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Gallo senior director of winemaking Michael Eddy-Cort with Ravenswood founder Joel Peterson.



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PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Meridith May
mmay@sommjournal.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Ruth Tobias
rtobias@sommjournal.com

SENIOR STAFF EDITOR

Kate Newton
knewton@sommjournal.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Lucy Beaugard; Abbie Bennington; Julie Berge; Kyle Billings; Stacy Briscoe;
Rachel Burkons; Michael Butcher; Francis Castillo; Tracy Eason; Chris Howard;
Marija Jovanovic; Mimi Leake; Mikhail Lipianskiy; Jill McNamara; Michelle M. Metter;
Helen Mitternacht; Rafael Peterson; Alexander Rubin; Grace Stufkosky; John Szabo, MS

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Christina Barrueta; Virginie Boone; Karen MacNeil; David Ransom; Allyson Reedy;
Erik Segelbaum; Marci Symington; Liz Thach, MW

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SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

Michael Viggiano

COO/MARKETING & SALES

Bill Brandel, CSW
818-990-0350
bill@sommjournal.com

VP/FINANCE DIRECTOR

Anna Russell
arussell@tastingpanelmag.com

VP OF EDUCATION

Lars Leicht
lars@sommjournal.com

SENIOR WINE & BEER EDITOR

Jessie Birschbach

EDITORS-AT-LARGE

Jonathan Cristaldi
Randy Caparoso

CONTRIBUTING WINE EDITOR

Stacy Briscoe

ASSOCIATE WINE EDITOR

Dave McIntyre

GLOBAL WINE EDITOR

Deborah Parker Wong

EAST COAST EDITOR

Wanda Mann

NEW YORK EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Stefanie Schwalb

EVENT MANAGER

Dawn Verdone
dverdone@tastingpanelmag.com

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FOR **FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS**,
QUALITY REMAINS KEY TO ADAPTING
TO A CHANGING MARKET

by Stacy Briscoe

Felix Solis
AVANTIS



*Félix Solís Avantis international marketing and commercial director
Félix Solís Ramos and his father, CEO Félix Solís Yáñez.*

“The story of Félix Solís Avantis is a true story of triumph yielded from hard work, sacrifice, and dreams coming true,” says Pedro Garcia, managing director for Félix Solís Avantis (FSA), U.S. and Canada. That story begins nearly 75 years ago, in 1952, when Félix Solís Fernández and Leonor Yáñez purchased their first piece of property in the Spanish region of Valdepeñas.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS



Félix Solís' headquarters in Valdepeñas.

"There's a lot of history here," says Garcia. "A lot of people don't realize that Valdepeñas is [Spain's] second-oldest DO after Rioja." Indeed, it was established in 1932, just seven years after Rioja. What's more, to hear Félix Solís Ramos, the company's third-generation international marketing and commercial director, tell it, Valdepeñas was a pioneering area for the country's wine culture. "Valdepeñas has been one of the most active, dynamic, and innovative appellations in Spain to date," he says of the approximately 13,000-hectare DO that over 1,600 winegrowers call home. Located in Castilla-La Mancha, the largest winegrowing region in the country, it has the ideal terroir for winegrapes, according to Ramos: The 2,500 hours of annual sunshine and low

rainfall that are hallmarks of its continental climate are balanced by the cooling influence of its elevation at 750 meters above sea level.

Though the family started out in idyllic terroir, the winery itself had humble beginnings. "In the 1950s and 1960s, Spain was facing difficult years both socially and economically," says Ramos. "With the passage of time, Spain began to emerge from a period of shortages. . . . In particular, the food and wine industry began to transform itself." One major accelerator was the move toward packaging wine in bottle; prior to that, it had predominantly been sold in bulk. "This was by far the most common way of marketing wine," says Ramos. "It was sold unbottled in retail outlets. . . . Consumers brought their

own containers to fill. This was because the domestic market did not encourage quality and demand was mainly for high-alcoholic-strength, low-priced wines."

In short, the family entered an industry where quality wine was not yet available on the mass market. But from the very beginning, they were obsessed with the idea of offering high-quality wine that would be accessible to everyone. "It was essential for consumers to be able to enjoy a good wine at an appropriate price," says Garcia—"honest wines that conveyed the identity of the land of Valdepeñas." By the 1960s, the family was bottling their wines in nearby Madrid and distributing them throughout Spain.

Fast-forward several decades, and FSA is now the sixth-largest still-wine producer

in the world, according to IWSR, and the number-one producer of still wine in Spain itself. Its labels include Viña Albali, which launched in 1962, “became enormously popular, and is now the bestselling brand in Spain,” says Ramos.

Today, FSA makes wines not only at its home estate in Valdepeñas but in DOs across the country; it’s the leading producer in Rueda, Ribera del Duero, and Toro and makes significant volumes in Rioja and La Mancha as well. This wouldn’t be possible without facilities like its state-of-the-art winery in Valdepeñas, which boasts a 400-million-liter production capacity, 17 bottling lines, and 130,000 barrels. “The winery produces all kinds of still wines, sparkling wines, organic wines, and wine-based beverages,” explains Ramos. “From [here], the national and international logistics are also centralized. The level of infrastructure and automation makes it possible to control and monitor all processes,” guaranteeing quality in every bottle that goes out to market with the Félix Solís name on it.

A large facility with fancy equipment the company may have, but the “secret sauce,” as Garcia describes it, is truly the family’s commitment to their partnerships with over 5,000 grape farmers—many of them being “old-school handshake

partners,” in his words. This is key, adds Ramos, to ensuring the quality of the fruit. “Contracting is frequent and collaborative throughout the year, with the field team sharing the latest trends in vineyard cultivation and treatment,” he says.

One can only imagine how important that communicative spirit is when negotiating the logistics of harvesting such a high volume of grapes. “To this end, the calendar is organized in advance and strict monitoring is carried out according to weather conditions,” says Ramos. “In the winery, special attention is paid to the measurement . . . of grape quality and the perfect phytosanitary state. For all this, the most modern technology is used in the unloading docks to classify and identify each consignment.”

While much of FSA’s current investment has been aimed at maximizing efficiency in conjunction with quality, it has also “defined a three-year strategic plan where we have defined our sustainability as a priority,” says Ramos. In 2023, the company was able to reduce its total carbon footprint by 6%, including a 35% reduction in Scope 2 emissions. In 2024, solar panel installation generated more than 550 megawatts of electricity, which helped reduce consumption by 4%. “In addition,” adds Ramos, “in 2024, 99.5% of purchased electricity was

generated from renewable sources. We are committed to the Science Based Target initiative [SBTi] to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. We improved waste segregation, reducing our mixed waste generation by 8% by 2024, and successfully passed the SCAN and SMETA ethical audits at our warehouses.”

The family-owned and -operated business has certainly come a long way; it now produces wines from not only Spain but also Chile, South Africa, and New Zealand, putting it on the global wine map. Yet even a company as tenured as FSA is not immune to shifts in the market. “Currently, one of our challenges is to adapt and focus on generational change,” says Ramos. “This new generation demands quality, novelty, and new experiences but also sustainability.” The key, he adds, is to keep innovating in an effort to meet these new consumers where they are with products that speak to their values and desires: “We are talking about blends, wines with lower alcohol content, fresher profiles—wines that are easier to enjoy without losing quality or personality. We know that the market is changing, and we must change with it.” SJ



The company’s main winemaking facility holds 130,000 barrels.

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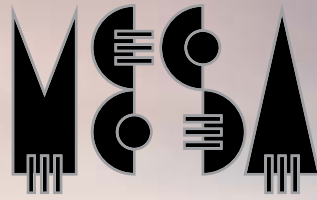
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One of the original Cabernet Sauvignon vines dating back to the 1970s in the Laurel Glen Vineyard.

