

THE SOMM JOURNAL



SIXTH SENSE OF PLACE

**AT RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS,
JUSTIN SEIDENFELD IS
STEWARDED A NEW ERA**

*Justin Seidenfeld is senior
vice president of winegrowing
and winemaking at Rodney
Strong Vineyards.*



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Privileges, Perks, and a Culture of Respect



PHOTO: GRACE SYUFKOSKY

Wesam Kawa, Advanced Sommelier and general manager at Christopher's at Wrigley Mansion in Phoenix, AZ, with SOMM Journal publisher/editor-in-chief Meridith May.

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All of us at *The SOMM Journal* are proud to introduce you to the wines we feature in every issue: Knowing that we are reaching such a close-knit community of professionals excites us and motivates us to tell their stories.


.....

ONE REASON FOR working hard and keeping pace with the wine industry through our publications is the perks. Perks for me come in the form of meeting fascinating people, finding great restaurants through my travels and in my home state of Arizona, and, of course, having the privilege of tasting incredible wines.

I created my SOMM Joury column to highlight my new discoveries, namely wines that are small-production and lesser known but deserving of the national attention *The SOMM Journal* can offer. In this issue, I go Trailside with Master Sommelier Carlton McCoy Jr.; sing the praises of Cecchi's new Coevo release; explore Thomas T Thomas Vineyards in the Alexander Valley and Sonoma County winery Innumero; and sample the bottlings of Cortonesi in Montalcino, Tuscany. But my discoveries don't stop there: I also meet with Advanced Sommelier Wesam Kawa to discuss his wine brand, DuCoeur, and try the latest vintages from Napa Valley's Priest Ranch.

All of us at *The SOMM Journal* are proud to introduce you to the wines we feature in every issue: Knowing that we are reaching such a close-knit community of professionals excites us and motivates us to tell their stories, whether we've experienced them during winery visits, portfolio tastings, or SOMM Camps and other prestigious events.

This issue, for example, we visit the Four Graces and Résonance wineries in Oregon; recap Premiere Napa Valley and a Ram's Gate luncheon in Chicago; announce the winner of the Best Sommelier of the Americas competition; follow the Russian River Valley Wine Tour in Washington, D.C.; attend CAB Camp in Paso Robles; and travel to Spain and Chile.

We live in a world driven by competition, yet the most profound rewards come not from personal accolades and achievement but from the recognition of others' talents. Hopefully this recognition cultivates a culture of respect and enriches all of our lives in turn. 

Meridith May

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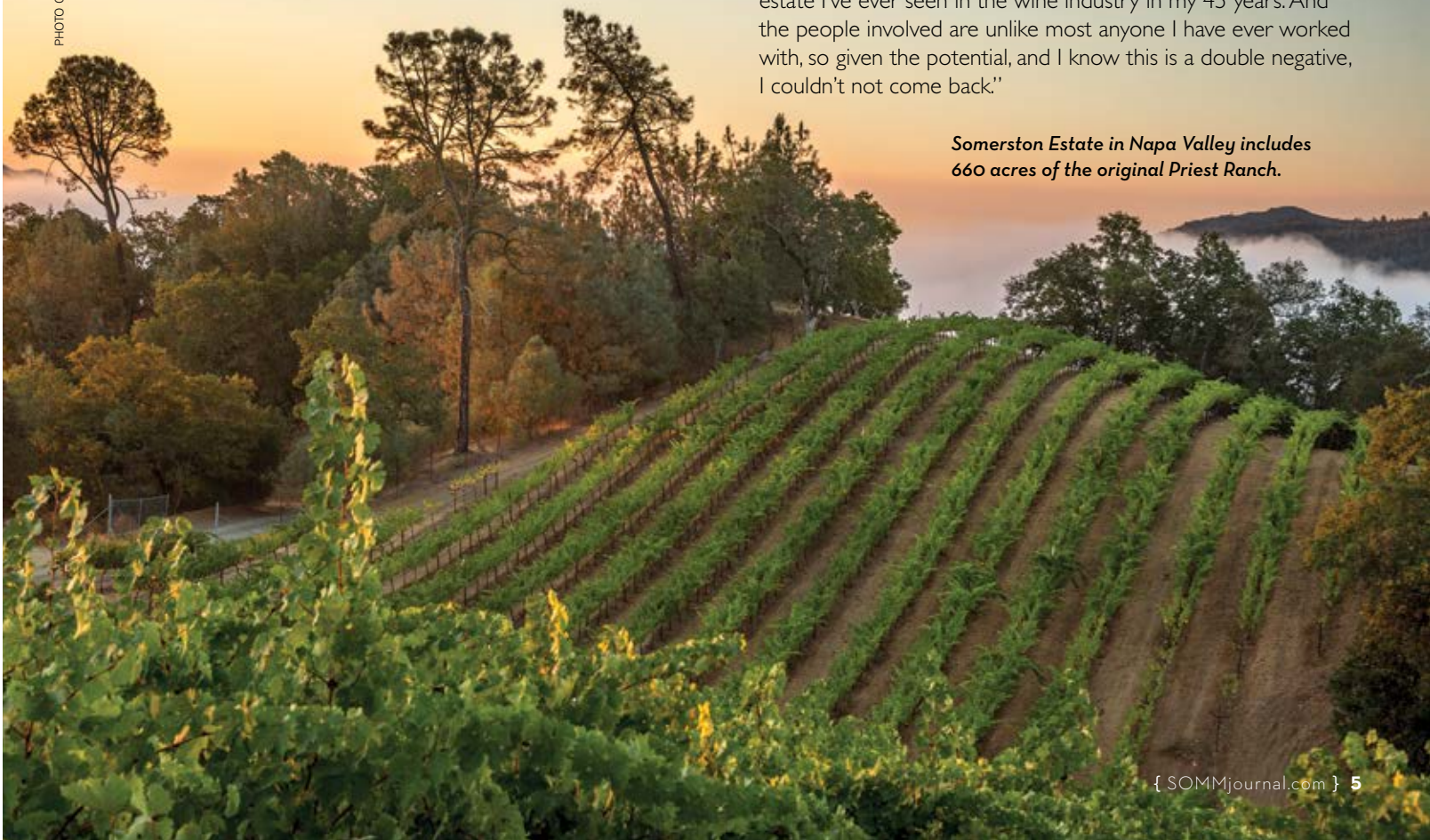
EXPLORING THE GENESIS OF
PRIEST RANCH'S ASCENDANCY

by Jessie Birschbach

THREE YEARS AGO, industry veteran Judd Wallenbrock realized he was failing at retirement. Continuing to employ the immense depth of his experience, Wallenbrock found himself consulting nearly full time, but the work lacked the gratification of being part of something larger and more meaningful. So when a recruiter called to ask if he knew of anyone with the right qualifications to run Napa-based sister wineries Somerston Estate and Priest Ranch as CEO, he enthusiastically suggested himself: "I knew the property really, really well and there's no place like it," he says. "It really is the most stunning estate I've ever seen in the wine industry in my 45 years. And the people involved are unlike most anyone I have ever worked with, so given the potential, and I know this is a double negative, I couldn't not come back."

Somerston Estate in Napa Valley includes 660 acres of the original Priest Ranch.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PRIEST RANCH



Priest Ranch CEO Judd Wallenbrock and winemaker Cody Hurd.



Although the inaugural release of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah from the 2007 vintage by founding winemaker Craig Becker and co-founder Allan Chapman marked the official beginning of Priest Ranch, the property has one of the longest histories in Napa Valley. In 1869, prospector James Joshua Priest settled there to raise cattle while planting about 20 acres of Zinfandel and Chasselas. His descendents sold the ranch in the 1960s, and Chapman purchased 660 acres of it in 2004; two years later, he bought the adjoining Elder Valley property, merging the two into what's now known as the Somerston Estate. "So what we've got are two valleys and a mountain in the middle of them that goes up about 1,600 feet. The slopes are very steep. [Both properties] combined total 1,682 acres, of which around 230 are planted. The rest is just wildlife. It's just beautiful, beautiful terrain. . . . You can't beat the terroir out of this place with a stick," says Wallenbrock with a laugh.

Those 230 acres of hillside vineyards range in elevation from 850 to 1,615 feet, and the striking terroir expressed by the wines becomes all the more extraordinary when considering that the Priest Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon retails at just \$60—about half the price of other mountain estate-grown Napa Cabs. Adam Barringer,

founder of Florida's SoNapa Grille restaurant chain, recently called Priest Ranch his everyday Cabernet Sauvignon on his podcast, *Grapes & Debates*. "I'm going to church," quipped Barringer. "Give me the Priest—it's my go-to Cab."

The quality and price also make "the Priest" a reliable by-the-glass Cab for savvy wine buyers like industry veteran Bella Lantsman, general manager and partner at Chinois on Main in Santa Monica. When chef Wolfgang Puck opened Chinois' doors 33 years ago, Lanstman started as its bookkeeper and worked her way up through the company while helping to build the restaurant's wine list from 48 SKUs to over 350 mostly Californian and French wines—some rare, all thoughtfully vetted—so if there's anyone who understands value in wine, it's Lantsman. "We serve [Priest Ranch] by the glass because it is a small estate wine from Napa that is rich and bold and yet very drinkable," she explains. "It's also extremely well priced given how pricey most Napa Cabs are these days. It's very well received by our customers."

As the producer's entry-level wine, Priest Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon is just the beginning of its offerings featuring mountain-grown Cabernet. The Priest Ranch Snake Oil Cabernet—whose name was inspired by the carbonated spring

water James Joshua Priest bottled and claimed as having health benefits—is sourced from part of the property on the eastern side of the Vaca mountain range and retails for a higher price than the estate Cab, but it's well worth its value.

Winemaker Cody Hurd, of course, is inclined to agree. Hurd started as a cellar worker for Somerston Estate nearly two decades ago and was promoted from assistant winemaker to winemaker in 2022, which has been bittersweet in the wake of Becker's death last year. Hurd remains devoted to Becker's minimal-intervention philosophy, and Priest Ranch's Snake Oil Cab is among the wines of which he's most proud. Hurd is not only in constant contact with director of viticulture Jake Knobloch through each step of the growing process, he and his wife live among the vines. "Living at the estate has given me an intimate knowledge and relationship with every vineyard block," says Hurd. "I go for walks around the property weekly and am always monitoring the progress of the vineyard throughout the season. There are many blocks that stand out for their own unique characteristics, but the blocks that always top the list are in the Everest section of our vineyards. These are all Cabernet Sauvignon, and they are the highest-elevation vineyards that we have, planted

at 1,615 feet . . . with mostly western exposure. These are on 110R rootstock and [include] a variety of great Cabernet clones. The soils are well drained, and the vines produce small grapes with great concentration. These blocks will typically be featured in our Snake Oil Cab Sauv.”

Wallenbrock’s similar ability to harness the potential of Priest Ranch and spread the gospel of its wines has been reflected in his creative approach to the producer’s branding. “We bill ourselves as the ‘eclectic epicurean estate’ because we do things a little bit differently: The last thing we’re going to offer is a charcuterie board at Priest Ranch, but we will offer a bacon and wine tasting, or a dirt tasting, or a pumpkin seed tasting, and things like that,” he says.

But the producer’s promotion of good food and drink doesn’t end at the doors of its tasting room: In 2023, Wallenbrock and his team opened The Kitchen at Priest Ranch, a fast-casual American restaurant that adjoins their tasting room in Yountville. The space opts to avoid competing with Napa’s fine-dining establishments and offers breakfast and lunch items like its beloved smashburger, leaving it open in the evenings for promotional brand activations and private events.



GM/partner Bella Lantsman serves Priest Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon by the glass at Chinois on Main in Santa Monica, CA.

Priest Ranch also shows its “eclectic epicurean” side through events held outside its own spaces. This year, Joel Quigley, Priest Ranch’s director of business development and national activations, organized a musical showcase celebrating the beloved *Garden State* soundtrack at the Hollywood home of celebrity chef Bob Blumer, who curated a bevy of small bites to pair with Priest Ranch wines while musical guest Cary Brothers sang songs like his hit from the album, “Blue Eyes.”

Drawing from the first decade of his



Chinois’ slow-braised lamb shank and wasabi potato puree paired with the Priest Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon.

career, which he spent under the wing of iconic winemaker Robert Mondavi, Wallenbrock attributes Priest Ranch’s creative approach to Mondavi’s mantra: wine, food, and the arts. “That’s Arts with a capital ‘A,’ and I’m just carrying his torch,” says Wallenbrock. “But you’ve got to enjoy wine and food in the way that’s right for you. It can be the symphony and a bottle of Haut-Brion at The French Laundry or

a bottle of Priest Ranch Cab, a pizza, and *The White Lotus* on [HBO] or anything in between. It’s the combination of these things that make wine easier to enjoy, and frankly, that’s what the industry needs right now, right?” One could argue that devoting ourselves to the refined enjoyment of food and drink is what the world needs right now, so here’s to spreading the gospel of Priest Ranch. **sj**

Tasting Notes

Priest Ranch 2023 Estate Grown Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$30) An articulate Sauv Blanc sparked by an array of flavors: white pepper, cucumber, honey-suckle, peach, grapefruit zest, and kiwi. An underlying creaminess softens the wine’s racy acidity. **94** —Meridith May

Priest Ranch 2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$60) Taste the soil: sweet and generous, threaded with minerality and espresso. Suede tannins are sleek and faintly dusted with dark chocolate. Black plum is introduced, graceful and poignant, alongside new leather and cedar sprinkled with nutmeg. **95** —M.M.

Priest Ranch 2019 Remedy, Napa Valley (\$85) A blend of 32% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Cabernet Franc, 24% Merlot, and 20% Malbec aged 27 months in (75% new) French oak. Plush tannins are amped by melting dark chocolate that’s a bit grainy but ultimately luscious in texture. Boysenberry ganache, soy sauce, and new leather take a sensuous pause on the palate, unleashing a windfall of violets on the long-lasting finish. **98** —M.M.

Priest Ranch 2019 Snake Oil Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$110) Creamy, velvety chocolate licorice indicates the soft tannins and sleek structure of this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon grown on hillsides as high as 1,600 feet above sea level and aged for 26 months in (75% new) French oak. Notes of tree bark, graphite, and blackberry cake surround the palate; spiced cedar braces against the tongue, while black tea and black plum are streamlined on the finish. **98** —M.M.

Priest Ranch wines are available for purchase at priest ranchwines.com.

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SAVOR THE COLORS OF TIME

CHATEAU DE SELLE, CÔTES DE PROVENCE ROSÉ

AS SEEN BY ETIENNE FRANCEY

DOMAINES

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97

POINTS

PUBLISHERS' PICK

THE *tastingpanel* MAGAZINE

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94

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Summer Sipping With Somms

WARDROBES AREN'T THE ONLY THINGS that need swapping out when the seasons change; our palates are thirsty to be revived with new flavors. Hot and sunny summer days are the perfect time to explore refreshing wines, so I asked four fabulous sommeliers for their sipping suggestions.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TOMOHIRO SATO



Tomohiro Sato is owner and sommelier at Creston on New York City's Lower East Side.

Cozy up to Koshu

"As a Japanese wine professional living in New York, I'm proud to introduce Koshu—Japan's iconic white grape—as a perfect summer wine," says Tomohiro Sato, owner/sommelier at Creston in New York City. "With its delicate citrus aroma, crisp acidity, and gentle minerality, Koshu is refreshingly elegant and wonderfully food-friendly. Served chilled, it complements the season's lighter fare and warm evenings. Koshu brings a breath of Mount Fuji's breeze to the heart of Manhattan—offering a subtle, serene taste of Japan in every glass. I personally recommend pairing Koshu with some of the city's finest summer fare—think oysters from Long Island, fresh farmers-market vegetables, or delicately prepared sushi and sashimi. One of my top picks is **Aruga Branca from Katsunuma Winery**, a beautifully crafted Koshu from Yamanashi that captures the purity and finesse of the variety."

PHOTO: GARY HE



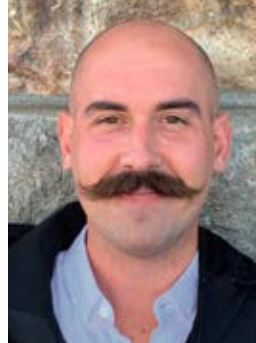
Mia Van de Water, MS, is partner and director of education and beverage operations at Gracious Hospitality Management.

Bring on the Bubbles

"While we love extolling the delights of sparkling wine year round at [New York City restaurant] COQODAQ and [Miami and New York steakhouses] COTE, as they are truly the most versatile of wines tableside, there's something especially delightful about bubbles in the summertime," enthuses Gracious Hospitality Management partner Mia Van de Water, MS. "Champagne is always a go-to, of course, but we are increasingly impressed by the quality of traditional-method wines around the globe, whether from classic sources like Spain and Northern Italy or up-and-comers like Tasmania and Southern England. Right now, we are obsessed with **Lena Singer-Fischer's Blanc de Blancs Sekt** [from Germany],

which is magical, profoundly mineral, and as good as or better than any artisanal sparkling we have tasted anywhere. At COTE, we think it's a perfect pairing with our beloved steak and eggs (filet mignon tartare topped with Petrossian caviar), whereas at COQODAQ, we would enjoy it throughout the meal!"

PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT GANT



Matt Gant is sommelier at Sakonnet Vineyard in Little Compton, RI.

Alpine Altitude, Summer Attitude

"Summer is the perfect time for Alpine wines—high-altitude . . . regions producing elegant, complex wines with pure focus," notes Matt Gant, sommelier at Rhode Island's Sakonnet Vineyard. "These wines are true expressions of their [cool] microclimates, crafted through traditions that have resisted globalization. This summer, I'm all in on the Alto Adige region of

Northern Italy. . . Two of my favorite producers [are] Falkenstein and Kuenhof—both [have] deep family roots in winemaking and a legacy of excellence. My recommendations: **Falkenstein Südtirol Riesling** and **Kuenhof Südtirol Grüner Veltliner**. Both are crisp, vibrant, and absolutely perfect for hot summer days. They pair effortlessly with everything you crave in the sunshine—fresh crudités, raw bar delights, [and] cheese and cured meats, [plus] even rich Alpine classics like fondue or dishes loaded with butter and cream."

PHOTO: SEBASTIAN SMITH



Lara Michole Tillotson is sommelier at Gabriel Kreuther, a two-MICHELIN-starred French restaurant in New York City.

Riesling and Rosé All Day

"For me, summer is all about Riesling and rosé," says Lara Michole Tillotson, sommelier at Gabriel Kreuther in New York City. "I love a steely Mosel Trocken with fresh oysters. A rich Austrian Smaragd or robust Alsatian expression is perfect for grilled fare. And summer wouldn't be summer without great rosé! My go-to will always be a good Txakolina. They're spritzzy and quaffable enough to just enjoy in the sun but

with complexity and depth that make them very food-friendly. There are plenty of tasty examples, but **Ameztoi Rubentis** is what's always in my refrigerator!"

Wanda Mann is a Certified Specialist of Wine and the founder of winewithwanda.com. Follow her on Instagram @winedinewanda.

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Let's Get Physical

WHY YOU SHOULD LOVE DOING INVENTORY

MOST SOMMELIERS are enamored with the intellectual aspect of their job. They'll happily list crus of Beaujolais from north to south or the subregions of South Australia. The technical requirements of beverage program management, however, leave them cold. Look, I get it—after a busy weekend of service, the last thing you probably want to do is a physical inventory. Yet it is the most valuable tool you have to ensure your program is

area in the same order. Count by the smallest sub-unit (consistent with your sales tracking). If you have the same wine in multiple locations, ensure you have a space to record each area separately and then add the total in an extension column. This way, you can easily see if a call was missed—for example for wines by the glass from the service bar. Consistency is your first line of defense against missed counts and other errors.



running profitably and accurately. It's also the best way to determine order needs for the upcoming period and the most accurate window into the health and status of your program, your stock, and your cost of goods.

Best Practices

The most important aspect of your physical inventory is consistency: Develop a rigorous routine. It should always occur at the same time and be done in the same way. It doesn't matter how often you inventory; whatever the frequency, do it with the same people performing the same role in the same order. Having the same individuals perform their respective repetitive tasks breeds familiarity and insulates against mistakes. Always start in the same area and move through that

The Usual Suspects

There are going to be periods where variances in actual CoGS (cost of goods sold) compared to theoretical CoGS are significant enough to indicate potential issues. It's worth noting that positive variances are just as problematic as negative variances and that it's important to be able to explain not just *what* the numbers are but *why* they are. Typically, significant variances are the result of these more common issues:

- **MISCOUNT:** Either an item was double counted or was not fully counted.
- **DATA INPUT ERROR:** Inventories often happen late at night when everyone is tired. It is quite easy to inaccurately enter a line-item count. Ensure you have a system of checks. For instance, have two parties input the extensions, one in

the master document and another in a copy. Then have one person read back the counts to identify and correct any discrepancies.

- **INVOICING ISSUE:** Ensure all your invoices are recorded properly and factored into purchases. Be careful they aren't double-entered.
- **UNRECORDED PRICE CHANGE:** In a perfect world, every distributor would proactively communicate price and vintage changes. Alas, this is the real world and that rarely happens. Be sure to check every invoice for price increases (often correlated to new vintages) and that they are recorded as new line items.
- **LACK OF PROPER PORTION CONTROL:** If you don't have a mechanism for measuring pours, your CoGS can fluctuate dramatically.

The Not-So-Usual Suspects

- **FORMULA ERRORS:** Make sure your formulas are locked so that you don't inadvertently change one. If you add new line items, ensure they are included in the calculations.
- **THEFT/SHRINKAGE:** We all know it happens and there's not a whole lot to be done about it. However, if it's consistently impacting your CoGS, then you have a big problem to solve.
- **UNRECORDED BREAKAGE:** Foster an environment where your staff feels safe to communicate breakage. Accidents happen, and if they know there are no ramifications for accidentally breaking a bottle, they'll report it.
- **IMPROPER POS PROGRAMMING:** If a new item is not reporting to the correct cost center, you won't get the revenue credit. The most common version of this is cloning the "open food" button to "open wine." The revenue will go to food even though the cost is in wine.

While physical inventory might not be the most fun thing you do, it's a valuable tool that will give you an accurate snapshot of your program and help you diagnose any potential issues. Bonus: It makes figuring out your orders easy, especially if you are restoring pars. So get physical and enjoy the benefits that come with it! **\$**

FELINO

ARGENTINA IN A GLASS

93
points

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VIÑA COBOS





From Headwinds to Harsh Reality

THE WINE INDUSTRY IS FACING A BRAVE NEW WORLD

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, I've heard dozens of wine pros say the wine industry is facing "headwinds" and then shrug them off as just part of a normal economic cycle.

It makes me want to scream.

We are facing way more than headwinds. Wine's current situation is both unprecedented and precarious. It's time to stop rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. If we don't act, I'm afraid that the wine industry we all know and love will disappear right in front of our eyes.

If this seems alarmist, I can only offer a few thoughts for your consideration. Let me share, for example, an excerpt from the World Health Organization's "Guide for Journalists." This is the published guide that any writer in the world is supposed to abide by when they write about wine or any alcohol. Point number six reads: "Alcohol-related social harms include: violence, vandalism, child abuse and maltreatment, public disorder, property damage, divorce, marital problems, financial problems, work related problems, work accidents and other social costs."

There's a very critical point embedded here. The attack against wine has shifted

beyond health concerns to morality.

What person can be for violence, child abuse, and vandalism? No one. And that is why the work of anti-alcohol forces is now gaining a new level of traction and why the spread of this false "moral message" is so insidious. When a society begins to change its moral idea of a product, it's very hard to change back.

We know too that there are seismic demographic forces that are negatively shaping the industry. American baby boomers (70% of whom are white) are aging out as wine drinkers, while Gen Z consumers—50% of whom are a mixture of races—are not yet adopting wine very quickly. It seems to me that for these younger consumers—many of whom came of legal-drinking age during the pandemic—wine is not the problem. Isolation is. For them, screen-to-screen time has replaced face-to-face communication. For a communal beverage like wine, this huge cultural shift does not bode well. In the new zeitgeist, a bottle of Caymus Cabernet must compete with a single-serving Chili Mango Buzzball.

And as compared to even 20 years

ago, the "mood-adjustment dollar" is now often being split with cannabis. In what is being hailed as the "Champagne-to-cannabis switch," cannabis beverage companies are actively branding wine as uncool, risky, and replete with "morning-after effects," all while co-opting wine's narrative as a beverage of moderation. One cannabis advertisement I recently read claimed that unlike wine, "Cannabis drinks build moderation and mindfulness right into the experience."

None of the above is a mere headwind. None of the above is part of a normal economic cycle that the wine industry has faced before.

No. We are in a brave new world. It's time for each of us to stand up, share our passion, and turn others on to the joy of wine—a beverage that for 8,000 years has brought people together. Will it do that for even 80 more? *sj*

Karen MacNeil is the author of The Wine Bible, the CEO of WineSpeed, and the cofounder of the national campaigns Come Over October and Share & Pair Sundays.

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A Matter of When

LIQUOR PIG IN SCOTTSDALE, AZ, IS A LABOR OF LOVE TWO DECADES IN THE MAKING

ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON at Liquor Pig in Scottsdale, Arizona, beverage manager and sommelier Scott Casey pours us both glasses of Bodega Bueyes La Jirafa y el Enano Criolla Grande. The Argentine red wine has been chosen to complement the Libertine Board before me—a lavish spread featuring roasted bone marrow slathered in oxtail marmalade, steak tartare accented with Sherry agrodolce, and foie gras ganache with huckleberry mostarda beneath a thatch of duck confit floss. “It’s a light red, and served chilled it

establishment Different Pointe of View in Phoenix, where they forged an enduring friendship. In the ensuing years, they honed their craft at various venues while collaborating as consultants: Smith earned devoted followers at such Arizona hot spots as Noca, Fat Ox, and Atria, whereas Casey, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, achieved his Advanced credentials from the Associazione Italiana Sommelier as he worked at establishments across the country, including Daniel in New York City, Spago in

it started my love affair with pasta.” Braised and breaded pork schnitzel with mustard spaetzle and bacon red cabbage pays homage to his wife’s German heritage. And a dish of fried, pickled, and brandy-braised mushrooms is a refined ode to his love of fungi. “Then we add mushroom sponge cake and paper made from tapioca starch and mushroom trimmings dried and ground into a powder,” explains Smith.

Casey, meanwhile, curates his beverage selections with Smith in mind. “Around 80% of my list is built around his food,



Liquor Pig GM/beverage manager Scott Casey and executive chef Steven “Chops” Smith.

works perfectly,” Casey explains, swirling his glass. “It has tannic structure but doesn’t overpower the food.”

This thoughtful pairing exemplifies the synergy between Casey and executive chef Steven “Chops” Smith at their new restaurant, which opened in March of this year. “We’ve been talking about this forever,” says Smith, reflecting on the co-owners’ winding path. Their connection began in the early 2000s at fine-dining

West Hollywood, and Lon’s at the Hermosa Inn in Phoenix. “I always knew this would finally happen,” says Casey. “It was just a matter of when and where.”

The menu reflects Smith’s diverse background, with “every dish sharing my story,” he says. Milk-braised veal papardelle nods to a dish from early in his career; when he was tasked with making something “more rustic” (read: economical), he recalls: “I came up with this and



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

Liquor Pig’s Libertine Board with roasted bone marrow and oxtail marmalade, steak tartare, foie gras ganache, and more.

with lesser-known varietals like Timorasso, Kerner, and Gamay, which I think are underrepresented,” he says. “But we also have showcase-style wines like Domaine Jean-Louis Chave Hermitage. It’s hard to find in Arizona, so to have that benchmark is phenomenal.”

True to the restaurant’s name, the cocktail program, led by Matthew Crisp, is equally noteworthy. It ranges from playful concoctions such as the popular Spam Folder, a tiki-style sipper garnished with a slice of Spam and served in its can, or the indulgent Diamond Eyes, which features olive oil-washed potato vodka gilded with caviar perched on a water cracker.

The partners now welcome guests with the same camaraderie that defines their friendship. “It’s time for us to share our skill sets and hospitality,” says Casey. “This is our home, and we’re here to take care of you.”

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by Deborah Parker Wong



Blind Mind's Eye

LACK OF VISUAL IMAGERY ISN'T A TASTING HANDICAP

IN HIS LATEST BOOK, *Message in the Bottle: A Guide to Tasting Wine*, Master Sommelier Tim Gaiser writes about a technique for manipulating mental images in order to deconstruct the flavor profile of wine. It's a visualization technique that he's perfected and that can be used by anyone who can see with their mind's eye. But for the small percentage of individuals with aphantasia, or the inability to generate mental images, the exercise can be replicated with verbal clues in lieu of visual clues.

The term *aphantasia* has been around since 2015. It was coined by Adam Zeman, a professor of cognitive and behavioral neurology at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, based on the classical Greek term for imagination, *phantasia*, defined by Aristotle as the "faculty/power by which a phantasma [image or mental representation] is presented to us."

Zeman's work is based on a famous "breakfast table" experiment conducted in 1880 by Sir Francis Galton, who studied the vividness of mental imagery. Galton asked participants to recall and describe their breakfast table, focusing on brightness and color, definition, and scale. His

experiments revealed that some individuals had strong mental imagery, while others struggled to visualize anything or saw nothing at all, illustrating the phenomenon now known as aphantasia.

Anywhere from 1% to 4% of the population is affected by aphantasia, meaning their mind's eye is effectively blind. This condition can be congenital or occur as the result of an injury, as in the case of the patient that Zeman studied, who suffered aphantasia following heart surgery. Researchers attribute it to a disruption of the brain's visuospatial sketchpad, a component of working memory that reduces the vividness of mental images when information is being retrieved from long-term storage.

In an article for *Nautilus*, "My Brain Doesn't Picture Things," author Marco Giancotti explains that the only thing he sees when prompted to visualize everyday objects is "the dark underside of my eyelids." With as many as one out of every 25 people experiencing aphantasia, it's common enough to require alternatives to traditional visualization techniques often used in behavior modification and psychotherapy.

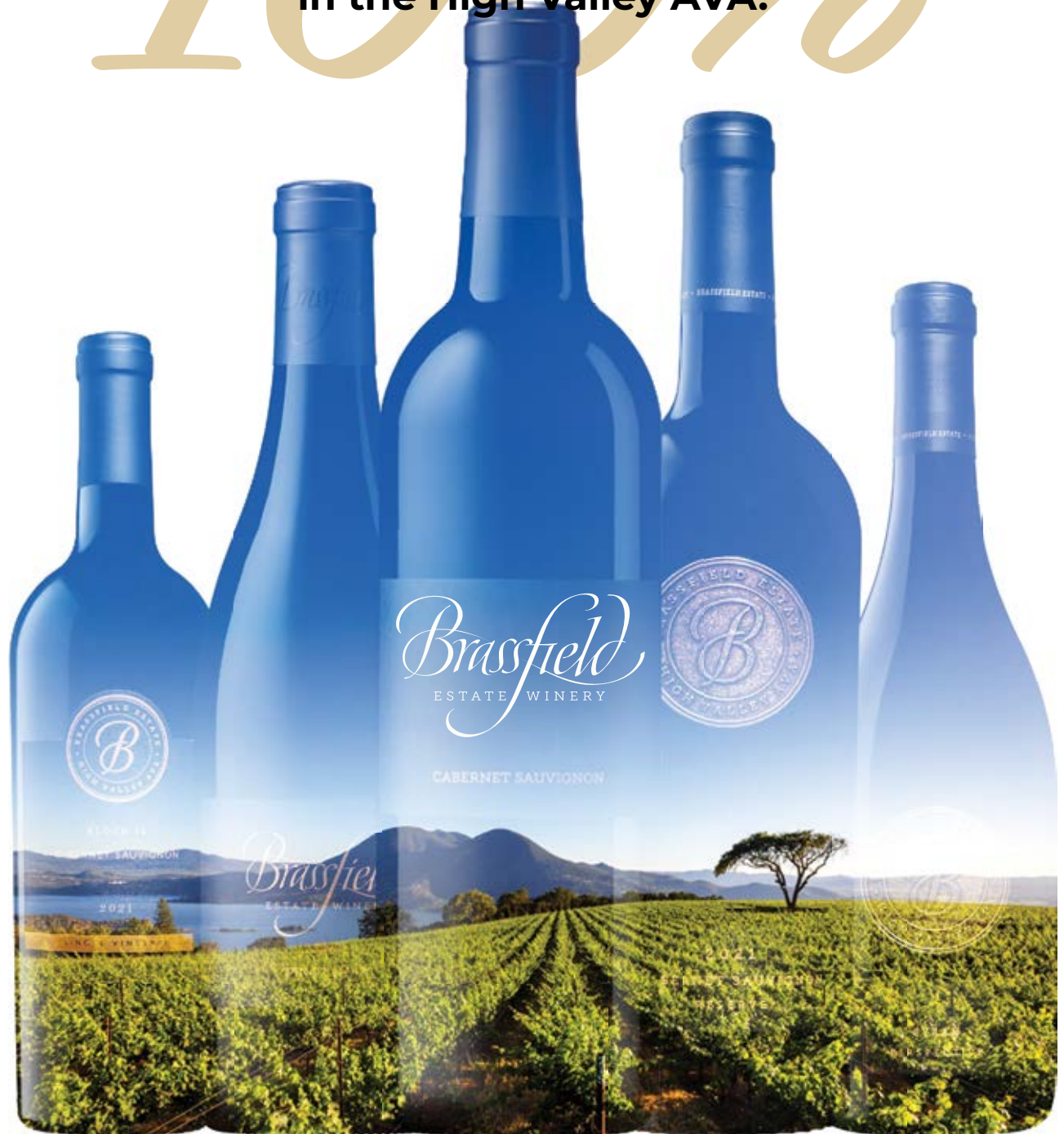
According to Giancotti, confusion about aphantasia comes primarily from the assumption that "imagination" and "forming mental images" are the same thing. He can form spatial thoughts, but without any accompanying imagery, "I'm fully aphantasic, including sight, smell, taste, and sound, unlike others who have low levels of imagery [yet] do dream in images," he says.

