

AT HOME WITH SCOT NICOL

"WE WANT TO KEEP IT INTERESTING, BUT BEING RELEVANT IS ALMOST SECONDARY - WE WANT TO MAKE THE BIKES WE WANT TO RIDE"

After San Francisco, strip malls and faded Americana, we discovered in the northern suburbs of Santa Rosa a Hockneyed vision of California: all verandas, glass and outdoor living, framed and shaded by old growth trees and the roll of the hills. This is the place Scot Nicol, founder of Ibis Cycles, calls home. It's a beautiful spot.

"I started the company in 1981, up here in Sonoma County. I was 27, which means I'm 60 next year - an old guy! I went to college at the University of California, Davis and I'm allegedly a hydrologist or soil scientist. I actually worked as a hydrologist for five years in Alaska before I came back down to California.

"I'd been riding 26-inch balloon bikes; they weren't mountain bikes yet. I had a Schwinn Excelsior 1947 when I was 11 years old. I grew up in the Bay Area and I'd be tearing around the walnut orchards as a kid and when I went to Davis, which has a huge cycling community, I ended up putting cantilever brakes and gears on my bike and turning it into a bit of a mountain bike.

"That was when all the Marin guys were purpose-building frames for mountain biking - there was a lot of simultaneous evolution taking place, but Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze, they commercialised it. They were getting a lot of publicity at the time, which is how I found out about it.

"I was living up in the woods in Mendocino on the coast, a big old hippie with a beard and hair down to my butt. I was reading an article in *Co-Evolution Quarterly* - which was like a whole earth magazine, a total hippie magazine telling you how to live off the grid and all that stuff - and Charlie Kelly had an article in there about the exploits of his group in Marin and their trip to Crested Butte to do the Pearl Pass Tour.

"I joined them on that ride in 1980 and that's where I got to know Joe Breeze, Charlie Cunningham - his first real public appearance, he'd been a hermit living in the woods before that - Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, Steve Potts and Tom Ritchey. That's where I got to know those guys and I became really close friends with them.





"We car-pooled to Crested Butte, a 22 hour drive, and we did a ride out into the middle of the desert. I'd never ridden with these guys before, I was sort of in my bubble up in Mendocino, but I'd always done a lot of trick riding, like figure of eight wheelies on the basketball court in my high school. I was just into doing fun stuff, and I was really good back then. Those guys were all Category 1 road racers, really strong, but they'd never done any of that fun stuff, so I was totally accepted into their group. I was really lucky that I was strong and could go toe-to-toe with them riding, and then go jump over logs and shit like that, and impress them a little. That single thing launched me into the world of mountain bikes, because from there, I asked Joe Breeze and Charlie Cunningham if I could apprentice for them and that's where I learned the craft."

The Sorcerers' Apprentice

Scot built the second batch of Breezer frames alongside Joe (he got, and still has, number 13 out of that batch; the price was a third of his 1980 income) and worked alongside Cunningham before returning to his hippy lifestyle in Mendocino. It was there, in 1981, that he built his first frame.

"I didn't have much equipment at the beginning, I just acquired it over the years. I had ideas of what I wanted to do straight away, something between Joe and Charlie. Joe was using the more slack angled, Excelsior-style geometry; Charlie was a bit more upright. Charlie was building with aluminium; Joe was building in steel. I sort of blended the two of those into the bike I wanted. It's interesting, the industry is going back to where Joe was; where Schwinn were with geometry in the '40s."

After a couple of years in Mendocino, Nicol took the leap to a larger community, moving to Sebastopol, a few miles west of Santa Rosa.

"I bought an apple orchard, built a shop in the middle of that orchard and operated out of there until '88."

By then the business was getting too big to be run from home, so they moved it into a commercial building and from there, in '98, to Santa Rosa. Two years later Nicol sold the business.

"I sold Ibis in 2000 which is a long sordid tale which probably ended up being a good thing. The buyers weren't in the industry, although they came in beating their chests and saying 'we're going to show you guys how to run a company' and they ended up bankrupting the company in 20 months.

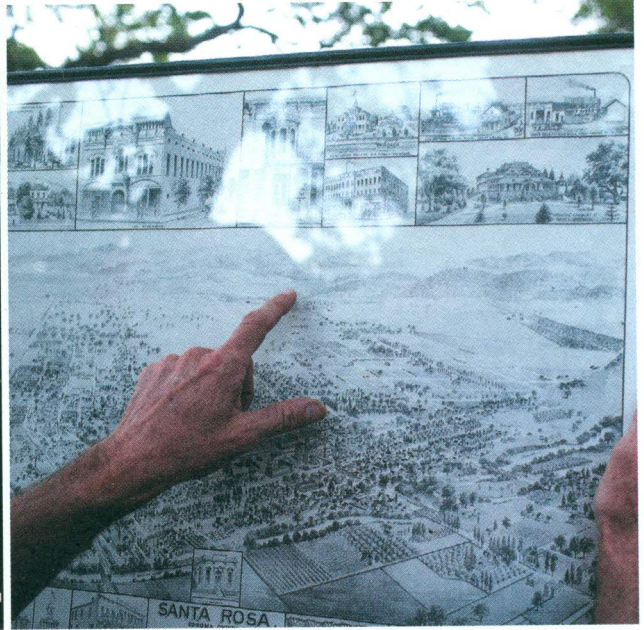
"The week that was announced was the same week my current partner Hans Heim left Santa Cruz [where he had been president and general manager for 10 years]. He and Rob Roskopp built that up big and I'd been watching Hans my whole career - he was an early employee at Specialized, he was at Kestrel for a bit and he was half of Bontrager Cycles; the guy who helped Keith build that before they sold it to Trek. He was integral to all the companies he was involved with.