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

The Tale of the Anti-Napa Cab

IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVE STYLES OF CALIFORNIA CABERNET SAUVIGNON

SOME OF US spend our entire careers searching for alternatives to what the industry shoves down our throats: You can hardly differentiate yourself when you're forced to sell the same wines as everyone else. When it comes to California Cabernet Sauvignon, I can think of a few producers that serve as poster children for that hard-reached goal.

In 1977, Patrick Campbell stumbled upon the 35-acre Laurel Glen Vineyard on Sonoma Mountain, originally planted to just 3 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. Among the coolest sites in California planted to the grape, it sat on what he called "a small finger of red volcanic soil" embedded into a gentle hillside facing east, where it soaked up mild morning sun. The vines were old enough to have begun producing their own, tiny-berried "Laurel Glen" selection, utilized exclusively in all new plantings. With these, Campbell felt he could produce the closest thing to a Bordeaux-style red, albeit as a single-varietal expression, in the country.

And so he did. Campbell increased his plantings on the 800- to 1,100-foot slopes to 14 acres, releasing his first vintage, 1981, under the Laurel Glen label in 1983. Early buyers, myself among them, came to look upon the wine as the "anti-Napa Cab"—svelte, compact (rarely higher than 14% ABV), concentrated, full of more minerality than fruitiness, and driven more by acidity than tannin or oak.

After laboring in almost heroic isolation for over 32 years, never producing

more than 5,000 cases of his estate wines, Campbell grew tired of the battle and longed to pursue his other lifelong passion—playing the fiddle (literally) with friends. Around the same time, in 2009, Bettina Sichel got her first taste of a Laurel Glen courtesy of the 2005 vintage. She still describes the experience as "electrical, like sticking a finger into a light socket . . . so much acid energy, a steely core, and savory fruit"—the opposite of the "big and luscious" style of Napa Valley, where, at the time, Sichel had been searching for a property to buy, all for nought.

Says Sichel, "Since I had spent a lot of my younger years in Bordeaux, where my father owned a property [Château Fourcas Hosten in Lustrac-Médoc], it was Laurel Glen that spoke to my heart." Since acquiring Laurel Glen from Campbell in 2011, she has converted the entire vineyard to certified organic, with aggressive cover cropping, soil amendments (particularly biochar), and buzzing insectaries between the rows. The benefit of conscientious farming, she tells us, has been "increased midpalate feel—more flesh on the bone—making the wine more easily appreciated when young, without sacrificing one iota of the acidity, phenol intensity, or longevity that have always been part of the vineyard."

PHOTO: TIM VALLERY



Like all recent vintages of Laurel Glen's Sonoma Mountain Estate Cabernet, the brand's current release, a 2019, is 100% organically grown, fermented with indigenous yeast, and aged in French oak (typically less than 55% new). It's deeply pigmented, with concentrated notes of black currant and chocolate; while

dense and unctuous, it's also upbeat and acid-driven.

Laurel Glen is special, but it's not the only producer in Sonoma County making a different style of Cabernet. I also appreciate Hamel Family Wines, whose Nuns Canyon Vineyard in the Moon Mountain District harbors biodynamically grown Cabernet vines on volcanic slopes of roughly 1,400 feet in elevation. These produce a mineral, almost briny style of the variety whose purity is ensured by aging in primarily neutral (68%) French oak for 12 months, followed by six months in concrete tanks.

Further north, there's Aldina Vineyards in the recently approved Fountaingrove District AVA, which sits on west-facing, volcanic slopes in the Mayacamas Mountains. It produces a restrained, savory, acid-spined style of wine that could convert even a Pinot Noir lover into a Cabernet freak, à la the blonde who, according to Raymond Chandler, could make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window. **SI**

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One Step Ahead

IMPROVING REVENUE THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, PART 1

THE VAST MAJORITY of wine lists in this country fail to perform their most critical task. This is because most sommeliers and beverage buyers misunderstand what a wine list truly is meant to be and therefore don't know how to ensure it lives up to that ideal: It should be a sales tool, not simply a catalog of what is available for purchase. While the latter often leaves money on the table, the former is responsible for increasing revenue.

One of the fundamental mistakes most sommeliers make has to do with the way they organize their wine list. They tend to forget that their wine knowledge is hyper-specialized, so what might make sense to them may mean nothing to untrained servers and patrons. If the information provided doesn't help your guests find what they are looking for, the list ultimately dissuades them from making a purchase rather than encouraging them.

There are several key psychological factors you should always keep top of mind when organizing a list. In this six-part series, I'll discuss these critical aspects of transactional psychology. They include organizational elements such as steppers, compellers, upper limit modifiers/the contrast effect, and the rule of three as well as communication strategies such as affordability reframing and excitement cues.

Steppers

Whether your list includes 20 selections or 2,000, it is super important that it offers easy steps between price points. For small lists, this could apply to broader categories, such as red wine. For larger lists, it applies to more specific classifications such as region or variety. It's important to note that what constitutes a reasonable price increment is highly subjective. Empirical evidence over my three-decade career suggests that a 10%–20% step is effective: For instance, shifting a guest's attention from a \$40 bottle to a \$48 bottle (20% increase) is likely not going to be a




dealbreaker for them. Similarly, upgrading from a \$200 bottle to a \$235 bottle is unlikely to trigger hesitation.

For smaller programs especially, this could mean you have to sacrifice a high-end unicorn wine for the sake of a workhorse wine to fill in a stepping point. But by implementing logical and incremental steps in price, you will find it much easier to frame the conversation around the best wine for your guest (within their general price range) rather than having to focus on the one wine that aligns with what they want to spend.

A Practical Example

Some of the most dramatic price jumps are found in red Burgundy sections. I've seen many lists with only one or two (and sometimes no) bottles below \$100; when they do appear, they are typically in the high \$80s or \$90s. Often, the next price point is \$150 or more, and the next after that is \$250 and above. There's nothing for the guest who wants to spend about \$125. Therefore, instead of purchasing, say, a \$175 bottle, they will trade down either to

the \$80–\$90 bottle, or even worse, avoid the category altogether. When it comes to Burgundy specifically, I find that many guests tend to mistrust the lower-priced bottles as being sub-par and/or bad value propositions. It is up to you as a savvy buyer to ensure not just that you have an appropriate range of price points but that the wines deliver in terms of value. That said, if sensible steppers are employed to provide options at incremental price points, a guest will likely feel more comfortable about spending a little more. If they intend to spend a maximum of \$125 but find something for \$140 that is appealing, they will probably be willing to make that jump. The result is increased revenue for your operation and a satisfied guest who feels neither gouged nor as though they were stuck with an inferior choice.

Steppers are among the most vital elements of a sensible wine list that truly delivers as a sales tool—but there are others. In future issues, I'll share additional proven tactics of transactional psychology that will result in happy guests and higher revenues. Cheers! 

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What Do We Mean When We Say . . . ?

ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF OUR WORDS

WHAT DOES IT mean to call a wine “approachable”?

I’ve heard a thousand wines described that way. So what exactly is an “approachable wine”?

Honestly, I have no idea. I think it’s one of those words that we wine people say when we don’t know what else to say.

OK, maybe there’s a vague sense in which “approachable” means “easy to drink.” But then why not just say the friendlier phrase “easy to drink?” “Approachable,” after all, is not a very approachable word. If some things *are* approachable, the implication is that other things *are not*. Describing a given wine as “approachable” subtly suggests that wine in general is *not* very approachable.

It’s crazy. To me, wine is never *un*approachable. Or to put it another way, every wine is approachable.