The consensus among researchers is that aphantasia is a normal variation in human cognition. It doesn't meet the criteria to be called a disability largely because aphantasics use different, less direct or alternative cognitive strategies for recall of visual memories and, unlike Giancotti, typically have the ability to imagine sounds, flavors, or other non-visual sensations.

The good news for aphanatics is that there are alternative cognitive strategies for tasks that involve mental imagery that lead to equally successful results. "While many tasters use internal imaging to recognize and remember aromas and flavors in a glass of wine, other modalities such as auditory and kinesthetic can also be effective and useful," says Gaiser. **SP**

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In Bloom

MARIGOLD IN LYONS, CO, IS A MARVELOUS “SURPRISE AT EVERY TURN”

A TINY BUT shining gem in the likewise tiny town of Lyons, Colorado, Marigold is named for the only Nirvana song to be written by Dave Grohl rather than Kurt Cobain in allusion to the fact that, after 20 years of serving as a chef in someone else’s kitchen, owner Theo Adley is finally leading the band, so to speak. And what a stellar job of it he’s doing. On my recent meal there, course after eye-opening course—from a Caesar salad riff with bagna cauda and gin-washed trout roe to chorizo-stuffed calamari in its own salsa verde—splashed ink to paglia e fieno (“straw and hay”) pasta in rabbit ragu with taleggio and radicchio—reflected what director of operations/sommelier Eric Bronson calls Adley’s “vision to bring something that feels like a neighborhood Williamsburg corner spot mixed with a Parisian brasserie. . . . The food is familiar, but in every single bite there’s going to be something that stands out of the box; [be it] an acidic element or a bit of crunch, there’s a moment of surprise at every turn.”

As the ever-evolving menu goes, so goes the wine list, which is Old World—focused but hardly old-school in keeping with Bronson’s penchant for “introducing people to wines that are different than they normally drink,” as he puts it, and providing “a super-engaging experience [that’s] changing every single night.” He came by that goal honestly. Growing up “as a steak-and-potatoes type of person” in Minnesota, Bronson quickly made up for lost time upon moving to Boulder, where one of his first restaurant employers gave him a copy of the *Sotheby’s World Wine Encyclopedia* that he read from cover to cover in a matter of weeks. Over the course of the next couple of decades spent in and out of the industry, he learned a lot about what



◀ *Marigold* director of operations/sommelier Eric Bronson and chef/owner Theo Adley.

▼ *Marigold’s* rainbow trout a la plancha with crispy jamón, potato, and brassica flowers alongside a chilled glass of Kalma 2023 Lifasi, a Sicilian blend of 60% Nero d’Avola and Merlot and 40% Albanella and Grillo.

hospitality did and didn’t mean to him. A stint at a three-MICHELIN-starred restaurant in New York, for instance, “wasn’t for me—it lacked a lot of soul,” he says. Conversely, working as director of business and development for a culinary school in Los Angeles taught him “how to engage with people on their level that is interesting to them.”

To that end, Bronson is a constant and animated presence in the dining room as he seeks in his words to “connect with people, not give them the heavy enological somm talk.” Recognizing that guests’ acquaintance with, say, Savagnin from the Jura, Muskateller from the Rheinhessen, or Teroldego from Trentino—Alto Adige is likely to be limited, he doesn’t expect to them pore over the wine list line by line; rather, he pops by their tables to come up with a game plan before bringing over a few bottles for them to consider as a group, with the element of surprise remaining top of mind. “I don’t abide by the strict rules of ‘this pairs with these particular types of ingredients,’” he says. “I really try to look at, what is Theo spe-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARIGOLD

cifically trying to create, and what is the story I’m trying to tell?” He recalls a dish of rigatoni in lamb bolognese seasoned with ras el hanout, a North African spice mixture of cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and so on; instead of pairing it with a hearty red, he opted for an orange Malvasia “with high acidity and those beautiful apricotty/dried-fruit flavors” to bring to mind something like a Moroccan tagine rather than an Italian pasta course.

For another example, my companions and I were enchanted on our visit by the chamomile grappa Bronson poured alongside a dessert of saffron-spiced quince clafouti with ginger ice cream. The heady combo exemplified his and Adley’s synergy—and further proved that Marigold’s in gloriously full bloom. **sj**

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May 2025

Faulty Premises and False Assumptions

CAN WE REPAIR THE BROKEN CONNECTION BETWEEN WINE INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS?

RECENT TALK AROUND wine has focused on its ability to forge connections, to bring us together over a glass. I explored this in my column for the October/November 2024 issue of *The SOMM Journal*; Karen MacNeil has written eloquently on this as well, and connection is a main theme of the Come Over October and Share and Pair Sundays campaigns she created with wine publicists Kimberly Charles and Gino Colangelo. As the wine community faces strong market headwinds, focusing on connection allows us to highlight what makes wine special to each of us.

But what if the connection is broken?

This question came to me as I listened to an audio version of a delightful but jarring short story by James Kaelen titled “Côte de Nuits,” which was published in issue 77 of *Timothy McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*, a literary magazine. The protagonist, Amelia, is a Level 3 sommelier at a two-MICHELIN-starred restaurant in San Diego “who intuitively gauges the credit card limits of her guests to devastating effect.”

Kaelen name-checks Domaine Leroy, Rudolf Steiner, and the biodynamic practice of stuffing “the fermented manure of a lactating cow” in a horn and burying it in the vineyard. This isn’t meant to educate the reader about wine but rather to make it sound silly and pretentious. Amelia has become disaffected, despising both the wine and the customers who flaunt their wealth by buying it. Her goal isn’t service, but conquest: She’s more concerned about the bonus money for the kitchen staff from the sale of an expensive bottle than the comfort and pleasure of her customer.

“Amelia had discovered that she was good at ascertaining the wealth of [her] patrons,” Kaelen writes. “She felt nasty doing it, but as a sommelier she found the talent was useful. Guessing wrong could



be dangerous. For some, price was aphrodisiac; for others, it was poison.”

When a couple arrives for a late reservation on a Tuesday, Amelia sizes them up quickly and uncharitably. The woman has just made her first sale as a real estate agent and wants to celebrate with a nice wine, while her indifferent husband asks for a beer. “You only make your first sale once,” Amelia coos, as she guides the vulnerable woman to an exclusive Burgundy recently purchased by a celebrity, preying on the customer’s aspirations for success.

Amelia’s mercenary approach ends disastrously. When I first listened to this story on my morning walk, I chuckled as the calamity unfolded. But as I thought about it, I winced at the tropes it satirized: our fear of being ripped off

than in making customers happy, the whole “emperor’s new clothes” aspect of wine appreciation.

I know many sommeliers who will say “reading the customer” is more about making them comfortable than guessing their credit limit. They work hard to forge multiple connections every service to make each customer happy. “Côte de Nuits” tells a different story, one that reflects a popular image of wine professionals. The persistence of this image suggests a connection broken: We’re not bonding over wine, we’re fighting over it. We’ve become adversaries. Overcoming such negative connotations won’t make for good fiction, but it could make for a better industry. It just takes hard work, one customer at a time. **SP**



AS THE WINE COMMUNITY FACES STRONG MARKET HEADWINDS, FOCUSING ON CONNECTION ALLOWS US TO HIGHLIGHT WHAT MAKES WINE SPECIAL TO EACH OF US.



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by Randy Caparoso

*A handful of compost
in Littorai Wines'
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The Results That Count

WHY THE TIME TO PROMOTE RESPONSIBLY PRODUCED WINES IS NOW

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, I composed a wine list for a client consisting entirely of wines grown organically, biodynamically, and/or sustainably. Symbols next to each selection indicated the farming practices that produced it. But after six months, we abandoned the program. Why? Because guests couldn't care less.

Now, however, the time for eco-conscious wine lists may have finally arrived. There seems to be a growing consensus within the wine industry that not only are consumers starting to care but a small segment of them—particularly younger millennials and Generation Z—are basing their buying decisions on some degree of sustainability.

"Sustainability," of course, is a fuzzy term, and so are the motivations behind its entry into the consumer mainstream. Are they health-related, environmental, or both? A more important question, at least for the on-premise industry: Are these motivations top of mind in restaurant settings, even when the pressure is on for guests to choose a wine appropriate to the occasion—to please a date, to seal a business deal? That may not always be the case yet, but what we do know is this: Consciously grown and crafted wine will only become more important as time goes by.

In March, I revisited two classic California producers to see to what extent they are taking their sustainability efforts. My first stop was Littorai Wines to chat with Ted Lemon, who has been farming or sourcing strictly organic grapes on the Sonoma Coast for no less than 40 years and has been incorporating biodynamic techniques since 2000. Lemon's vineyards are not Demeter-certified, yet I do not know of another winegrower as deeply



Hanzell Vineyards estate manager Jason Jardine.

PHOTOS: RANDY CAPAROSO

immersed in the holistic principles of biodynamics, from all its spiritual and cosmic implications to the intricacies of each and every compost preparation. The proof, of course, has always been in the bottle: Littorai's wines are as ethereal as they can be while tasting of their terroir.

My second stop was Hanzell Vineyards, founded in 1953 on a sun-soaked, west-facing slope in Sonoma's Moon Mountain District. While it's historic in many ways—producing America's first French oak-aged Chardonnays and the first Pinot Noirs to be made in 1-ton open-top stainless-steel fermenters—it's the estate's farming methods that are industry-leading today. Partly to maintain the health and productivity of plants as old as 72 years, Hanzell's estate manager, Jason Jardine, began adopting practices in 2017 that were

meant to "mimic nature"—for instance, by running cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, and geese through the vineyard for weed maintenance and natural fertilizer while tending year-round, untilled cover crops, which are meticulously crimped (i.e., folded over) rather than mowed.

As with Littorai, the only results that count are expressed in the wines: Coming off healthier grapevines yielding physiologically mature grapes at lower sugars, the Hanzell wines are more intense, more tautly balanced, and higher in phenolics and acidity than ever before. This, I think, is what responsibly farmed wines suited to contemporary lists—be they sustainable, "natural," organic, biodynamic, and/or regenerative—should be all about: their intrinsic sensory qualities rather than mere certification labels. **§**

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PHOTO: ALEX STEIN



Harold Moore is chef/owner of Cafe Commerce in New York City.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAFE COMMERCE

Foie gras-stuffed chicken is a signature dish.

Nostalgia Meets the Here and Now

CAFE COMMERCE IN NEW YORK CITY IS THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

by Debbie Thomas

IN A CITY OBSESSED with novelty, chef Harold Moore is betting on something refreshingly different at Cafe Commerce on Manhattan's Upper East Side: familiarity. It's all about the sense of comfort that makes a place feel like home.

"I want to offer dishes you can't just get across the street," Moore says by way of explaining the personal touch he aims to bring to his food. At Cafe Commerce, which opened in January, Moore has revived the spirit of his beloved West Village restaurant, Commerce (which closed in 2015), reimagining it for a new neighborhood while listening intently to the locals who frequent it.

"The customers write the menu," he admits. "You think you know what should be on the menu, but they tell you what stays." Case in point: his chicken stuffed with foie gras, which dates back to his time at Montrachet, the acclaimed Tribeca restaurant where he once cooked. Though the recipe was devised under pressure to use up an excess amount of poultry, the irresistible result became an instant hit and remains a signature dish to this day. Likewise, his coconut cake, already a favorite among regular clientele, took on even greater significance during

the pandemic, when proceeds from its sales were donated to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, ultimately raising \$50,000. Today, some guests stop by just to take a slice home.

Even the decor at Cafe Commerce feels deeply personal. The saffron-hued walls, adorned with a showstopping mural, provide a warm backdrop for classic-meets-modern comfort food. Take the complimentary breadbasket, handmade daily—a quiet gesture of hospitality guests genuinely appreciate.

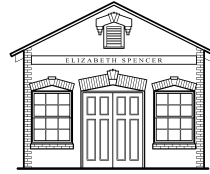
Moore doesn't ignore trends, but they're filtered through his lens. Think, for example, playful takes on luxury ingredients. Caviar? Yes—but served on potato chips with onion dip. Escargot? Absolutely—in the form of butter for sea scallops presented in the shell. As for cocktails, "It's surprising how much that's changed," Moore notes. "Today, cocktails are scrutinized as much as food." His bar team, led by Olivia Balboni, crafts both visually appealing classics and house specialties such as the Agave Stinger with Tres Agaves Tequila, agave, blood orange, and lime and the Gold Rush featuring Maker's Mark, pineapple, honeycomb, and lemon.

Meanwhile, Janet Pouchot's wine list favors quality over quantity, offering a thoughtful selection of French and Californian wines that complement the menu. "Young people are drinking more cocktails than wine," Moore observes. "It's just the reality."

He's already thinking about expanding thoughtfully, perhaps opening a gourmet store that offers prepared foods for the neighborhood's nights in or launching a casual small-plates concept showcasing raw-fish preparations like crudos and tartares alongside boldly flavored cocktails. "I'm always thinking," he confesses. "But it's about not upsetting the balance."

More than anything, Moore's maturity as a chef and restaurateur shines through. Reflecting on his journey since the original Commerce opened in 2008, he's candid: "I'd save more money, be patient, and instill my values more effectively. It takes too much energy to be angry and scream."

If Cafe Commerce is any indication, Moore's patience has paid off. It's not just a revival. It's a restaurant that embraces the qualities that he—and New York City—hold dear now: dynamic, deeply personal, and, above all, meaningful. **sj**



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The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

IN THE OPENING of his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens suggests that certain periods (in his case, the time of the French Revolution) can be simultaneously filled with immense joy and unbearable suffering. The quote is often used to describe the complex and paradoxical nature of human existence, but for me it nails the four-decade period that I have been in the wine business.

In 1985, the industry was rocked by a scandal in which Austrian producers in general and the bestselling imported brand in the U.S., Italy's Riunite, were accused of adding diethylene glycol (DEG) to their wines, prompting a national recall. The controversy set Austria's wine industry back decades. The importer of Riunite was able to prove that the trace amounts came from a leak in a refrigerated tank and that the infected wines were harmless to consumers unless they drank multiple cases of the stuff in an impossibly short session. The voluntary recall nevertheless proceeded, and while the brand maintained its top-selling position for years, its unprecedented growth trajectory was essentially reversed, and a chilling effect set in on all imports.

One might say that it would have been a bad time to get into the imported wine business, but on March 3, 1986, I started working for an Italian wine importer just the same. My justification was akin to the scene in the 1982 movie *The World According to Garp* when a plane crashes into a house that the Garp family is considering purchasing. The lead character, played by Robin Williams, immediately declares, "We'll take the house. Honey, the chances of another plane hitting this house are astronomical. It's been pre-disastered. We're going to be safe here."

Of course, it doesn't work out that way for the Garp family, nor did it for imported wine.

The same month I started "dragging a bag" as a sales representative, Italy was rocked by yet another scandal, this one leading to the deaths of 23 people and the hospitalizations of another 30 who had drunk wine contaminated with methyl alcohol. It was mainly cheap bulk or jug wine sold in local markets in Northern Italy, and not a drop was imported to the U.S., but here and around the world,

lessons, unforgettable experiences, and lasting relationships.

In the meantime, for sure, there were more scandals, trade wars, military wars, economic downturns, neo-prohibitionist trends, changes in consumer preferences, and competition from categories such as wine coolers, low- and no-alcohol wines, spirits, and RTDs. . . . The hits just keep on coming. But as Elton John sang, I'm still



governments blockaded the sale of all Italian wines for weeks until things were sorted out.

Again, the chilling effect was not limited to just one imported brand or country of origin but extended to all wine. Great time to get into the business. I thought about returning to my short but successful previous career as a daily news writer, but at 21 I felt flexible and confident, just like T.S. Garp. I stuck it out. I went on to enjoy a career rich in valuable

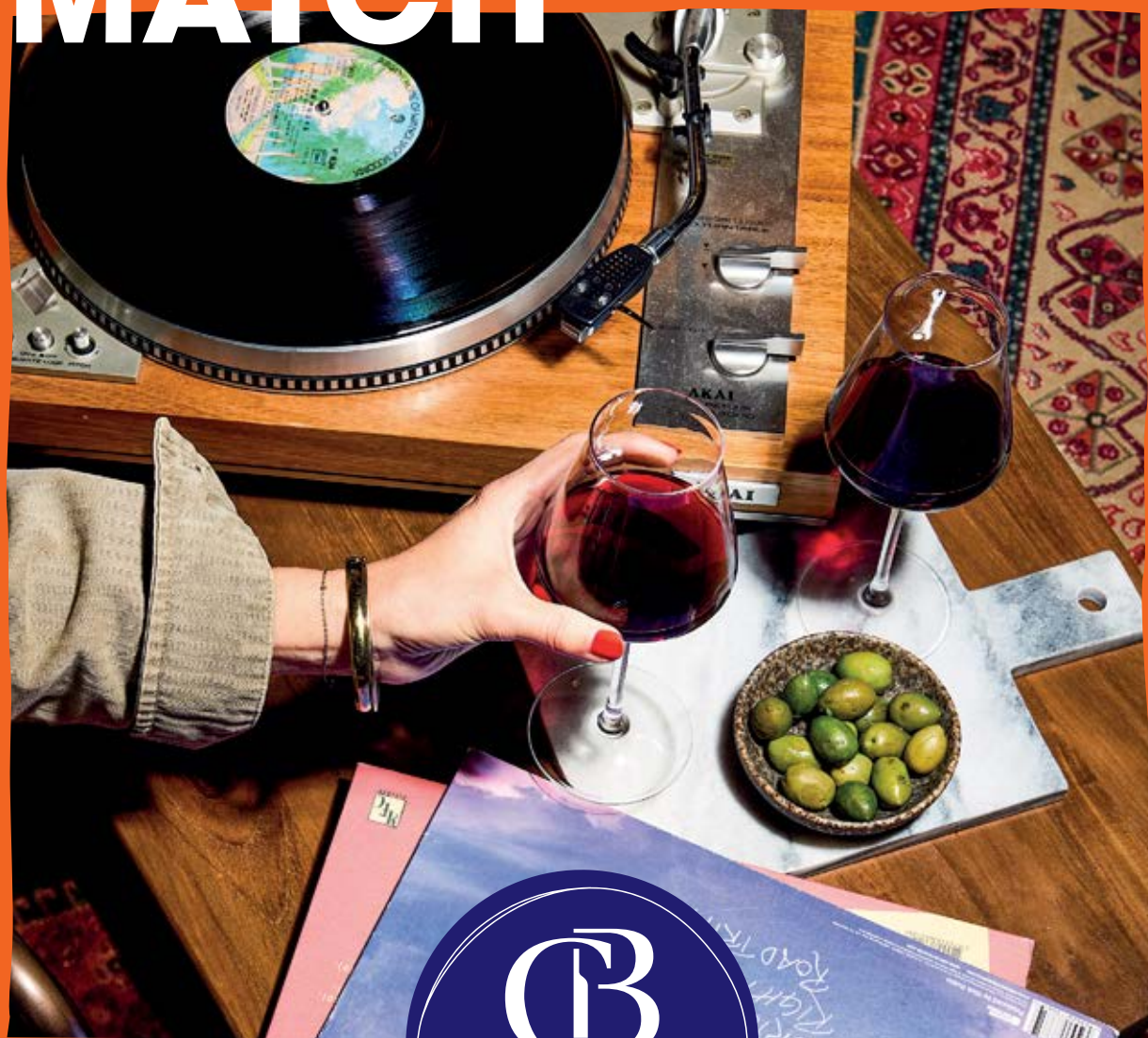
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"HONEY, THE
CHANCES OF
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WE'RE GOING
TO BE SAFE
HERE."

—T.S. GARP,
*The World According to
Garp*

standing. Because there has also been a growing appreciation of wine among both consumer and trade audiences as well as an increase in quality as a result of more sustainable, organic, and natural production. As I've said many times, we now live in a golden age for delicious wines.

Current challenges may lead some to conclude that this is the worst of times for the wine world. That may be so. But I maintain that it is also the best of times. ❧

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Somewhere Over the Rainbow

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS FROM **AMY CURRENS** OF THE MORRIS IN SAN FRANCISCO

THE STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

and their many fine-dining restaurants seemed far past the end of the rainbow for Amy Currens while she was growing up on a farm in Kansas. But her career took her further than she could have ever imagined, and now she works the floor and oversees the wine list of one of that city's most sought-after reservations as sommelier/general manager at The Morris, a jewel in the Potrero Flats neighborhood.

A lifelong love of food and some eye-opening stints in hospitality paved her professional path. Granted, Currens wasn't always sure wine service was where she wanted to be, as her interests are many and varied—but when she felt unfulfilled after diverting into the tech and journalism fields, she eventually returned and now finds the rewards were well worth the wait. Read on for excerpts from our recent conversation.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AMY CURRENS AND THE MORRIS



Amy Currens is sommelier/general manager at The Morris in San Francisco.

Q: What initially got you interested in wine?

My interest in wine—and wine service—grew out of a blend of experiences in fine dining, hospitality, food, and travel. I've always had a deep appreciation for cultural narratives, history, and storytelling—and wine connects beautifully to all of those things. I made the jump a bit later and have now been a sommelier and beverage director for about 18 years, with added experience as a general manager to round out my restaurant chops.

Q: Do you have any certifications in wine?

Yes—certifications were important to me early on. I'm certified through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust and the Court of Master Sommeliers, and I also hold a Champagne certification through the Wine Scholar Guild. That said, my years of

working in the field have been the most valuable when it comes to knowledge that sticks.

Q: What's the hardest part of your job? The easiest?

The hardest part is the long hours and the challenge of balancing service, morale, and business needs. The easiest? Connecting with guests and guiding them to a wine they'll love—it's second nature.

Q: As a veteran in the industry, what don't you see these days that you think is important in wine service?

I see less focus on the art of intuitive, gracious hospitality. Service is becoming too transactional—there's less storytelling, less

emotional connection. Also, some wine professionals try to bluff their way through things instead of simply saying, "Let me find out." Taking the time to get it right always builds more trust.

Q: What advice do you have for someone interested in a career in wine service?

Get comfortable being uncomfortable. You'll never know everything, so stay curious and keep tasting. Develop a strong presence—enthusiasm and connection go further than encyclopedic knowledge. And carve your own path. (That might be advice for my younger self, too.)

Q: What's something that may surprise people about you?

I've seriously considered leaving restaurants to dedicate my life to road-tripping and creating historical content about food, drink, culture, and fashion. I love making period costumes, diving into culinary history, and exploring how wine evolved over time. I'd love to blend all my passions into something completely new—but my love for The Morris and the joy of saying "yes" to our guests keeps me rooted and inspired.

Q: When you're not in the restaurant, where can we find you?

Probably with a glass of wine and a book on historical fashion, sewing something elaborate, or dreaming up a road trip to a wine region. I love creating content around food, wine, and history. When I need a reset, you'll find me in a sauna [and doing a] cold plunge at a friend's place (yes, I know how lucky that sounds!) or off-grid in nature, hiking or kayaking with a camper van nearby. **sj**



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ITALIAN CUISINE, CHAMPAGNE, AND DISTINCTIVE COCKTAILS ARE ALL ON OFFER AT D.C. RESTAURANT VIA SOPHIA THANKS TO GENERAL MANAGER **THOMAS DELASKO**

by Dave McIntyre



PHOTO: MICHAEL BUTCHER

Thomas Delasko is general manager and sommelier at Via Sophia in Washington, D.C.'s Hamilton Hotel.

HOW DOES A New Jersey sommelier wind up creating a version of a Moscow Mule using Virginia white lightning while managing a high-end Italian restaurant in Washington, D.C.? Ask Thomas Delasko, general manager and sommelier at Via Sophia in the Hamilton Hotel.

Delasko was working at a seaside restaurant in Monmouth County, New Jersey, when it was wiped out by Hurricane Sandy in late October 2012. He moved to D.C., working in restaurants in the Virginia suburbs before landing at the Hamilton three years ago as the world was beginning to emerge from the isolation of the pandemic.

Delasko has dubbed his signature cocktail the Montanaro Mula, which basically translates as “Hillbilly Mule”—a reference to the (licensed) Virginia moonshine he substitutes for the vodka of a traditional Moscow Mule. Instead of ginger beer, Delasko brews his own ginger tea, a three-day process; citric and lactic acids, meanwhile, mimic lime and add texture. He then pressurizes the concoction to serve it on tap, yielding a deliciously refreshing, low-cost cocktail with a high profit margin that has the added virtue of reaching the customer quickly. “People want to drink, they don’t want to wait,” Delasko says with a wry smile.

Via Sophia is on D.C.’s K Street, a thoroughfare known to be frequented by high-powered lobbyists, lawyers, and the lanyard crowd of conference attendees (so it’s a good thing that the restaurant, which seats 90, can turn 125 covers for lunch and up to 250 for dinner on a good day). In addition to stocking high-end whiskeys such as Pappy Van Winkle, it offers an award-winning wine list with 115 labels. Befitting a menu heavy on osteria staples and pizza, Delasko features Italian classics such as Barolos from Piemonte and Chiantis from Tuscany. But he’s not doctrinaire about his selections. After all, he caters to a clientele that tends to know what it wants and how to get it. “There’s a lot of California and other New World on here, because people want it,” Delasko says. “I like to be a popular sommelier, so I have a little bit of something for everybody coming in. You want a Bordeaux? I’ve got some in three different price points. I have Grand Cru Burgundy.” And during lunch and happy hour, he offers some wines at \$5 a glass, a rarity these days.

He also has a strong Champagne selection, with names like Gimmonet & Fils Special Club, Tarlant Cuvée Louis, and Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill. “People know I like Champagne, so they bring me good ones, and I put them on the list,” he says, a decision he doesn’t regret given client demand. “On Inauguration Day, we probably had our biggest wine sales ever. Everything was flying out of the cellar—big bottles of Champagne, big bottles of Cabernet. I came in the next morning and thought a hurricane had hit the place. I couldn’t believe how much wine we sold that day.”

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A Taste for Adventure

THE INTREPID EXPLORATION BEHIND PAUL HOBBS SELECTIONS

by Ruth Tobias



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL HOBBS SELECTIONS



Paul Hobbs in Vayots Dzor, Armenia.

The Paul Hobbs Selections portfolio includes Crocus (France), Viña Cobos (Argentina), Alvaredos-Hobbs (Spain), and Yacoubian-Hobbs (Armenia).

PAUL HOBBS SELECTIONS is the eponymous winemaker's portfolio of projects around the globe: In addition to the renowned Viña Cobos in Mendoza, Argentina, he's also a partner in Yacoubian-Hobbs in Vayots Dzor, Armenia; Crocus in Cahors, France; and Alvaredos-Hobbs in Galicia, Spain. All this might come as a surprise to his younger self. "Most of these regions were not on my wish list," Hobbs admits. "I would say I am like a raft on a wild river, right? You kind of get to choose where you go, but you're not in full control. . . . I just want to make clear I didn't plan on becoming an international wine consultant. But I feel blessed, [because] probably if I had complete control, none of these great things that have happened in my life would have happened."

The vineyards of Alvaredos-Hobbs in Ribeira Sacra, Galicia, Spain.



Luckily, what he has instead is a taste for exploration. “I do like adventures,” he acknowledges. “I like cultures and history and all that, and some of that probably comes from my father, who was ready to pick up and very spontaneously just go somewhere—he would announce at the dinner table to our family, ‘Well, we’re going to Mexico, so pack your bag’ . . . and then we’d pile into the car at 5 o’clock in the morning and take a two-week trip. So I have that love for traveling and meeting people.”

Said people include brothers Viken and Vahe Yacoubian, who in 2003 “called me up and left a message one night after drinking a bottle of Paul Hobbs Cuvée Agustina Pinot Noir,” Hobbs says. “They knew about my work in Argentina”—where he has been a pioneer of modern viticulture (for details, see our April/May 2023 issue)—“and they thought, well, if you can do it in Argentina, perhaps you could come to Armenia and . . . help put the region back on the map.”

That, he discovered, would take some doing. Though the Armenian province of

Vayots Dzor had a wine industry, “it was dilapidated and had fallen on hard times during the Soviet era,” Hobbs explains. “The vineyards were for the most part not well managed—pruning, for example, looked like pretty much a free-for-all. There was no strategy that I could discern. So I was like, OK, it’s a pretty wild situation, but they have vineyards and . . . I thought the soils, the slopes, the topography, the geology, the climate . . . all looked intriguing, and it had some parallels because of elevation and so on to Argentina. Our vineyard, for example, is 1,405 meters above sea level; that’s high even by Mendoza standards.”

As Hobbs and the Yacoubians began to tackle the logistics of the project they officially established in 2008—from the task of training employees in a place where “expertise had basically dropped to zero” to the difficulty of bringing modern equipment into the country (“I myself was driving an old Russian-made tractor that I could hardly control,” he recalls), they also acquainted themselves with

indigenous varieties like the red Areni and white Voskehat. In them, Hobbs found, “there was an elegance and a sophistication that I thought was going to be fun to work with . . . [and] a possibility that these varieties could be made into what would be considered noble varieties that would reflect terroir; they would age, things of that nature. That’s what really got my blood going.” (*SOMM Journal* publisher/ editor-in-chief Meridith May would agree, having called the winery’s 2019 Areni “unwavering, elegant, and complex” in a review last year.) When archaeologists unearthed the world’s oldest winery in the Areni-1 cave in 2011, his involvement in the region started to feel like serendipity. “This place has been around for over 6,000 years, and it’s a privilege to go to where it all began. It’s pretty inconvenient; there are a lot of challenges. But I love it,” he says. “I like to go to places where people really want you there and you feel like your work makes a difference.”

Cahors was another place that modernity seemed to have bypassed



Harvesting Areni grapes at Yacoubian-Hobbs.

when Hobbs first visited it in 2009 at the invitation of now-partner Bertrand Gabriel Vigouroux, who imagined the winemaker could do wonders for the birthplace of Malbec, just as he had for Argentina as the grape's adopted home. Hobbs was intrigued by the climate of the region, not unlike that of Bordeaux where Malbec once flourished, and as for the Burgundy-esque soils, "they were red clays full of iron and massive amounts of limestone on terraces and plateaus on a winding river: 'This is like a dream,'" he recalls thinking. "Then you taste the wine and you go, wow, these wines are truly impossible to drink." For one reason, "as the prices of Cahors wines kept falling and falling, [growers] did less and less" in the vineyards, eschewing key practices like thinning; for another, staunchly traditional production methods had begotten a style that was overextracted and frequently suffered from bacterial problems.

Yet slowly but surely, Hobbs has overcome these obstacles. Helping to convince the government to build a reservoir in the area, he's now able to use drip irrigation in the vineyards, where high-density plantings are also contributing to quality fruit; in the winery, meanwhile, "we realized that we could clean up the microbiological and oxidation issues; we could clean up the extraction problems and get a more finessed style of tannins," he says. While he can't control the weather—harvesttime rains are a common problem—the wines at their best, including Crocus Le Calcifère, have "an energy that's incomparable. It's like picking a wild raspberry on a brisk mountain morning just after a spring rain or something," he muses. "The concentration and the explosiveness, the burst of flavor, in the good vintages from Cahors are probably as good as it gets for Malbec."



Overlooking the Lot River in Cahors, France.

For all his proficiency with that grape, Hobbs admits he knew little about Godello and Mencía upon his first trip to Galicia in 2015; for that matter, he didn't know much about the region itself. Picturing Spain as mostly plains, he was pleasantly surprised to find a mountainous landscape that the Romans had developed "very much the way they planted the Mosel, with terraces where they could, [practicing] *viticultura heroica*" (heroic viticulture) atop steep slopes whose soils include "some of the finest slate in the world," he remarks. He also admired his now-partner Antonio Lopez's efforts to consolidate vineyards in the Ribeira Sacra DO that Lopez's family had owned in the past: "This is a hodgepodge—these vineyards are really small," he notes. "Sometimes they're the size of a large room; you can't put a tractor, you can't even put a horse on them because they're just like a little outcropping on a cliff." All in all, he recalls, "I got infatuated"—and thus was Alvaredos-Hobbs born in 2018.

As in Cahors, Hobbs found that "a lot of the wines made in that region were made in a very old-fashioned way [that yielded] these funky characteristics, so it was hard to really parse out, well, where does the grape start and end and where's this other stuff that's coming in?" Once he and his team figured that out, they determined that, "at least in Ribeira Sacra, Godello's in some ways similar to an aromatic clone of Chardonnay, with a little bit of a terpene or floral note [that] we can tone down or enhance depending on the level of ripeness and the *élevage*,"

he explains. "But I'm more of a mouth-texture kind of person . . . and I think it has a marvelous tension. It's like a firm handshake [or] a nice tug on your arm. . . . We try we put a little oak, but the *élevage* is for the most part in foudres so as not to cover up the character—and it has plenty of character; you see the soils and the complexity of them, with feldspar, quartz, and slate."

As for Mencía, Hobbs says, "We're still learning about the way we make it and how it will evolve, because we're still pretty new and we're doing experiments" in French oak barriques and 500-liter puncheons as well. But so far he's a big fan. "It's very lifted on its aromatic profile and . . . really dynamic in the mouth; there's also this mineral quality [that] I find really refreshing," he enthuses. "It has good depth, richness, velvety tannins, [and] you get this cream note along with the tension. For me, that's the coup de grâce."

