get to where the winemaker needs to be. And vice versa. If you're a winemaker and you don't understand timing in terms of the harvest decisions, you're going to miss every window to get something done right."

The limited production of McIntyre Estate wines account for only about five percent of the vineyards' total yields. The farming practices in the vineyard are designed to limit production and produce only the highest quality concentrated fruit. "I always tell people our best wines are ahead of us because we've got so much to learn," said McIntyre explaining how the region is still young and learning which clones, rootstocks and even which pruning techniques work best. "The next time it's different and it's better," he says smiling.

As McIntyre's continues his quest for producing the best grapes possible, I can only imagine the wines that we're likely to see from the Estate and the SLH in the future. The time spent with Steve McIntyre affirmed what we've always heard: that wine is truly made in the vineyard.



Fog from Monterey Bay rolls into the Salinas Valley nearly every day in the summer, breaking about mid-morning. Originally, the University of California had said Cabernet Sauvignon would be the perfect variety to plant here, but it wasn't. "They didn't take into account the wind," said McIntyre. The fog and strong maritime wind, which picks up in the early afternoon, limits the amount of time that you're at maximum temperature and keeps the Santa Lucia Highlands cool enough for growing quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay—not heat-loving Bordeaux varieties.

THE WINES

All prices are suggested retail.

McIntyre NV l'Homme Qui Ris Sparkling, Santa Lucia Highlands ($36) *260 six-packs* Made by the *méthode champenoise* from 100% estate Pinot Noir grapes, this is one of my favorite sparkling wines tasted in California at this price point. Subtle hints of fresh-baked sourdough, lemon zest and toasted Marcona almonds. Silky with a long bright finish. Vibrant on the palate with refined bubbles and subtle flavors of Asian pear and Meyer lemon.

McIntyre 2015 Rosé of Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands ($24) Made from 40-year-old Pinot Noir vines on the McIntyre estate, this purposeful rosé is bright and refreshing with aromas of raspberry tea, rhubarb and orange peel. Flavors of rhubarb carry through on the palate with hints of sage and a long, tingly finish.

McIntyre 2014 Estate Chardonnay, Santa Lucia Highlands ($36) *300 cases* Consistent with McIntyre's minimalist approach to winemaking, this Chardonnay sees very little new French oak to focus the flavors on the fruit. The Chardonnay grapes (clones 76 and 96) are harvested in two sweeps: one earlier around 23 Brix to maintain bright acidity and citrus flavors and one around 25 Brix to develop tropical fruit character. Aromas of fresh-picked corn, lemon zest, grilled pineapple and subtle hints of yogurt and pasta water. The palate is broad with flavors of yellow stone fruit, cardamom, baked pears and a tingle reminiscent of kumquats.

McIntyre 2014 Estate Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands ($45) *500 cases* Sensual nose with a balance of fruit and earth: bright red cherries, roasted red beets, warm dirt and dried savory. Red plum and raspberry with indescribable umami flavors. A combination of mainly clones 777, 115 and a little old-vine Pinot Noir; 30% whole-cluster fermentation makes for a textural, savory palate and long finish with integrated tannins.

McIntyre 2014 Estate Pinot Noir, Block 3, Santa Lucia Highlands ($56) Mostly Swan clone, 30% whole-cluster fermentation, nine months in barrel. McIntyre prefers to go to bottle rather early so as to preserve the desired fresh fruit character. Beautiful aromas with notes of black plums and oolong tea. Savory, concentrated flavors but not overtly lush: black cherry, red beet juice and subtle hints of hoisin.