Maybe this seems like a precious distinction to some readers, but I believe


words are power. Language itself is the main tool we have to share our passion for a wine, to turn someone on to a bottling that just might change their life. Somms are the “deliverers” of wine language. Every night in restaurants across the U.S., the words they use—and the words they don’t use—steer and change what people drink. It’s a heady power.

As a writer, I’m deep into words and careful about them. But I also love it when a word begins to dominate the consciousness of a field. Today the dominating word is “freshness.” That word is used to describe every variety of every color grown everywhere in the world. No tech sheet says “not fresh” in its description of a wine.

So what is freshness? I think many associate that word with acidity. But in my mind, freshness is way more than that. Freshness is an energy, a lift, an ethereal bounce in flavor driven by—well, we don’t actually know.

We only know that freshness can happen in red wines as well as whites and rosés. That it cannot easily be explained as the exclusive result of a cool climate (lots of Ports have freshness). And that it also can’t be explained by variety. Indeed, the very best wines made with low-acid grapes—the very best wines—soar with freshness.

To me, freshness is a hallmark of greatness. Freshness, I think, frames the fruit in a wine and gives it a pulsating precision, clarity, definition, and vivacity. For the drinker, freshness is what makes wine salivating—riveting even.

So “approachable”? It’s a word I never use. “Freshness”? It’s what I’m always looking for in wine. 

Karen MacNeil is the author of The Wine Bible, editor of the digital newsletter WineSpeed, and cofounder of the Come Over October campaign.

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From Dom to d'Yquem

CAFÉ MONARCH IN SCOTTSDALE, AZ, UPS THE ANTE FOR ENOPHILES

“CAFÉ MONARCH HAS always been a place where *no* isn't an answer,” says wine director John Germain with a smile. “I've never had too many restrictions.” That kind of professional freedom has ensured that the Lewkowicz family's fine-dining jewel in historic Old Town has one of the country's most ambitious wine programs. And with the successful launch of the \$1,500-per-person Grand Cru pairing last year, Germain has created an experience that is among the nation's most exclusive.

“When we started out over ten years ago, we had 37 wines; one four-course menu; and two pairings, \$45 and \$75,” Germain recalls. Today, with a cellar of approximately 18,000 bottles, Café Monarch offers four- and eight-course menus, each



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

Café Monarch wine director John Germain.



A recent Grand Cru pairing lineup.

with multiple wine-pairing tiers. At the top is the Grand Cru, offered with the eight-course prix fixe.

“We look for once-in-a-lifetime wines that are highly allocated even for collectors,” explains Germain, granting guests rare access to legendary vintages without requiring them to purchase full bottles. This approach extends even to premium water: Germain pours Hallstein, sourced from an artesian aquifer in the Austrian Alps. From there, guests embark on a sommelier-guided journey through benchmark wines and rare bottlings. A recent lineup opened with the coveted Dom Pérignon 2015 and closed with the equal-

ly renowned Château d'Yquem 2016. In between were Château Cos d'Estournel 2020 Blanc, a rare white from a château better known for its reds; Clos Sainte Hune 2018, Trimbach's cult Alsatian Riesling; Laurent Ponsot 2022 Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru Cuvée du Kalimeris, a rarefied white Burgundy from a legendary vintner; Domaine Jean-Louis Chave 2022 Hermitage, one of the Rhône Valley's most prized Syrahs; Casanova di Neri 2019 Cerretalto, a single-vineyard Brunello made only in top vintages; and Screaming Eagle 2021 The Flight, the ultra-allocated sibling to Napa's fabled Cabernet Sauvignon.

“These are wines that most have only read about,” says Germain, who has found that the program “creates a bond, a trust,” with his guests. While the cost of a \$1,500 bottle might be prohibitive, he explains, “when they have the opportunity to try it alongside seven other premium wines, they trust the value of the experi-

ence.” He remains humble—“I'm always trying to improve,” he says—but the response has been gratifying: “Guests who choose this pairing dine out frequently, often at restaurants with famous chefs or MICHELIN stars, but they'll tell me, ‘We've been doing pairings for 30 years,’ or ‘We've been to restaurants on every continent, and this just might be the best pairing we've ever had.’”

Germain is also quick to share credit. “A shout-out really goes to the staff. We have two advanced somms and five certified, with others studying for the exam. Everyone is passionate and constantly learning,” he notes of the team, who help guide the 35%–40% of guests who opt for wine pairings nightly. “They don't just pour and walk away; they're executing a knowledge-driven experience.”

“It's been awesome to see people gravitate towards our pairings,” continues Germain. Reflecting on Café Monarch's wine culture and the cellar he's built, he adds, “I'm pretty lucky!” **sj**

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by Deborah Parker Wong



Fingerprints Don't Fade

RESEARCHERS MAKE A NEW BREAKTHROUGH IN TANNIN MEASUREMENT

JUST AS WE can see the molecular fingerprints of a vineyard in a wine it yielded, Penn State researchers studying the biological activity of taste and mouthfeel have developed a method for identifying, or “fingerprinting,” the tannin structures in wine that reveal clues to its flavor and texture.

Condensed tannins (CTs) are polyphenols found in the stems, skins, and seeds of winegrapes and are a critical component of mouthfeel and quality in wine. Current methods of measuring these compounds only provide researchers and winemakers with a simplified total phenolic or tannin value, which isn't enough information to gauge the potential astringency and bitterness in wine or to definitively correlate condensed tannins with health-related benefits.

For example, two wines can have identical amounts of condensed tannin, but due to their molecular structures, one will feel rough and drying on the palate while the other will be velvety smooth. In wine, CTs form branched chains that can be up to 12 units long; these long, tangled

chains are responsible for stripping away salivary proteins, resulting in the undesirable sensation of astringency. The perception of bitterness, on the other hand, relies on shorter tannins that bind with taste receptors.

In search of a better way to measure tannins, a team at Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences developed a method known as condensed tannin fragmentation fingerprinting to visualize the diverse structures of CTs, from smaller to larger polymers or chains. According to the study, the process separates the compounds in a given sample and bombards them with three voltage steps that increase in power from gentle to moderate to high, breaking them into fragments that can be matched to existing standards. Complex tannin structures known as *dimers* (two units), *trimers* (three units), and longer polymers were all found by the researchers to have distinctive fingerprints.

With access to these findings, winegrowers and winemakers in cooler climates like Pennsylvania can select

clones, tweak maceration length, and/or add oak alternatives in a targeted quest for more body in their cool-climate wines. According to Earth.com writer Jordan Joseph, the Penn State researchers are now collaborating with grape breeders to evaluate experimental crosses for mouthfeel before full planting. In effect, they're turning what would otherwise be sensory perceptions into data that they can act upon.

The fingerprinting technology developed at Penn State could also help nutrition researchers screen batches of cocoa or tea harvests for the most potent molecular forms of tannin content before those ingredients make their way to candy factories or tea manufacturers. In turn, ingredient labels could list tannin content alongside other nutritional information, and regulators might rely on this data to validate label claims.

With regard to health claims, differentiating tannin shapes could also help clarify why some researchers find evidence that ties moderate red-wine consumption to health benefits while others do not. **sj**

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PHOTO: CASEY WILSON

A springtime dish at Barolo Grill.

The Little Things

HOW BAROLO GRILL AND FLAGSTAFF HOUSE MAINTAIN THEIR MOJO ON THE FRONT RANGE

LONGEVITY IS AS admirable in a restaurant as it is in a wine (and perhaps even harder to achieve). I recently revisited a pair of decades-old fine-dining institutions in my neck of the woods—Barolo Grill in Denver and Flagstaff House in Boulder—and was delighted to be reminded that, while both remain firmly in special-occasion territory, neither is the relic of a stuffier era; the experiences I had in surprisingly lively environs felt as relevant as ever, whether I was enjoying a Tuscan Chardonnay alongside lamb gnocchi with rapini and pickled cranberries at the former or a Chilean blend of Carménère and Syrah with a pullet egg–topped spinach-ricotta raviolo in sauce vert at the latter. How do they do (and keep doing) it?