Though he's not done exploring the wine world, "just to do *something*, just to make another winery, never has appealed to me," he says. "I'm not a rabble rouser. But I do like to come up with new ways to solve problems that people have either stopped trying to solve or never thought that it could be done better." When asked what he'd like for his legacy to be, he ponders for a while before answering that he hopes to be remembered "as an innovator, a risk taker, and an adventurer—and a person that's tried to do something good for their industry and for humankind." Mission already accomplished. S



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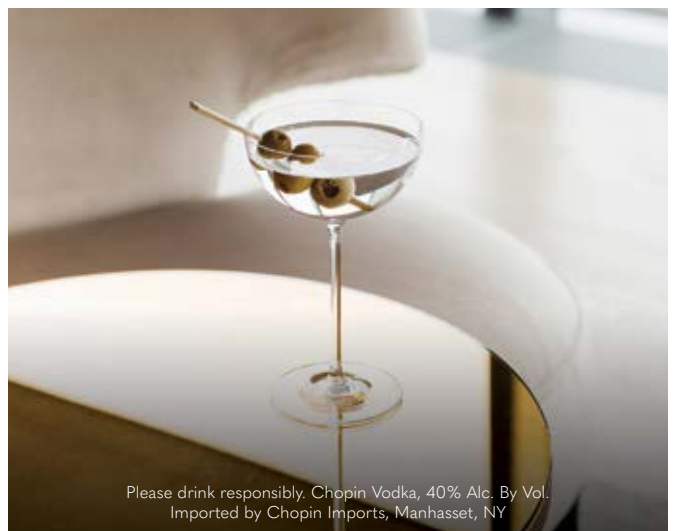
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Slopes and Sips

TASTE OF VAIL OFFERS HIGH-TOUCH HOSPITALITY AT HIGH ELEVATIONS

by Antony Bruno

THERE ARE MANY WAYS in which the Taste of Vail sets itself apart from other food and wine festivals, from its elevation (8,000 feet above sea level) and unpredictable weather—the temperature didn't budge above freezing until the third day of this year's festival, held April 2–5—to the world-class skiing, which played no small part in the fact that over 80% of the 6,200 people who attended came from out of state. But perhaps the standout feature is the organizers' rule for participating producers.

tions, many of which don't even distribute to Colorado.

So why are they there?

"Just being able to connect with consumers at four different events in a meaningful way is really great," said Bonterra senior winemaker Margaret Leonardi-Pruett. "Very often we're working with our restaurants and our retailers. So we're here to kind of teach and educate people. It takes a lot of boots on the ground."

Just make sure those are snow boots. Taste of Vail is a "snow-or-shine" festival

mix it up a little bit," said Jeremy Reimann, regional sales manager for the company. "That's especially important for the people who did buy tickets for every day, because we want them to come back to the table and say, 'I didn't try that yesterday.' So I have fun."

Educating enophiles one by one is



The Taste of Vail food and wine festival in Vail, CO, is held "snow or shine."

"Unlike many festivals where distributors pour on behalf of wineries, Taste of Vail requires that a winemaker, owner, or an integral team member is present to personally share their wines with guests," says Angela Mueller, who has served as executive director of the festival for the past 13 years. "This creates a deeper, more intimate tasting experience."

It also gives smaller, family-run vineyards the same platform as the larger brands that typically frequent the festival circuit. Of the 50-plus producers in attendance, 39 would be considered smaller opera-

held both inside and out. The opening Debut of Rosé Tasting (featuring over 100 labels) and Grand Tasting finale were both comfortably indoors. But the Après Tasting sprawled across the Vail Village base area, and the Mountaintop Tasting was set on Vail Mountain, requiring guests to either ski in to or take a complimentary gondola.

While tickets for each tasting, seminar, and dinner were available for a la carte purchasing, many attendees went to multiple events. With that in mind, vendors like Foley Family Wines & Spirits tried "to



PHOTOS: ZACH MAHONEY

Canard Vineyard director Adam Philip Fox presents at "The Essence of Napa: A Deep Dive Into Terroir."

no small feat. But the hope is that each person who develops a new level of appreciation of wine on the ground will go out and spread the word to ten more. Take, for instance, one of the smaller breakout seminars held on the final day. While some visitors were making turns on the slopes, a few dozen die-hard wine lovers skipped the skiing to attend "The Essence of Napa: A Deep Dive Into Terroir," where Canard Vineyard director Adam Philip Fox delivered a plea to save the region from the monotony of monoculture.

"All the families that put Napa on the map have been bought out by corporations," he said. "It's become less about unique style or terroir . . . and more about engineering wine to meet what the market wants. If I give you the same thing every year, we're [just] making a wine-flavored beverage. It may as well be Coca-Cola. So I encourage you guys to support family-owned wineries that are making wine from specific vineyards." SJ

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From Tech to Terroir

HOW **DAVID TAYLOR** OF ALLIANCE HOSPITALITY GROUP BECAME ONE OF LOS ANGELES' MOST INFLUENTIAL WINE DIRECTORS

story by Christina Barrueta
photo by Cal Bingham

WHEN DAVID TAYLOR joined the team of Los Angeles restaurant Baltaire five years ago, he couldn't have foreseen how significantly wine would shape his path—or how quickly. "I worked my way up from server to sommelier to wine director," he shares. "And last year, I was promoted to corporate wine director for the entire Alliance Hospitality Group."

Taylor graduated from Syracuse University in New York with a degree in information management and technology, a far cry from a career whose duties include decanting Côte-Rôtie and recommending the perfect Barolo to complement a dry-aged rib-eye. "But I found that I was far too social for that," he says with a laugh. "When I started working in pubs back home in London, I realized how much I loved interacting with people, listening to their stories and sharing my own. And wine is all about stories. Every bottle has its own history, and I love being able to share that with guests and create a dining experience that they can continue to talk about, even after they've left the restaurant."

Today, Taylor curates wine programs for the group's portfolio, which encompasses restaurants in California and Arizona, including FLINT by Baltaire, Coral Tree Café, Comoncy, Encanto, and Mora



David Taylor is corporate wine director for Alliance Hospitality Group.

Italiano as well as Baltaire. "Baltaire is our flagship restaurant, and I oversee the day-to-day operations here," he explains. Set in Brentwood, it's a polished take on the classic American steakhouse. "We celebrated ten years in operation this past February, and we're thrilled to have been a neighborhood staple for that long," notes Taylor. But it's not only a community fixture; it's also a destination for serious wine lovers, he adds. "The wine list has around 850–900 selections, from very high-end cult wines to local producers like AJA Vineyards out of Malibu." It also boasts one of the largest collections of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in California, among the world's most prestigious wine estates. "We carry every vineyard that they make," says Taylor. "That includes vintages of La Tâche and Corton and even a few vintages of their namesake vineyard, Romanée-Conti Grand Cru."

Despite the restaurant's scale—it seats around 230—and diverse clientele, Taylor

maintains an intimate, tailored approach. "We have new guests who come in to celebrate milestone events," he notes, "and regulars who dine with us two to three times a week. There's no one-wine-fits-all, so it's important to utilize your education and your skills to match the guests with the right wine." While upholding Baltaire's exceptional service standards, he's equally passionate about making fine wine approachable. "The world of wine can be intimidating, especially with a 70-page wine list. It's important to us that everyone, especially younger generations, feels comfortable talking with a sommelier," he adds.

Now Alliance Hospitality Group has expanded again with Sexy Roman, a bold Italian concept that debuted at the W Scottsdale hotel in the city's Entertainment District in May. "It's been a fun journey," Taylor says. "Watching the company grow while I grow has been the perfect alignment." **SJ**




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{ cover story }

THE SPARK *of* SIMPLICITY

RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS UNVEILS A NEW WINE COLLECTION
DESIGNED TO “SURPRISE AND DELIGHT”

story by Liz Thach, MW / photos by Alexander Rubin



Rodney Strong Vineyards senior vice president of winegrowing and winemaking Justin Seidenfeld with his daughters Madison, Lila, and Reagan.



Justin Seidenfeld fell in love with wine when he was working as a server at the Broker Restaurant in Denver, Colorado. “We had one of the largest wine cellars in the state, and I always remember the impact of the wine on the guests and how important it was to the enjoyment of their meal. Wine creates memories,” says the Colorado native. So it wasn’t surprising that he decided to study winemaking at the University of California, Davis. Upon graduation, he spent four years working as an enologist at Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa before taking a position with Rodney Strong Vineyards as assistant winemaker in 2010; he’s since risen through the ranks to become the winery’s senior vice president of winegrowing and winemaking with over 100 employees reporting to him, including three other winemakers.

“Our winemaking philosophy at Rodney Strong is to surprise and delight the customer because this creates special memories. All of our wines start with this concept, and we use this to make

decisions,” states Seidenfeld, adding that the winemaking team references their goal at least once a day and that it has been integral to many of the innovations that have taken place in their cellars over the years.

One of these innovations is the introduction of a new tier of estate wines, Rodney Strong Limited Collection, sourced from the family-owned producer’s premier vineyards in Sonoma County and targeted toward on-premise accounts and DTC.

A PENCHANT FOR PURITY

Rodney Strong Vineyards, which was established in 1959 by area pioneer (and dancer) Rodney Strong, was the 13th bonded winery in Sonoma County. Given his early start in the region, Strong was fortunate enough to acquire some of what are now its most famous vineyard sites, such as Alexander’s Crown in Alexander Valley. Today the winery is owned and managed by the Klein family, who farms 12 outstanding estate vineyards

across 1,150 acres in some of Sonoma County’s most exceptional AVAs.

“For this new collection”—which consists of a Chardonnay, a Pinot Noir, and a Cabernet Sauvignon—“I am fortunate to be able to pick the very best vineyard blocks to showcase both the purity of the grape variety and the site,” explains Seidenfeld. “I’m a philosophical winemaker, and the overarching philosophy behind this series is based on Leonardo da Vinci’s concept of simplicity as the ultimate form of sophistication. Therefore, I am limiting the number of clones and the amount of oak in these wines. They are pure and seamless wines, made in a natural fashion.”

For example, the Rodney Strong 2023 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir highlights two clones carefully selected from the best blocks in the producer’s new River West Vineyard in the Russian River AVA. “I selected the 115 clone because it provides elegance and freshness to the wine along with notes of violet, rose, and raspberry,” says Seidenfeld. “But to add



fleshiness, texture, and a long finish, we [also] used the Mt. Eden clone because it provides black fruit, more structured tannins, and a bigger mouthfeel." The wine ages in (35% new) French oak for 12 months, which lends a touch of vanilla, light toast, and texture.

For the 2023 Russian River Valley Chardonnay, Seidenfeld sourced clones 76 and Old Hyde Wenté from different blocks in the same vineyard; the wine underwent gentle bâtonnage and aged for a total of 12 months in French oak before bottling. "I have some wines that have ten different oak profiles and multiple clones," he says. "Here, I focused on light oak (35%) and just two clones from the very best blocks, so that the site can shine through and heighten the complexity."

"THE OVERARCHING PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THIS SERIES IS BASED ON LEONARDO DA VINCI'S CONCEPT OF SIMPLICITY AS THE ULTIMATE FORM OF SOPHISTICATION. . . . [THESE] ARE PURE AND SEAMLESS WINES, MADE IN A NATURAL FASHION."

—JUSTIN SEIDENFELD

Indeed, these are not simple wines but instead have layers of texture, fruit, and delicate oak. They are well balanced, with the classic bright fruit and crisp acidity of the Russian River Valley AVA.

For the 2022 Cabernet, Seidenfeld and his team headed further north to Knights Valley. "These grapes come from the Bavarian Lion Vineyard, which is located at a higher elevation in an old riverbed and has stones the size of my hands," he says, holding up his hands to demonstrate. He explained that due to the large stones, reminiscent of the rocky soil of Left Bank Bordeaux, the vineyard is well draining and provides the wine with great structure, bold tannins, and more blue fruit as well as a milk chocolate note. "I age the Cabernet longer, for 18 months in (50%



Seidenfeld believes that "all great innovation comes from a desire for fun."



The Rodney Strong estate in Healdsburg, CA.

new) French oak," Seidenfeld notes. "And every year I go to France to select the trees that go into our barrels. We have our own seasoning yard there."

Erica Odden, vice president of marketing for Rodney Strong, describes the Limited Collection as having a strong sense of place: "Justin Seidenfeld has assembled a collection of wines that highlight the pedigree of our most loved sites—River West Vineyard in Russian River Valley and Bavarian Lion in Knights Valley. We believe Sonoma County and these special AVAs are brought to life in these unique wines steeped in their site."

A DESIRE FOR FUN

Innovation is a constant at Rodney Strong. "I believe that innovation stems from fun and delight," says Seidenfeld. "I have actually studied the history of delight. There is a great book called *Wonderland* [by Steven Johnson] that suggests that all great innovation comes from a desire for fun."

A recent example is the new wine grid the team has just implemented. "It is the first automatic Brix-monitoring system of any winery in the world, and it beams the Brix to our phone up to 30 times per day," he explains. In the past, wine samples had to be taken to a lab to obtain this information, so not only is this innovation more time-saving, it allows the team to more accurately control the fermentation temperature and length. According to Seidenfeld, "In order to create a wine that provides surprise and delight to the customer, you need three things: great grapes and [the right] fermentation time and temperature."

He and his team have also created the world's most advanced square stainless-steel tanks, inspired by the concrete tanks that are often found in older wineries in Europe. There are multiple benefits to their shape: They ensure a more efficient use of space, a maximized skin-to-juice ratio, more effective pumpovers, and easier

cleaning; they also have more efficient refrigeration, so they're more sustainable. "Invention is fun," says Seidenfeld. "The fun part is overcoming the challenges."

Speaking of fun, when he is not working, Seidenfeld spends his free time with his family and enjoys hiking, golf, and telling "stupid dad jokes" to his three young daughters. "Fun, games, and enjoyment, that is what life is about," he says. "I tell my daughters a new joke each day." He also sometimes brings them to the vineyard, where "they really enjoy playing amongst the vines."

When it comes to the wine those vines produce, he continues, "One of my favorite quotes is from Queen Elizabeth II. She said, 'Memories are everybody's second chance at happiness.' For me, wine can create memories, because we often drink it to celebrate special occasions, and so when we craft a wine that brings surprise and delight, we help to create lasting memories." **sj**

Sangiovese Stylist

THIRD-GENERATION WINEMAKER
TOMMASO CORTONESI CAPTURES THE
ETHEREAL ESSENCE OF BRUNELLO

by Meridith May



Tommaso Cortonesi.

"I AM A LUCKY MAN," claims Tommaso Cortonesi, third-generation winemaker for his family's business in Montalcino, Italy. "I am able to live and work in my homeland. While many others have to move from small Italian villages and find careers in the cities, I can do what I love where I love to live."

Expressing the terroir through single-vineyard

wines is key for Tommaso, who, with his father, was able to understand the specific soil compositions of their two prestigious vineyards: Poggiarelli's rock marl and La Mannella's clay and limestone. The Cortonesi winery has been producing single-vineyard Brunello and Rosso di Montalcino since 2012. In 2017, Tommaso, who has been recognized for his techniques that balance tradition with modern innovation, was appointed as vice president of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, an influential position from which to help guide the region's future.

I met up with Tommaso in Chandler, Arizona, where he was visiting to show the latest releases of his beautiful, inspirational Brunellos to the trade. The wines are imported and marketed by Quintessential. *sj*

Poggiarelli Vineyard is a Grand Cru site.



Cortonesi 2022 Lèonis Toscana IGT, Italy (\$20)

A single block in a vineyard planted 20–25 years ago in the northeastern part of Montalcino produces the grapes for this stunning blend of 85% Sangiovese with small amounts of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot. With its billowy mouthfeel and silky tannins, it's an overachiever at its price point. White pepper, Morrello cherries, and rose petals deliver a most approachable Super Tuscan, or as Tommaso Cortonesi refers to it, Super Montalcino. **94**

Cortonesi 2022 La Mannella Rosso di Montalcino, Toscana, Italy (\$32)

La Mannella was the original name of the winery before the family changed it to Cortonesi in 2012. This wine is 100% Sangiovese, culled from the youngest vineyard in the cooler northern end of Montalcino and aged 12 months in large-format Slavonian oak. "This is my business-card wine," notes Tommaso. "We are building a personal identification for our Rosso di Montalcino and won't refer to it as a 'baby Brunello.' It takes on a unique character from its single-site expression."

Bright, fruity, and in possession of the coveted trio of balance, finesse, and elegance (which we noticed in all the Cortonesi wines we tasted), it also shows freshness derived from startling acidity that links to salty raspberry, cherry, and red tea leaves. "This is the future of Montalcino," predicts Tommaso. **95**



Cortonesi 2019 La Mannella Brunello di Montalcino DCG, Toscana, Italy (\$80)

Sangiovese from a 1,000-foot hill to the north and an even higher elevation of 1,150 feet on the region's coolest southeastern side spawned this luxurious red. Lightly veiled without density or edge, notes of coffee, cocoa, roses, and peonies are captured and refreshed by the acid structure of the wine, which spent 36 months in large, tightly grained Slavonian oak. Its accessibility for drinking now is remarkable, yet its longevity is undeniable. **98**

Cortonesi 2018 Poggiarelli Brunello di Montalcino DCG, Toscana, Italy (\$115)

At 1,400 feet in elevation on the southeastern side of Montalcino, Poggiarelli is a Grand Cru site (monopole) with sandy, rocky limestone soils and great sun exposure. The aromas of this wine, which spent two years in 500-liter French casks, are deep and dark, including cardamom, white pepper, and soy sauce. Black plum saturates the palate, layered with fig, black cherry, and graphite. The relative warmth of Poggiarelli shows in the ripe profile of the wine, which possesses no tannic aggression but does have a savory, earthy, umami nature. Says Tommaso, "We know that 2018 was an underrated vintage, but this wine has incredible aging potential." **96**

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A Champion of Curation

IN CONVERSATION WITH **ROBERT VARDANIAN**, DIRECTOR OF WINE PURCHASING AND SALES AT WALLY'S WINE & SPIRITS **by Ruth Tobias**

THOUGH HE STARTED his hospitality career as a restaurant sommelier; Los Angeles native Robert Vardanian quickly found himself “intrigued by retail,” in his words. So when he walked into the then-new Wally’s Wine & Spirits in Beverly Hills in early 2015 to discover “the best of both worlds”—a high-end alc-bev shop, gourmet market, and restaurant under one roof—he naturally “fell in love right away,” as he recalls, “and I said, ‘I have to work here.’” Today, the Master Sommelier candidate is the director of wine purchasing and sales for the company, which now has two other locations in Santa Monica and Las Vegas, Nevada. “It’s a lot of tasting, it’s a lot of staring at inventory—but it’s fun,” he says. We asked him for some insights into the position.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WALLY'S WINE & SPIRITS



“IT’S VERY INTERACTIVE. THERE’S A LOT OF ENERGY. IT’S GOT A LOT OF MOVING PARTS TO IT. SO IT’S ALWAYS EXCITING. IT NEVER FEELS LIKE WORK.”
—ROBERT VARDANIAN

Q: What’s your favorite part of your job?

I’ve always been very attracted to the retail piece of it. I think there’s something very romantic about people who go to a specialized wine shop to buy a bottle of wine instead of the sheer convenience of just getting what’s at the grocery store. And the people who work in retail shops are always so passionate—you know, they bought that bottle two weeks ago and they can’t wait to tell you about it. I love that [our customers] have a curated experience. And at Wally’s, you can do that

better than anywhere else, because it’s not just the retail shop, but you have this whole gourmet food section—you could take home six different types of cheese if you wanted to, or caviar, or chocolate bars. You could stay and have a glass of wine. You could have a glass of wine *while* you shop for retail. It’s very interactive. There’s a lot of energy. It’s got a lot of moving parts to it. So it’s always exciting. It never feels like work.

Q: What trends are you noticing in 2025?

Because we do specialize in the premium side of the spectrum, there are certain categories, like Burgundy, where you think it’s just going to hit the roof of how expensive or how allocated something can get. But it doesn’t show any signs of stopping. The biggest names in Burgundy, domaines like DRC and Rousseau and Roumier—people still come to us asking for those. And some other categories are very consistent, like Italian wines. Barolo and Brunello tend to be very reliable. I think they’re not as susceptible to price

increases and decreases, so your Brunello customer has always been able to pay a certain amount and get a great bottle.

In the lower price points, people are looking for wines that are refreshing, that are dry and low in alcohol, something that they could commit to a case of. Sancerre is still a very strong category for us, but people are also experimenting a little bit more with things like Vermentino and Albariño. They’re just looking for that easy, wallet-friendly, refreshing style of wine. [In fact,] people are experimenting more with fun whites than they are going to the usual rosé; I think interest in rosé has taken a little bit of a dip.

Q: What do you wish would become a trend?

I’ve always been a huge advocate of wines from the Rhône Valley. It’s my favorite region. The Northern Rhône is a little bit more niche; you kind of have to be interested in funky, smoky, peppery wines to like them. But the Southern Rhône is an amazing gateway for all palates—whether you’re a Napa Cab drinker, whether you like bigger styles or you like more elegant, fresh things like Pinot, I find the Grenache blends from the Southern Rhône are at the crossroads of every wine style. They’re also less susceptible to vintage quality—they tend to be great pretty much every year, always a good value.

Within the Super Tuscans category, wines like Sassicaia, Tignanello, or Ornellaia sell on their own, but there’s other ones from the region that . . . are lesser known, and I feel like it’s up to us as sommeliers to champion some of those things. Fontodi’s Flaccianello, Isole e Olena’s Cepparello, Lodovico Antinori’s Biserno—those are all great wines. But I find they’re wines that, if you don’t tell the story, if you don’t communicate what the blend is or what the style is, the label doesn’t tell you much. So I like to promote those as well. **ST**

TWENTY-EIGHT
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THE TASTING PANEL

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August

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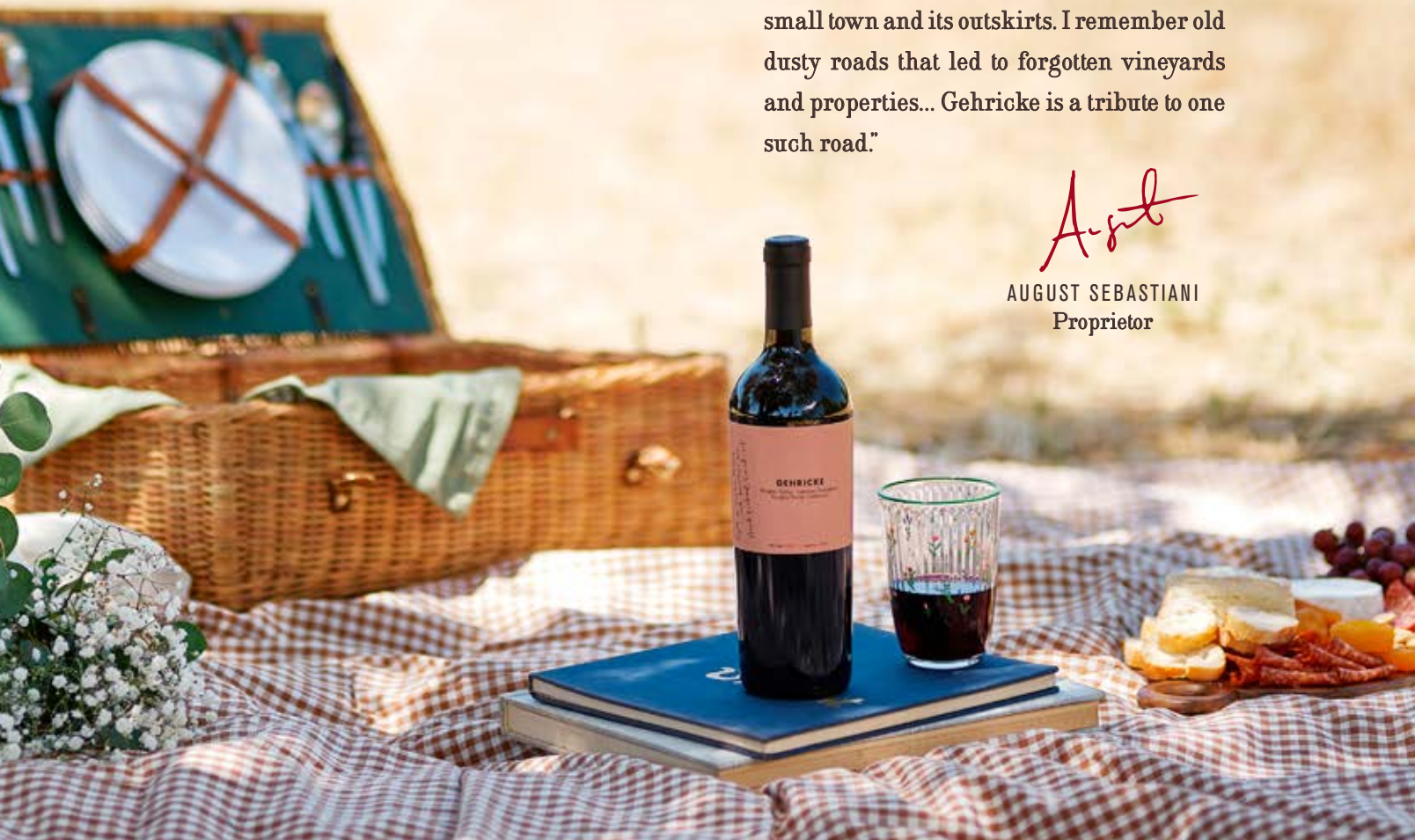




PHOTO COURTESY OF LAWRENCE WINE ESTATES

Domaine Dujac winemaker Jeremy Seysses with Lawrence Wine Estates CEO Carlton McCoy Jr., MS.

Best of Both Worlds

TRAILSIDE VINEYARD IS A WINE OFF THE BEATEN VINEYARD TRACK

LAWRENCE WINE ESTATES CEO Carlton McCoy Jr., MS, and Jeremy Seysses, winemaker at Burgundy's Domaine Dujac, have joined forces to craft a terroir-driven Cabernet Sauvignon from Rutherford called Trailside. McCoy recognized the potential of the Trailside Ranch vineyard—previously known as Wildwood Ranch and now owned by Lawrence Wine Estates—and sought to craft a wine that would honor Napa's classic roots while embracing a modern approach. Made with grapes fermented separately by soil type, the 2022 vintage was released in February. —*Meridith May*



Trailside Vineyard 2022, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$225)

With an Old World aura and acidity both keen and generous, this energetic, striking red possesses an inner light. Notes of cherry skin, rose petal, hibiscus, and jasmine show athletic poise and persistence on both the nose and streamlined palate. Subtle, spicy earth tones play amid tannins that present themselves with verve.

A New Leaf

TRACING CECCHI COEVO'S EVOLUTION OF ELEGANCE

CECCHI COEVO WAS introduced in 2006 as a tribute to Luigi Cecchi, the visionary third-generation leader who spearheaded the expansion of his family's winery. Now, for the first time in this Tuscan wine's 18-year history, the blend has been redefined with Sangiovese from Villa Rosa in Chianti Classico and Merlot from Val delle Rose in Maremma. A shorter period of barrel aging also influences the 2021 vintage, which was released in March and was limited to a production of 3,000 bottles.

"This wine represents, in a sense, a turning point in my winemaking journey," says Andrea Cecchi. "It inspired me to approach both the vineyard and the craft of winemaking with renewed dedication and a clear focus on expressing each vintage to its fullest potential. It's thanks to Coevo that I've gained a deeper understanding of the path we need to take for our winery." —*Meridith May*



Cecchi 2021 Coevo, Toscana IGT, Italy (\$120) A magnificent trio of violets, heather, and ripe black cherry greets the palate on entry. It's joined by dusty cocoa and plum skin, driven by keen acidity within a satin mouthfeel. Black olive and espresso show depth from the midpalate to the exquisitely woody finish of wild berries. **98**

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by Suzanna Mannion, communications manager,
California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance

Guiding Light

THE CALIFORNIA SUSTAINABLE WINEGROWING ALLIANCE RELEASES A TOOL KIT TO PROMOTE CLIMATE RESILIENCE

FROM INTENSE HEAT WAVES to heavy rainfall, the signs are clear: Climate change is already impacting California's vineyards and wineries. In response, the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA) and its partners have designed a comprehensive new resource to help the industry respond proactively to the urgent need for climate resilience: the California Vineyard and Winery Climate Action Toolkit.

Significant groundwork has been laid for the project, as many California growers and vintners have been leading the way in climate action for decades by using sustainable winegrowing practices that are inherently climate-smart. Developed through a grant project and designed specifically for California winegrowers and vintners, the innovative, user-friendly tool kit will support and enhance such efforts while promoting more widespread adoption and empowering users to create tailored action plans to mitigate climate change and adapt to its ongoing impacts.

So what exactly makes a particular practice climate-smart?

It must help not only build an understanding of climate change's impact on vineyards, wineries, and supply chains but address climate change by sequestering carbon, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and/or enhancing the resilience of vineyards and wineries in the face of current and future climate challenges. Advanced water efficiency to address water scarcity, canopy management to buffer extreme heat, integrated pest control to handle shifting disease pressures, and the use of renewable energy to reduce energy usage are prime examples of such practices.

The tool kit is designed for accessibility and flexibility and grounded in the collective experience and expertise of a Climate Action Advisory Group made up of industry leaders from vineyards and

wineries of various sizes, scientists, and sustainability professionals. It is intended to be a living resource that is regularly updated with the latest best practices and research. Whether the grower or vintner is just beginning to grapple with climate

Planting cover crops to enhance soil resilience and sequester carbon is an example of a climate-smart practice.




PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA WINE INSTITUTE

concerns or already has a sustainability plan in place, it meets them where they are, providing actionable step-by-step guidance and information across a spectrum of related topics, including:

- Explaining why action is essential to navigate the current and expected impacts of climate change
- Identifying and prioritizing climate-smart practices to include in a climate action plan
- Implementing climate-smart practices across the vineyard, winery, and supply chain
- Engaging teams, suppliers, and consumers in climate action
- Tracking progress and evolving strategies over time

In an industry so deeply connected to the land, inaction is not an option. By tap-

ping into CSWA's California Vineyard and Winery Climate Action Toolkit, California's wine community can continue to lead with innovation, stewardship, and sustainability—ensuring that great wine continues to flow from healthy vineyards for generations to come.

For a deep dive into what climate-smart vineyards and wineries are doing, explore the tool kit at cswaclimatetoolkit.org. 

Authored by Wine Institute contributors, "The Inside Sip on California Wine" provides an insider's look at the latest developments in California's wine community. Wine Institute is an advocacy group of over 1,000 California wineries and affiliated businesses that initiates and advocates for state, federal, and international public policy to encourage the responsible production, consumption, and enjoyment of wine.

{ south america }

A VITAL
Viticultural

EXPLORING
ICONIC CHILEAN
TERROIR THROUGH
THE LENS OF
VIÑA SANTA RITA

VISION

by Erik Segelbaum

*The Limarí Valley receives
dense coastal fog despite its proximity
to the Atacama Desert.*



Viña Santa Rita is based in Alto Jahuel in Chile's Maipo Valley.



In recent decades, the entire dynamic of how Chileans produce and consume wine has changed dramatically: Gone are the days of homogenous commercial production, replaced by a desire to make quality wines reflecting various terroirs. Notes Amanda Barnes, acclaimed author of *The South America Wine Guide*, “Over the past decade or so Chile has taken enormous leaps in improving not only the quality of its wines, but a greater authenticity in reflecting the country’s incredible and diverse terroirs. Regional identity has become a central pillar of the wines of Chile—whether the vibrant fresh wines from the cool coastal regions or the structured finesse of wines from the Andes.” At the forefront of it all is Viña Santa Rita, a benchmark producer of world-class Chilean wines whose commitment to planting the right varieties in the right terroirs has paved the way for modern viticulture in its home country.

Founded in 1880 in the Maipo Valley, Santa Rita has ascended over the past 145 years to become one of Chile’s most emblematic wineries. Its holdings include nearly 3,000 hectares across many of the country’s most coveted growing regions, and its facility in Alto Jahuel, one of Chile’s oldest operational wineries, is a registered historic monument. The producer has earned global recognition not just for its terroir-driven wines but its deep commitment to sustainability (for more on the latter, see our April/May 2025 issue).



The Three Pillars of Great Terroir

Truly great terroir can be defined by three underlying factors: uniqueness, consistency, and reputation. Regarding the first pillar, a combination of factors—among them elements of soil, geology, slope, aspect, and orientation as well as micro-, macro-, and meso-climate—must speak to a distinctiveness that provides a true sense of place. Ultimately, these factors differentiate a specific region or plot. Secondly, the wines must be produced in a consistent manner and with deliberate effort made to highlight and amplify the qualities of the site. This oft-overlooked human element of terroir is vital to preserving a region's sense of place. And lastly, a reputation of quality must be maintained: Producers should devote themselves to the region's signature style rather than fleeting trends or the use of overly manipulative winemaking practices such as additives. It is through this shared vision that the intrinsic qualities of an appellation are upheld.

While there are many diverse terroirs across Chile, from the hot and dry Atacama Desert in the north to the cold Austral region in the south, three areas stand

out as representative examples of Chilean terroir. Through decades of dedication, Santa Rita has been instrumental in shaping these terroirs and producing wines that reflect their typicity and unique character. It is through the lens of these three regions that global consumers can gain a deep understanding of Chilean viticulture.