"He approached me when the bankruptcy was announced. I was angry about it all and not interested in starting Ibis up again, but Hans and I worked out a way we could get the company out of bankruptcy cleanly.

"He had a non-compete when he left Santa Cruz so when we reformed the company with our third partner, Tom Morgan, we all got together and decided where we wanted to go. I'd had the last couple of years off, away from Ibis, being able to ride my bike midday, midweek if I wanted and that was a personal goal of mine to be able to continue like that. Tom and Hans both live in Santa Cruz so the company would be down there, but I'd be up here - it's a luxury I'm afforded as founder. There are times I'm down there a lot - like we just launched the Ripley and I was down there for three weeks solid - and other times when I just work from home."

When your home is a place like Santa Rosa, temperate and surrounded by good riding, you can see why you wouldn't want to leave too often. We rode from Scot's house through the affluent suburbs of Santa Rosa, then off-road through a series of interlinking city, then regional, then state parks on increasingly enjoyable trails, all of which were legal.

Nicol may be about to enter his seventh decade but he had the measure of us on our ride, casually putting us into oxygen debt on the climbs and dropping us like stones on the descents. On the flat sections he'd show off some of that soil science knowledge, reeling off the Latin names of the plants that lined the singletrack.



We were only a few miles from Marin County but the legal status of mountain biking, and the public's attitude towards mountain bikers, couldn't have been more different. Sonoma just seemed much more laid back. We even exchanged good-natured chat with the horse riders we came across – a world of difference to Novato, where we'd ridden with Mark Weir a few days earlier.

Ibis Reborn

As it turned out, Heim's non-compete clause when he left Santa Cruz was one of the best things that could have happened to the new Ibis. It meant that when they began work on the Mojo, they had three years to get the project ready for the market – an unparalleled amount of time in the bike industry.

"Most of the industry is working on a one-year product development cycle, and consequently product development tends to be incremental and maybe not that significant. We're not tied into that cycle; we're not tied into those constraints. With the Mojo we'd had a three-year time frame. We'd spent 2,000 hours on the CAD machine and countless hours on the development, and so when the Mojo came out in 2005 we were way ahead, no-one was doing full carbon fibre dual suspension all-mountain bikes.

"It was a bike you could use for all-day riding – it's what I rode today – but it does well wherever because of the kinematics of the dw-link. That bike really leapfrogged a lot of the market. It was a real revelation at the time and we feel like we have to exceed that all the time."

Ibis grew differently second time around.

"We had more employees in the old company than we do in the new one, but our revenues are probably five times what they ever were then and we're on a pretty strong upward trajectory. I'm really excited about where we're going now – the next six months are going to be really good. We're pinning it right now."

The new Ripley, particularly, is a step up in innovation. When we visited the Ibis factory a week later in Santa Cruz we got to see the deconstructed linkage in action and it's really quite something. Designed with Dave Weagle, it's a revised dw-link, using two eccentric links built into the seat tube to achieve what in other designs typically requires two external links. It's like that because the traditional dw linkage adds to chainstay length, something Ibis wanted to avoid on the Ripley 29er. It seems to have worked – Brian Lopes rode one to ninth place at the Sea Otter downhill and placed 15th on the same bike in round one of the Enduro World Series a couple of weeks later.



Terroir

One of the things we'd been talking about on our travels is what makes California the place that can sell bikes to the rest of the world. Is there something in the world of mountain biking equivalent to *terroir* in the world of wine – the concept that climate, geography, and geology all interact with a grape's genetics to produce wine unique to an area. Knowing Nicol to be a wine connoisseur, I posed the question to him.

"We're building bikes that we want to ride on the terrain we want to ride them on. One of the reasons we were slow getting a 29er out is that where we ride in Santa Cruz the trails are tight, and that's conducive to a 26-inch wheel bike.

"On one hand that sort of connection produces really good results, but other times it can restrict you from success in bigger world markets. I like to ride my bikes in places where wine grapes grow. I don't like riding in the tropics – I find it miserable. I like riding in this kind of climate, where we don't have a ton of rain and where we have so much sun. That's a huge part of why I do what I do. But we can't just build California-centric bikes; we really have to look outside our geographic area, and we are. Before the Ripley was released

we made sure we had endurance racers riding it in muddy races in the north west, and that really changed the development process. We had two different pivot systems and one of them won out. We have to consciously get out there and seek out different terrain."

On the subject of wine, Nicol is an obsessive. His '60s-built house doesn't have any kind of climate control – except in one room, the cellar. There were over 800 bottles of wine in it when we visited, mostly from the US and Italy.

"I've got a drinking problem," Scot told us. "I don't drink it fast enough."

We sat with Nicol on the veranda as the late spring evening faded, talking about how a small company like Ibis remains relevant and keeps up in the modern world.

"You could look at it in a lot of ways. Some musicians spend their careers upsetting their original fans; similarly artists like Mark Rothko or Richard Serra have ended up in a completely different place to where they started. For us, we want to keep it interesting, but being relevant is almost secondary – we want to make the bikes we want to ride."