PHOTO: JONI SCHRANTZ



so that you can share it again with guests,” be it a rare 100% Roscetto from Lazio to accompany seafood agnolotti or a Daniele Conterno Nascetta from the Langhe with chilled lump crab, cucumber sorbet, and pickled jicama. “Any time I can feature a wine that maybe even I haven’t heard of,” she says, “I’m going to try to do that and champion some of these grapes that deserve attention.”

At Flagstaff House, wine and beverage director Connor Sullivan takes much the same approach, for instance by pairing a Gusborne sparkling wine from England with salmon crudo drizzled in strawberry balsamic vinegar—“I just think it’s a match made in heaven,” he says—or serving Etna Bianco to complement Alaskan halibut over spruce risotto with English peas, ramps, and almond crumble. “The volcanic soils give the wine this cool minerality,” he explains, “and it’s fun to showcase something that gets people excited about wine, [since] this is definitely not something that they’d pick out at a grocery store.”

Not that they have to become wine geeks on the spot. “I have all of this information so [guests] don’t have to have it,” he says. “I try to feature different wines if people are feeling adventurous, but if they’re comfortable and know what they want to drink, then we have plenty of options for them.” (That’s an understatement—Flagstaff’s famed cellar holds 16,000 bottles.) Ultimately, Sullivan joined the restaurant because “I wanted to be a part of celebrating the best parts of people’s lives,” he notes, while ensuring they “will remember the experience 20 years down the road . . . whether it is a wine pairing or having someone [notice] a crumber and be like, ‘Oh, that’s really cool. I’ve got to get one for my house,’ and giving them one to take home. It’s little things like that that really make you love what you do.”

Tablescapes at Barolo Grill in Denver and Flagstaff House in Boulder.



PHOTO: BEHIND THE APRON MEDIA

“The secret is a mystery even to us,” Barolo Grill owner Ryan Fletter half-jokes. “I think, honestly, it’s a lot of humility. . . . No one is entitled to success without hard work, and [thanks to that] you have high quality, which is timeless.” One such humble, hard-working team member is sommelier Erin Lindstone, who notes that the whole staff gets “reinvigorated [and] inspired in so many different ways” by their annual trip to Italy. “When you’re standing

in the vineyard or the cellar and getting [information] directly from the source, it makes it so much easier to talk about tableside, and it kind of turns this 100-page wine list into, like, a storybook and a journal of people”—people who remind her what hospitality is all about. “Five days a week . . . you put all of your energy into service. So it’s essential to have some time every year where you’re getting that feeling back . . . and getting your own cup filled

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Team Effort

CATCHING UP WITH SOPHIE BURTON AND GREG ENGERT OF **JUNEBUG** IN NEW ORLEANS

WHEN JUNEBUG OPENED earlier this year in New Orleans, it could have just been another restaurant offering traditional Creole cuisine alongside classic cocktails like French 75s and Sazeracs. And it would probably have done well—but that's not what either beverage director Greg Engert or bar manager Sophie Burton (or the team at parent company Neighborhood Restaurant Group, for that matter) envisioned would make a splash in a city already teeming with such concepts.

They wanted to do something different, so they set out to build a program that would resonate with locals and visitors while shedding the image of New Orleans as culinarily narrow. Accordingly, though the menu is, by Engert's account, "Southern with a focus on French technique," the beverage program is anything but. We asked them to tell us a bit about it—and themselves.

Q: Describe Junebug's beverage program for us.

Greg Engert: Our wine program looks to cover the major wine styles of the world, with a focus on small producers, low intervention, and sustainability. We knew we wanted a strong list of bubbles to pair well with Junebug's somewhat rich cuisine—and not just Champagne. We were interested in the ways that things like Lambrusco or even sparkling kombucha could work with these dishes—and on their own.

Sophie Burton: Both Lambrusco and kombucha [which is served in stemware] are offered by the glass on our drinks list, which also includes two forms for every cocktail: I often find that certain ingredients go together very well, and I don't want to pick just one cocktail to put on the menu, so I make two—one stiff and one spritz. Also, all our cocktails are available in two sizes: full-size and taste-size, for the curious who don't want to commit to a whole cocktail.

PHOTOS: RANDY SCHMIDT



Greg Engert and Sophie Burton are beverage director and bar manager, respectively, at Junebug in New Orleans, LA.

Q: What's your idea of teamwork?

Burton: Behind the bar, I like to see willingness to commit to what the program is—taking the time to learn about the offerings. I also love a team member who wants to know about how other people do things, from building drinks to recommending them. A team in sync makes everything run better.

Engert: Same on the floor. It's a two-way street—I'm hoping to teach team members and also to learn from them. What turns me off is a team member who thinks they know everything already. While I certainly respect methods and knowledge brought to our restaurants from past experiences, I'm looking for team members who are aware of how much we all don't know and how much more there is to learn.

Q: What advice do you have for newcomers to the hospitality profession?

Burton: Study and stay humble, but advocate for yourself. Hard work and knowledge actually do earn you a good reputa-

tion, and that reputation is important.

Engert: Working in hospitality is not for everyone, though it often feels like everyone has bartended or waited tables at some point in their lives. This is a profession, and, like all professions, some people are better suited to it than others. If you're in the front of house, you need to love people. You have to enjoy talking up guests, sharing stories, teaching, listening, and ultimately providing hospitality beyond merely delivering food and beverage.

Q: Tell us something surprising about yourself.

Engert: I planned to be an English professor. Part-time work in bars and restaurants derailed those intentions. One day I dropped out of grad school and committed myself to hospitality. Now it's bottles over books and Nebbiolo over narratology. I've never looked back.

Burton: I'm allergic to juniper! Not the easiest for a bartender, so my gin cocktails need to be perfect the first time. They are, of course. *SJ*

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A Bigger Toolbox

FOCUS ON HEALTH USHERS BARTENDERS ONTO THE LOW- AND NO-ABV BANDWAGON

ALEX JUMP IS a veteran beverage professional and co-founder of Focus on Health, a wellness advocacy group for hospitality workers. She recently led the group's third annual No/Low Tour, bringing no- and low-ABV cocktails to six cities across the U.S. The tour aims to educate the trade and show that low-proof and nonalcoholic drinks can be just as fun, dynamic, and sophisticated as anything full-proof.

Focus on Health was created to help people who work in hospitality take care of themselves and their communities, with programming around personal well-being, mentorship, and community health. The No/Low Tour is one of its core programs. "It came out of a desire from members of our team who don't consume alcohol or not a lot of alcohol and who go to events where brands put up so much money but forget there's a whole segment of our industry that doesn't drink," Jump says. "There's no reason why we as an industry shouldn't be putting as much time and consideration into non-alc offerings as alc offerings."

Granted, although "the quality of products has really risen, we still have a long way to go," she acknowledges. "The challenge is in analog products sparking a comparison. There's a lot of science to be developed to get there. What's doing

best right now in terms of quality are the amaro and aperitif categories." Of course, "there are some who don't want an analog non-alc product for whatever reason, and then there are people who don't want an esoteric non-alc," she adds. "There's room for everything; people are excited to have options."