LIMARÍ VALLEY: *Chilean Chardonnay at Its Finest*

The Limarí Valley is a case study in distinctive terroir. It sits near the driest desert in the world yet is tempered by the strong influence of the Pacific Ocean. The daily impact of the dense coastal fog known as the *camanchaca* has a cooling effect, prolonging the ripening period while promoting the retention of bright natural acidity. This combination of low humidity and cool maritime breezes creates ideal conditions for grape health. Says Barnes, "The bracing cool influence of the Pacific is what really shapes the wines of Limarí, an ideal cool-climate terroir with poor soils that create vibrant and saline Chardonnay." These soils are similar to the calcareous soils of Burgundy and the Willamette Valley, with a significant amount of calcium carbonate. Furthermore, their

structure promotes deep root penetration, allowing the vines to tap into a rich mix of nutrients and leading to low yields of high-quality fruit.

It's no wonder that mineral-driven, fresh Chardonnay thrives here, and Santa Rita's Floresta Chardonnay serves as an example of the heights the grape can achieve in the Limarí Valley. Planted in the Punitaqui area after a decades-long search for an ideal Chardonnay location, this classic bottling is a combination of two selected blocks.

MAIPO VALLEY: *The Heart of Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon*

As Barnes opines, "The Maipo is the heart of Chilean Cabernet country for a reason—the gravel stones on the river terraces and cool mountain breezes with sunny, dry days are perfect for structured, refreshing, and balanced Cabernet Sauvignon wines—always with a trademark lift [and a note of] cedar." Alluvial terraces similar to those in Bordeaux serve a dual function, providing well-drained soils and the necessary thermal amplitude to warm grapes that are simultaneously being chilled by cool mountain winds. The resulting prolonged ripening period leads to

Cabernets boasting intense concentration, remarkable freshness, and deep sophistication that rank them among the world's best: Expect Maipo Cabernets to be well structured and smooth in texture, with creamy rather than astringent tannins and generous ripe-fruit flavors.

Santa Rita's Floresta Cabernet Sauvignon hails from high-elevation hillside vineyards, where vines rooted in a blend of volcanic and colluvial soils thrive at nearly 2,000 feet above sea level. This combination of ideal altitude, soil composition, drainage, cool breezes, and diurnal shift manifests in a densely structured wine with sophisticated floral and fruit notes, ripe tannins, and vibrant acid-

APALTA: Where Carménère Reaches New Heights

Widely considered the "Grand Cru" of the Entre Cordilleras region of Chile, Apalta has a distinctly Mediterranean climate. According to Barnes, the region is "surrounded by hills with both a coastal and mountain influence moderating the warm temperatures to bring balance and richness. It is also home to some incredible old vines, which are a testimony to how blessed this terroir is in terms of longevity and quality over time."

Apalta experiences a significantly higher level—roughly 35%—of winter rainfall than the rest of the Colchagua Valley, the broader winemaking region in which it's

ing the variety in a site it affectionately nicknamed "the nursery." Sheltered by soaring mountains and heat-protected by cool Pacific ocean breezes, it's home to thriving vines that date as far back as 1917. The sheer age of the vines, combined with such aspects of terroir as steep slopes and soils of alluvial clay gravel and sand, means that the Carménère bunches grown there are marked by small, concentrated grapes largely devoid of the vegetal notes to which the variety is prone. The result is expressive, balanced, and elegant Carménère.

The variety needs a long growing period (much longer than Merlot) in order to properly ripen and achieve the spices and



Apalta is located in the Colchagua Valley.

ity. Alternatively, there's the Triple C, a Bordeaux-style blend with a decidedly Chilean signature that's supported by Cabernet Franc and the Chilean icon variety Carménère, which adds elegant savory notes and a delicate vegetal herbaceousness that complements the rich fruit and spice of the Cabernet Sauvignon.

Santa Rita's contribution to shaping the terroirs of Chile took on another dimension in Maipo in 1991, when the producer became the first to import and plant Petite Sirah there in response to an increased demand for Syrah and a general shortage of vine material. Grafting onto old vines in a tiny 5-acre pergola vineyard, it created the Bougainville Petite Sirah, which is still one of the country's most high-end expressions of the variety.

located. This natural source of irrigation leads to early and uniform budbreak while well-drained granitic soils help moderate vine vigor and restrain the water supply, encouraging consistent and slow ripening. Most importantly, they mitigate the development of some of the more intense pyrazines that can be both a signature and a flaw in other areas' expressions of Carménère. It's well known that for decades the variety was mistaken for Merlot in Chile; as a result, it was grown in the wrong sites and farmed incorrectly, often yielding insipid and weedy wine. Thankfully, the grape was correctly identified in 1994, and a renaissance began.

But Santa Rita's prowess with Carménère dates back much further: Nearly a century earlier, Santa Rita began grow-



vivacious fruit flavors found in only the best expressions of Carménère. In the right site, such as Santa Rita's Pewën de Apalta, a small, dry-farmed block planted in 1938, the grape truly shines. The wine it yields has been recognized as Chile's best Carménère three years in a row by the wine guide *Descorchados*, proving to be not only the country's but one of the world's best expressions of this grape. Meanwhile, Santa Rita's Floresta Carménère from 80-plus-year-old vines represents a new vision for the variety. The south-facing horseshoe-shaped vineyard experiences a slow ripening period (remember that in the Southern Hemisphere, a south-facing vineyard would be like a north-facing vineyard above the equator). The Santa Rita team harvests early to preserve freshness and finishes the wine for 12 months in concrete vats, resulting a bright, soft, and savory Carménère.

In short, Viña Santa Rita has played a key role in shaping the signatures of Chilean wine: Be it Chardonnay from Limarí, Cabernet Sauvignon from Maipo, or Carménère from Apalta, its wines serve as vital examples of the best terroirs of Chile. **ST**

{ tastings }

RECAPPING THE POPULAR
RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY PINOT
FORUM IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

A Leisurely NEIGHBORHOOD STROLL

story by DAVE MCINTYRE / *photos by* MICHAEL BUTCHER



Attendees of the Russian River Valley Pinot Forum sniff sample pours at Lulu's Winegarden in Washington, D.C.



D.C.-based sommelier Michael Markarian served as Pinot Forum's emcee.



Jesslyn Jackson, executive director of the Russian River Valley Winegrowers (center), with Tiaan Lordan, winemaker at Hartford Family Winery, and winemaker James MacPhail of Tongue Dancer Wines and The Calling.



The wines featured at MITA.

The

Russian River Valley Winegrowers (RRVW) association took its Pinot Forum on the road this spring for the first time in 22 years, stopping first in Washington, D.C., to introduce the famous Sonoma County AVA to sommeliers, retailers, and writers in the nation's capital.

Billed as "A Walk Through the Neighborhoods," the trade event featured stops at three wine bars along D.C.'s hip U Street Corridor, each featuring Pinot Noirs from two "neighborhoods" of the Russian River Valley. The format allowed participants to stretch their legs between wine flights and snacks on a brisk spring day. (A similar event was held in Atlanta in May, while the RRVW's annual program in Sonoma County will take place in mid-July; there are also plans for a Pinot Forum in Dallas in 2026.)

"We wanted to support three local businesses in this exciting neighborhood of D.C. as we introduce our guests to the range of expressions Pinot Noir achieves in the different neighborhoods of the Russian River



The lineup at Pop Fizz Bar.

Greg Morthole, winemaker at Davis Bynum; Cushing Donelan, owner of Donelan Family Wines; and Tessa Gorsuch, estate director at Martinelli Winery.



Valley—from the cooler, ocean-influenced Sebastopol Hills to the warmer influence of the Eastern Hills,” said Jesslyn Jackson, executive director of the trade association, which counts 70 wineries and 50 growers among its members.

The RRVW developed its concept of “neighborhoods” in tandem with the viticulture department at the University of California, Davis, which helped delineate differences in soils and microclimates within the larger AVA. The model is simpler and more flexible than the formal system of sub-AVAs, explained Michael Markarian, a D.C.-based sommelier who acted as the afternoon’s emcee. The names of these neighborhoods may not appear on labels, but the approach allowed the organizers to showcase the diversity of the Russian River Valley: “Each of these neighborhoods has a distinct fingerprint,” Markarian said.

Our first stop was MITA, a MICHELIN-starred restaurant featuring Latin American-influenced vegetarian cuisine. Tiaan Lordan, winemaker at Hartford Family Winery, presented his 2022 Jennifer’s Vineyard Pinot Noir from a cold, windy, and foggy site in the Sebastopol Hills. Christopher Strieter, founder of Senses Wines, introduced his 2022 Pinot from Kanzler Vineyard, a property he said was made famous by Kosta Browne. Both

wines featured bright red-fruit flavors around a taut core and a long finish.

Winemaker James MacPhail represented the Green Valley neighborhood with two wines, describing the area’s signature as “strawberry and cola.” From his own label, which he founded with his wife, the Tongue Dancer Wines 2023 Lakeview Vineyard (not yet released) was made with a “suitcase clone” rumored to have originated in a venerated Burgundy vineyard, he said. The second was from The Calling, a label co-owned by Peter Deutsch of Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits and TV sports commentator Jim Nantz. The Calling 2021 Fox Den Vineyard Pinot Noir hails from a site located at about 1,000 feet in elevation just 12 miles inland from the Pacific.

The crowd then strolled two blocks to Pop Fizz Bar, a playful bubbly-themed wine bar, to learn about the Laguna Ridge and Santa Rosa Plains neighborhoods. Over slabs of Detroit-style pizza, we heard from Tessa Gorsuch, a fifth-generation member of the Martinelli family, about the Martinelli Winery 2022 Zio Tony Ranch Pinot Noir. The ranch was an apple orchard for more than a century before Gorsuch’s grandfather converted it to grapes in 1999–2000.

“Laguna Ridge sees cool, foggy mornings and warm afternoons, so you’re



Marshall McGlone (center) is wine director at Takoma Bev Co. in Takoma Park, MD; Motorkat in Silver Spring, MD; and Zinnia, also in Silver Spring.

definitely going to taste darker, bigger fruit flavors compared to Sebastopol Hills and Green Valley,” she said. The wine indeed showed density of color and weight on the palate, as did the 2021 Klopp Ranch Annabelle’s Block Pinot from Donelan Family Wines, presented by owner Cushing Donelan. This vineyard was planted in the late 1980s with “old Swan selection” vines, he pointed out, referring to Joseph Swan, a legendary Sonoma County vintner. The reference, like MacPhail’s to suitcase clones, evoked the romance of

an era before clones with more clinical names like 777 and 115 became all the rage. “This darker side of Pinot Noir screams quintessential Russian River Valley,” Donelan said.

The Davis Bynum 2021 Lindley’s Knoll Pinot Noir represented the Santa Rosa Plains neighborhood. Winemaker Greg Morthole noted that this area is known for clay-based Huichica loam soils rather than the celebrated Goldridge soils in the Sebastopol Hills and Green Valley; these heavy clay soils lend earthy, savory tones to the wines. The Davis Bynum selection was made from clone 115, which produces bright fruit flavors and a hint of rose petals, according to Morthole.

Roman Ivey, a sommelier at high-end Italian restaurant L’Ardente, said he was interested in finding some Russian River

try to meet people where they are in their wine preferences.”

The best part of an event like this, he mused, “is to actually meet the growers themselves. That’s the best way to learn about the wines, to get their perspective on how the wines are made and how they might fit into a restaurant program.”

This wouldn’t be Washington, D.C., without current events hanging over the festivities. Marshall McGlone, wine director for three restaurants—Takoma Bev Co., Motorkat, and Zinnia in the nearby Maryland suburbs—said he was especially interested in looking for American wines as the prospect of tariffs threatened to make European choices more expensive. “We’re going to have to start thinking about looking domestic for a lot of our quality products, so I was definitely

2022 The Benefactor, both representing the Middle Reach of the Russian River Valley. East of Healdsburg, the Eastern Hills was represented by Balverne Estate’s 2022 Pinot Noir and Ancient Oak’s single-vineyard 2022 Siebert Ranch Pinot. These wines were the richest and boldest of the day, featuring flavors of baking spice and sappy textures. Geoffrey Thompson, general manager at Notre Vue Estate (formerly Balverne Estate), described them as “hotter and spicier than further to the west.”

Melissa Moholt-Siebert, owner of and winemaker at Ancient Oak, relished the opportunity to present her wine to a room full of thirsty sommeliers in a market with the potential to amplify a



The lineup at Lulu’s Winegarden.

Mark Gamache, owner of Mon Premier Wines; Michael Kobler, winemaker at Kobler Estate Winery; and Melissa Moholt-Siebert, owner/winemaker at Ancient Oak Cellars.

Pinot Noir to add to the restaurant’s list. “Domestic Pinot Noir is always in demand,” noted Ivey, who previously worked the floors at Rose’s Luxury and St. Anselm’s, two other top D.C. restaurants. The Russian River Pinots “are midway in body for customers who are Cabernet drinkers to enjoy something with more elegance and finesse,” he added as we hoofed it between tastings. “Not everyone who goes to a fine-dining restaurant is a wine drinker, and I always

interested in how these wines were presented, especially the cooler sites versus warmer sites, the differences and similarities with European wines,” McGlone said. “It’s not something I’m super doomsday-prepping for, but it’s definitely something to keep in the back of my mind.”

The final stop on our tour was Lulu’s Winegarden. Over an assortment of tacos and short ribs, participants savored Kobler Estate Winery’s 2022 Bacigalupi Vineyards Pinot Noir and Mon Premier’s

winery’s profile. “D.C., as the nation’s capital, has a lot of influential people come here from around the world and the country to visit or to live and work for a few years, so this is a market that can really help a winery brand,” she said. “This isn’t so much a sales opportunity as an education opportunity. Geeky somms are my customers, not the supermarket wine buyers. And so getting to be in a room—or three rooms—with 30 of them is a dream come true for us.”

Bird's Eye View

**PEREGRINE WINES
HAS A LONG-TERM VISION
FOR CENTRAL OTAGO**

by Ruth Tobias

Peregrine Wines founder Lindsay McLachlan and his son, CEO Fraser McLachlan.

LOCATED AT 45 degrees south latitude, Central Otago on New Zealand's South Island is one of the world's southernmost winegrowing regions. Extreme as that may sound, thanks to the protective influence of the surrounding mountains, it has a continental climate—marked by warm days, cool nights, plenty of sunshine, and minimal rainfall—that distinguishes it from the rest of the country while earning it comparisons to Bourgogne. Not surprisingly, Pinot Noir thrives here, as do whites in general, including Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Riesling.

Lindsay McLachlan recognized the region's potential for viticulture early on, planting his first vines in Bendigo in 1999, just two years after grape cultivation began in the subregion. He named the winery he established there Peregrine after the peregrine falcon, "the fastest bird

in the sky and the fastest animal in the world," as Lindsay's son, company CEO Fraser McLachlan, points out. "The peregrine inspired us with its power, elegance, and confidence, and we have continued to emulate those dynamic characteristics in the style of our wines and the core attributes of our brand."

The peregrine falcon also happens to have incredible vision—it can see more than a mile into the distance—and the same could be said of the McLachlan family. In addition to the timely foothold they obtained in Central Otago, they have been adhering to and advocating for organic farming practices since the early 2000s, receiving certification by BioGro in 2017. Today, says Fraser, "My goal . . . is [for Peregrine] to be recognized as an industry leader in sustainable wine production. This goal encompasses leadership

in organic and biodynamic grape growing and winemaking in a commercially sustainable way," for instance by "embracing decarbonization in wine production through electrification of machinery (we are the first to put electric frost fans into a vineyard in New Zealand), reduction in fossil fuel consumption, and energy-efficient winemaking practices."

It also encompasses such regenerative methods as cover cropping—ryecorn is a favorite—and incorporating animals into the 180-acre vineyard, 105 acres of which are currently planted. With an additional 150 acres of farmland on the estate, husbandry is an important part of the viticultural program. Cattle, for instance, "eagerly consume" pomace from the winery, "a nutrient-rich byproduct, and in turn produce manure that becomes a cornerstone of Peregrine's organic compost

and biodynamic preparations,” according to Fraser: Sheep, as our readers well know by now, “take on a seasonal role, grazing down grasses through spring and summer, then returning post-harvest to tidy the vineyard floor ahead of budburst. Their natural fertilization enriches the soil while also reducing the need for tractor passes and mechanical intervention.” And “a hard-working collection of heritage chicken breeds,” he adds, “contributes by naturally managing pests like grass grubs and helping control weed growth. As they forage, they also aerate the soil, bringing added vitality to the vineyard environment.”

primarily from its Bendigo estate, the remainder from the Pisa subregion; the fruit is hand-harvested, partially destemmed, vinified in open-top fermenters, and aged ten months in French oak. The finished wine combines rich aromas of red berries and spice with a palate marked by pure flavors of red fruit plus a touch of cacao, a delicate structure, subtle oak, and silky tannins. The Sauvignon Blanc, for its part, is quite distinct from its Marlborough counterpart. As with the Pinot, a majority of its hand-harvested, partially destemmed fruit comes from Bendigo, the rest from Pisa; it all sees overnight skin



▲ The McLachlan family raises cattle on their estate along with sheep and chickens, all of which contribute to the health of the vineyards.

◀ Peregrine is located in the Bendigo subregion of Central Otago in New Zealand.

Tasting Notes

Peregrine 2023 Riesling, Central Otago, New Zealand (\$29)

Aromas of petrol and basil are mirrored on the palate, where notes of dried mango and cashew butter are drawn out and broad. This is an earthy style of Riesling, with honeyed citrus and flint playing a role on the crisp finish. **93** —*Meridith May*

Peregrine 2024 Sauvignon Blanc, Central Otago, New Zealand (\$31)

Iconic aromas of gooseberry mingle with thyme and unripened banana. The palate is tart, with shiny notes of green tea and yellow apple with a midway hint of flint. Extroverted acidity cheers on the flavors through the stunning finish. **94** —*M.M.*

VINEYARD BRANDS

That soil covers the glacially formed terraces at the foot of the Dunstan Mountains where Peregrine’s fruit grows at about 1,150 feet above sea level. Called Molyneux, it consists of well-draining sandy loam over schist-based alluvial gravel, “a unique combination [that] allows for deep root penetration, leading to mineral-rich grapes ideal for producing high-quality premium wines,” in Fraser’s words—which, of course, is what it’s all about.

Taking what he calls “a pure, low-intervention approach to winemaking that allows our sites to express their characters,” including “a distinctive mineral [quality], bright acidity, and ripe and concentrated flavor profiles,” Peregrine produces bottlings from all of the aforementioned key grapes in Central Otago. Its Pinot Noir, for example, is sourced

contact before cool fermentation in stainless steel. The result shows vivid aromas of cantaloupe, pineapple guava, and lime zest that lead to a palate of lime and green apple, where mouthwatering acidity is met by notable minerality.

With these wines and others, Peregrine is set to soar in the U.S., where it’s available through Vineyard Brands. Meanwhile, it’s ensuring its namesake continues to soar too, as it partners with the Wingspan Birds of Prey Trust to reestablish the native falcon population in New Zealand, raising chicks in special bird boxes at the winery until they can be released into the wild. Given that everything is connected, the McLachlan family’s commitment to the land and its flora and fauna is part and parcel of ensuring their second-generation winery itself has a future in Bendigo for many generations to come. **SJ**

The Essence of a Classic

THE SPIRIT OF BARBARY COAST SUFFUSES **IZZY'S STEAKS & CHOPS** IN SAN FRANCISCO

WITH TWO LOCATIONS in San Francisco's Marina District and San Carlos, California, respectively, Izzy's Steaks & Chops is a second-generation family-owned-and-operated dining destination inspired by bootlegger Isadore "Izzy" Gomez, the namesake of a rowdy saloon in a bygone San Francisco neighborhood known as Barbary Coast. Gomez came to the city penniless from Portugal at the age of 18 and soon got a job as a "swamper" (that is, an assistant or handyman) in a local gin joint.

He eventually saved enough money to buy his own place, which during Prohibition became a frequent violator of the dry laws; Gomez even saw jail time for bootlegging. Ten years later, he got a presidential pardon and was the inspiration for a play by William Saroyan, *The Time of Your Life*, which was set in his saloon. Founded in 1987 by the late restaurateur Sam DuVall, who in his lifetime opened 30 restaurants, the modern-day Izzy's Steaks & Chops continues Gomez's legacy with luscious comfort fare and good-time cocktails. DuVall's daughter and current managing partner, Samantha DuVall Bechtel, maintains that legacy and honors the traditions that have made Izzy's a Bay Area institution for nearly 40 years.

The flagship San Francisco location recently reopened after an extensive redesign that included a revamp of the menu and cocktail program, the latter of which celebrates the classics while pushing its guests to be a little adventurous. "When Samantha approached me about creating a cocktail menu, she wanted to highlight the rich history behind cocktail culture in San Francisco," says lead bartender Drew Keeler. "I wanted to celebrate the bootlegger era by paying homage to some of the spirits that would have been featured in such institutions; pisco, pastis, absinthe, and barrel-proof whiskeys are amongst the 'heroes' featured in our

PHOTOS: DANIEL SEUNG LEE



this classic cocktail be slightly unique to us while still keeping the essence of what made that drink a classic in the first place?" Keeler explains. "On our menu, you'll find an Espresso Martini, a must for our neighborhood, but with some Branca Menta for a fresh take on it. Also, for our Negroni Sour, throwing the flavors of a Negroni in with the preparation of a Pisco Sour . . . feels familiar but is still new. [Additionally,] our Flaming Sazerac features an ignited spritz of absinthe. While we can suggest [our guests] expand their horizons with a riff on a Sazerac, the truth is they want to feel the comfort and familiarity a steakhouse offers." SJ

Izzy's Winter Cosmo with vodka, Cointreau, rosemary, pomegranate, and lime.

cocktail program, as well as spirits such as Branca Menta."

But institutions like Izzy's can't rock the boat too much. "Our guests are not coming here to go on a journey of new and different spirits or to explore over-the-top ingredients and flavors," Keeler adds. "Steakhouses aren't really focused on trends but rather how to do the classics properly." For instance, the majority of diners coming in the door of a steakhouse already know they're going to order a Martini or Manhattan and know the brand of spirit they prefer. "At baseline, if you just make sure your Martini glasses are fresh from the freezer and you prepare the cocktail exactly as it's ordered, you have a guest for life," Keeler points out.

Still, he takes the opportunity to create something different and delicious whenever possible. "When thinking about our menu, we ask ourselves, how can we make



The Bacon-Washed Old Fashioned with bacon-washed bourbon, mezcal, maple, and walnut bitters.

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Sketches of Spain

HOW **GARCÍA CARRIÓN** HAS MAINTAINED ITS VISION FOR RESPONSIBLE GROWTH THROUGH FIVE GENERATIONS OF FAMILY STEWARDSHIP

by Chris Howard

IN THE LUMINOUS landscapes of southeastern Spain, a humble bodega established in 1890 has evolved into an international superpower that provides a benchmark for what it means to be a large-scale winegrower. García Carrión, now Europe's largest wine producer and the fourth largest globally, has accomplished something remarkable: maintaining the soul of Spanish winemaking while operating at a scale that brings its labels to tables in over 156 countries.

A Family Legacy of Innovation

The story begins in Jumilla, where the Carrión family had been growing grapes and making wine for several centuries prior to establishing a new winery in 1890, driven by a surge in demand from a France devastated by phylloxera. Five generations later, the company remains firmly in family hands, with Don José García-Carrión and Doña Fala Corujo at the helm alongside their son Luciano García-Carrión, who spearheads international expansion.

"Since 1890, García Carrión has remained rooted in its agricultural heritage, emphasizing respect for the land, commitment to quality, and a long-term vision," explains Luciano. This continuity has allowed it to take bold steps that might seem at odds with industry convention, such as its revolutionary introduction of Spain's first wine in brick-shaped Tetra Pak cartons in the 1980s, a move that cut costs and made affordable wine more accessible to a broader segment of the Spanish public.

The family's approach to business reflects a philosophy that has guided them through 135 years: Innovation doesn't mean abandoning tradition—it means renewing and refining it. This principle has driven strategic moves like the 1997 acquisition of Jaime Serra, one of the few major Cava producers still in Spanish hands, and the expansion into diverse beverage categories under the Don Simón brand, from fruit juices to smoothies to sangria.

A Passport to Spanish Terroir

Perhaps García Carrión's most innovative contribution to Spanish wine has been the creation of Pata Negra, the inspiration behind which "was a vision of unifying quality wines from different DOs [Denominaciones de Origen] under a single, recognizable identity," says Luciano. "Initially, it wasn't well received at the national level due to the traditional nature of the wine sector. Several groups within the industry were opposed to the idea."

Such resistance is understandable in a country where regional identity is a matter of pride and protection and each DO has maintained distinct branding, marketing, and distribution channels. By unifying these diverse appellations under a pan-Spanish label, García Carrión challenged the status quo of region-specific marketing—creating what amounts to a vinous passport that allows consumers to explore Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Jumilla, La Mancha, Rueda, Toro, Cava, and Valdepeñas through a trusted brand.

García Carrión estate Viña Arnáiz in Ribera del Duero.



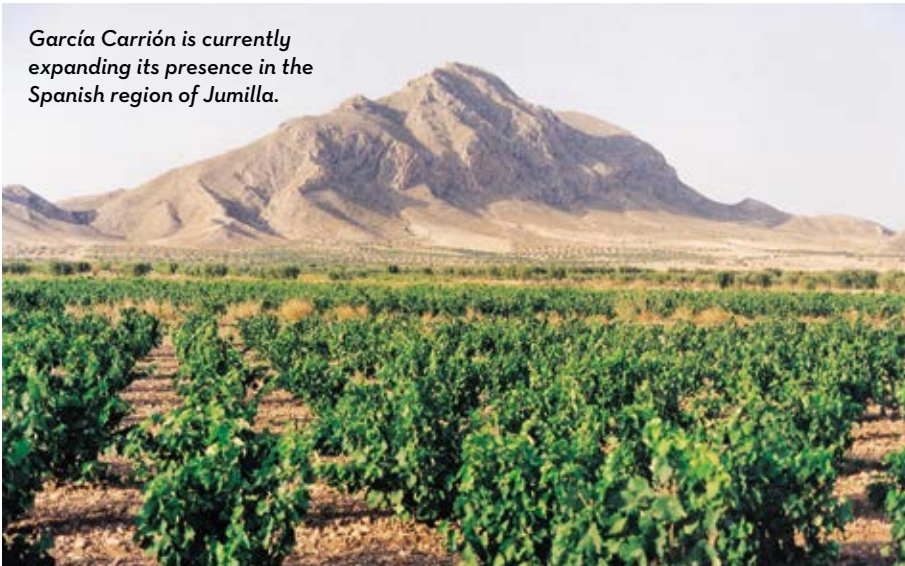
The gamble has paid off, especially in export markets like the United States, where the Pata Negra Rioja Reserva has found particular success. “Its balance of oak aging, fruit complexity, and value makes it attractive to both enthusiasts and casual wine drinkers,” notes Luciano. “Consumers respond to the prestige associated with Rioja and the approachable elegance of the Pata Negra label.”



García Carrión acquired Cava producer Jaime Serra in 1997.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

García Carrión is currently expanding its presence in the Spanish region of Jumilla.



Scale Without Compromise

Many wine professionals assume an inverse relationship between quantity and quality. García Carrión addresses this perception head-on through a production model that emphasizes local authenticity despite the vast size of its total production. “We operate in 12 Spanish DOs, with each wine produced in its respective region, ensuring terroir expression,” Luciano explains. “Our scale allows for technological investment, but every region retains its winemaking autonomy.”

The company views terroir not just as a location but as a story to be told through the preservation of each region’s unique climate, soil, and varietal character. To that end, it has invested in state-of-the-art production facilities in each DO rather than simply sourcing grapes to be vinified at centralized locations—a commitment that has required significant capital investment but helps ensure each wine accurately expresses its origin.

Also impressive at this scale is García Carrión’s commitment to sustainability, which extends from vineyard to bottle.

The company has established partnerships with over 40,000 local farmers and promotes “zero-kilometer sourcing”—obtaining grapes and raw materials as close as possible to production facilities to reduce carbon emissions and support local economies. “Our partnerships ensure fair pricing and stable contracts, which encourages sustainable practices and fosters trust across generations of growers,” Luciano contends.

Other practices include the nighttime harvesting of white grapes in Rueda, which preserves aromatic compounds while reducing energy consumption; installing solar energy systems at production centers that now cover 30% of the company’s power needs; and using lightweight bottles to reduce transport emissions and material use.


Meanwhile, at Viña Arnáiz in Ribera del Duero, García Carrión showcases how technology and ecology can be symbiotic. Its Viticulture 4.0 program employs drones to monitor vine health, sensors to collect real-time data on soil moisture and vine stress, and digital monitoring

systems to track grape development. “These tools help us reduce resource use, improve grape quality, and make data-driven decisions that support both the environment and the wine,” asserts Luciano. The result is a more precise, sustainable approach to viticulture that enhances quality while reducing environmental impact.

The Way Forward

As García Carrión continues to expand in regions like Toro, Jumilla, Valdepeñas, and Rueda, it faces perhaps its greatest challenge: capturing the interest of younger generations who are less engaged with wine culture.

Its strategy includes developing more accessible formats, modern branding and packaging, and digitally integrated experiences. The company is also designing wines with flavor profiles that resonate with younger audiences—fruity, fresh, sustainable options with compelling stories behind them. And its enotourism program at three of its wineries—Viña Arnáiz, Jaime Serra, and Los Llanos—incorporates immersive experiences that connect emotionally with new consumers, inviting them to discover the rich heritage of Spanish wine in an engaging, contemporary context.

From a small bodega in Jumilla to a global ambassador for Spanish wine, García Carrión demonstrates that scale and soul can coexist when guided by family values and a commitment to authenticity. In short, it’s not just producing wine—it’s sharing Spain’s vinous heritage with the world, drop by drop. 



Unearthed

TWO SMALL-PRODUCTION PINOT NOIR AND CHARDONNAY PRODUCERS COME TO LIGHT by Meredith May

A Burgundian Vision

THE OLD AND NEW WORLDS UNITE AT
THOMAS T THOMAS VINEYARDS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THOMAS T THOMAS VINEYARDS



IN 2017, Thomas T. Thomas launched the first vintage of his namesake label from the Anderson Valley. His 36-acre estate is located near downtown Philo in Mendocino County, where dense fog reigns until the warmth of the morning sun burns it off—yet with the Pacific Ocean just 20 miles away, cool ocean breezes are a daily occurrence in the afternoons. This climatic cycle, as we know, is ideal for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Thomas T. Thomas in his tasting room.



Thomas T Thomas 2022 Chardonnay, Anderson Valley (\$42) Rich and creamy yet pleasantly clean, with a ray of sunshine illuminating notes of lemon chiffon and vanilla meringue plus linear acidity that balances the wine's toastiness. **93**

Thomas T Thomas 2022 Estate Grown Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley (\$70) Aged ten months in (50% new) oak, this red possesses dimension and a taste of terroir that brings us closer to nature. Nutmeg and tobacco chime in with strawberries just pulled from the soil, and dried violets and plum graze the palate on the savory finish. **96**

Thomas T Thomas 2022 Reserve Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley (\$85) Exotically spiced with ginger, jasmine, and patchouli, this opulent wine speaks to the character of the soil. Soy sauce, black tea, and Brazil nut appear before boysenberry gelée adds gloss on the finish. **96**

Thomas T Thomas 2022 Buster's Hill Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley (\$90) This terroir-driven red exhibits both an earthy, umami character and a sleek gossamer texture. Tart cherry glistens with high-toned acidity as notes of heather and black tea wrap around the palate. **95**



A view of Anderson Valley from Thomas T Thomas Vineyards.

Common Denominator

INNUMERO SYMBOLIZES SHEREE AND BRIAN THORNSBERRY'S INCALCULABLE PASSION FOR WINE

WHEN IT CAME TIME to name their winery, Sheree and Brian Thornsberry agreed that numbers were pertinent to winemaking, from vintage year to months in barrel—but then again, they didn't express what the couple deemed the “unmeasurable magic that makes wine gloriously exceptional.” *Innumero* is Latin for “beyond the numbers,” and although these wines are scored numerically, we can vouch for their magic. **SP**

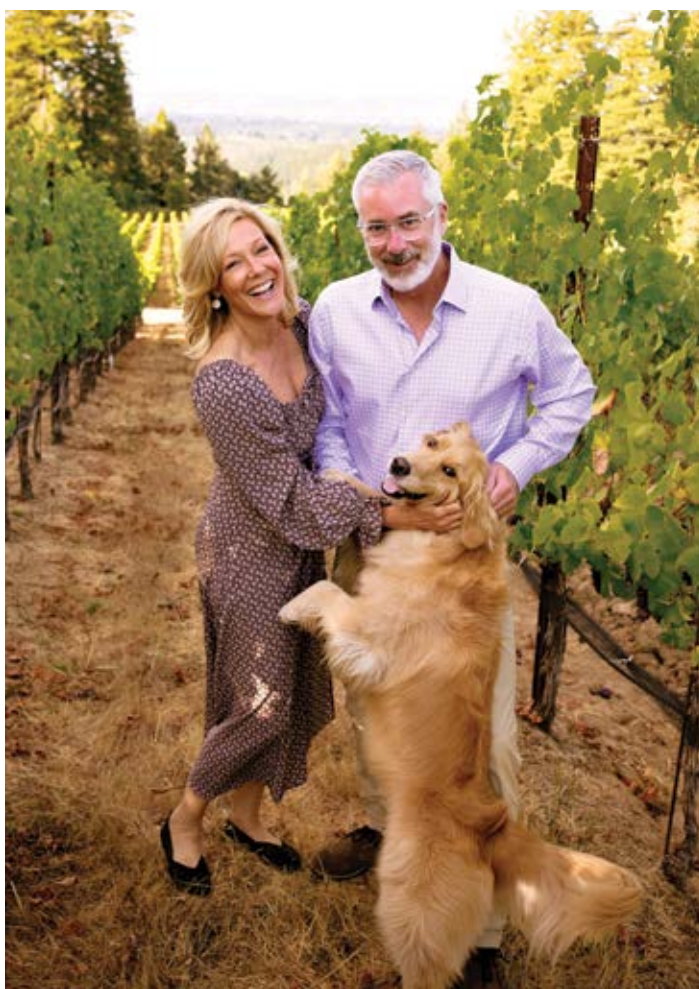


PHOTO COURTESY OF INNUMERO WINES

“We love the style and quality of our wines and the deft hand of our winemaker, Ashley Herzberg,” says Sheree Thornsberry, pictured here with husband Brian and their Golden Retriever, Bella. Adds Brian, “Our single-vineyard, single-clone approach, combined with the exceptional vineyard sites we source from, gives our patrons the truest sense of what is so special about the AVAs of Sonoma County.”

