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## IN THE STUDIO

With passion for art and winemaking, Tom Rodrigues carves out an ideal working space in Mendocino County

WRITTEN BY Chase Reynolds Ewald    PHOTOGRAPHY BY Tom Liden



Tom Rodrigues has been a professional artist since the age of 15. Originally trained as a stained-glass artist, his work includes photorealistic nature images of sticks and stones, paintings of West Coast and Hawaiian landscapes and portraits of baseball's most legendary players. (His portrait of "Cool Papa Bell," in fact, hangs in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.) In 1978, Rodrigues was approached by an aspiring winemaker, Gil Nickel, and asked to design a label for his new varietal. The resulting pen-and-ink drawing of Far Niente's historic 1885 winery building and vines, surrounded by a flowing design of grape vines and lettering in an Art Nouveau style, has endured the test of time even as, fortuitously, the wines went on to become Napa Valley classics. Rodrigues has since designed more than 20 wine labels, and has many more commissions in process.

**This page:** Winemaker Tom Rodrigues pursues his twin passions — winemaking and art — from his vineyard, home and studio in the rolling hills of Mendocino County, California. **Opposite:** A former baseball player once chosen for the New York Mets' farm team, Rodrigues' subjects are often portraits of legendary baseball players.

A decade ago, Rodrigues fell victim to the California Syndrome: He felt a calling to become a winemaker. Urged on by former partner Linda Stutz, he purchased a property and found a wine guru, Kerry Damskey, to train him. "In 2001 I launched my own label. I called it Artevino," he says, "because art and wine are two of my favorite passions."

Rodrigues' Maple Creek Winery encompasses 180 acres in Mendocino County and boasts 10 acres of vines, vegetable and flower gardens, fruit orchards, pastureland for Rodrigues' three horses, and madrone and oak woodlands, all fed by seven natural springs. Rodrigues' ranch-style home is a short stroll away from his guest house, barn and art studio. The wine-



**This page:** In addition to his baseball portraits, Rodrigues paints Western scenes and landscapes, including his own vineyards. **Opposite:** A quiet montage of memorabilia in his den reminds the artist of career highlights, including a trip with his daughter to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, where one of his portraits resides in the museum's permanent collection.





nice age-ability because of the way I make them,” explains the winemaker. “I use ripe fruit with French techniques.”

The life of a farmer leaves little time for art, at least during the growing and harvesting months. But once the harvest is in, the vines are dormant, the days become shorter, and Rodrigues is drawn to his studio, an 1,800-square-foot con-

tasting room, which doubles as an art gallery, is open to the public. The property — set between two famous wine-growing regions, the Alexander and Anderson valleys — falls into the Yorkville Highlands appellation. Rodrigues’ chardonnay, merlot and symphony grapes benefit from coastal fog and sunny days. “My wines are fruit-forward but have really

converted hay barn whose previous owners kept 140 Nubian goats. The workspace has good light with a southern exposure and inspiring views for 10 miles in two directions. The simply constructed space lends itself well to Rodrigues’ various disciplines; he has a kiln, stained-glass-making equipment, easels for his pastels and oil paintings, big walls



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for large artworks and an uninsulated roof “because,” he explains, “ I like the sound of the rain hitting the roof.” A woodburning stove keeps things cozy on cold days, while two dogs and four cats provide companionship.

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In the past year, Tom Rodrigues the artist completed two landscape commissions, accepted three new label assignments and sold original paintings and limited-edition giclee prints from his wine tasting room. During the same time period, Tom Rodrigues the winemaker took Double Gold Best in Class at the San Francisco International Wine Competition for the 2007 Largo Ridge Zinfandel and a



In the past 30 years, in addition to his painting and stained glass work, Rodrigues has designed more than 40 wine labels for Far Niente, Nickel & Nickel, Hamel Family Wines, as well as his own label, Artevino. | The Maple Creek Winery tasting room, located on Rodrigues’ 180-acre sustainable farm, is open to the public.





Double Gold Best in Class at the North of the Bay Wine Competition for his 2009 Reserve Chardonnay Artevino wines. The two disciplines, fine art and winemaking, complement each other, he says, and each pursuit energizes him for the other.

“I’ve been very fortunate to live my passion as an artist, and, for the past 10 years, as a winemaker” says Rodrigues. “I love being a farmer and working with nature. We have a wild pig problem, but the good news is that they’re delicious. We have unbelievable mushrooms, wildlife, clean water, fresh air and space. I love living off the land.”

After the rains have come and he’s picked his chantrelles (175 pounds last year) and porcinis (50 pounds), Rodrigues heads into his barn studio and lights a fire in the woodstove. “It’s a great space. I don’t have a telephone out there, which is great. I thought about it, but I have so many interruptions during the day and it’s sort of my sanctuary. I go there with the dogs and a bottle of wine and I lose myself. It’s a wonderful feeling.” ■



Photos: Dawn Bowery

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