They just need to know what those options are. Jump says that while bars and restaurants have figured out nonalcoholic cocktails, low-alcohol drinks remain a mystery, even though 78% of those who purchase NA beverages still drink alcohol. According to data from Innova Market Insights, low-ABV cocktails can bring up to 800% ROI, yet the hospitality industry remains slow to adopt them. Some of the concerns include how to charge for something that's half-proof versus full-proof and what counts as "low" alcohol.

When Jump is educating bartenders, she tells them it's best to have something already on the menu rather than just asking guests what flavor profile they like and making something up on the fly. One product she's excited about is Ola Sol, a low-ABV tequila alternative categorized as an agave wine that's legal for use in venues with beer and wine licenses.

As for zero-proof recommendations, she says, "RTD non-alc products are a great option for people, especially if they run a casual bar program or dive bar or sports bar where they're not making cocktails anyway. Those can be a great fit for [such] programs." Another product she likes is Pentire, a line of nonalcoholic aperitifs that are made by distilling plants native to Cornwall, England, and intended to taste like the Cornish seaside. In short, she adds, "People are excited to have more tools in their toolbox to make a drink they couldn't make before." ISI

Alex Jump is co-founder of Focus on Health.

PHOTO: SHAWN CAMPBELL

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Mendoza Beyond Malbec

THE EVOLUTION OF ARGENTINE BRAND **DOÑA PAULA** by Abbie Bennington

FOR DECADES, Malbec has served as Argentina's calling card in the world of wine; the bold, generous grape variety put the Mendoza region on the global viticultural map. But Argentina today is not the same winegrowing country it was in the 1990s; in short, there's more to it than Malbec alone. At the heart of this evolution stands Doña Paula, a winery that has not only grown with the times but helped shape them.

Doña Paula was born from the vision of Chilean businessman Ricardo Claro in the early 1990s, before Argentina was appreciated fully for its fine wines. Investing in high-altitude land in Luján de Cuyo and the Uco Valley—now two of Mendoza's most prized subregions—Claro laid the groundwork for what would become a benchmark estate in the region. From the beginning, the ethos was clear: Quality is non-negotiable.

In 2013, Doña Paula launched Terroir in Focus, an ambitious research initiative that has involved the excavation of over 1,000 soil pits and countless micro-vinifications. This deep dive into Mendoza's diverse soils and elevations has been instrumental in teasing out the nuances of

site-specific winemaking. In the Uco Valley, the winery team ventured closer to the Andes, planting in previously untapped sites of great potential with cool climates and alluvial soils.

The flagship Doña Paula Estate Malbec exemplifies this philosophy. Crafted from high-altitude vineyards in the Gualtallary and El Cepillo subregions of the Uco Valley, it is a wine of structure and finesse, layering vivid fruit with savory depth. The result is a Malbec that speaks fluently of its origins: bright, focused, and undeniably Argentine.

Yet Doña Paula is not content to rest on its Malbec-driven laurels. Take the Altitude Series: As wine director Toti Undurraga describes it, "Each of the wines in the series reflects a unique combination of altitude, soil type, and microclimate from our high-elevation vineyards. These blends allow us to show the diversity and potential of Argentine terroir—highlighting varieties like Cabernet Franc . . . and Chardonnay [as well as Malbec] in a way that speaks of our mountain places."

What truly sets Doña Paula apart, though, is its hands-on approach. Behind every estate-grown wine is an ongoing commitment to sustainable farming practices such as natural pest control, composting, and investment in water-saving technologies. Throughout this journey, "the progress we've made affirms our belief that great wine must also reflect care for the land and the people who tend it," says Undurraga.

Looking ahead, the winery's focus remains on deepening its understanding of terroir and refining its stylistic interpretations. The recently launched Single Vineyard tier, which started with Malbec, now includes additional varietal bottlings such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, and Riesling.

Argentina is no longer just about Malbec, a point made clear by Undurraga: "As wine director, [I've made] both a creative and philosophical commitment to excellence, and [I believe we have] an opportunity to invite the world to discover the uniqueness and complexity we can offer." **SJ**





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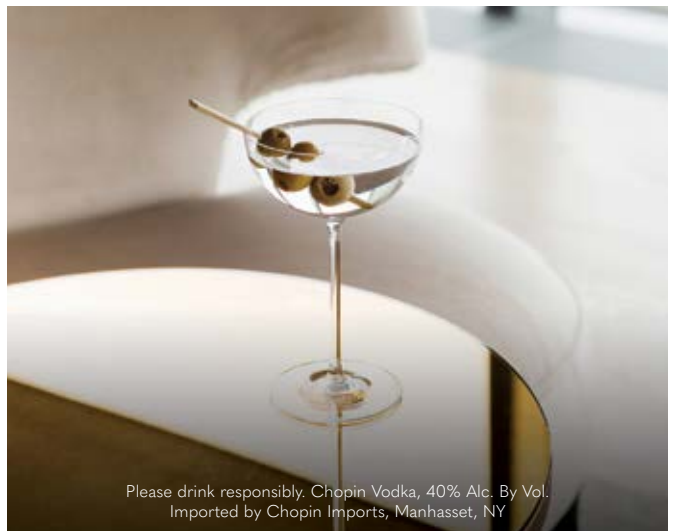
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Make Way for Willamette Chardonnay

OREGON CHARDONNAY IS HAVING a moment. The Willamette Valley may always be best known for Pinot Noir, but in recent years Pinot's white Burgundian sibling has been raising eyebrows and thrilling palates.

Chardonnay is hardly new to Oregon. It was among the varieties planted by the state's wine pioneers in the 1960s and 1970s, though it long played second fiddle to Pinot Noir. The introduction of Dijon clones in the 1980s gave it a temporary boost in prestige, but it still struggled to emerge from Pinot's shadow.

French influence has helped raise its profile. The Drouhin family of Maison Joseph Drouhin founded Domaine Drouhin Oregon in the Dundee Hills in 1987. Dominique Lafon partnered in Lingua Franca, established by Master Sommelier Larry Stone. Jean-Nicolas Méo joined Nicolas-Jay, and Maison Louis Jadot arrived in 2013 to establish Résonance, which recently launched a Chardonnay program, as profiled by *SOMM Journal* senior editor Kate Newton in our June/July 2025 issue.

Younger vineyards planted to Chardonnay ten to 15 years ago have reached maturity. Notable sites include X Omni and X Novo, planted by former Joseph Phelps executive Craig Williams, and Koosah Vineyard, planted in 2013 and purchased by Résonance in 2022. These vineyards,

on volcanic and marine sedimentary soils in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA, benefit from warm days and cooling afternoon winds through the Van Duzer Corridor to the west. Domaine Drouhin, a Dundee Hills veteran, expanded into Eola-Amity Hills in 2014 by acquiring Roserock Vineyard, where it produces excellent Chardonnay as well as Pinot Noir. "Eola-Amity Hills is the future for Chardonnay in the Willamette," Résonance winemaker Guillaume Large told me in June.

A group of younger winemakers is helping drive this surge. Seth Morgen Long of Morgen Long claims to be the only producer in the Willamette Valley producing exclusively Chardonnay. Ken Pahlow and Erica Landon, founders of Walter Scott Wines, started with Pinot but soon focused on outstanding single-vineyard Chardonnay from X Novo, Koosah, Witness Tree, and Temperance Hill. Evening Land Vineyards crafts exceptional Chardonnay from its Seven Springs Estate property, also in Eola-Amity Hills.

In tasting these wines, I noticed striking stylistic contrasts that may be just as important as the influence of their appellation. Morgen Long's and Walter Scott's Chardonnays are oak-forward and reductive, emphasizing structure, energy, and a mineral quality. These are edgy, provocative wines that make me lean in with curiosity: I want to know what's happening.



PHOTO: CLAY MCACHLAN

Seth Morgen Long of Morgen Long winery in his cellar.