Innumero 2023 Chardonnay, Bootlegger’s Hill Vineyard, Green Valley of the Russian River Valley (\$65) From a vintage with a rainy winter that delayed budbreak and flowering, this is the winery’s first Chardonnay. The “hens and chicks” in the clusters included small, unfertilized berries that added bright acidity to this stunner; perfumed by tapioca, honeysuckle, and lemon chiffon, it’s an extraordinary wine that lights up the senses with its glistening notes of lime sorbet, hazelnut, and vanilla meringue. Steely undertones cleanse the palate on the salty, toasty finish. **97**

Innumero 2023 Pinot Noir, Little Boot Vineyard, Green Valley of Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$75) Located in the cool Green Valley of West Sonoma County, Little Boot Vineyard experiences coastal breezes and cold nights before warming up for a short period of time during the day. The wine is elegant from the start, with a lithe quality and notes of rose petal, candied ginger, sage, and blackberry that melt across the palate. Salty, clove-spiced raspberry and a leafy herbaceous quality indicate its savory yet quiet demeanor. **96**



Innumero 2023 Norstar Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$75) From the Middle Reach neighborhood of the Russian River Valley, Norstar reflects the cold nights and dense fog of its source. Cozy notes of forest floor, porcini mushroom, and wild strawberry offer a Cali-French sensibility as ambrosial hints of rose petal saturate the mouth. Roasted coffee and charred toast appear on the silky finish. **96**

Innumero 2023 Pinot Noir, Bootlegger’s Hill Vineyard, Green Valley of the Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$80) Showing graceful intensity, this single-vineyard Pommard clone Pinot Noir from West Sonoma County brings us into a rose garden, some petals dried and tinged with clove. Spiced mulberry, red tea, and just-tilled soil flavor the palate. **95**



Innumero 2023 Barrel Select Family Reserve Pinot Noir, Green Valley of the Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$90) This seamless multi-clonal cuvée was blended from four select barrels by the Thornsberry family. Remarkably fresh notes of cherry, rose petal, and strawberry meld with cinnamon, cedar, and cocoa as a savory hint of root beer vibrates within the balanced acid structure. **96**

An Alignment of VALUES

RAM'S GATE WINERY SHOWED HOW
SUSTAINABILITY AND QUALITY ARE
INTERTWINED AT A LUNCHEON IN CHICAGO

story by **DAVE MCINTYRE** / *photos by* **REBECCA PEPLINSKI**



Joe Nielsen is winemaker for Ram's Gate.



*Ram's Gate Winery
in Sonoma, CA.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF RAM'S GATE WINERY



RAM'S GATE
WINERY • SONOMA



**Maeve Pesquera is chief marketing officer/
executive vice president of luxury at O'Neill
Vintners & Distillers.**

An equal commitment to hospitality, sustainability, and quality

was on display at a luncheon hosted by Sonoma County producer Ram's Gate Winery and *The SOMM Journal* in Chicago in late February. The event marked a relaunch of Ram's Gate as the flagship brand of O'Neill Vintners & Distillers' new luxury wine division (additional events are planned for New York City, Miami, and Texas later this year).

Maeve Pesquera, chief marketing officer/executive vice president of luxury at O'Neill Vintners & Distillers, welcomed more than a dozen members of the on- and off-premise wine trade to the tasting at FIRE by the Alinea Group, a new concept by famed chef Grant Achatz featuring wood-fired hearth cooking. "What you'll see with these wines is the same intensity of purpose we see right here in this kitchen [and] that you bring to your wine lists and to your consumers at your restaurants—it's the same craft," Pesquera said.

"When you drive to Sonoma from San Francisco, we're the first winery you pass," said Breck O'Neill, proprietor of Ram's Gate and son of O'Neill Vintners & Distillers founder Jeff O'Neill, who helped establish the winery in 2011 before taking full ownership in 2024. The estate, designed by architect Howard Backen, sits along the north shore of San Pablo Bay at a point where the Sonoma Coast, Sonoma Valley, and Los Carneros AVAs converge. "Carneros means 'rams' in Spanish, and we are at the gateway to Carneros," O'Neill said. "So at Ram's Gate, we welcome you to our world with hospitality, incredible wine, and incredible food."

Winemaker Joe Nielsen, who has been at Ram's Gate since 2017, presented Chardonnays from the Sonoma Coast and Hyde Vineyard in Carneros as well as Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast and Bush Crispo Vineyard, a 4-acre site in the Russian River Valley that yields a mere 400–600 cases each vintage. Nielsen said the winery's location at the juxtaposition of three AVAs "means we can play to different expectations—and sometimes even defy expectation."

These wines clearly appealed to the guests. "My list is heavy on California, especially Cabernets, but we have a lot of seafood on the menu, so there's room for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir," said sommelier Diego Bermudez of Mastro's Steakhouse. Maria Montero, purchasing director for Smoque Steak, echoed this sentiment, adding, "We sell a lot of Chardonnay. I'm looking for wines that taste above their price."



Guests at a luncheon hosted by Ram's Gate Winery and The SOMM Journal included Matthew Sussman, owner of Table Donkey, Stick, and Danke; Marsha Wright, wine director at DineAmic Hospitality; Kandyce Alvear, wine director at Cira at The Hoxton; Maria Montero, purchasing director for Smoque Steak; and Katia Savinkova, lead sommelier at Fioretta.

The wines were paired with an adventurous menu prepared by chef Adair Canacasco and his crew at FIRE, including prawns smoked over juniper branches; halibut cured in kombu and steamed with celery; and even “glowing log-scorched dairy,” essentially smoked ice cream, for dessert. Especially outstanding was the spice-cured, stewed beef cheek accompanied by the Bush Crispo Vineyard Pinot Noir. FIRE general manager David Kearns described such dishes as more “primitive” than the refined and inventive cuisine of Alinea. “With a focus on open flame and no control of temperatures, you are really beholden to the elements,” he explained. “We wanted to create a menu using smoke and fire techniques in an unusual way.”

During the meal, Nielsen shared his approach to sustainability. “At the core, we love freshness in our wines, and we achieve that both by better farming, more focused farming, and by pushing the envelope on what is acceptable acidity for the standard classic wines of California,” he said. “And that means picking earlier than most people . . . as we try to find that

Goldilocks [level] of just enough richness and just enough acidity.”

A whopping 98% of Sonoma County's vineyards and wineries are certified sustainable. Even so, Nielsen expressed dismay that more Sonoma County vineyards and farms were not pursuing organic certification, noting a “barrier of entry, because [they] assume it's too difficult.” As for Ram's Gate, it began farming organically in 2020 and achieved certification last year through California Certified Organic Farmers.

O'Neill Vintners & Distillers as a whole has become a leader of regenerative viticulture in California. Head of sustainability Caine Thompson explained that, in late February, O'Neill's Robert Hall Winery became one of 16 wineries worldwide to be certified Regenerative Organic since the certification debuted in late 2019. The parent company itself is being certified by the Regenerative Organic Alliance for its 140 acres of vineyards, and Ram's Gate expects to be certified later this year.

Regenerative farming is “still relatively niche, but it's one of the most exciting



Mastro's Steakhouse sommelier Diego Bermudez.

things happening in agriculture and wine at the moment,” Thompson told the guests. “You take all the principles of organic—no pesticides, insecticides, or herbicides—and you start building [healthy] soil on top of that. That means planting specific cover crops, so not keeping a naked soil. Traditional agriculture brings up the plow to till the land. Regenerative

Spice-cured, stewed beef cheek in a puffed wild rice-sesame seed crust was paired with Ram's Gate's Bush Crispo Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley.



able, organic, and biodynamic farming. At Ram's Gate, this means paying vineyard workers a fair wage and involving them in the decisions about caring for the vines. "Living wages, ethical farming, nothing harmful being applied to the vineyards—that's creating this pure, regenerative, holistic system," Thompson continued.

And the team isn't stopping there. In the weeks following the Chicago event, Thompson and Nielsen began planting trees among the vine rows in the winery's estate vineyard in what Thompson described as California's first experiment with agroforestry, a concept that's also being put into practice in Bordeaux at Château Cheval Blanc and Château Palmer and in Champagne at Ruinart and Bollinger.

Maria Montero was impressed by the presentation. "The ethos about doing the right thing . . . even when it's difficult totally aligns with our restaurant and our values in our space," she said. "So on values alone, we really aligned. And these wines are exceptional versions of all these varietals and deliver a level of excellence and quality that is really noteworthy."

Marsha Wright, wine director at DineAmic Hospitality, which includes Greek restaurant Lyra among its 17 concepts around Chicago, also admired Ram's Gate's sustainability efforts. "It's wonderful what they're doing with the agriculture and the ROC certification," she said. "They've gone above and beyond to care about the land, because we've all come to this place in life where we need to give back to Mother Nature."



Breck O'Neill is proprietor of Ram's Gate.

is no-till to keep roots in the ground and not expose the soil to sun, wind, and rain." Tilling releases carbon from the soil into the atmosphere and over time results in a depleted topsoil, he added.

Regenerative farming also recognizes the role animals play in viticulture; Ram's Gate, for its part, employs sheep during the winter and spring, before budbreak, to graze on the cover crop and weeds and fertilize the soil with their manure. This emphasis on soil health is complemented by a social fairness standard, which Thompson said sets regenerative methodology apart from that of sustain-



Caine Thompson is head of sustainability at O'Neill Vintners & Distillers.

"It's the most crazy thing you'll see," he said, noting that they're planting about 50 trees per acre. "This isn't random trees around the boundary of a vineyard. This is the intentional planting of ancient fruit tree varietals, to bring diversity back to the land. It adds shade, it stops the wind. It opens up crevices in the soil for the grapevine to get down deeper. . . . It's building life within the vineyards that has been removed for hundreds of years. This is what we refer to as building climate-smart vineyards for the future, [a means] to battle climate change and be at the forefront of protecting not just the land but the style of wine."

The acidity and minerality of the Chardonnays remind me a lot of some of the wines from Greece, and the Pinot Noirs are just extraordinary."

Pesquera concluded the afternoon by stressing the importance of pursuing excellence at a time when the wine industry is facing tough headwinds. "We're resolute, and we believe in what you bring to life in your restaurants, which is a commitment to craft, quality, sustainability, and doing the right thing for the sake of doing it, even when it's exceptionally hard," she said. "That will always resonate with the people you're sharing it with." ❧

Form Meets Function

CASA OBSIDIANA'S EARLY SUCCESS OPENS NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

by Alissa Bica Raines

WHEN JEAN-CHARLES BOISSET,

a Franco-American vintner who owns wineries in both France and California, partnered with eighth-generation agave growers Jorge and Roberto Beckmann Gonzalez, they had high hopes for their tequila, Casa Obsidiana: They knew that the combination of high-quality estate-grown Blue Weber agave from volcanic soils at the base of El Volcán de Tequila—where the brand's namesake obsidian stones are found in abundance—with aging in French oak barrels previously used for Boisset's Napa Valley Chardonnays would make for a special spirit. Their optimism was well founded, as aficionados across the country are embracing the brand.

After Casa Obsidiana soft-launched in Napa Valley in December 2023 at the opening of Calistoga Depot—a historic train station turned lively dining and drinking destination in downtown Calistoga—it made its official debut in Northern California the following March with three expressions: a Blanco, Reposado, and Añejo. According to Patrick Egan, senior vice president of marketing and communications at Boisset's company, Boisset Collection, the focus wasn't on mass sales but rather on the legacy of the Beckmann Gonzalez family as well as on modern Mexican culture—in other words, on the intersection of the country's traditions, contemporary customs, and future. "Our vision was not to go after cases but to



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BOISSET COLLECTION

go after places that would speak to that story," Egan says, referring to their account strategy.

The aim was to gain placements in more than just cocktail bars; in fact, the MICHELIN-starred PRESS Restaurant in Napa was the brand's first account, and by mid-2024, it had a home at approximately 100 high-end establishments in Northern California. Early competition wins and strong reviews—including a gold medal at the 2024 USA Spirits Ratings competition and 96- to 98-point scores from *The Tasting Panel*—put Casa Obsidiana on the radar of even more

beverage professionals, who were drawn to the tequilas' agave-forward flavors, elevated and smoothed by their time in the Chardonnay casks, which lend more delicate oak flavors than traditional charred bourbon barrels. (Even the Blanco is aged for 16 days in oak, creating a plata with added texture, while the Reposado and Añejo rest for four and 15 months, respectively.) The trade also appreciated the brand's family ownership and the beauty of the artistic packaging.

Casa Obsidiana's bottles are unique in that each expression has a different shape, color, and backstory. The white

The Beckmann Gonzalez estate is located at the base of El Volcán de Tequila in Mexico.



Casa Obsidiana co-founders Jean-Charles Boisset (center) with his partners, Roberto and Jorge Beckmann Gonzalez.

Blanco bottle, when turned upside down, looks like a piña sprouting out of the earth; the angular edges at the top are fashioned after cuts made by the *coa de jima*, a traditional agave-hewing tool with a long handle and a circular, razor-sharp blade at the end. The Reposado bottle is green to represent the color of Blue Weber agave leaves, and its shape is inspired by the fluidity of water—notable because the tequila’s water source is a spring that

flows from the base of the volcano on the Beckmann Gonzalez family’s estate underground to the distillery. “We call this bottle the Picasso,” Egan says. “It reminded us of the shape of a woman as Pablo Picasso would have designed one, combined with the grace of the flow of water.” Finally, the red color of the Añejo bottle represents the property’s iron-rich volcanic earth and, through its Cubist shape, tells the story of modern Mexican

architecture, with its strong, angular lines. (Admittedly, the standout packaging can be a blessing and curse. “We’ve seen some journalists and bartenders question the integrity of the product at first glance, saying, ‘With that fancy bottle, this must be all marketing,’” Egan points out. “Then they taste it and hear the story and go, ‘Wow. No, this is serious!’”)

In September 2024, Casa Obsidiana expanded outside of California—first to Texas, where it’s available at the Mirador Dallas, among other locations, and then to Oklahoma, where it formed a partnership with the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa. There, it launched at an auction to create excitement and energy around the brand before it moved into local hotels and restaurants. Each new success has helped to grow its momentum, and this year to date, Casa Obsidiana has entered Florida, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Nevada, and Delaware as well as Washington, D.C.; while accounts are approximately 80% on-premise, the brand also sells direct to consumers on its website and can additionally be found at select Total Wine & More, K&L, Pavilions, and BevMo! locations.

The Beckmann Gonzalez brothers advocate for tequila as an accompaniment to a meal: Begin with the Blanco, have the Reposado with an entree, and pair the Añejo with dessert or an after-dinner cigar. This also creates sales opportunities for on-premise accounts, which can serve flights of the three expressions; restaurants doing just that include Bourbon Steak Los Angeles, Bar Sprezzatura in San Francisco, and Santi in New York City. (The Casa Obsidiana team recommends presenting the flights on a board made from staves of the same barrels used for the aging process.) But whether due to its approachability with food, its unique flavors derived from aging in wine barrels, its beautiful design, or the fact that it’s made by a local family in an age of corporate tequila brands—or a combination of the four—Casa Obsidiana has clearly found a lasting place in the market. *sj*

Pinot With Purpose

SUSTAINABILITY, SITE, AND A SECOND-GENERATION FOLEY FAMILY VINTNER DEFINE A NEW ERA AT **THE FOUR GRACES** by Jonathan Cristaldi

THE FOUR GRACES has become a cornerstone of Oregon's Willamette Valley since its establishment in 2003. Based in the Dundee Hills but spanning multiple AVAs, the producer—part of the Foley Family Wines & Spirits portfolio since 2015—is known for expressive, site-driven wines from estate-grown fruit, with a focus on Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, and Pinot Blanc.

degrees in history and geology from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, she went on to study environmental law at the University of Oregon. "Between undergrad and law school, I was fortunate to intern at the Montana Land Reliance, where I learned about conservation easements and a person's responsibility to the land," Foley says. "Through this opportunity, I saw how important it was to be a



Courtney Foley at Grange Winery in the Dundee Hills, home to The Four Graces.

Sustainability is a defining value. All of The Four Graces' vineyards are farmed according to the standards of Pacific Northwest-based certifying organization LIVE, while the broader Foley portfolio undergoes third-party audits by various organizations to ensure continual environmental improvement across its California and Oregon holdings.

That core principle finds its biggest champion in second-generation vintner and executive vice president Courtney Foley, who has a deep-rooted connection to the Pacific Northwest. After earning

steward of the land. That was something I also learned from my grandparents, who were berry farmers and committed to their land and community in Sumner, Washington, for over 45 years."

Today, Foley divides her time between Portland and Healdsburg, California—with three dogs in tow—and she views Oregon as being central to her life and leadership style. "If you had told me that I would be working in the family business when I was 16, there is no doubt you would have been met with an eye roll," she says. "But as time went on and



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOLEY FAMILY WINES & SPIRITS

my horizons broadened, I began to see that I could be most impactful in my professional life by working through the avenues carved out by my family." Under her guidance, the Foley Family Charitable Foundation has donated over \$400,000 to Willamette Valley nonprofits, including AHIVOY, ¡Salud!, Assemblage, and the Willamette Valley Wine Foundation—underscoring her deep commitment to Oregon and the people that make it so special.

Of course, The Four Graces is a beneficiary of that commitment. In May 2024, it moved into a new home at the Grange Winery property, which also houses Anthology, an intimate 14-seat open kitchen overlooking the Valley. Available exclusively to Foley Food & Wine Society members, Anthology features cuisine centered around seasonal ingredients sourced from local farmers and ranchers alongside The Four Graces' estate wines.

"We're incredibly fortunate to farm four distinct estate vineyards across three sub-AVAs of the Willamette Valley," says Alan Crawford, the winery's vice president, luxury estates and imports. "The diversity in terroir is remarkable. In the Dundee Hills alone, we have two sites just a mile apart—one is consistently among our earliest picks and the other among our latest. That kind of variation allows for real dimension in our wines."



The Four Graces' Black Walnut Estate Vineyard in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA.

Indeed, those four vineyard sites are the source of the winery's stylistic range. The Foley Family Estate Vineyard, nestled in the Red Hills of Dundee, spans 110 acres, of which 50 are planted to vine. Here, Pinot Noir—namely Pommard; Wädenswil; and Dijon clones 114, 115, and 777—is predominant along with 12 acres of Pinot Gris and 5 acres of Pinot Blanc. The volcanic Jory soils and cool climate yield refined wines with red-fruited delicacy and bright acidity.

In the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, the Doe Ridge Estate Vineyard encompasses 90 acres, with 40 planted to Pinot Noir. Marine sedimentary Willakenzie soils and a cooler, drier climate than that of the Dundee Hills produce more structured, muscular wines from Dijon and heritage Pommard clones. Also in Yamhill-Carlton, the Black Walnut Estate Vineyard covers 39 planted acres—28 of Pinot Noir and 11 of Chardonnay. With soils and a climate similar to Doe Ridge, it yields grapes that contribute pure, concentrated red-fruit flavors; structured tannins; and bright acids.

The Weathergage Estate Vineyard is the newest site in the Four Graces portfolio. It's situated in the Van Duzer Corridor AVA, where oceanic winds whip through the vines, reducing pest and disease pressure while ultimately leading to thicker-skinned berries. Of 99 total acres, 21 are planted, with additional development underway. Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, and a small amount of Pinot Blanc grow at elevations of 260–380 feet, yielding bold, earthy wines with fine structure and tannic presence due in part to those strong coastal winds.

The terroir clearly translates for consumers, as the Four Graces Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$35)—a blend of all four vineyards that balances red fruit, spice, and supple tannins—is the number-one luxury-tier Oregon Pinot Noir, growing 1% faster than the category, according to market research company Circana. “Pinot Noir is the heartbeat of The Four Graces,” says Crawford. “While we produce small lots of Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, our focus is Pinot and expressing it through the lens of each unique site.” He adds that the vineyards’ sustainable certification—which entails such practices as wildlife conserva-

tion, integrated pest management, and cover cropping—“speaks to our long-term commitment to responsible farming and preserving the health of these sites for future generations.”

Joining the Willamette Valley Pinot Noir in the winery's core lineup are four other expressions: the Dundee Hills Reserve Pinot Noir made exclusively from Foley Family Estate fruit, which offers darker fruit tones, deeper concentration, and a signature silkiness; the Willamette Valley Rosé, made primarily from Pinot Noir with a dash of Pinot Blanc, which boasts bright acidity and aromas of wild strawberry and lime; the medium-bodied and fruit-forward Pinot Gris sourced from both estate and partner sites, expressing notes of pear and melon with floral lift; and the Pinot Blanc from the Foley Family Estate and Weathergage, which brings minerality, citrus, and hints of almond.

In the on-premise channel, Four Graces targets chef-driven restaurants and wine bars; off-premise, it appeals to independent shops with a premium selection as well as high-end grocery chains, explains Crawford. “With supporting marketing programs like ‘Grace the Table’ with in-store POS, the focus is on storytelling and site expression—[we’re] connecting with consumers who value origin, quality, and authenticity in the glass.” *sj*

Tasting Notes



The Four Graces 2023 Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$35) Aromas of honeyed pear, fig, and nutmeg draw you in to a

well-defined white set on a platform of minerality, honeycomb, and white peach. It brings to mind liquid sunshine spiced with candied ginger, honeysuckle, and a pinch of white pepper. **93** —*Meridith May*



The Four Graces 2023 Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$35) Delicate jasmine and rose petal meet white raspberry and cinnamon-

sprinkled red beet. Stony soil notes are subtle while igniting balanced acidity that freshens the palate. **93** —*M.M.*



The Four Graces 2023 Reserve Pinot Noir, Dundee Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65) A perfume of rose petal, iron, raspberry,

and melting chocolate drenches the rich, plush palate, expressive with heather, plump cherry, and orange peel. Touches of underbrush, sarsaparilla, and cinnamon toast leave a remarkable lasting impression. **95** —*M.M.*

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ROSATO TUTTO IL GIORNO

**FEUDI DI SAN GREGORIO
BRINGS ITALIAN STYLE TO
THE ROSÉ CATEGORY**

by Lars Leicht

*Move over, Provence—Campania,
Italy, is the next hot spot for rosé.*

IT WOULD NOT be fair to say Italy is often late to the game, but there are many examples in history when Italians went from resisting to embracing to downright changing and perhaps even owning the game.

Let's start with a banal example: the tomato. A product of the New World, it was introduced to the city-states of the Italian peninsula in the mid-1500s. At the time, it was associated with the lower classes and considered poisonous until pizza was popularized in the late 19th century. Today, however, the tomato is ubiquitous in—and almost synonymous with—Italian cuisine, growing particularly well in the country's abundant sunshine and volcanic soil.

Here's another case in point, this one vinous: From the 1980s to the early 1990s, Italy was one of the leading export markets for Champagne. But on the current Italian wine market, sales of French bubbly are far outpaced by the pop of local corks—namely metodo classico sparklers sourced from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir vineyards in Franciacorta, Trento, and other parts of the country.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FEUDI DI SAN GREGORIO

The latest global wine trend that Italy is poised to dominate is rosé. Only a handful of Italian regions have any sort of tradition of rosé production, including Puglia Rosato, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo, and Chiaretto in the Veneto's Bardolino zone, and many examples could be more accurately described as quasi-reds. When Provençal rosé took the world—or at least the U.S. market—by storm in recent years, Italy shrugged its collective shoulders. But during my visits over the first half of this year to multiple wineries in Veneto, Tuscany, and Umbria, I witnessed a groundswell of interest in rosé. The most likely results to succeed, in my humble opinion, hail from an unexpected region: Campania.

Feudi di San Gregorio, a leading regional producer in Southern Italy that's known for its work with indigenous varieties, old vines, and single-vineyard plots, this year introduced the U.S. market to San Greg, a rosé of Aglianico from high-altitude vineyards in Irpinia, a subregion of Campania located in the mountains east of Naples.

San Greg's packaging already tells part of its story: The grooved, clear glass bottle shows off the wine's onion-skin color and brightness, while the black-and-white label is even more minimalist than that of the Feudi di San Gregorio brand, illustrating the producer's straightforward approach to making rosé from a variety that is known for its intense color, body, and ageability. By the same token, "the name is simple, with immediate appeal; it is informal, like a friend," says Antonio Capaldo, president of Feudi San Gregorio. "It is not unnecessarily sophisticated."

"Aglianico has the ability to make a vivid rosé full of light," he adds. But it takes some coaxing—or, perhaps more accurately, restraint: "The challenge with this wine is always the color. To make a rosé we have to employ low reduction and extraction; otherwise it tends to be too intense. We have to tone down the varietal typicity to make a rosé."

Capaldo admits that while it is a challenge to produce a rosé from Aglianico, the grape is perhaps even better suited to a serious offering than Italy's other iconic varieties: "Aglianico has roundness and a

sugar profile that Sangiovese and Nebbiolo do not have." To compensate for its intense polyphenols and tannic structure, Capaldo vinifies San Greg as if it were a white wine, with zero skin contact prior to fermentation. He exclusively uses high-elevation fruit from vineyards at 2,300 feet above sea level, harvesting earlier than he would for a red to preserve freshness and acidity. Despite its extreme altitude, the vineyard is in an open area exposed to the sun and therefore ripens relatively early. The resulting wine has less intense tannins than is typical for the



variety thanks to lower temperatures, greater diurnal shifts, and mineral soil. "I do believe the character of the soil passes through to the wine," Capaldo says.

He calls San Greg "the most complicated wine for us to make," yet he sees it as a potential ambassador for the region, appealing in particular to younger drinkers and those not already familiar with Aglianico or the region's signature whites, Greco di Tufo, Falanghina, and Fiano. "[San Greg] is transversal," he declares. "It can help attract new consumers. They can start here and work up to Taurasi Riserva, Aglianico's ultimate expression. If you want to gain some perspective on our

region, you need to have an easy introduction. You need to strike a balance."

The path to introducing San Greg was not a short one: The development process took roughly ten years, and market approach was a serious consideration. The rosé debuted in the U.S. with the 2024 vintage but has been sold since the 2023 vintage in Italy, where consumers are decidedly less inclined to drink rosé wines in general than are their American counterparts. "In Italy [rosé] is not yet an established category," reports Capaldo. "The beauty of Italy, its diversity, is also its curse. We need to work on education here."

Capaldo and I tasted the rosé together over an al fresco lunch on a sunny spring day in a trendy restaurant in Rome. The wine was perfect for the setting, and servers confirmed to me the wine's growing popularity with their discerning diners, both locals and tourists.

San Greg has a crisp, clean attack with a pronounced mouthfeel that makes it a gratifying aperitivo but also a great pairing with oysters, ceviche, sushi, deviled eggs, any sort of roasted fowl, and, of course, pastas such as carbonara or amatriciana (I did try it in Rome, after all), whose richness it cuts and complements. The grace of this wine is apparent in not only its structure but its long, elegant finish, a rare quality for a rosé and one that I particularly appreciated.

"In Italy, rosé is gaining ground in quality, but we always have to look at the benchmark," Capaldo explained to me. "The challenge for

selling is that Provence is very aggressive in terms of price." But while Provençal rosés are known for their soft character and drinkability, San Greg offers structure and complexity that appeal to the aficionado as much as the casual wine drinker.

Capaldo's vision includes removing the stigma of seasonality from rosé, at least in the U.S. "In France they drink rosé year round at ski resorts, and in Italy's Alto Adige too," Capaldo said. "If a restaurant anywhere already offers San Greg by the glass, they should be able to sell it in the winter too."

Year-round rosé? Now that's a category that Italy can own. **SJ**

The New Kingdom of CHARDONNAY

STORY BY KATE NEWTON / PHOTOS BY CAROLYN WELLS-KRAMER

IN THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY,
RÉSONANCE SETS OUT TO
BECOME A STANDARD-BEARER
OF THE CLASSIC GRAPE

Growing up in the Burgundian region of Pouilly-Fuissé, Résonance winemaker Guillaume Large was surrounded by Chardonnay vines “from birth”: “I would say Chardonnay is a little bit part of my blood, part of my roots for sure,” he says. In 2016, Large made the transatlantic leap from Maison Louis Jadot, where he worked as assistant technical director under Jacques Lardière, to Oregon’s Willamette Valley to join Louis Jadot and Lardière’s first New World project. There, the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land manifested in the form of immense intrigue as he immersed himself in its vastly varied terroir.

*Résonance’s Jolis Monts estate vineyard
is located in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA.*



“If you think about the few wine regions in the world able to grow Chardonnay, Willamette Valley is really at the top with Burgundy by the quality of the fruit, by the unique complexity,” says Résonance winemaker Guillaume Large.

The Résonance team soon discovered that perhaps the most notable aspect of that terroir is the ancient soil types that characterize the Willamette Valley. Chardonnay production in the region is still in its infancy compared to Burgundy (and to Oregon’s production of Pinot Noir; the focal point of Résonance’s winemaking), but even the young vines planted as recently as 2020 across three of the producer’s four estate vineyards—Jolis Monts in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, with marine sedimentary soil; Koosah, a high-elevation site in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA with primarily volcanic basalt; and Découverte in the Dundee Hills AVA, with red volcanic soil—are already yielding wines that are “so aromatic, so expressive. . . . There is a balance and a harmony between the aromatic complexity and the tension—a certain purity that is directly linked with the volcanic [and] sedimentary rock. It is different for sure than the limestone we have fortunately in Burgundy, but there is a true condition of terroir for growing Chardonnay [here],” notes Large.

That’s due in no small part to the fact that all of Résonance’s estate properties are dry farmed and certified organic. Lardière, co-founder Thibault Gagey, and Large knew their approach to establishing a Chardonnay program would need to be fairly experimental given their lack of experience in the Willamette Valley: “We were aware that it would be something we’d have to develop by ourselves, and so that means to plant and then to be patient and to learn,” says Large.

It was imperative, then, to set a “good message for the vines from the start,” in his words, and familiarize themselves with how the distinct composition of each soil type would affect the vines’ arduous journey deep into the earth in search of water. The knowl-





Résonance currently produces four Chardonnays: a Willamette Valley expression, multivineyard estate blend Le Coteaux, and single-vineyard wines from its Découverte and Koosah estate properties.

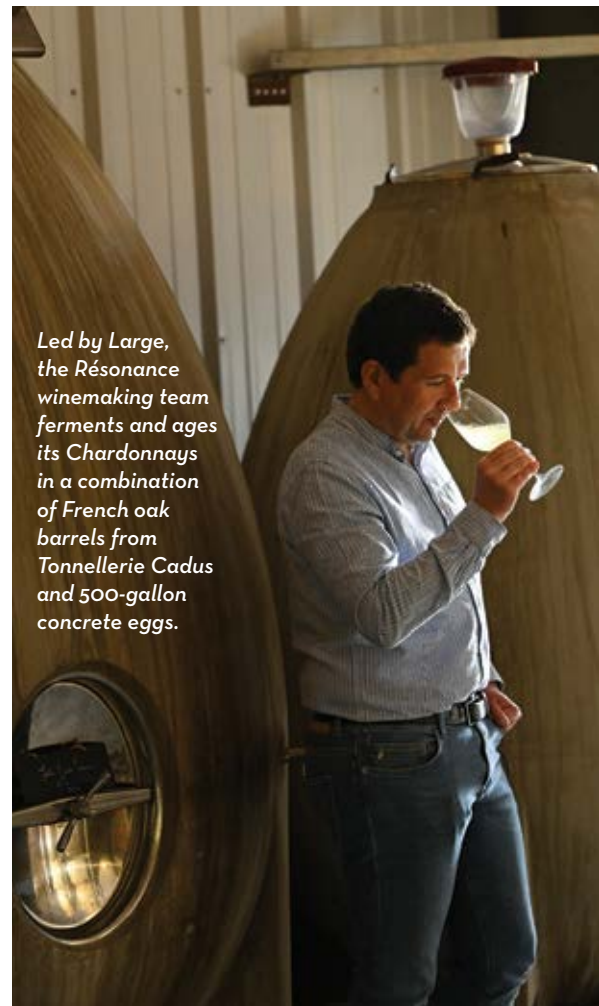
edge they gained formed the foundation of their current Chardonnay program, for which they farm a combined 40 acres of Dijon-clone grapes across Jolis Monts, Koosah, and Découverte, which are located within a roughly 15-mile radius. In Jolis Monts, the basaltic bedrock sits atop “layers and layers of sediments [from] when the ocean was covering this area,” and as the vines “go through the sediments with the goal to reach the water, all this minerality is immediately sent to the fruit,” Large explains, noting that while the grapes from Koosah and Découverte also yield wines with a thread of salinity, their vibrancy is more readily apparent, as the fragmented basalt in these approximately 15-million-year-old volcanic soils enables the vines to access water more easily. “Dry farming, this is the key to see [these nuances], and organic farming, because . . . that creates a space where everything is alive,” he adds. “The quality of the fruit is key if you want to have the true expression of each place.”