Others are calmer, with less reduction and new oak. Chardonnays from Résonance, Bergström, Domaine Drouhin, Sokol Blosser, and The Eyrle Vineyards had me smacking my lips and thinking, "Yeah, that's what it's about."

Either style is a superb ambassador for Willamette Valley Chardonnay. And just to throw a teaser out there, the next wave in the wine region is already underway—get ready for Willamette bubbly. **sj**

PHOTO COURTESY OF RÉSONANCE

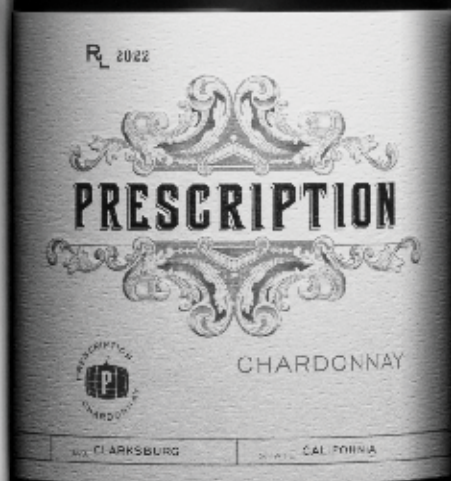
Résonance is based in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA of Oregon's Willamette Valley, though it also owns Koosah Vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA.



92
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A dose of sunshine lights up notes of lemon verbena. A mineral component entices an inner purity and enhances its bright acidity. Finishes with a squeeze of salted lime.

THE TASTING PANEL



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Avoiding the F Word

WHY CHOOSING A “FAVORITE” WINE IS AN IMPOSSIBLE—AND UNNECESSARY—TASK

IT'S INEVITABLE: The minute somebody finds out you're somehow involved in the industry, they can't help but ask, “What is your favorite wine?”

My variable response always depends on a series of questions. What am I eating? Who am I with? What time of day is it? What's the weather like? What are we celebrating, if anything? People think I'm trying to be dodgy, but if you truly love wine, you are an equal-opportunity imbibor. The savvy swirler, sipper, and savorer does not discriminate. We avoid the F word in absolute terms.

Ever hear of a breakfast wine? If you're one of the 100 or so somms who traveled with me throughout Italy from 2008 through 2018, you'll recall sabering Brachetto around 8 a.m. before getting in the van for the next winery visit. Now, before any civilians call the Alcoholics Anonymous hotline, they should note that this was at the start of a long day of scientific tasting that preceded a long night of, shall we say, less scientific tasting. The Brachetto had just enough sugar to get the heart rate going and just enough alcohol—about 9%—to bring up the par levels for the day's research. It was the proverbial breakfast of champions. At that very moment, at that very place, that was my favorite wine in the world. Do I want some now? No thank you. Well, wait—maybe . . .

When I would go visit my uncle, Zio Angelino, in the hills south of Rome, the first thing he would ask me was if I had eaten. At first I thought it was a classic Italian “Let me feed you” thing, but then I realized his true motive: He wanted me to taste his homemade wine, but cultural sensitivities wouldn't let us do so on an empty stomach. So if I said no, he would scrounge up a crust of bread and hunk of cheese and make sure I chewed 25 times before swallowing. Only then would he

PHOTO COURTESY OF LARS LEICHT



WHEN I WOULD GO VISIT MY UNCLE, ZIO ANGELINO, IN THE HILLS SOUTH OF ROME, THE FIRST THING HE WOULD ASK ME WAS IF I HAD EATEN. AT FIRST I THOUGHT IT WAS A CLASSIC ITALIAN “LET ME FEED YOU” THING, BUT THEN I REALIZED HIS TRUE MOTIVE: HE WANTED ME TO TASTE HIS HOMEMADE WINE.

The author's uncle, Zio Angelino, would make wine in the family's hand-chiseled cellar.

pour me his latest vintage of effervescent Malvasia-based wine harvested from vineyards my great-grandfather Domenico and grandmother Maria planted, made in the cellar that Domenico had chiseled out by hand. It was fermented on the skins for close to a week in 150-liter casks of chestnut wood that were sealed not with a silicone bung but a plate or tile resting on top of the opening. It was slightly oxidized, of course, and a bit cloudy, but at the same time fruity and fizzy and yummy. With no additives or preservatives, it was a true natural wine, already evolving during the short walk from the cellar to the kitchen. At that moment, at that time, at that place, that was my favorite wine in the world. Do I want some now? Yes, please!

Then there was the time I opened a birth-year Brunello as both me and the

wine headed into our fifth decade. I was arguably in the best shape of my life, the wine not so much. But it was a gift from colleagues at the winery I worked for, plucked from the dungeons of the castle where it was made and full of sentiment (not sediment). It too was slightly oxidized, delicate, and downright ethereal. It was not meant to pair with a meal but to be sipped and appreciated for what it was. We were drinking memories, enjoying the moment, and savoring a survivor (the wine, not me). And guess what? At that moment, at that time, at that place, that was my favorite wine in the world. Do I want some now? What am I eating, who am I with . . .

Being in this business is not about having favorite wines. It's about having favorite wine moments—ideally many of them. What are some of yours? **SL**

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Harvesting fruit from vines planted in pits called hoyos at Jable de Tao on the Canary Island of Lanzarote.

VOLCANIC WONDERLAND

A LOOK AT THE EXTREME— AND MAGICAL—TERROIR OF CANARY ISLAND LANZAROTE

by Marija Jovanovic

PHOTO COURTESY OF JABLE DE TAO

Lanzarote, often called the Island of 1000 Volcanoes, is a place like no other. The remote Spanish territory, which is almost ten times closer to Morocco in North Africa than to mainland Spain, is one of the seven main Canary Islands that, along with the Azores and Madeira, belong to Macaronesia. It is the most southern wine region until you reach South Africa, and the vines here have acclimated to the tropical heat and the winds blowing off the Sahara.

Most of these vines are over 100 years old, and many date back to the 19th century. They struggle against the constant, salt-laden trade winds; negligible rainfall; and vast, barren lava fields covering nearly one-third of the island, in whose pure volcanic soils they grow. Here, each cluster is an act of resilience. All these challenges make Lanzarote wine unique—a spectacular and enchanting expression of place.

Lanzarote's lunar-looking landscape and unique method of grape-growing date back to the 1730s, when the island experienced some of the most powerful volcanic eruptions in recorded history, lasting for six years and permanently reshaping its terrain. These eruptions deposited a layer of volcanic gravel-like ash or *lapilli* (locally known as *rofe*) across the island, which allows moisture (mostly from dew) to drain into the subsoils and



PHOTO: MARIJA JOVANOVIC

Author Marija Jovanovic with a 175-year-old Moscatel vine at El Grifo winery.

prevents evaporation; without it, farming would not be possible. Vines are planted by digging 3-meter-wide and several-meter-deep pits (*hoyos*) where the nutrient-rich soil is found beneath the layer of inert volcanic rock. Semicircular walls (*zocos*) are built around the northeastern side of each vine as protection from the strong winds. This painstaking arrangement provides