“THE ESSENCE OF THE PROJECT”

Also key is the Résonance team’s commitment to consistency when it comes to applying the same winemaking techniques Jadot uses in Burgundy; “because like that, vintage after vintage, we learn about the expression and the complexity of the Chardonnay [even as] we start with very

young vines,” Large says. “It’s not magic—we know we are building for the long term.” The hand-harvested grapes from each vineyard are brought into the winery in small lots, and “when we press our fruit, we are [doing it] gently—we are not trying to extract the maximum [amount] of juice we can,” he notes. “Then fermentation takes place in oak barrels. We work with only one cooperage, named Cadus, [which] was founded and is owned still today by Jadot, so we control the process of barrel making as well [as] . . . the quality of the grain of the oak. We use different forests from France to bring more complexity, but not too much toast. . . . We keep the [juice in contact with the] lees, and that gives [a] certain volume and a style that is every year the same, so that helps to express what we want: this connection with the place.”

In addition to the barrels, Résonance ferments and rests a portion of its wines in 500-gallon concrete eggs. “[With the barrels], we don’t extract too much and keep the contact with the lees, but with the egg, there is this permanent movement inside, which is a little unique,” Large says. Then, following an aging period of roughly 14 months, the winemaking team designates which eggs and barrels will be used for the four Chardonnay bottlings Résonance produces: two single-vineyard expressions from, respectively, Découverte and Koosah, the latter of



Led by Large, the Résonance winemaking team ferments and ages its Chardonnays in a combination of French oak barrels from Tonnellerie Cadus and 500-gallon concrete eggs.

which debuted with the 2023 vintage; Les Coteaux, an estate blend of all three vineyards whose name pays homage to the hills that define much of the area’s topography; and the Willamette Valley Chardonnay, which is meant to serve as an overarching expression of its name-sake by blending the estate vineyards with other top sites in the region.

“It’s a very interesting project, the blending, and I would say it’s very easy, because we have three very different terroirs of Chardonnay and three different styles,” says Large. “They work well together, so when we blend them, we are almost sure of the results: We will have a little bit more yellow fruit and floral notes from [Jolis Monts and] a little bit more texture as well. Découverte Vineyard will [have] a little bit more complexity [conveyed through] the citrus fruit, the white florals, and a certain volume on the palate. I think a lot about Pouilly-Fuissé when I taste Découverte Chardonnay. And Koosah, due to the elevation and the influence of the Van Duzer Corridor—the wind and the variation of temperature—that gives . . . more tension, more citrus

notes, and higher acidity” in addition to that aforementioned volcanic minerality.

Large sees the strong ties between Résonance and Jadot’s winemaking philosophies as “more than natural: This is the essence of the project. We are the inheritance of all this tradition, all this work made by winemakers and workers at Maison Louis Jadot. . . I have a certain freedom to make the wine in a way that I would like, [but] at the same time, it’s automatic, it’s natural, to have this synergy with Jadot.”

That synergy has also helped set the tone for Résonance’s goal of distinguishing itself even among what Large calls a “small group of producers of Chardonnay” in its home state: “Having our Burgundian approach helps us to reveal the terroir and to learn maybe a little faster about this unique wine region that is the Willamette Valley,” he notes, adding, “I think it’s important, I would say even

the top with Burgundy by the quality of the fruit, by the unique complexity.”

That said, the potential impacts of climate change are as daunting here as they are elsewhere in the wine world, making the 2022 purchase of Koosah Vineyard particularly strategic; with an elevation of 700–1,200 feet, it’s one of the highest sites in the region. “It’s a good way [to plan for] the future. If unfortunately we see the weather getting warmer and warmer, higher elevation will work better, and we have still the influence of the winds cooling down the valley. What the weather will be in a few decades, we don’t know, but it’s a part of our heritage for winemakers to find a way to adapt ourselves and our production in link with Mother Nature,” says Large. “It’s really a place that has to be seen to be believed because it’s very steep and very rocky, so it’s a very challenging vineyard to farm—we break a lot of equipment, but for a good reason!”

rested in stainless steel to emphasize the “purity of the fruit”).

With a production of roughly 2,000 cases, the Willamette Valley Chardonnay is available both on- and off-premise nationally under the purview of Ko-brand Wine & Spirits and distributed to global markets. It epitomizes Résonance’s vibrant, food-friendly style: “It’s not too exotic, it’s not too tannic, it’s not too rich—it’s balanced, and with a balanced wine, you know you can play easily with food,” Large says.

The other three wines—with a much more limited production of 300 cases for the bright, yellow-fruited Les Coteaux; 500 for the fragrantly floral and mineral-driven Koosah; and 600 for the delicate, elegant, and persistent Découverte—are the rising stars of Résonance’s direct-to-consumer program and its tasting room experience both at its main estate property in Carlton, located on a hilltop with a view of the Coast Range, and a newer facility situated within a natural amphitheater in Découverte. Built with reclaimed wood in the style of barns found throughout the Willamette Valley, they are intended to blend in seamlessly with the vineyards and exist “in harmony” with the surrounding landscape. “It’s like a true immersion in the place, and [visitors] feel a little bit the difference between the terroirs as well. . . [Plus] we have an excellent team: They have a passion for the wine; they have a passion for the Willamette Valley. They share the truth about our estate, about our wines, and I think this is what the visitor appreciates,” Large says.

While the plan is to eventually plant more acreage and scale up production of Chardonnay in keeping with demand, especially as more consumers become familiar with Résonance’s distinct style of and potential for Chardonnay, Large’s interactions both with visitors to the winery and during his ventures into the market have given him the impression that “people are impatient like we are to see the next chapter in the Willamette Valley for Chardonnay,” he says. “For a winemaker, this is probably the most magical part of our jobs, when you . . . see [the vines] growing up [and] becoming more complex, a little bit more expressive—a little bit like your kids, you know?” Considering he was raised among vines himself, it’s a fitting role reversal. **sj**

The grapes harvested from Jolis Monts eventually impart a distinctive minerality in the wines due to the site’s soils, composed of basaltic bedrock atop “layers and layers of sediments [from] when the ocean was covering this area,” notes Large.



key, for us . . . to be part of this [evolution] early. Today, the weather that we have . . . is perfect for Chardonnay. We have water during winter and spring, so the soil can collect [it] for the dry season with warm days but cool nights every day, which is the key for the acidity [that] is so important for [this variety]. If we can keep these conditions, this will be the new kingdom of Chardonnay. That will be hard for me, because my favorite terroir for Chardonnay is Pouilly-Fuissé. But it’s clear that for the moment, if you think about the few wine regions in the world able to grow Chardonnay, Willamette Valley is really at

APPRECIATION AND IMMERSION

Released this spring, the 2023 vintage of Résonance’s quartet of Chardonnays itself represents a warm year that alleviated concerns of overripeness due to the plentiful acidity present in the finished wines, which brought “a certain generosity [and] freshness,” in Large’s words. Some of the lots underwent partial malolactic fermentation to help preserve that crispness, while both barrel fermentation and aging saw the use of just 25% new oak, “because when it’s a little riper, you don’t need to push too far” (a portion of the Willamette Valley blend, meanwhile,



Paso Robles CAB Campers gather at Ancient Peaks Winery in the Santa Margarita Ranch AVA.

In This Thing Together

PASO ROBLES CAB CAMP DEMONSTRATED THE POWER OF COMMUNITY IN A REGION ON THE RISE

story by Ruth Tobias / photos by Lisa Pretty

Maybe it was the moment that Andrew McCreery, owner of d’Vine Gourmet in Chandler, Arizona, and Jeff Menzer, wine director at The Mick Brasserie + Bar in Scottsdale, began reciting Shakespeare to one another across the dinner table in the light-strung barrel room at Riboli Family Wines. Maybe it was the moment when Adrienne Bennett, wine director at Mastro’s Ocean Club in Los Angeles, appointed herself DJ of our shuttle, prompting singalongs with her crowd-rousing playlists. Or maybe it was right from the get-go, on an introductory tour of our lodgings at Allegretto Vineyard Resort, as we all shared a laugh at the bleating of the goats cavorting with sheep, alpacas, and llamas in the on-site vineyard. Regardless, at some point, it occurred to me: Something about this place really brings people together.

The place in question is Paso Robles, and the people in this case were the attendees of the Paso Robles CAB Camp 2025, held March 3–5 by the Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC) for beverage professionals from across the country to explore its facility with Bordeaux varieties. But the sentiment applies as easily to the winemaking community in this rapidly ascending yet still downhome region: As Amber Willis, beverage manager for Delaware-based restaurant group SoDel Concepts, observed to me while watching the sun set over the vineyards at Eberle Winery, “When you visit Sonoma and Napa, there’s a lot of people moving around. Everybody feels settled and content in this place. People always say, ‘We’re in this together,’ but I really feel that here.”

Which isn’t to say they’re not striving, individually as well as collectively, to prove their mettle as they usher their appellation (and its 11 sub-AVAs) onto the world stage. Fifty-two years ago, Gary Eberle himself—known to many as “the godfather of Paso”—came here “because my professors at [the University of California], Davis, told me that it would be the next great wine-producing region in the state,” in his words; then home to three producers, it now boasts about 300, all of which aim to substantiate that prediction. Among them is LXV Wine, whose co-owner, Neeta Mittal, pointed out during one panel discussion that, in this difficult time for the industry, “Paso has seen double-digit growth in sales in Bordeaux [wines]. We are outpacing other regions. . . . So it’s a groundswell, and it’s something that we do from our heart. We are inviting you into our family [while] putting the responsibility back onto you guys . . . to carry our story to the outside world.” Every tour, tasting, seminar, and dinner we attended over the course of two and a half days surely inspired us all to do just that.



Campers assemble around the fire pit at Ancient Peaks Winery.

Day 1: THE LAY OF THE LAND

Arriving from as near as the Bay Area and as far as New England on the morning of March 3, CAB Campers hit the ground running, starting with a buffet lunch at the aforementioned Allegretto resort, where proprietor Douglas Ayres gave us an overview of the stunning, Tuscan-inspired Estrella District property and the worldview behind not only its design but that of his vineyards both on the premises and in the Willow Creek District, which provide fruit for his label, Allegretto Wines. Studying spiritual traditions around the world led him to believe in what he called “cultivating a new garden, the garden of within.” The hotel grounds are a manifestation of that, encompassing an abbey, multiple labyrinths, and a vast collection of globally sourced artifacts and natural objets d’art such as geodes to invite quiet reflection; as for the vines, they are mostly farmed biodynamically in accordance with the rhythms of nature, yielding wines like the estate-grown 2021 Della Vita, a quintessential Paso Cab in its fruit-forward plushness. (As Charlene Pontrelli, owner of Cellar 406 in Downers Grove, Illinois, put it to me, “Paso is all about approachability—you can just pop the bottle and drink it. It’s what everybody wants.”)



At Allegretto Vineyard Resort in the Estrella District AVA, sheep, goats, alpacas, and llamas roam the vineyard.

At our next stop, Ancient Peaks Winery, some campers went on a foraging tour while others, including Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay, sommelier Marco Mendoza, went ziplining over the property, which he said “was a great way to look at the landscape and the geography of the vineyards. . . . You can talk about it, but when you do that, you can really see it.” I stayed on the ground to explore the producer’s 14,000-acre Santa Margarita Ranch (named for the southernmost sub-AVA in which it’s located), where a little less than 1,000 acres are under vine, leaving ample room for all sorts of wildlife: Co-owner Karl Wittstrom and naturalist Jackie Redinger rattled off the names of a slew of critters to be found there, from turkey vultures and bald eagles to mountain lions and black bears. They also showed us a sample of the soil type, one of five on the property, that they called “ancient seabed,” which is full of oyster fossils: Hence the Ancient Peaks label Oyster Ridge. We tasted the majestic 2013 vintage, redolent of black currant and licorice, and the plummy, mineral-tinged 2020 during dinner in Ancient Peaks’ barn—a “warm and welcoming” way to wrap up the first day, said Mendoza, who added, “I’m here to get an overview of the appellation as a whole, because [from afar] you only see it in broad strokes as red wine country.”



Day 2: A DEEP UNDERSTANDING

Getting down to the nitty-gritty of the region was very much the point of the next day’s activities. While half the campers headed to Hope Family Wines, my group made our way to Opolo Vineyards in the Willow Creek District, where grower relations manager Robert Nadeau and winemaker James Schreiner started with an overview of Paso Robles, covering everything from its famously large diurnal temperature swings of 40 and even 50 degrees to its topography—more rugged on the west side, more gently rolling on the east side—to its soils, which tend to be more calcareous closer to the coast and alluvial further inland.

For concrete examples of these differences in terroir, we tasted wines from both Willow Creek, about 11 miles from the ocean, and the warmer, drier Estrella District. Regarding the former, Nadeau asserted, “The calcium carbonate in these soils contributes to juice that has a low



A comparative tasting of Willow Creek District and Estrella District wines at Opolo Vineyards.

pH and high acidity [and] to skins that are thicker. . . . The more skin mass you have, then the more phenolics you have available.” The resulting wines, explained Schreiner, tend to be bolder and more intense, with more minerality and firmer tannins, than those from Estrella, which are riper and softer; comparing barrel samples of two 2024 Malbecs, he noted the “darker, blacker blue-fruit tone” of the

Varinder and Anita Sahi lead campers on a tour of Copia Vineyards & Winery in the Willow Creek District.



Willow Creek version and “a lot more red-fruit tone” in the Estrella wine. For Cole Berlin, GM/sommelier at Fahrenheit 132 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the distinction was clear: “Willow Creek is definitely fresher, more floral, a little wider and a little longer on the palate, whereas the Estrella District [is] riper, a little heavier on the mouthfeel, a little more viscous,” he commented.

Our lesson in the ins and outs of Willow Creek continued at Copia Vineyards & Winery, where co-owner Vahinder Sahi also credited the calcareous soils with allowing him to “maintain amazing acidity in our wines. . . . That’s what attracts a lot of winemakers here,” including himself, a native of Punjab, India, and his wife-partner Anita, who grew up in the Midwest. Of course, it takes work to benefit from the magic of that limestone: Of Copia’s flagship estate, 20 of whose 50 acres are planted, Varinder said, “It’s a winemaker’s dream vineyard, but as a farmer, it is a nightmare, because it’s subdivided into

such small blocks”—24 in all, in which “we use different rootstocks, different clones, different varieties, [and] we also employ different training methods, different pruning methods.”

With that, Ivan Gonzales, vineyard manager for Vineyard Professional Services, conducted a thorough pruning demonstration that perhaps inadvertently went to show, in Anita’s words, what “a scary job” he has: “We have massive respect for the crew that does this work, because these decisions that are made really set the stage for the entire growing season.” But it’s all worth it to ensure that Varinder has “as many lots as possible [to work with]. . . . The bigger the spice box, [the] more opportunity to create a blend that is much more balanced.” His success in that regard revealed itself in the lyrical, elegant Cabernet-based blends we tasted as he touched on his team’s 100% organic viticultural practices in transition to regenerative farming, from the use of a permanent cover crop to integrated pest management; they also dry farm to the extent possible (for instance, “in 2023, we did not water at all”).



An al fresco lunch at Robert Hall Winery in the Geneseo District.

That conversation served as a perfect segue into the topic of sustainability, which we delved into with gusto at Robert Hall Winery in the Geneseo District—an ideal host given that the producer has been farming its 70-acre Terrace Vineyard according to the standards of the Regenerative Organic Alliance for the past three years and was awaiting a final audit and certification at

press time; the plan is to eventually certify its entire 140-acre estate. As its managing director and head of sustainability, Caine Thompson, explained, “This is a move away from synthetic agrochemicals and herbicides. It’s a move away from tillage, which has resulted in the loss of topsoil across the world. And it’s a move back to nature-based farming” via such methods as composting, cover cropping, and introducing beneficial species like mealybug destroyers to control pests and sheep to control weeds, to name a few—all in service of increasing carbon sequestration, improving water retention, and enhancing vineyard health and biodiversity. A slideshow offered visual proof of the benefits to the vines, with before-and-after pictures depicting a more robust canopy, corresponding to an increase in yield that, Thompson asserted, has nearly offset the higher costs of farming this way.

But the ultimate evidence was in the glass. A comparative tasting of conventionally and regeneratively farmed wines across three vintages prompted James Woodhouse, manager at The Carriage House in Rye, New Hampshire, to remark that the latter were “more aromatic, more textured,” while Brandon Filipowicz, wine director at Kiki on the River in Miami, put it poetically: “The conventional is cloudy, and the regenerative is sunny.”

Following lunch, a panel discussion on sustainability brought together Thompson, Douglas Ayers, and Varinder Sahi with Ancient Peaks co-owner Doug Filipponi, Castoro Cellars associate winemaker Craig Reed, and Treasury Wine Estates director of vineyard operations Simon Graves, representing DAOU Vineyards. While at different places in their ecological journeys, all detailed how they were “trying to do a better job of using the resources it takes to make it a glass of wine,” in Filipponi’s words—whether by participating in a regenerative pilot program called the 1 Block Challenge, as in Ancient Peaks’ case (for details, see our April/May 2025 issue); by achieving so many certifications that “our label eventually is gonna look like a NASCAR driver,” as Reed joked; or even by experimenting with varieties that may be better suited to a changing climate, as DAOU has been doing with Arinarnoa, a fascinating cross of Tannat and Cabernet Sauvignon that was approved for use in Bordeaux in



The sustainability panel included Ancient Peaks co-owner Doug Filipponi, Castoro Cellars associate winemaker Craig Reed, Allegretto Wines proprietor Douglas Ayres, Robert Hall Winery managing director and head of sustainability Caine Thompson, Copia Vineyards & Winery co-owner Vahinder Sahi, Treasury Wine Estates director of vineyard operations Simon Graves, and moderator Cindy Rynning.

2021 and that “tends to hold its acidity really well” even during “extended heat periods,” according to Graves.

With that in mind, we struck off to Cass Winery for a panel discussion on the “Fab Five,” as moderator Mira Honeycutt called the traditional Bordeaux varieties in the glasses before us: a black-fruited, leathery, and peppery 2022 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon from Opolo Vineyards; a spicy, lively 2022 Cabernet Franc from CV Wines; Cass’ own strawberry- and rhubarb-tinged 2022 Merlot; Hearst Ranch Winery’s meaty, cherry-forward 2022 Babcora Malbec; and Dilécta Wines’ 2019 Roller, a Petit Verdot showing blue fruit and earth. Representing them, respectively, were winemakers James Schreiner, Tyler Kollmann, Sterling Kragten, and Soren Christensen and vintner Paloma Bilson; they would serve as the judges for a blending competition that followed the confab, whereby campers attempted to create their own Bordeaux blend. It was an exercise that made Kevin Bratt, partner in Illinois-based restaurant group Lettuce

Entertain You, think: “To be a blender and to come up with a model you’re supposed to recreate—that’s so challenging,” he said. “Major credit to those who have honed their palate so well that they can consistently nail the house style.” Agreed Jeremy Lloyd, manager at Williquors in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, “I’m very much in love with Bordeaux varieties, and to be able to be a chemist and try a little of this and a little of that—how do you want the midpalate to be, how do you want the finish to be—to take that winemaker’s work and build upon it [provided] such a deep understanding.”

After all that food for thought, the group was ready for, well, some food for the belly; the aforementioned dinner at Riboli Family Wines, accompanied by copious expressions from the company’s top-tier San Simeon label, was just the respite they needed. Of course, it was preceded by a tour of the impressive facilities—from the forest of jacketed tanks, each with its own automated pump, to the solar-paneled barrel room stocked by some 20 different French and American



Brittany Peterson, manager/beverage director/sommelier at Cellar Door Wine Bar & Bistro in Downers Grove, IL, assembles a Bordeaux-style wine during a blending competition at Cass Winery.

cooperages; as Adrienne Bennett pointed out, “Not all family-run wineries are small. ‘Family-run’ can still mean grand and wonderful. [The Ribolis] came from Italy and started with one small shop . . . and now they’re this huge winery and importer and distributor. It’s the Cinderella story of the wine world.”



Dinner in the barrel room at Riboli Family Wines.



Camper Cole Berlin, general manager/sommelier at Fahrenheit 132 in Fredericksburg, VA, listens as McPrice Myers leads a barrel-trial workshop at his winery in the Adelaida District.

Day 3: THE RIGHT THING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Granted, there is no shortage of inspiring stories in Paso Robles. Take Niels Udsen of Castoro Cellars, which half the campers visited the next morning, while the rest repaired to Brecon Estate; having “started making wine in a trash can for a barrel,” in his words, he established the winery with his wife, Bimmer, in 1983, and today they organically farm 1,400 acres across 13 sites, which “makes us one of the largest organic growers in California. As we grew and acquired vineyards, our kids were playing out in [them, so] we didn’t want to be using nasty chemicals,” he explained while objecting to the idea that doing so is the norm: “I hate the word ‘conventional,’ because I think we’re conventional. [Organic] is how farmers were to begin with.”

They employ biodynamic techniques as well, and while “some of it feels a little voodoo-y,” he quipped, “where we’re doing treatments, we see more earthworms; the grass is greener.” One such site is the Whale Rock Vineyard in the Templeton Gap District, so named for its wealth of whale-bone fossils; while the wines it also yields don’t get quite *that* ancient, they—and Paso wines in general—do “age very well,” according to Udsen. “We have

wines from the ‘80s that I’ll ask people to guess the vintage and they won’t get anywhere close.”

On that note, the “incredible” 2023 vintage in Paso is itself producing wines that are “going to age gracefully,” asserted McPrice Myers, whom we joined at his namesake winery in the Adelaida District for an engrossing barrel-trial workshop designed to show, through the lens of wood aging, how a given blend—in this case the 2023 Cuvée Kristina—comes together. To that end, we tasted Cabernet Sauvignon out of one neutral barrel and five new barrels representing three different cooperages as well as varying levels of grain and toast; for instance, from the sample in a Tonnellerie de Jarnac barrel with a blonde toast, “you’re going to get a lot more of that graphite, pencil shavings, [and] there’s also gonna be more structure and more tension,” Myers observed, while the impact of a tight-grained, medium-toasted Boutes barrel was “sweeter, darker, [with] much more spice.” We then tasted those six components in a blend of equal parts—“so now you’re building layers, right?” he remarked—that was, finally, blended in turn with 50% Syrah.



J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines co-owner and chief brand officer Cynthia Lohr and her brother, president and CEO Steve Lohr.

While praising the composition thus far—“there’s a silkiness, there’s a freshness, there’s a vibrancy, there’s a minerality, there’s a tension, [and] we’re looking to hit all those notes”—Myers admitted he couldn’t promise that it wouldn’t be adjusted further before bottling. “I treat winemaking more like a chef than a scientist,” he asserted. “There is no recipe,



The Cab Is King panel featured LXV co-owner Neeta Mittal, Riboli Family Wines winemaker Brian Benson, McPrice Myers head of business development/brand partner Billy Grant, moderator Ali Rush, Matthew Glunz of Glunz Family Winery & Cellars, J. Lohr vice president of winemaking Steve Peck, and Eberle Winery's Gary Eberle.



a lot of it's intuition . . . and one plus one when blending never equals two." (No doubt some of us wished we'd heard those wise words before the previous day's blending exercise.)

Speaking of mantras, J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines has got a simple one that accounts for its longevity in Paso Robles, where the 51-year-old producer has been farming since 1986: "Family, Place, and Craft." Upon welcoming us to its Paso Robles Estrella District property, co-owner and chief brand officer Cynthia Lohr pointed out that "family" extended beyond blood relatives—namely her father, founder Jerry Lohr, and her brothers, president and CEO Steve Lohr and Lawrence Lohr, president and COO of J. Lohr Vineyards, Inc.—to include "an incredible constellation of people that we are fortunate to call part of our growing tribe," be they distributors, on- or off-premise buyers, or consumers as well as colleagues like vice president of winemaking Steve Peck; red winemaker Brenden Wood; and winemaker, white wine, Kristen Barnhisel.

Steve Lohr then addressed the next two pillars of the winery's philosophy: "Place" alludes to its 4,000-plus acres of vineyards across California, nearly three-quarters of which are in Paso Robles—from Rain Catcher in the Adelaida District, according to him "the westernmost vineyard in the Paso Robles AVA," to Shotwell and Beck in the south-central El Pomar and south-eastern Creston districts, respectively. From

one side to the other, he added, annual rainfall patterns can differ by as much as 25 inches (with more precipitation to the west and less to the east), "so it gives us as winemakers lots to play with."

As for "craft," the team is justifiably proud of the fact that all but one of the 40 wines in their portfolio is Certified California Sustainable—among them its J. Lohr Estates Seven Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles' bestselling Cabernet with an annual production of 1 million cases. "One thing you can count on with J. Lohr is we will never skimp on what it takes to do wine well," Steve asserted. That includes their aging program: "I personally write checks for about \$8 million a year just for oak barrels. . . . I don't know of another winery in California our size or larger that does such a high percentage of their wine in oak barrels as we do here. It's something that you just can't replace with oak chips or staves and stainless-steel tanks."

One of J. Lohr's four barrel rooms, then, was the ideal backdrop for the "Cab Is King" panel with Steve Peck, Eberle Winery's Gary Eberle, LXV's Neeta Mittal, Riboli Family Wines winemaker Brian Benson, Matthew Glunz of Glunz Family Winery & Cellars, and McPrice Myers head of business development and brand partner Billy Grant. While the wines they presented were certainly distinctive—from Eberle's brooding, earthy 2021 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon with hints of licorice and tobacco to our host's own purple-

fruited, powerful yet smooth J. Lohr 2021 Signature Cabernet—they all represented "this word that's out there, 'typicity,'" said Peck. "You can bring Merlot and Cab Franc into a Cabernet Sauvignon blend and it pretty much still tastes like Cabernet Sauvignon." Which isn't to say it has to be stereotypically big and bold: "At J. Lohr," he added, "we make wine at different price points and they do get denser, darker in color, richer, but there's a real hard effort not only in our winery but I think industry-wide to keep those top-end wines still soft and approachable."

In Paso in particular, the grape's character is marked by "this blessing of acidity that we get" courtesy of the aforementioned diurnal temperature swings, Glunz pointed out, adding, "Cab is really easy to make [here], and I think that means you have the right thing in the right place. When you have to make additions, when you have to screw around with something, you probably don't have the right thing in the right place. Some of the wineries I've worked at, it's like, 'Oh shit, back up the sugar truck, we've got to add sugar to bring the [wine] up to Brix,' and in other places, we had to add tartaric to [balance] the pH. . . . We don't have to do that here." For camper Brian McGahey, event sales director and certified sommelier at Corsair Creative in Washington, D.C., the tasting was proof positive that "Cab has a distinct brand character for people who don't have a lot of wine experience," as



The Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC) Grand Tasting was held in the cellar at Eberle Winery.

Cabernet/Bordeaux varietal region." Their interest in Bordeaux, added winery ambassador Laura Reynolds, stemmed from their emigration to France as their family fled civil war in Lebanon: There, "their dad fell in love with Cheval Blanc immediately, and thus began this obsession with Bordeaux. . . . So Danny always had this kind of crazy idea of like, 'OK, this stuff is really good. It makes my parents happy.' After enduring the deep trauma of war, Daniel saw how the discovery of [wine] in France brought a rare and profound happiness to his family—a joy that inspired him to one day recreate that feeling by building a winery of his own." Upon learning that western Paso's calcareous limestone soils were similar to those of Bordeaux, he came out to inspect the property that no lesser a California winemaking authority than André Tchelistcheff

with dried cherry and toffee, to sister label PATRIMONY's gorgeously minerally and herb-flecked 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon. Meanwhile, the spread executive chef Spencer Johnson put on, which included a shrimp- and oyster-laden seafood bar, passed bites like lamb sliders with kale slaw, and a buffet featuring beef bourguignon, against a backdrop of live music went to show how "everything is bundled up in one piece," as VP of hospitality Marino Monferrato put it. "You have the view, you have the wines, you have the food; they all indicate the intention that we have here for hospitality, which is to make sure that you're going home with something that reminds you of this place—and every time you open a bottle, it's not just a bottle of wine."

Jeff Menzer certainly went home with a reminder of his trip to Paso Robles:

he put it. "Cab shows through for them. There are nuances of terroir, but it has an identity"—especially in Paso Robles.

That identity was also on dazzling display at the Grand Tasting in the cellar at Eberle Winery, where PRCC's member producers were out in full force to pour such wines as Vina Robles' perfumed, high-acid 2021 Mountain Road Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon; Pomar Junction's 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon, handsome with blackberry and graphite; and Chateau Margene's cassis-, vanilla-, and cedar-laced 2021 Stella's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. In "looking for wines with a more elegant expression within . . . the classic style that Paso Robles can produce," Marco Mendoza also singled out bottlings from Castoro, McPrice Myers, and Eberle as showing "a high pedigree of winemaking with layers of flavor:"

Friends in High Places

If the Grand Tasting was the ice cream sundae of CAB Camp, dinner at DAOU Vineyards 2,200 feet above sea level was the lavish, convivial cherry on top. The Adelaida District estate was built by brothers Daniel and Georges Daou back in 2007, when Paso Robles "was mainly a Rhône region," explained VP of enology and viticulture José Santos. "They really made a difference to push Paso to where it is today, where we are a mostly



Jeff Menzer, wine director at The Mick Brasserie + Bar in Scottsdale, AZ, thanks PRCC executive director Linda Parker Sanpei and moderator Mira Honeycutt as he accepts the Award of Excellence for the blending competition.



Don Paul, food and beverage director/sommelier at Yiannis Wine & Food in Virginia Beach, VA, poses with a double magnum of DAOU's 2016 Soul of a Lion.

had called "a jewel of ecological elements," and the rest is history.

Those elements include not only high elevation and ideal soil composition but also proximity to the Pacific Ocean, which contributes to "perfect Goldilocks weather," as Reynolds called it, being "2 degrees cooler than St. Helena in Napa and 2 degrees warmer than Bordeaux." The combination, according to Santos, "allows us to keep the freshness, keep the minerality, keep the acidity of our wines, while every year, year after year, achieving full ripeness."

To illustrate as much, the DAOU team showcased its entire portfolio—from the 2018 Soul of a Lion, seamless and supple

the Award of Excellence for winning the blending competition, announced during dinner. His heartfelt speech brought our CAB Camp full circle: "I'm just thankful to have this camaraderie . . . because that's what this is all about, isn't it? To share experiences together, not only just amongst each other but also with the guests that we get to take care of and all these people that we get to serve. And Paso, to have a community like this is incredible. . . . You're giving us this information and this knowledge and we come back and we're not just somms, we're now ambassadors, and you've helped create that." ❧

The historic schoolhouse located on the grounds of Alexander Valley Vineyards.

Alexander Valley's Prominent Players

PART ONE OF OUR REVIEW SERIES

At the northern end of Sonoma County, California, Alexander Valley is one of the region's warmer AVAs—during the day, that is; it cools down considerably after sunset. Moderated by the Russian River and the fog that follows it through the valley, it's notable for its broad, rich Cabernet Sauvignons.

We tasted eight impressive wines from six producers, each of which has its own character and a story to be told through our tasting notes. We'll follow up with more in an upcoming issue.

GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY: ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS

In the late 1960s, the Wetzel family bottled a few cases of Cabernet Sauvignon for friends and family. That homemade wine became the inspiration for Alexander Valley Vineyards, founded by Hank and Linda Wetzel in 1975. Then 24 years old, Hank was solely responsible for producing 7,500 cases of wine while building the two-story structure that is still in use today. Fifty years later, the winery is iconic in a region that's known as a home of world-class Cabernet Sauvignon.



Alexander Valley Vineyards 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$28) This wine gets off to a toasty start, with nutmeg, cinnamon, and a pinch of white pepper weav-

ing through strawberry jam. Energetic and bright, it delivers plush tannins and a finish of cherry cola. Winemaker Kevin Hall blended in Malbec and Petit Verdot for color; Merlot to add a hint of structured fruit, and a touch of Cabernet Franc for aromatics. **93**

—Meridith May

BANFIVINTNERS

PHOTO COURTESY OF TRIONE VINEYARDS



Trione winemaker John Duckett.

A TRIUMPHANT TRIO: TRIONE VINEYARDS

Trione Vineyards, led by second-generation brothers Mark and Vic, is a three-generation affair; the family has been farming premium grapes across five estate ranches (now covering nearly 600 acres) for over 40 years. These small-lot, handcrafted wines deserve the status they've achieved as gems from Sonoma County.

Winemaker John Duckett approaches his craft with a delicate touch, ensuring the fruit remains true to its origins. Collaborating with vineyard manager Kris Hicks, Duckett maintains a philosophy aligning with the family's belief that truly memorable wines can only be made from the highest-quality grapes.

Trione Vineyards 2020 Block 21 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$80) The winery's 135-acre Cloverdale Ranch is home to Block 21, boasting some of the warmest temperatures in the area. Aged 24 months in French oak, this gentle giant is broad and sturdy, showing both backbone and finesse.

Dark chocolate, espresso, used saddle leather, and graphite form a consortium of elegance as firm, expressive tannins bear weight on the palate. **96** —M.M.

Trione Vineyards 2019 Henry's Blend Red Wine, Geyserville Ranch, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$65) Dried violets, clove-spiced roses, and hoisin sauce lead the way in this ripe, alluring Bordeaux-style blend of 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 13% Petit Verdot, 13% Cab Franc, and 5% Malbec. Tannins are supple and acidity is fairly high; a spotlight on bright plum, cola, and sour cherry lingers, catching a touch of nutmeg on the finish. **94** —M.M.

Trione Vineyards 2019 Zinfandel, Flatridge Ranch, Sonoma Coast, Sonoma County (\$40) Undergoing gentle punchdowns throughout the fermentation process in open-top tanks and aged in American oak, this Zin is Mark Trione's passion project. Aromatically stunning, with a perfume of cherry and vanilla, it's also chewy and ripe, with blueberry and sandalwood leaving a slick trail on the elegant palate. Super-fine acidity primes notes of tobacco, licorice, and chocolate fudge. **93** —M.M.



**BORDEAUX STYLIZED:
JORDAN VINEYARD & WINERY**

Jordan Vineyard & Winery is an independently owned 1,200-acre estate in Healdsburg known for its lower-alcohol style. In 2019, Maggie Kruse took the helm as director of winemaking; she is only the second winemaker that Jordan has had since its founding in 1972, which she calls “an honor and a responsibility. At Jordan, we believe in creating wines that tell a story—one of place, tradition, and meticulous craftsmanship,” she explains. “Our commitment to sustainable farming and time-honored techniques allows us to produce wines that are both ageworthy and have a distinct food-pairing affinity. I strive to uphold the winery’s legacy while always innovating, ensuring every vintage is better than the last.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN VINEYARD & WINERY

Maggie Kruse is director of winemaking at Jordan Vineyard & Winery.



Jordan 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$60) With lower alcohol than most California Cabs, this elegant beauty reveals an Old World acidity that levels out on the palate with a freshness that speaks to the wine’s excellent food-pairing abilities. Plum, anise, tilled soil, and Italian herbs are integrated into its luxe mouthfeel. **96** —M.M.

ORGANICALLY FARMED, QUALITY DRIVEN: ACTA WINE

ACTA Wine is a partnership between longtime friends Dustin Moilanen, director of winemaking, and Alan Wildstein, who oversees operations. The pair sought a location where the climate, soil, and water were all conducive to the cultivation of great vineyards and the production of great wine—which they found on a 16-acre site in Alexander Valley just south of Jimtown, where an existing winery and hospitality center just needed a little care and attention to restore their potential. Begun in 2021, a two-year project to upgrade the facilities, reestablish the garden and the olive grove, and rehabilitate the vineyards has been completed (though work in the vineyard is, they say, a “lifelong pursuit”).

PHOTO COURTESY OF ACTA WINE



ACTA co-founders Dustin Moilanen and Alan Wildstein.

ACTA 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Battle Vineyard, Chalk Hill, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$90) This red from the southern end of the AVA is a limited production of seven barrels. It aged in (55% new) medium-toast French oak for 23 months. The brand’s name comes from the Latin phrase *acta non verba*, which translates as “actions not words.” And the wine does take action: Notably frisky, with firm tannins and relentless energy, it grips, holds, and then releases amid plum skin and graphite. Notes of blackberry and lilac are taut, the acidity is high, and the finish of tobacco and leather is elegant and austere. **94** —M.M.



THE PIONEER: J. RICKARDS WINERY

Jim Rickards began farming in the Alexander Valley in 1978 and is considered one of its grape-growing pioneers. He has also led the way in sustainable farming practices.

J. Rickards 2021 A.V. Select Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$42)

This small-production blend of 84% Cabernet Sauvignon and 16% Malbec aged 20 months in 50% French and 50% American oak. It exhibits poise through a fine structure and dense tannins. Thyme- and oregano-sprinkled purple plum, dried violets, and toasty vanilla-laced oak accent the velvet-lined finish. **94** —M.M.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT YOUNG ESTATE WINERY

A view of Robert Young Estate Winery from the tasting room patio.

**DEEP CONNECTIONS:
ROBERT YOUNG ESTATE WINERY**

Since 1858, six generations of the Young family have lived and farmed at their home ranch in Alexander Valley.

Robert Young 2021 Thomas Meek Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$105)

It was Uncle Thomas who saved the Young family’s Alexander Valley home ranch during the Great Depression, when he guaranteed a \$70,000 bank note. The deal was that the Youngs had to pay it back, and sure enough, they successfully handled that challenge. A tribute to his memory, this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from three hillside lots aged 24 months in (65% new) French oak; only 17 barrels were produced. Subtle clove and mint notes attach to rich black currant and dark chocolate. Muscular and bold, with prominent features of roast coffee, graphite, and blood orange, it’s a luxurious wine with staying power. **96** —M.M. SJ

Fourteen sommeliers competed in the Best Sommelier of the Americas competition in February 2025.



PHOTOS: @ASISOMMSASIS

“Being Your Best Self”

CANADA'S **JORIS GUTIERREZ GARCIA** CLAIMS THE 2025 BEST SOMMELIER OF THE AMERICAS TITLE *by David Furer*

AS COMPARED TO EUROPE, the education and training of sommeliers in the United States is a recent phenomenon—as are competitions that measure their skill. That makes the 2021 inception of the Best USA Sommelier Association (BUSA) all the more notable. Conceived the year before by its president, Doug Frost, MS, MW, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit acts as the U.S. chapter of the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI), whose triennial *Meilleur Sommelier du Monde* event featuring the winners of various regional competitions is held as the world standard. In 2018, the Best Sommelier of the Americas competition was held in Montreal, Canada, followed by Santiago, Chile, in 2022. With the rapid rise of BUSA, it fell to Frost; vice president Alejandro Ferris Wallis; treasurer Evan Goldstein, MS; and their fellow board members to organize the seventh edition—and the first in the U.S.—of Best Sommelier of the Americas.

Held at the Flamingo Resort & Spa in Santa Rosa, California, February 17–20, the competition also included a series of master classes highlighting its sponsors, most notably Sonoma County Winegrowers, which Frost proclaimed as being indispensable to its success. In addition

to Frost's presentation on the wines of the Pacific Northwest, Canada's Michael Tremblay discussed the saké and shochu traditions of Japan, while MW candidate Tiago Macena provided details on Portugal's Vinho Verde; panel presentations, meanwhile, explored topics like regenerative organic viticulture and the AVAs of Sonoma County.

Ushered quietly into the testing room, a cadre of us witnessed a panel of five judges charge the six semifinalists with various tasks assessing their knowledge, poise, and service skills. Candidates were required to offer their services in one of the three eligible languages—English, Spanish, or French—that isn't their mother tongue. Conducting their presentations in English, Colombia's Nicolas Reines, Canada's Joris Gutierrez Garcia, and Uruguay's Jerónimo Tellarini were given five minutes to introduce the dish of the day and wines by the glass, then to take the orders and conduct table service. Next, the judges threw a curveball by implying that the chef had made their own pairing decisions, forcing the candidates to immediately explain the reasoning behind their pairing suggestions. Additionally, they were tasked with providing music selections to accompany each dish, responding in the nick of time

before the bell rang. Reines and Garcia were also required to identify which of the two vintages of an otherwise identical wine was better suited to long-term aging, detailing the nuances of each expression and drawing comparisons between them.

Once the candidates were dismissed, the judges conferred, criticizing and complimenting details of their performances while assembling their scores; points were lost due to lapses such as suggesting a wine deemed unsuitable for the dish, the misuse of a service cloth, and other errors in providing fully proper service.

The second group was then asked to conduct a full organoleptic tasting of a single wine in three minutes. When finished, they were told they'd just tasted a Pinot Noir from Baden, Germany, and with three additional Pinot Noirs placed front of them, they were tasked with identifying the origins and vintages of each. This tasting portion of the examination concluded with an assessment and identification of three unknown beverages poured in opaque stemware in six minutes. Ecuador's Guilhem Renaud, originally from France, chose Spanish as his language, while Peru's Joseph Ruiz Acosta performed in English; Mark Guillaudeu of New York City's Eleven



Joris Gutierrez Garcia of Canada (center), who was crowned Best Sommelier of the Americas, with finalists Mark Guillaudeu of the United States (left) and Nicolas Reines of Colombia.

- Taking an aperitif order and serving to a table of three
- Serving a bottle of 1969 Santenay Premier Cru Rouge to a table of four
- Conducting a blind organoleptic assessment of a single glass of wine
- Suggesting three wines to accompany each course of a four-course menu for a party of three
- Conducting blind identification of two wines followed by a speculation of their aging potentials
- Identifying ten beverages tasted blind and suggesting food pairings for five of them
- Identifying a picture of a notable person in wine history and providing a short description

Madison Park, representing the U.S., chose French. Compared to their criticism of the service portion, the judges were more concise in their scoring here, as the process of identifying the beverages was more straightforward.

Displaying understandable disappointment on the third day was Andrea Donadio of Buenos Aires, co-founder of online retailer Tinte Vinos and one of eight competitors who didn't make it to the semifinals. "You have to plan your studies to improve a lot of things," said the mother of a young daughter. "My eight-month study plan grew more intense the final two with an hour's studying daily."

Eleven of the 14 participating sommeliers hailed from South American and Caribbean countries where U.S. and even some European wines are in scant supply. "They don't have access to these wines," confirmed ASI president William Wouters, "which is why we held a boot camp last year in Ecuador since one of [the event's] sponsors, Chablis, knew that 80% of these sommeliers had never tasted one! The world is big but small at the same time, so ASI is working more to develop our diverse, broad educational programs." Wouters urged vintners to host young sommeliers at their wineries since "these are the people who are later transmitting to customers the work you're doing. They don't forget these special visits and will reference them throughout their career



Master classes included an overview of saké and shochu.

when making tableside recommendations."

Having competed unsuccessfully for the regional Best Sommelier USA contest in 2024 against fellow New Yorker Guillaudeu, who won both that year and in 2022, Jienna Basaldu of The Modern was on hand to cheer on her "forever study partner," in her words. Guillaudeu was the first American ever to make it to the finals of the Best Sommelier of the Americas. "I love competitions so because it brings the best together from around a country, a hemisphere, and eventually the world," he said. "Ultimately this business is about people more than product, and I meet the best people through this calling from which we all benefit."

Three of the six semifinalists were disqualified before the final examinations, with the three remaining—Gutierrez Garcia, Reines, and Guillaudeu—brought onstage in front of an audience of approximately 100 (and live-streamed via YouTube) and given the following tasks:

Gutierrez Garcia won, earning him the right to compete for the world champion title in 2026. The 32-year-old, who is honing his skills at Montreal's Club Chasse et Pêche and as a partner at importer Agence Pirates, noted that though listening to music while studying helps to put him at ease, "I learn the most when traveling in a wine region." Beginning his studies in 2013 at Canada's Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie du Québec, he has set his immediate sights on his WSET diploma and MS theory exams, "so I've a lot of work to do before heading to Lisboa in 2026—but I'm super happy tonight!" he noted, adding that "one of the biggest lessons I learned over the years is that competitions aren't just about wine. I spent a lot of time focusing on beverages I wasn't as confident with, like saké and spirits, and it paid off." Gutierrez Garcia also credited his experience at the aforementioned ASI boot camps in Malaysia and Ecuador as pivotal in his development, as they offered the opportunity to train alongside top sommeliers from around the world: "Being surrounded by people who challenge you and learning how to speak confidently in front of Masters of Wine and former world champions was invaluable preparation. At the end of the day, it's not about beating each other—it's about being your best self when it matters most. You are competing against the judges and your own nerves, not the other candidates." ❧



Integrity Meets Integration

HOW A SAVVY SERIES OF EXPANSIONS HAS MADE **FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS** ONE OF THE LARGEST WINERIES IN THE WORLD

by Jillian Dara

IN THE EARLY 2000S, the fourth-generation proprietors behind Félix Solís Avantis decided their company would become an ambassador of Spanish fine wine across the globe. With two existing wineries in two of the most important appellations in central Spain—Valdepeñas and La Mancha—the family knew they needed to expand their footprint to northern Denominación de Origenes (DOs) such as Rioja, Rueda, Toro, and Ribera del Duero.

The latter, says Pedro García, managing director, USA and Canada, for Félix Solís Avantis, “is to Spain as Napa Valley is to California. It’s a gorgeous region, [where] more than 5,000 families make a direct living growing grapes.” As a family-owned

company itself, Félix Solís prioritizes familial ties and aims to honor the country’s rich history of multigenerational viticulture; today, it works in partnership with over 450 family growers whose vineyards cover nearly 4,000 acres.

While Ribera del Duero was granted DO status in 1982, its winemaking history dates back over 2,000 years; today, about 50% of its vines are over 55 years old, and 10% are over 80. “The concentration of old vines delivers exceptionally high-quality Tempranillo,” says García. The grape’s ability to thrive in the region is also due to massive diurnal temperature swings that place the vines under tremendous stress and long summers with intense sun that produce smaller berries

with thicker skins, darker color, and more acidity, which lend well to Tempranillo’s “tremendous” aging structure, according to García.

Today, the Pagos del Rey winery in Ribera del Duero—specifically the town of Olmedillo de Roa—serves as a hub for Félix Solís’ production in Spain’s northern DOs. Built in 2002, the ultra-modern facility was the first of four wineries the company would build in northern Spain. The massive Pagos del Rey structure utilizes every part of its 750,000 square feet. There are two bottling lines primarily producing red wines: one devoted to special formats and limited productions and a larger automatic line that can bottle up to 8,000 units per hour of recognized

A vineyard in Ribera del Duero tended by one of the 450 growers with which Félix Solís works across Spain.



labels such as Condado de Oriza Reserva Tempranillo, which ages for 24 months in American and French oak before an additional 12 months of aging in the bottle. The subterranean cellars, 50 feet underground, are temperature-regulated to optimize prolonged aging periods and are stocked with 12,000 American and French oak barrels. “The winery allows for consistency and capacity in a region where it’s very expensive to make these wines,” explains Garcia, describing the facility as “something out of *Star Wars*” with its soaring glass ceilings and geometric steel beams in the shape of isosceles triangles that seemingly rise from the otherwise horizontal countryside.

Condado de Oriza Reserva has found success in the international market, claiming more than 100 awards in various competitions, and is particularly popular in the United States. Due to Félix Solís’ ability to offer competitive pricing as a vertically integrated company, the wine offers outstanding value for price in comparison to other reserva Tempranillos on



the market: It sits at \$20, while most of its direct competitors go for \$45 or higher. “We grow the grapes, make the wine, sell it to ourselves as Félix the importer, [and] then hand it off to our distributors—it’s a complete cycle,” explains Garcia, adding that the winery also produces a Gran Reserva priced at \$40, which is almost “unheard of” for a wine that ages for five years. Condado de Oriza is also available as a youthful Crianza (\$12) aged for 14

months in new American oak barrels before resting another nine months in bottle. In addition to the flagship Condado de Oriza, the Pagos del Rey winery produces such Félix Solís labels as Altos de Tamarón, 409, Canta Mañanas, and Pago de Fuentecojo.

Félix Solís entered the U.S. market in 2017 and is among the top ten largest wineries in the world, selling 32 million 9-liter cases in 120 countries last year. Garcia notes that at Félix Solís, “Our mission statement is to grow the Spanish category and produce the best wines at the best prices so that everybody can have a quality bottle of wine at the table,” he adds. “We’re fully committed to the business of making wine and expanding wine culture to the world.”

While Félix Solís’ market integration may be a key to its prolific growth, Garcia explains that it’s also a “game changer” when looking toward the company’s future: “It’s the only way to navigate the many external waves of challenge, from climate change to inflation.”



Sheep grazing at Bonterra Organic Estates in Hopland, CA.

Soil to Sip

DONUM ESTATE AND BONTERRA ORGANIC ESTATES EXPLORE THE LINK BETWEEN REGENERATIVE FARMING AND WINE QUALITY

by Stacy Briscoe

“**REGENERATIVE ORGANIC IS THE** gold standard of regenerative certifications,” says Joseph Brinkley, senior director of regenerative organic farming at Bonterra Organic Estates in Mendocino, California. “Those of us going through these practices are really committed to a relational form of farming—‘relational’ meaning connecting below-ground with above-ground life. And for us, given our scale and distribution, having a third-party verification to back up our claims is very important.”

Meanwhile, in Sonoma’s Carneros AVA, Tony Chapman, senior director of wine-growing at Donum Estate, asks, “How do

we increase our soil health? How do we increase vine health? How do we make better, more exciting, more terroir-driven wines?” The answer to all these questions, he believes, lies with regenerative farming.

These two seemingly disparate operations—one a large-scale winery with wide commercial availability, the other a boutique brand focused predominantly on direct-to-consumer sales—actually have a lot in common: a passion for and focus on the holistic philosophy and practices that define regenerative organic viticulture. This motivated them to obtain certification through the Regenerative Organic Alliance (ROA) as well as to

form partnerships with predictive ag company Agrology, which accumulates data showcasing how regenerative viticulture positively impacts both the vine and the wine.

Biology Is the Vehicle

Wind, rainfall, fog, growing degree days: These abiotic elements are, arguably, the factors of terroir most easily understood by industry and consumers alike. But, Chapman argues, it’s the biology below ground that truly captures the essence of a place.

Those familiar with regenerative agriculture are aware that the first pillar

of the practice involves soil rejuvenation and vitality. It's the nuances of a healthy microbiome that lead to successful vine growth cycles, fruit development, and the ability to express terroir. "The industry talks a lot about soil structure in reference to the top 10 inches, but anyone who farms winegrapes knows that the more important components are found at depth," says Chapman. For roots to dig deep, form a firm foundation, and build a life cycle of longevity, a combination of soil aggregation and aeration is needed to promote root integration, water and nutrient infiltration and retention, and carbon cycling.

A fundamental first step is the elimination of synthetic inputs. "Fifty [percent] to 80% of soil organic matter is dead micro-

vintages, Donum has seen as high as a 1,047% increase in total fungi in one of its blocks. The benefit: "Certain fungi, like trichoderma, bacillus, [and] pseudomonas, can act as biocontrol agents, outcompeting or inhibiting pathogens like eutypa and botrytis," says Chapman.

Data also proves that year-round cover cropping—sans tillage—is especially successful in maintaining healthy fungal communities. "Soil aggregate needs to constantly be replenished—the average lifespan is only 21–27 days," explains Dubbe. "Here [at Donum], they consistently feed and build biology through permanent cover crop, which is cycling nutrients, increasing water holding, and, as a result, helping the resilience of the vine

Taste Test-Approved

"Soil health lends itself to measurable nutritional density compared to conventional counterparts," explained Chapman while introducing me to a comparative tasting of Pinot Noirs that were conventionally farmed, farmed with minimal tillage, and farmed without tillage, respectively. "Density of phytonutrients only occurs when vines are getting good nutrition through the soil microbiome. [These] secondary metabolites, the same compounds that help defend against stressors, also create elevated textures, aromas, and flavors in the wine."

Success with regenerative methods has informed winemaking decisions at Donum. "We're doing all these things in the vineyard, but if you bring it into the winery and treat it with conventional winemaking—meaning sulfur at the crusher, inoculating commercial yeast strains, whatever it may be—you're losing what you're building up," says the winery's vice president of winemaking and vineyards, Dan Fishman. It's in the lag phase, he comments, between 0% and 5% alcohol when complexity from terroir is built into the wine. "A lot of really interesting things happen before *saccharomyces* takes over," he says. During this time, beneficial fungi, or so-called "native yeasts" that are not responsible for alcohol conversion, release aromatic compounds, flavonoids, and glycerol, adding depth and complexity.

Tasting through the wines, I couldn't escape their sheer physical transition: The regeneratively farmed grapes achieved full flavor and phenolic ripeness earlier in the season, meaning the wines are lower in alcohol, carry brighter acidity, and have a lighter body with more delicately layered flavors.

"It takes a long time for adaptation to evolve," says Chapman. "But once a plant has, it's inheritable and gets passed on indefinitely. It's a huge motivation to keep these vines in the ground, keep them healthy, keep them adapting, keep them producing more and more profound wines." *SJ*

Owls are beneficial predators in vineyards, feeding on pests.



Cover crops in Donum Estate's Carneros vineyard.

bial bodies," explains Agrology's head of regenerative partnerships, Charlie Dubbe. "If you're trying to increase organic matter and water-holding capacity, it's imperative to increase the microbial biomass." Donum achieves this by making its own compost teas to spray in vital phases of the growing season—at budbreak, during flowering, and immediately following harvest. "This is really to feed the fungal matter. In agriculture, typically, soils are bacterial-driven. Grapevines prefer fungal-dominant soils; our goal is to restore the fungus-to-bacteria ratio naturally," says Chapman, explaining ideal ratios are site-dependent but that he aims for three to one or higher. Over the course of three

against stressors like heat, pest, and disease."

There's a common misconception that vines are more stressed by competition from cover crops, but throughout the growing season, data showed the opposite: They experienced less water stress in the untilled sections of the vineyard versus those that underwent minimal tillage. However, there was a shift in the weeks leading up to harvest: "Stress during this time of the season incentivizes the plant to produce secondary metabolites—phenolics, terpenes, thiols, all these flavor compounds right before picking," says Chapman. "From a winemaking and wine quality perspective, that's what we want."

PHOTO: BOB BERG

PHOTO COURTESY OF DONUM ESTATE

Farmer's Daughter Makes Good

NIKI WILLIAMS LETS NATURE TAKE THE LEAD IN CRAFTING CAKEBREAD CELLARS' DISTINCTIVE WINES by Christina Barrueta

"I ABSOLUTELY LOVE the expression 'Mother Nature bats last,'" says Cakebread Cellars winemaker (and devoted Chicago Cubs fan) Niki Williams. We're tasting through four beautiful expressions: the silky Two Creeks Pinot Noir, an elegant Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, a plush Merlot, and a coveted Cabernet Franc that until recently was exclusive to the producer's wine club. "Every vintage brings elements of surprise, so you have to stay flexible and work with what nature gives you," she says with a smile. "That's what makes it so fun."

Raised on an Illinois farm, Williams absorbed early on the lesson that no matter how much you plan, the earth has the final say. "Growing up in a farming family, I've always loved that connection with the land," she says. But her path to the cellar was anything but linear:

of terroir: "Travel really opened the door for me to understand wine as more than just a beverage in a glass," she recalls. "In the Veneto region, I remember visiting a vineyard with the family and really feeling that connection—that this family owns a little pocket of the planet where they're growing this special crop and transforming it into an amazing beverage. The pride

sophical and practical: Let nature take the first swing, then guide the results with intuition and restraint. "The artistry lies in keeping the purity of the raw material as the strongest expression and not putting my fingerprints all over it," she notes. "That has to come through first to best serve each vintage from our amazing estate vineyards."

Cakebread Cellars ▶
is located in the
Napa Valley town of
Rutherford, CA.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAKEBREAD CELLARS



◀ **Cakebread Cellars winemaker Niki Williams.**

Before earning her enology degree from the University of California, Davis, Williams studied theater and also spent a decade in the travel industry. Her experience carried her across continents and through vineyards in France, Italy, and Spain, where her agricultural roots found fresh expression in the language

they felt was so poignant because I really understood it.

"That's what is so interesting to me—the way wine expresses itself as a true sense of place and time," continues Williams, who sees herself less as a creator and more as a curator of each Cakebread harvest. It's a viewpoint that's both philo-

Her approach reflects the winery's founding principles, Williams explains, which trace back to the complementary visions of founders Jack and Dolores Cakebread. "Jack was focused on the winemaking side of things, while Dolores, who created a garden at the winery, was more enthusiastic about cooking and how food and wine pair together," she says. "The signature Cakebread style was a vibrant expression of each variety with food pairing in mind, and to this day, we've stayed true to that. We celebrated our 50th anniversary in 2023, and I feel very fortunate to work with a style of wine that personally resonates with me. Every lot from every block is different, and that's how you build layers and create complexity. The joy is in the journey!" **ST**

The Moscato Maven

ANNOUNCING THE WINNER OF OUR LATEST BLIND TASTING: TROPICAL BY LUCA BOSIO

SIX EDITORS AT *The SOMM Journal* were recently tasked with blind tasting and comparing a group of 12 sparkling fruit-flavored Moscatos wrapped in brown paper bags and grouped in four categories: orange, green, red, and purple. Our first and second place winners are as follows:

ORANGE

First place: Tropical Mango

Second place: Barefoot Mango Fruitscato

GREEN

First place: Tropical Ginger Lime

Second place: Barefoot Lemonade Fruitscato

RED

First place: Stella Rosa Cranberry

Second place: Tropical Cranberry

PURPLE

First place: Tropical Passion Fruit

Second place: Roscato Tropical



PHOTO COURTESY OF QUINTESSENTIAL



Luca Bosio is a third-generation winemaker from Italy and the creator of Tropical Moscato.

Created by Italian winemaker Luca Bosio, Tropical by Luca Bosio—a fusion of premium Moscato from Piedmont and 100% real fruit—claimed victory in three out of four flavor categories, scoring the highest out of the selection of competitors as the best-tasting brand of sparkling fruit-infused Moscato. Made with all-natural ingredients and without added sugar or artificial additives, it contains top-quality fruit sourced from notable regions such as the Italian Alps. *sj*

Here are some notes from our team:

TROPICAL MANGO

If mango lassi was made without dairy. Strong fruit flavor with a burst of effervescence on the palate. Rounded, smooth mouthfeel. —*Stef Schwab*

Clean, sweet, and ripe mango notes arise in an unctuous, spritzy frame. Floral tones of white petals, pineapple, and candied ginger. —*Meridith May*

TROPICAL GINGER LIME

Refreshing, with a subtle spicy lift that serves as a nice counterpoint to the sweetness. —*Brian Freedman*

Pale golden yellow in the glass, this Moscato boasts a powdery floral bouquet with a hint of almond and nostalgic notes of gummy candy, paving the way for flavors of mandarin orange, Meyer lemon, and key lime that leave behind a mouth-coating texture. —*Kate Newton*

TROPICAL PASSION FRUIT

Subtle passion fruit on nose, good as a fruit accent. This is a very well-balanced wine, lifted with racy acid and juicy fruit. Refreshing, not syrupy sweet. —*Alissa Bica*

Lush note of the tropics, with gardenia, plumeria, and orange sorbet. —*M.M.*

Smells appealingly like a strawberry-banana smoothie and tastes like it too, with a lively texture and a bit of mango on the finish. —*Ruth Tobias*

THE JUDGES

Meridith May, publisher/editor-in-chief

Ruth Tobias, managing editor

Kate Newton, senior editor

Stef Schwab, New York editor

Alissa Bica, contributing editor

Brian Freedman, contributing editor

A Meaningful Merger

WINEMAKER JOE WAGNER ENVISIONS **BÖEN BY BELLE GLOS** AS AN ENTRY POINT INTO THE WORLD OF FINE WINE

by Kate Newton



Joe Wagner established Böen to explore his family's farming roots, channeling five generations of experience into the production of a tri-appellated Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, among other wines.

WHEN WINEMAKER JOE WAGNER

released and marketed the industry's first tri-county Pinot Noir under his Belle Glos brand over a decade ago, some in the industry were perplexed: Why not simply label the wine as a California designate? But despite the lack of precedent, the fifth-generation vintner believed it was imperative to highlight the specific sources of his grapes—in this case, Sonoma, Monterey, and Santa Barbara

counties—as coastal areas where Pinot Noir in particular thrives. The risk soon paid off: "People caught on and understood . . . that it wasn't just a California Pinot, it was a coastal Pinot Noir that had tons of diversity in its profile—and people fell in love with it," he says.

Years later, the tri-county concept served as the foundation of another label altogether within the portfolio of Wagner's company, Copper Cane Wines & Spirits.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COPPER CANE WINES & SPIRITS

Böen—established as an outlet for Wagner to return to his family's farming roots and invest in more vineyards after selling his enormously popular brand Meiomi—set out to offer both a tri-appellated Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as well as a Russian River Valley Pinot all \$35 and under, while Belle Glos continued to establish itself as the vineyard designate-driven pinnacle of Copper Cane's lineup. "We had these two opposing views where we were very much entrenched in the vineyard designation and showing a true character of terroir under one winemaking ideology but also had this much broader perspective on Pinot Noir," notes Wagner, adding that "diversity [in sourcing became] the strength" of Böen, as it exemplified the expansion of that farming footprint and the myriad expressions that result "not just from a textural standpoint but also in terms of aromatics and flavor profile."

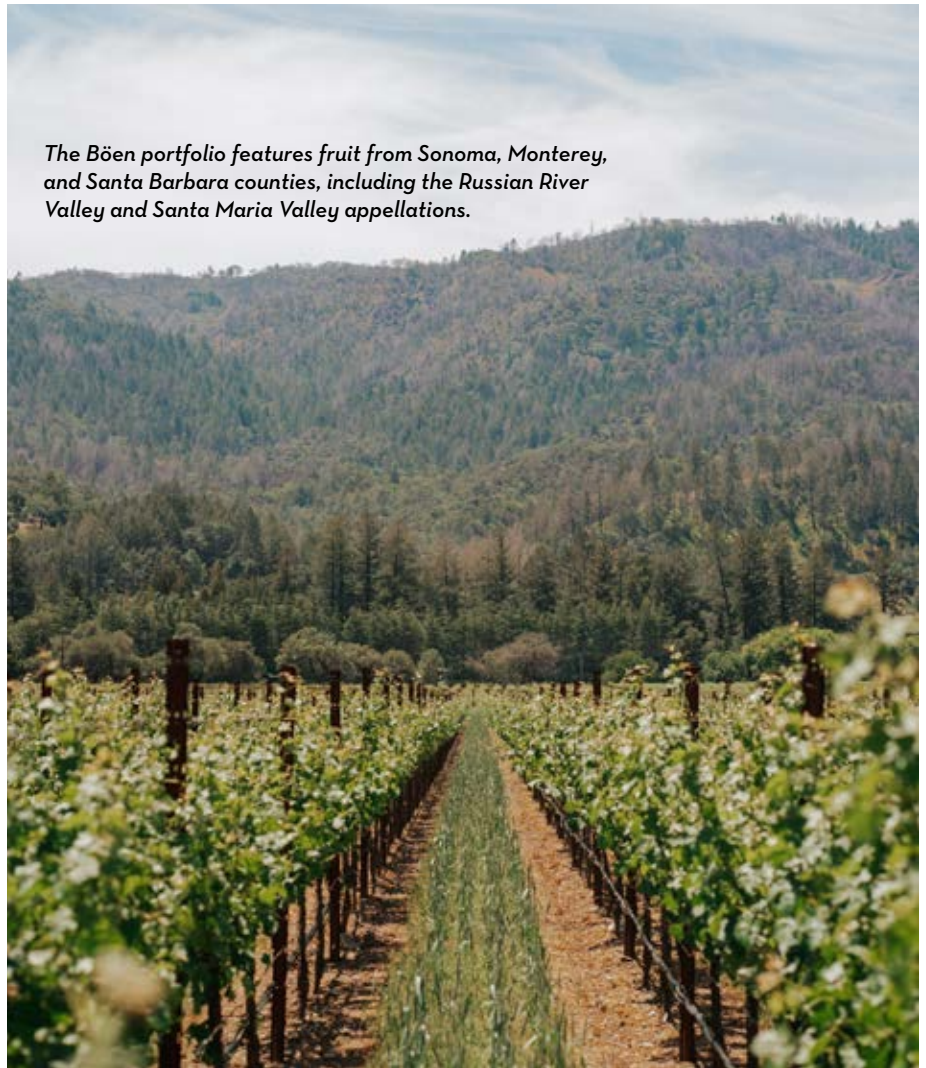
Opposites, no longer: The two brands are reaching across the aisle in the form of Böen by Belle Glos, a tie-in that rolled out this spring with the release of the 2023 vintage and that will see ongoing promotion on Böen's social media platforms and marketing materials. The front labels of the aforementioned tri-county Pinot Noir and Chardonnay will bear the new name, as will the back labels of Böen's Russian River Valley Pinot Noir and Reserve Pinot Noir (\$45) from the Santa

Maria Valley, whose gold wax-dipped bottle resembles the iconic red packaging of Belle Glos.

The intention behind bridging the gap between the two brands, Wagner explains, is to “give people that offering where they can have a soft entry point with Böen and, as they gain confidence in that style of wine, move up into Belle Glos and get really into the details of what the characters coming out of the glass are, because at the end of the day, Pinot Noir is I think the best variety to express the vineyard site. Not only is it that, it’s also, I think, the best overall food wine. We understand people are going to both casual and fine-dining restaurants, and we want to have that offering for them” that suits both settings. “[They can] go up to Belle Glos and enjoy that level of prestige, or if they’re looking for a \$12 glass pour that is going to convey the essence of California’s coast and what Pinot Noir can be here, that’s where Böen comes in,” he adds.

And because the Copper Cane wine-making team applies “the same parameters for picking and assessing maturity” as well as using the same winemaking practices—among them Wagner’s signature cryoextraction technique, in which the grapes are layered with dry ice in bins, freezing the skins to eventually extract maximum levels of color and texture—Böen serves as a seamless stepping-off point for its sister brand while also providing a platform “to bring what I would consider [our] newer plantings to the marketplace, whether that be through the tri-county [releases]; the Appellation series, [represented by the Russian River Valley Pinot Noir]; or our Reserve series,” Wagner continues. “You’ll be getting every bit of our winemaking style and character and quality, and it’s going to be a little more diverse rather than singular in nature with the vineyard designates. But it’s going to be able to at least convey the message that [consumers can] find confidence in this style; if you like it and you want to move up, we’re all aspirational by nature, and once you’re ready, try out Belle Glos and get a bit deeper into the terroir.”