[Continued on page 36] ▶

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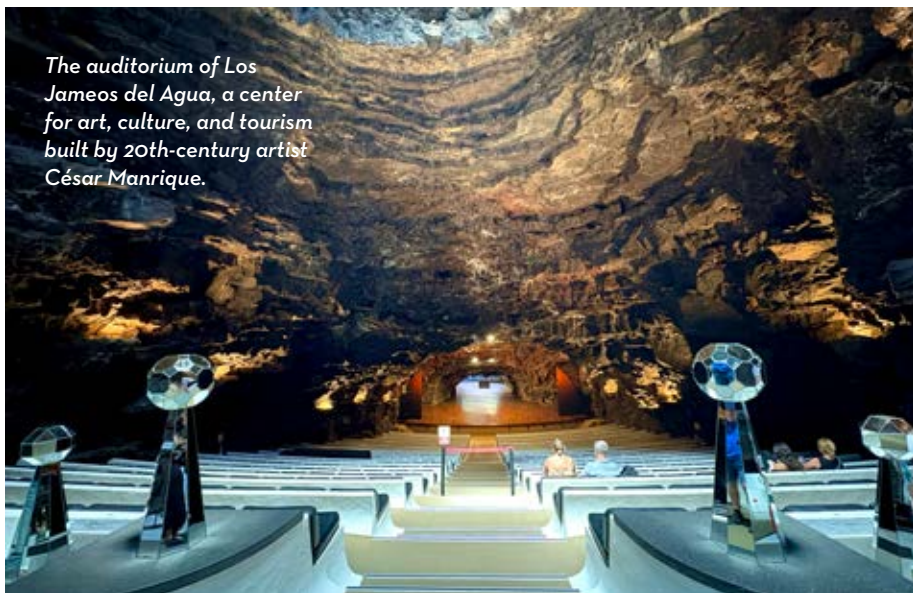
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The auditorium of Los Jameos del Agua, a center for art, culture, and tourism built by 20th-century artist César Manrique.



minimal yields of 100–150 hectoliters per hectare (less than one-quarter of the yield for Burgundy Grand Cru). Wines are made from predominately white varieties, namely Malvasía Volcánica, Listán Blanco (Palomino), Diego, and Moscatel de Alexandria, while the main red grape grown on the island is Listán Negro, supplemented by a few international varieties. The wines from Lanzarote in general show more savory than fruity character along with vibrant freshness and distinctive volcanic minerality.

An excellent way to begin to understand the history and winegrowing philosophy of the island is by visiting El Grifo, the oldest winery in the Canary Islands; founded in 1775, it's among the oldest in Spain. Its estate vineyard still harbors vines that were planted in the 19th century, including a 175-year-old Moscatel vine. It has adapted these vines via pruning to produce a February harvest, the earliest in Europe, in order to avoid the summer heat waves and preserve freshness and salinity. Its newest offering, El Grifo Vendimia de Invierno, is a monovarietal Malvasía Volcánica born from five different plots; it has exotic aromas of jasmine, orange blossom, and guava as well as notes of fennel and savory volcanic minerality.

Jable de Tao, by contrast, is an exciting newer project on Lanzarote, recognized for producing extraordinary, terroir-reflective wines made by traditional methods exclusively from local varieties. *Jable* is a reference to the sandy-textured marine subsoils that allow the roots to dig deep for water—the counterpart to

the aforementioned rofe, which protects the surface of the vineyard from evaporation. This combination of soils allows the vines to survive and produce minimal amounts of intensely mineral-driven wine. One not to miss is Chupadero, a Listán Blanco made from 100-year-old vines planted inside the caldera of an ancient volcano on weathered lava rich in iron and magnesium.

Casa Althay is another exciting discovery located in the heart of Lanzarote's best-known wine region, La Geria. This producer is leading the way with wines from single parcels similar to Etna's *contrade*. These are organically grown and unfiltered, capturing the true essence of Lanzarote. Parcela Avelina Listán Negro is a single-vineyard wine highlighting the site's 200-year-old vines. It shows rose hips, hibiscus, and pomegranate along with intensely salty, savory volcanic character. Casa Althay makes a number of styles, including white, red, rosé, orange, and dessert wine.

Bodega Los Bermejos is a relatively large producer whose wines are widely available in the U.S; it makes wines of all styles, but of particular interest is its sparkling Rosado Brut Nature, composed of Listán Negro and Malvasía. Puro Rofe is a certified-organic producer whose Juan Bello label comes from century-old hoyos planted on the slopes of the Volcán de Juan Bello. The wine is naturally fermented, aged in neutral oak, unfiltered, and unfiltered. Other wineries of note include Bodega Erupción and Titerok-Akaet, but there are many more to discover via a

friendly conversation at a local restaurant or wine bar.

No trip to Lanzarote would be complete without exploration of the work of 20th-century artist César Manrique, whose creations have enhanced the extreme volcanic beauty of the island. He was known for transforming one of the world's longest lava tubes into Los Jameos del Agua, a center for art, culture, and tourism complete with a swimming pool and a spectacular auditorium. He also built his own Volcano House directly in a lava field, with his studio in a volcanic bubble. His work left such a special mark on Lanzarote that an illustration of his is the official Consejo Regulador seal for the DO. Seen on each bottle, it depicts the always-present sun shining on the volcanic slopes of Lanzarote.

As to be expected, Lanzarote's wines have evolved to perfectly match the local cuisine, from goat, rabbit, and an impressive range of seafood (including grouper and parrotfish) to goat cheese that's often smoked and covered in paprika or *gofio* (toasted corn flour). The MICHELIN-starred restaurant Kamezí is the perfect place to experience the flavors of the island, featuring the best products from both marine and volcanic environments. Its avant-garde menu is created with a respect for traditional recipes, as seen in its trio of tapas (called *enyagues* on the islands) featuring eel, rabbit, and pork. Another eye-opening experience can be had at the restaurant El Diablo, designed by Manrique and built over a volcanic vent; its dishes are cooked using the natural heat coming from a magma field located 3 kilometers below. Popular traditional dishes include *papas arrugadas*, small potatoes boiled in saltwater and served with *mojo rojo* and *mojo verde*, as well as Canarian *sancocho*, a flavorful stew with salted fish and sweet potatoes.

Lanzarote is a one-of-a-kind place where sustainability is survival, thanks to practices such as manual farming and the preservation of biodiversity. It is defined by the resilience of the winegrowers who overcame the incredible challenges formed by the island's extreme conditions to create exceptional wines while maintaining a strong connection to and respect for their surroundings. It doesn't take much time to realize that one visit is not enough. S

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French Twist

CHEZ FIFI'S WINE LIST WOWS NEW YORK

LISTEN CLOSELY AND you'll hear effusive murmurs of "ooh la la" on New York City's somewhat staid Upper East Side. Call it the Chez Fifi effect. Since opening last December, this beguiling French restaurant in an exquisitely renovated townhouse on East 74th Street has become one of the toughest tables in town to book.

Brothers Josh and David Foulquier of Sushi Noz followed their hearts when it came to developing the concept for Chez Fifi. "Chez Fifi is really a love letter to their mom in a way. They wanted to have the restaurant reflect how she made other people feel; she was very warm and hospitable," says beverage director Tira Johnson. Indeed, between her name on the door, the "Le Bistrot de Fifi" plaque on the wall that once graced her backyard, and a delicious pommes dish named for her on the menu, the late Fifi is a warm presence in the posh but cozy space.

The chic and welcoming ambiance is a powerful lure, but the food and wine keep folks clamoring for one of the 44 seats in the street-level bistro or a spot in the intimate 28-seat Salon de Fifi à L'étage upstairs. Executive chef Zack Zeidman's menu riffs on French and Basque classics and features many dishes that the Foulquier brothers enjoyed on trips abroad with their mother, from a classic roast chicken to Txangurro deviled crab: Dungeness and Jonah crab blended in a sofrito of tomatoes, leeks, and paprika and served in a Jonah crab shell.

To complement the cuisine, Johnson has created a compelling list of around 1,200 bottlings predominantly from France, Spain, and the United States. And although she confesses to opening more bottles of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti at Chez Fifi than at any other restaurant she's worked in, she has built a selection that showcases both classics and unexpected gems. "It's fun to represent the benchmark producers but also the up-and-coming ones," says Johnson.