From the outset, Wagner and the Copper Cane team intended for Böen to primarily be an on-premise brand that, in his words, “delivers [a high] level of quality at a price point that is appetizing



The Böen portfolio features fruit from Sonoma, Monterey, and Santa Barbara counties, including the Russian River Valley and Santa Maria Valley appellations.

to our restaurant partners [while] exposing more people to the California coast and what it does for Pinot Noir”—a goal that was stymied by the arrival of the pandemic in 2020, just months after the brand’s tri-county wines launched. They made the most of the temporary setback, however, pivoting to the off-premise without losing sight of their long-term vision. Now, five years later, “while we still have a good number of retail placements, we want to make sure we are catering to the on-premise, so we have regained that ground to [reach] where we want to be. . . . I would love to see it continue on that trajectory, and I do believe it is,” says Wagner. “It’s been a wild ride, and it seems like every year that passes, we see a little more stability. . . . We’ll take [the challenges] as they come and hopefully help guide the next generation into understanding what fine dining is about—that in itself is a struggle. . . . [But] everyone starts their journey somewhere, and as they evolve

into it, they start to appreciate the arts associated with it, whether that be the culinary arts or wine.”

The hope is that interest in the latter prompts them to “explore the vast world of not just Copper Cane but the vast world of wine [as a whole]. That’s one of the beauties of this industry: You have [thousands] of products out there and you can journey through the world glass by glass and then hopefully get out there and enjoy, through travel, some of these wine regions,” says Wagner, noting that passing on this perspective to younger generations of consumers is vital to the success of the industry. “If we [need] an offering for them to get involved and feel like they’re . . . part of a brand that’s meaningful and brings an elevated experience to their daily life, then Böen is that answer; and if we can cater to them being tied to something that will evolve into them being lovers of fine wine in the future, then hopefully we’re doing our job right.” ❧



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PHOTOS: MARIO PIONBO

Meaghan Steele, VP/director of luxury business operations, Americas, at Sotheby's, served as auctioneer at Premiere Napa Valley.

Paddles Up!

PREMIERE NAPA VALLEY 2025 MARKED A RETURN TO FORM by Jonathan Cristaldi

ACCORDING TO Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), this year's Premiere Napa Valley auction, held February 22, raised \$3.3 million—a 10% increase over last year's total—thanks to a higher number of lots and a noticeable uptick in participation, a welcome rebound after a dip in engagement over the past several years.

"The 2023 Cabernet vintage was one for the books," noted board chair and Trois Noix founder Jaime Araujo. "It was that rare combination of quantity and quality that gave us an amazing bounty after several years of less-than-generous harvests." An ideal growing season—buoyed by ample winter and spring rains followed by warm weather—supported exceptional canopy growth through a relatively cool summer. "It was so mild that even at Trois Noix, where we have most years finished harvest by mid-September, we harvested our final 2023 lots in October," said Araujo.

While the wines have consistently impressed, Premiere attendance has taken time to rebound since the onset of the pandemic. Yet under Araujo's leadership, a fresh sense of purpose has returned. As only the seventh woman—and the first openly gay person—to serve as chair since the organization's founding in 1944, Araujo believes that her presence signals a meaningful step toward inclusivity in Napa's leadership. "Representation matters, and being elected [as] chair of the Napa Valley Vintners is an honor and a responsibility I take seriously," she said. "My term as chair is another great way to show people in the Valley and beyond that Napa is becoming ever more inclusive."

The top 20 red wine lots featured at the 2025 event were Simon Family Estate; The Mascot; Hourglass; Quintessa; a joint lot by JennaMarise Wines and Robert Foley Vineyards; Robert Mondavi Winery; Duckhorn Vineyards; a joint lot by Grgich

Hills Estate and Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery; 001 Vintners; HQ Winery; Arkenstone Vineyards; a collective effort by Davies Vineyard, Diamond Creek Vineyards, Diamond Mountain Vineyard, Dyer Vineyard, Lokoya, and Wallis Family Estate; Lail Vineyards; Darioush; Raymond Vineyards; Shafer Vineyards; Silver Oak; a joint lot by Continuum Estate and Staglin Family Vineyard; The Vice; and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.

The top five white wine lots were Hudson, Schramsberg Vineyards, Vineyard 7 & 8, Chandon, and a sparkling wine collaboration between Paula Kornell and Charles Krug.

While pouring his Scalene Dream, sourced from three prized vineyard sites farmed by Phil Coturri, Hugo Maldonado, and Giancarlo Bettinelli, Favia Wines owner Andy Erickson summed up the 2023 vintage succinctly. "It has an old-school vibe—acid and tannin and very



The Grand Tasting preceded the auction.

precise wines. . . . Early signs point to integrated tannins, immediate approachability, and balanced structure across the board. Crops were bigger than estimated," he said, while Chelsea Barrett of Materra Cunnat Family Vineyards noted that "it took a long time for things to ripen. Whites were behind, and everything came in later—even whites were coming in October. So logistically it was a challenge. Reds are lighter, with red fruit profiles."

Jennifer Williams of Arrow&Branch described it as "an easy year from a winemaking perspective. Fermentations were clean, and fruit was very pure. The tannins are structured, and I expect them to have a long life. There's freshness and a wide range of fruit character—from dark black to red cherry and raspberry—because it was a cooler year; there's a lot of complex aromatics." Added Jeff Cole of Sullivan Rutherford Estate, "The 2023s are powerful and structured with elegance and intensity. There's good acidity, freshness, and elevated aromatics. Bigger crop, high quality."

Fantesca Estate director DLynn Proctor poured the winery's Prelude 2023 Cabernet, which was scooped up by H-E-B. Winemaker Tony Arcudi offered perhaps the most telling line of the day: "There is no more 'typical' as far as harvesting goes," as climate change has made the timing of the growing season more unpredictable.

But while 2023 shares surface similarities with years like 2016 and 2018—mild weather, long hang time—it avoided major climatic pitfalls. In 2022, a dramatic



Industry luminary (and SOMM Journal contributing editor) Karen MacNeil interviewed Tim Mondavi on the ground.

heat dome hit the Valley over Labor Day, pushing temperatures beyond 115 degrees Fahrenheit. Not so in 2023, when the season unfolded without a single major weather event. As a result, Julian Gonzalez of Guarachi Family Wines noted, "Everything is softer, with rich tannin and plenty of mineral intensity." Founder Alex Guarachi added, "I love the balance of aromatic intensity and body. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end."

Araujo, who remained an energetic presence throughout the auction, described Trois Noix's vision as a bridge between "classic Napa" and "new Napa." Certified by B Corp and Napa Green, the producer aims to engage a broader, younger, and more diverse audience with its fresh, bright wines that range from

\$30 to \$150 at retail and are often lower in alcohol. "We believe people want to know their money is going toward something that does good in the community," Araujo said.

Premiere Napa Valley 2025 brought more than a stellar 2023 vintage to the table—it delivered a glimpse of a more open, forward-thinking Napa. The \$3.3 million raised will go toward the NVV's efforts in marketing, education, sustainability, and community outreach, ensuring the region's continued excellence and resilience. With wines that exhibit poise, power, and precision, and with leaders like Araujo amplifying voices that have too long been sidelined, Napa is clearly entering a new era—one rooted not only in fine wine but in meaningful progress. *sj*

The Merits of Mindfulness

CALIFORNIA-BASED PRODUCER **JULIEN FAYARD** TAKES AN INTENTIONAL APPROACH TO LOWER-ALCOHOL WINES

by Jonathan Cristaldi



PHOTO: SUZANNE BECKER BRONK

Napa-based winemaker Julien Fayard is the mastermind behind Les Vins Julien.

A NEW ERA of nonalcoholic and low-alcohol wines has arrived. At *The SOMM Journal*, we've observed that the production of these wines is like two sides of a coin: On one side are producers making intentional wines from vine to bottle, and on the other are those whose methods constitute ultra-processing (think spinning-cone technology).

In the wake of the pandemic, production of low- and no-alcohol wines has surged across the EU, where regulations have kept pace. In 2021, the EU approved the dealcoholization of wines from designated Geographical Indications down to 0.5% ABV, and France now allows IGP producers to dealcoholize wines to as low as 6% ABV.

In the U.S., this trend is also rapidly gaining traction. A quick search yields updated lists from major outlets—*The New York Times*' Wirecutter vertical now recommends top nonalcoholic wines, and in 2024, *Forbes* published a beginner's guide to low-alc imbibing. Even the *New York Post* recently reported on how "sagging sales" in New York City liquor stores are being shored up by low-alcohol wines and spirits.

The story that is not being told—and the story most consumers would find appalling—is that many low- or no-ABV wines have been ultra-processed. In the past decade, ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have increasingly come under fire. *The New York Times* has extensively covered

scientific findings linking UPFs with heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, obesity, gastrointestinal issues, depression, and even premature death. That's why Napa-based vintner Julien Fayard, one of the region's leading consulting winemakers, has gone all in on naturally low-alcohol wines under the label Les Vins Julien, which made its debut in 2022.

The portfolio spans three tiers. The first is Light, which consists of wines under 11% ABV, including Le Chardonnay Light (\$28), the Grenache Blanc-based field blend Le Blanc Light (\$25), and the soon-to-be-released Le Rouge Light. The second tier is California Small Production, currently featuring a Russian River Pinot Noir, an Alder Springs Pinot from Mendocino, a Sonoma

Coast Pinot, a Mt. Veeder Zinfandel, and a Napa Grenache, priced \$25–\$35. And the third tier is Imports, encompassing a Côtes du Rhône and forthcoming Bordeaux wines, priced \$22–\$50.

In an increasingly noisy market, we asked Fayard to clarify how his Light

ness while enhancing midpalate volume. Aging takes place in stainless steel, with minimal lees contact (four to six months) to preserve freshness.

Arriving at the sweet spot of 10%–11% ABV came through trial and error: “Below 9%, California wines can start losing

may adjust to benefit the wines.” His team is even working to reduce the ABV of Fayard’s collector-level wines, “so long as structure and integrity are preserved. It’s a slow transformation.”

Fayard acknowledges alcohol’s health impacts but insists it’s about moderation. He likens ultra-processed low- or no-alcohol wines to sugary, artificial orange juice. “How is that better?” he asks. “We spend a lot of time in the fields and the winery, making sure we don’t have to add anything to these wines.”

He also champions accessibility: “If we want a healthier U.S., we need better-made wines at lower price points across the board.” He notes that lighter wines are “easier on the digestive system” and says that consumers can enjoy multiple glasses without unwelcome side effects. Relatedly, transparency is paramount. Starting with the 2024 vintage, Les Vins Julien’s back labels will list not only ABV but also ingredients, residual sugar amounts, and calories and carbohydrates per 5-ounce serving as well as indicate whether the wine is vegan. “These are



wines achieve 10%–11% ABV. “We don’t de-alc,” he says plainly. “It’s an ultra-processed method; I’m more interested in how to farm sustainably and naturally within this new low-alc category. Every Les Vins Julien wine is intentional, [farmed with] technical [precision], and minimally processed.” For starters, he adds, “We work with vineyard partners who are aligned with our goals.” Director of winemaking Camille E. Gaio, a longtime collaborator of Fayard’s, explains, “The grapes need to be challenged just enough so that sugar ripening allows for phenolic development, but with final alcohol in that 10%–11% range.” Fayard admits he once ignored fruit from such “underperforming” blocks. “Now,” he says with a laugh, “when growers say their blocks take time to ripen, I’m listening closely—that’s what I want for Les Vins Julien.”

He initially worried that earlier harvests might compromise flavor. For Le Blanc Light, ripening was carefully extended to avoid vegetal notes, with the target being a Brix level of around 17–18. And because low-ABV wines can be delicate, Le Chardonnay Light underwent partial malolactic fermentation to ensure bright-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JULIEN FAYARD

structure and concentration, and you’re getting into Michelob Ultra territory,” Fayard explains. He finds that wines with 10%–11% alcohol can retain the body and palate feel he seeks. Wines in the California and Imports tiers, for their part, will top out at around 12.5% ABV. “It’s a work in progress,” he acknowledges, “and as farming and winemaking improve, we

modern low-ABV wines,” Fayard says, “crafted by a highly knowledgeable and technical team.”

Intentional production from local grapes, adds Gaio, is “something that resonates with the health-conscious drinker.” For those consumers, Les Vins Julien offers lower-alcohol wines made with purpose and transparency, not manipulation. **SJ**

Wholehearted

ADVANCED SOMMELIER
WESAM KAWA STANDS
“ON THE SHOULDERS
OF GIANTS” IN ALL
OF HIS PURSUITS,
INCLUDING HIS WINE
BRAND, DU COEUR

*story by Meridith May
photos by Grace Stufkosky*



Pictured at Geordie's Bar at Wrigley Mansion in Phoenix, AZ, Advanced Sommelier Wesam Kawa is general manager at Christopher's at Wrigley Mansion as well as the vintner behind Oregon and Washington wine label Du Coeur.



The Du Coeur Chardonnay paired with fried chicken, waffles, and caviar.

AFTER EXITING THE ARMY in 2005, Wesam Kawa took advantage of the GI Bill and enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu in Scottsdale, Arizona. "I was a poor college kid," admitted Kawa during our recent interview, "so at least I knew I'd never go home hungry."

Kawa's father had offered him a large sum of money not to go into the military, but he had other ideas. "I wanted to do something where I would stand out by being an exceptional reflection of my skill sets with whatever I decided to pursue," he explained.

As he worked several restaurant jobs in Arizona, Kawa did improve his hospitality skills, but it took a chance meeting for the wine bug to bite. "I came across a gentleman who was sitting at the bar in the pub where I worked," he recalls. "What made him stand apart other than his three-piece suit, which was odd enough in this casual setting, was the pin affixed to his jacket."

It was Jay James, wearing his Court of Master Sommeliers lapel pin. Kawa introduced himself to the man who would be his first mentor, and James encouraged him to chase his next adventure. So he did, and "at the conclusion of my Level One exam, Master Sommelier Rob Bigelow, his 6-foot-4 frame towering over me, advised, 'Paid in advance.' I took this to heart as a green light to mentor the next group of somms. Being a true sommelier is not just playing the role of gatekeeper to a wine list; it's a journey to help people who want to strive and raise the bar for our community and the industry."

Now general manager at upscale dining spot Christopher's at Wrigley Mansion in Phoenix, Kawa is proud to work for Christopher Gross, whom Kawa refers to as "an extremely talented and generous professional who strives to give his best to the Phoenix culinary scene."

In 2018, Kawa launched his passion project: Du Coeur—translating as "from the heart" in French—is a line of artisanal wines that consists of Pinot Noirs from the Willamette Valley in Oregon and a Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon from Washington's Walla Walla Valley, among other expressions.

We tasted the following wines with Kawa and his wife, Sarah, over a beautiful brunch at Geordie's at Wrigley Mansion. "If I am successful, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants," noted Kawa, paraphrasing the expression made popular by Sir Isaac Newton about the privilege of gaining knowledge from major thinkers who have laid a path for progress. *sj*

Tasting Notes

Du Coeur 2023 Chardonnay, Eola-Amity Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$55) Aged 11 months in French oak, this is a weighty Chardonnay with aromas of marzipan and lemon blossom. Grown in the rocky Van Duzer Corridor, it starts with briny lemon wedge, followed by white peach amid a flood of creamy meringue. "True balance is a rhythm," vintner Wesam Kawa points out. Nuanced and exceptional, the wine is certainly balanced with acidity, fruit, and minerality. **95**

Du Coeur 2022 Pinot Noir, Domaine Daniel Laurent Vineyard, Yamhill-Carlton, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65) Winemaker Laurent Montalieu sourced grapes from this 110-acre vineyard planted 23 years ago. Aromas of jasmine, parchment, and raspberries in aspic are stunning, and the liquid is ethereal, accented with white-peppered cranberry gelée, cinnamon-dusted rose petals, savory rhubarb, and bergamot. Boasting dense tannins that will stand the test of time, this wine is sold out, but the 2023 vintage will release this summer. **97**

Du Coeur 2022 Pinot Noir, Shea Vineyard, Yamhill-Carlton, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65) Between the angel and the devil illustrated on the label, who knows which will steal your heart—but this wine aged nine months in (75% neutral and 25% new) French oak certainly tempts with its earthy nose thanks to whole-cluster fermentation, which also enhanced its texture and intensified the flavors. Notes of heather and basil with volcanic-soil nuances delicately spread across the palate before the finish of blood orange and tobacco leaf derived from Pommard clones. **96**

Du Coeur 2022 Syrah, Stoney Vine Vineyard, Walla Walla Valley, Washington (\$75) Kawa and winemaker Justin Wylie crafted a special wine here, with layers of boysenberry liqueur, salted charcuterie, smoky minerality, and seductive hints of cracked pepper atop a velvet foundation. Violets and cassis join in on the aromatics, eventually giving way to a long, cedar-washed finish. Kawa calls it a "wine lover's wine: a bicycle without training wheels," adding that the soil is so rocky on this site in the cool southwestern part of the AVA that it's impossible to mechanically harvest the fruit. **97**

Du Coeur 2022 Cuvée Layla Cabernet Sauvignon, Rosebud Vineyard, Walla Walla Valley, Washington (\$75) Named for his 1-year-old daughter, with lyrics to the Beatles' "Across the Universe" written in reverse on the label, this red reflects the effort Kawa puts into his work and is ultimately a celebration of the life he shares with his family. It's creamy and quite approachable in its youth, with notes of boysenberry ganache and dark chocolate dressed in satin. **96**



The United Sommeliers Foundation

The United Sommeliers Foundation's mission is to provide immediate financial assistance to Sommeliers who are experiencing a pause or termination of their employment due to circumstances beyond their control. Founded five years ago, the USF has awarded over \$2 million in emergency financial grants to more than 2,500 wine professionals.

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Exploring the Anbaugebiete

WEINBÖRSE 2025 WAS A VIBRANT SHOWCASE OF SEKT, SPÄTBURGUNDER, AND MORE story and photos by Loris Jones-Randolph

THE VERBAND DEUTSCHER PRÄDIKATSWEINGÜTER, or VDP, is a collection of independent winemakers from across Germany's 13 Anbaugebiete (wine regions). Each year the association hosts Weinbörse, a showcase of the previous year's vintage from the association's members, which now number over 200. It includes master classes and tastings for journalists, sommeliers, and other members of the trade.

Among the master classes I attended was a detailed spotlight on the VDP's quality classification system, which is much like that of Burgundy's, led by Master of Wine Caro Maurer. At the bottom of the pyramid is Gutswein, or regional quality wine, followed by Ortswein, made with grapes that hail from vineyards within a single district, potentially from young vines; Erste Lage (IG) corresponds to the Premier Cru category, while Grosse Lage (GG) is the Grand Cru designation.

Next came a comparison of Pinot Noir styles from across Germany with Sascha Speicher, editor-in-chief of *Meiningers Sommelier*. We explored the regional differences among GG Pinots from the 2022 vintage, which allowed for the abundance of soil types in each Anbaugebiet as well as their distinct microclimates to shine through. From the ability of slate to yield high-toned acidity to the richness of limestone to the complexity of gneiss, attendees agreed that Spätburgunder was a perfect vehicle for the expression of each soil type. (Speaking of gneiss, a deep dive into the Baden region revealed how the amalgamation of minerals such as feldspar and quartz in the Ortenau subregion tones down the acidity of the varieties that grow there while contributing notes of salinity and yellow fruit.)

Marie-Helen Krebs and Nancy Grossmann, sommeliers at three-MICHELIN-starred restaurants Schloss Elmau and Grill Royal, respectively, led the only



Master of Wine Caro Maurer discusses the VDP's quality pyramid.

tasting to focus on Riesling, considering the art of maturation for dry versus semi-sweet expressions. The insightful overview showed how both categories develop and convey the unique material of the grape, helping us to understand their place in both on- and off-premise settings and how their balance of acid and natural residual sugar is key to pairings.

The last master class I attended was led by Master of Wine Mike Best, who discussed the VDP's new Sekt guidelines, the VDP.Sekt.Statut. As the demand for quality sparkling wine rises, this is an exciting development. In contrast with the more general category of German Sekt, VDP.Sekt must be made by the traditional method; a minimum of 15 months of aging on the lees is required for nonvintage wines and 24 months is required for vintage wines. The VDP.Sekt.Prestige designation raises the duration to 36 months, though many winemakers choose to leave their wines

Author Loris Jones-Randolph samples Pinot Noir at Wienbörse.



on the lees for much longer—as long as 60 months in some cases. This category is proving ripe for delicious experimentation. The grapes permitted vary by region, some of which emphasize traditional varieties like Silvaner and Pinot Gris—but all must be estate grown, hand harvested, and whole bunch-pressed. For VDP.Sekt, a regional expert is commissioned to assess its quality, while a national expert is employed to evaluate VDP.Sekt.Prestige.

Beyond the seminars, there were plenty of exhibitors on hand to support trade. Bottle-closure and case packaging companies were available to demonstrate their wares, for instance, while the Sommelier-Union Deutschland eV scouted recruits. Outside the event, food trucks served up regional dishes and vendors poured sparkling tea, coffee, and, of course, beer.

Weinbörse is a must-visit for any professional looking to advance their knowledge of German wine. §



The Apotheosis of the Apothecary

AT MILK OF THE POPPY IN SANTA FE, NM, **SOKHANG PAN** ENGAGES IN MIXOLOGICAL MAGIC by Ruth Tobias

SOKHANG PAN HAS a decidedly eclectic background. The son of Cambodian refugees (his aunt is a chef in the royal palace in Phnom Penh), he got his start in the industry at a Pinkberry Frozen Yogurt shop in Los Angeles before taking a position as a barista—“That’s when I truly started developing a love for beverages,” he recalls—and then joining the National Park Service, through which he served as a concierge in the Grand Canyon and a bartender in Olympic National Park, among other roles; along the way, he also became a graphic designer. So it’s only fitting that he’s now beverage director for a fiercely eclectic venue: Milk of the Poppy in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Backed by famed fantasy author George R.R. Martin, it bills itself as an “immersive apothecary meets craft cocktail bar”—one that, according to Pan, “draws from a lot of historical references, mainly the medieval era or the Middle Ages, and it’s informed by the world of speculative fiction.” It’s his job to apply that aesthetic to the beverage program.

In a space decorated with chain mail and leather; skulls and tree branches, Pan asks, “How do you create menu offerings that, on the surface, might be pretty esoteric or eccentric but that I would actually say are really approachable?” One idea came from head bartender Andy Pollack, who suggested they place an emphasis on fruit-based products such as brandies, eaux-de-vie, and fortified wines that “might mimic some of the production methods that you would find during the Middle Ages,” explains Pan. Another idea was to follow the kitchen’s lead in incorporating local and seasonal ingredients, given that “that’s what people were forced to work with” in the pre-industrial, pre-globalized world.

Take the MOTP Milk Punch. It’s currently a blend of pisco, white Armagnac,

PHOTO COURTESY OF MILK OF THE POPPY



matcha, melon, and Calpico, which Pan describes as “a dairy-based beverage from Japan . . . that’s just a funny little playful drink,” but the recipe will change with the seasons; for instance, come autumn, he’s “hoping to make a punch that uses red chiles, [which are] prominent in New Mexican cuisine, and baking spices [like those found in the] biscochito, which is a cookie that’s often served during the holiday season here.”

Yet another idea he had was to work with lesser-known spirits as a way to channel what he calls “the encyclopedic knowledge” of tinctures and preparations that one might encounter in an apothecary—think arrack, cachaça, and

Sokhang Pan is beverage director at Milk of the Poppy in Santa Fe, NM.

xtabentún, a Mexican honey-anise liqueur. And he takes the same approach to the wine list: “We want something that is just a little bit left of center, so we don’t have any Napa Cab, we don’t have any Sauvignon Blanc,” he notes. “We try to feature growers’ wine, and we try to work with small producers and suppliers that are doing interesting things,” be it sparkling Albariño from Rías Baixas, skin-contact

País from Chile, or the naturally fermented Sohm & Kracher Grüner Veltliner from Niederösterreich, Austria, that he likes to pair with a dish of rattlesnake-rabbit sausage over pappardelle.

If it all sounds a bit mysterious, Pan’s motivation is crystal-clear. It stems from his time at the Park Service, which “was really rewarding, because I was able to be in these spectacular spaces with all of these people who were looking for a break from their daily lives, and I was able to celebrate alongside them,” he says. It’s no different at Milk of the Poppy, which welcomes guests into its own little world of intrigue—one that surely makes Martin proud. *SJ*



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TIME TRAVELING THROUGH *Montalcino*

TASTING THE LIBRARY VINTAGES OF CASTELLO BANFI

For the 2025 re-release of Castello Banfi's library vintages, Gabriele Gorelli, Italy's first Master of Wine, tasted through several of the estate's Brunellos and Super Tuscans in collaboration with *The SOMM Journal*. His notes on both the vintages in general and the resulting wines follow, revealing the truth of his statement that "older vintages catapult us back to their birth year. The markers of the specific weather conditions and the human decisions that were made are there for us in the glass, flanked by enigmatic tertiary aromas."

For further information on the availability and pricing of these library releases, including large-format bottles, contact your Banfi representative or local wholesale distributor.

CASTELLO BANFI BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

An expression of the estate philosophy and the standard-bearer of the portfolio, this wine is emblematic of Banfi's dedication to crafting affordable luxury from the Montalcino territory: A variety of microclimates, soil types, and elevations allow for its hallmark consistency and notable complexity. Made with Sangiovese grapes selected from estate vineyards dedicated to the production of Brunello, it's a refined wine, 80% of which ages in 60- and 90-hectoliter French oak barrels and 20% in 350-liter French barriques.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALLE MURA BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

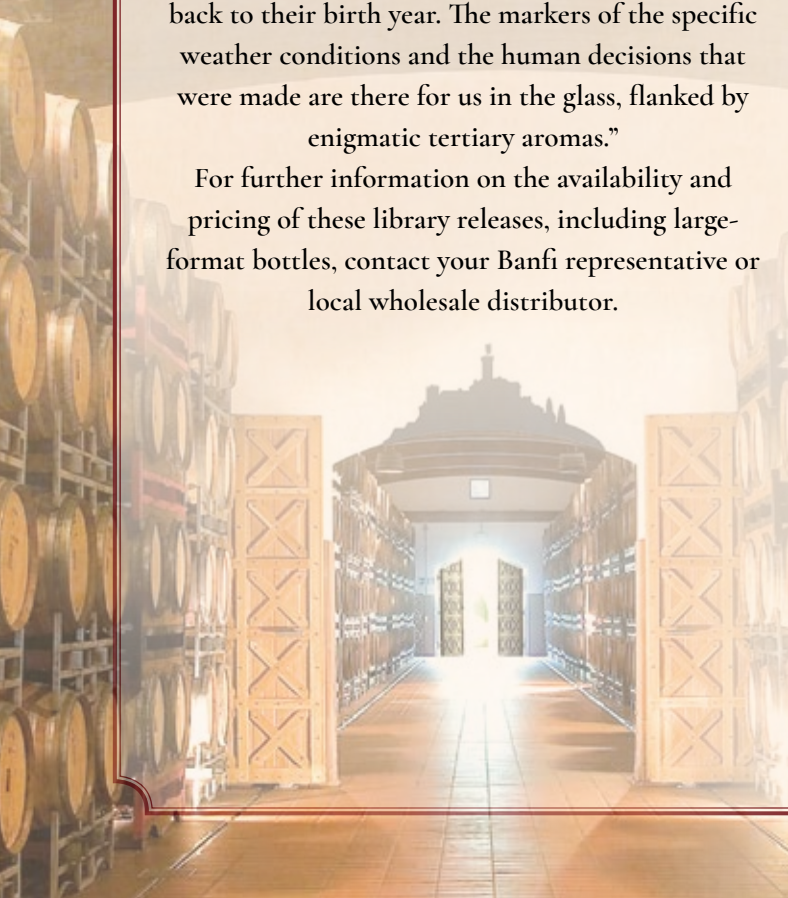
The result of more than two decades of experimental research on Sangiovese clonal selection and zonation, Poggio alle Mura is the synthesis of Banfi's pioneering approach, ultimately showcasing a signature style of elegance, power, and finesse. The 30-hectare plot in which the grapes are grown is named for the majestic hilltop castle on the Banfi estate.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALL'ORO BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO RISERVA DOCG

This single-vineyard riserva is produced exclusively in exceptional years from Banfi's Poggio all'Oro ("Hill of Gold") vineyard; the inaugural release, the extraordinary 1985 vintage, represented one of the best harvests ever recorded in Montalcino. On this southwest-facing plateau at an altitude of 240 meters where four different soil types converge, Sangiovese finds the ideal microclimatic conditions for a distinctive expression of Brunello, and only the best grapes are hand-harvested and vinified to create Poggio all'Oro. The wine ages for at least 30 months in 60- and 90-hectoliter French oak casks (80%) and 350-liter French oak barriques (20%).

CASTELLO BANFI SUMMUS TOSCANA IGT

Named for the Latin word for "summit," this estate Super Tuscan—the first of record in Montalcino—blends Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, and Syrah to yield a wine as elegant as it is powerful. The three varieties are each vinified in temperature-controlled Horizon hybrid tanks of stainless steel and wood and then aged separately for 12 months. After blending, aging continues in French oak for an additional eight to ten months prior to bottling.



STUDY GUIDE



for a better wine world

• the 2004 vintage •

Brunello di Montalcino was born to last: the ideal combination of remarkably concentrated fruit, vibrant acidity, and firm tannins. The 2004 vintage proves it. A concatenation of average conditions made for an out-of-the-ordinary vintage. The year began with good spring precipitation, which replenished the aquifers, and summer compared to previous years was much cooler, with higher variations between daytime and nighttime temperatures. Still, there was enough sunshine and warmth to create optimal conditions that extended into September: The grapes benefited from gradual and balanced maturation, slowly reaching full phenolic ripeness and allowing deep, complex flavors to develop. Ultimately, it was an excellent vintage with rich aromas and great structure, making for wines of true refinement.



CASTELLO BANFI BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

Intriguing notes of iron, blood orange, wet earth, and blond tobacco. A roasted and empyreumatic touch. Highly agile on the midpalate with crisp and persistent tannins. The finish is warm and embracing.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALLE MURA BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

Sweet, spicy, and generous nose. Inviting and ambitious, this is a wine with real presence: impressive concentration of flavor; a voluminous midpalate; and long, velvety tannins. Graceful yet intense, in great balance.

CASTELLO BANFI SUMMUS TOSCANA IGT

Minty with balsamic character on the nose. A hint of dried sage adds to vibrant and vivid acidity that leads into a dense character that is not heavy but rather agile. Herbaceous notes make it lively.

STUDY GUIDE



for a better wine world

• the 2006 vintage •

Drinking an aged Brunello is as close as we get to time travel. Who can resist? A superb juxtaposition of grace and elegant power, 2006 is a racehorse of a vintage: Austere and monolithic, with grippy tannins, it still has much to give.

The summer months were hot, but the diurnal temperature swings proved excellent for ripening. The gradual maturation of the grapes provided excellent tannin evolution and ultimately yielded a soft, harmonious wine endowed with intense varietal expression.



CASTELLO BANFI BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

More monolithically structured than the 2004, with aromatics still developing. Hints of Morello cherry on the subtle nose. The palate is nicely shaped and intense. A dense midpalate leads into flinty and flavorful tannins that make for a long, solid finish.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALL'ORO BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO RISERVA DOCG

Great minty refinement and Mediterranean character driven by ripe cherry and aromatic herbs. The vital midpalate and grainy yet succulent tannins resonate with a dusty dark-chocolate finish. Super persistent, closing with a delicious note of tart wild raspberry and strawberry.

CASTELLO BANFI SUMMUS TOSCANA IGT

Coffee and dark fruit drive this well-evolved wine's character. Sweet tannins polish the palate, which finishes with a distinctive touch of coffee bean and ample aromatics that linger.

STUDY GUIDE



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• the 2010 vintage •



A serious contender for the vintage of the decade (and perhaps the century) in Montalcino, 2010 continues to offer much in terms of great potential as well as polyphenolic concentration and balance.

A rainy spring and a cooler-than-average early summer finally gave way to hot temperatures in July through mid-August. Temperatures dropped at the end of August, which, along with good diurnal shifts and low rainfall, allowed for excellent ripening.

With this vintage, patience has brought its own rewards. Twenty-four months or more in oak casks served to enforce the structures of ageability.

CASTELLO BANFI BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

Typical of the vintage, the nose is highly evolved, with fruit flavors yielding to more umami sensations. Notes of tobacco and spice lead to firm tannins that release a lot of flavor. The lingering finish is pleasantly refreshing, with an array of flavors, including citrus pith, that enhance the wine's succulence.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALL'ORO BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO RISERVA DOCG

A touch of fumé on the nose is very much typical of Poggio all'Oro and enhances the wine's restrained bouquet, which has hints of cherries in alcohol along with a certain salinity and umami. Tannins are firm and fine-grained, with a lot of drive to indicate that it's still a young, evolving wine.

CASTELLO BANFI POGGIO ALLE MURA BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG

The pleasant and captivating nose shows the intensity of nectarine at the edge of ripeness and leads to a weighty midpalate followed by assertive, firm tannins that are well supported by the breadth of fruit. Full-bodied, with a sandalwood-driven finish.

CASTELLO BANFI SUMMUS TOSCANA IGT

Striking nose of nectarine and tart cherry. The presence of Syrah helps lubricate the more vibrant tannins of the Sangiovese and Cabernet. Incredible sweetness on the nose lingers on the finish of this voluminous, bright, and long-lived wine, which is still showing great youth and depth.



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