PHOTO: HANNAH WYATT

The Chez Fifi beverage team: head sommelier Ramon Manglano, general manager and sommelier Jirka Jireh, beverage director Tira Johnson, and sommelier Markiya Paige.

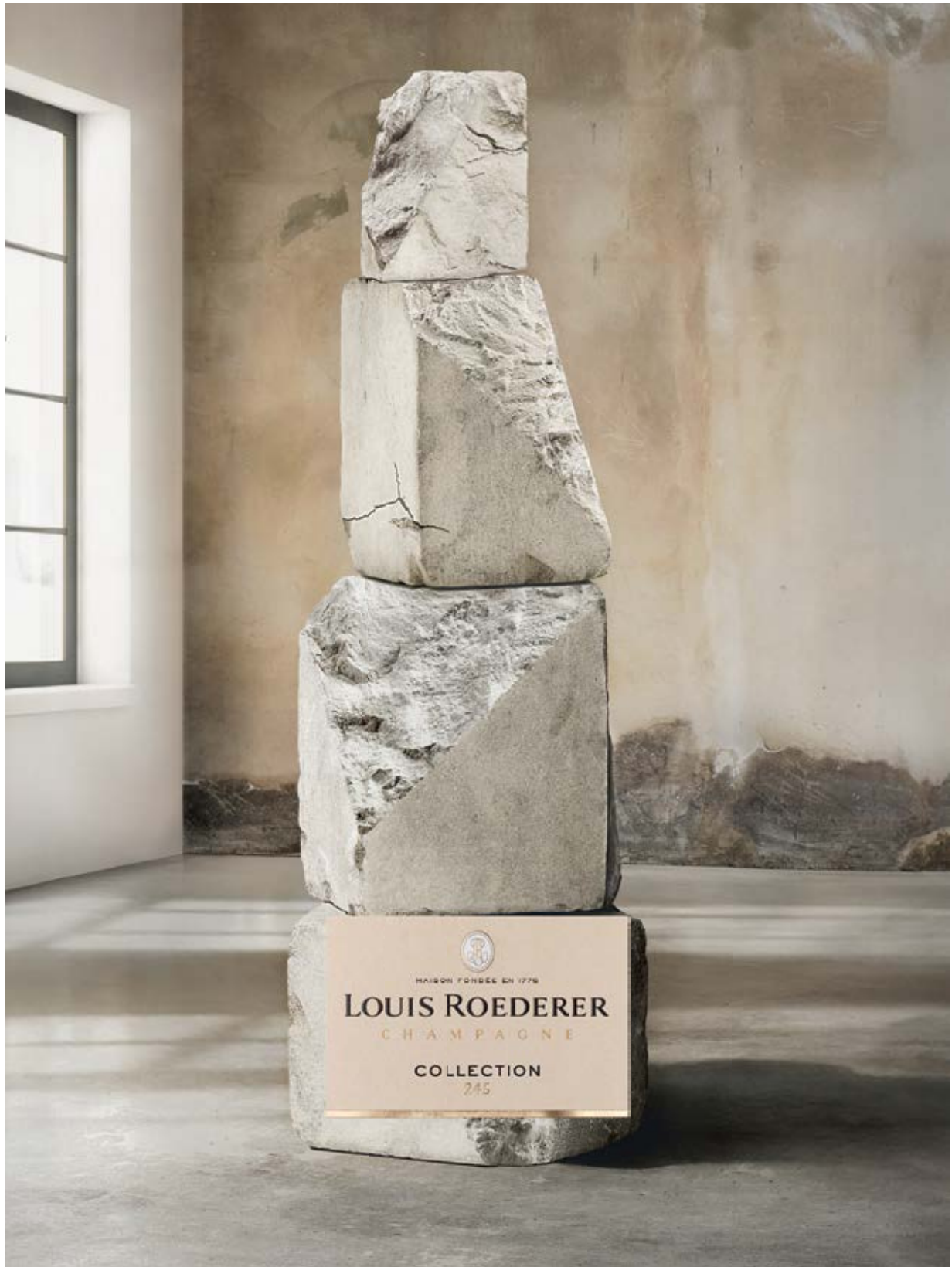
Johnson's favorite pairings include Chez Fifi's filet mignon au poivre and frites with a bottle of Syrah such as the Pax 2022 Sonoma Hillside or the Les Champs Libres 2021 Crozes-Hermitage. For the aforementioned Txangurro deviled crab, Johnson recommends a Txakolina from Alfredo Egja: "It's cool because you're drinking wine from the same region where that dish is from." She also suggests a light Alsatian Riesling from La Rogerie because it has "just a little touch of spice and herby kind of textures."

On my recent visit to Chez Fifi, I found myself geeking out over the breathtaking breadth and variety of the 90-page wine list: From Burgundy to Santa Barbara, the Northern Rhône to Napa Valley, and Rías Baixas to Ribera del Duero, it's a fascinating journey. Highlights include an extensive sparkling section featuring grower Champagnes and historic selections—I did a double take when I saw the Louis Roederer 1974 Cristal Brut and Dom Pérignon 1964 Brut. And while my jaw also dropped at the \$12,000 magnum

of Arnaud Ente's 2020 La Sève du Clos, the list includes many accessibly priced options under \$150 per bottle. "I want people to have fun with the list and think of it as an adventure . . . [but] also to have vintage depth and all different price points too," says Johnson.

This creative and thoughtful approach earned Chez Fifi the title of "Best Newcomer List" at this year's Star Wine List of the Year New York Awards, where I served as a judge alongside Stephen Wong, MW, and award-winning sommeliers Salvatore Castano and Paz Levinson. In her assessment, Levinson said, "What a crazy list to start a project with! How is it possible? How have they brought all these amazing wines together? A masterful mystery, but a wine list to shine among the best in New York." For more information, visit chezfifinyc.com. 

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



LOUIS ROEDERER
HAND IN HAND WITH NATURE

“Sunshine in a Glass”

AT CALLIE IN SAN DIEGO, CA, **TRACY LATIMER** CURATES A WINE PROGRAM

ROOTED IN JOY story by Michelle M. Metter / photo by Rafael Peterson

FOR TRACY LATIMER, lead sommelier at Callie in San Diego, wine isn't just a beverage—it's a means of connection. Similarly, her restaurant career has been forged by instinct, curiosity, and a deep desire to serve others.

After graduating from Brandeis University in Boston in 2008, Latimer briefly worked at a law firm before making a move into hospitality, due in part to the financial crisis but mostly to a deep sense that a desk job was just not for her. What began as a job at Legal Sea Foods quickly evolved into a calling, as Latimer discovered a love for attending to guests. She held a multitude of positions, but serving as a bartender stoked her passion for beverages, and before long, she found herself drawn to wine.

In August 2020, during the height of the pandemic, Latimer and her husband packed up and moved cross-country to San Diego. She joined Callie in June 2021, originally as a server. By October of that year, she had stepped into the lead sommelier role, and she now oversees a wine program as distinctive and vibrant as the restaurant itself.

Callie's kitchen, helmed by celebrated chef Travis Swikard, leans heavily on Mediterranean flavors, and Latimer's wine list reflects the cuisine. “We're looking for wines that feel like sunshine in a glass,” she says, describing her focus on bright, high-acid expressions layered with salinity and energy. Her selections span both the Mediterranean and California, with an emphasis on independent producers. Corporate labels have no place on her list; instead, she seeks wines with a strong sense of place and personality.

Rather than organizing the list by variety or region, Latimer opts for a more

“Wine should be approachable, joyful, and a little bit magical. My goal is to take away the intimidation and make it about connection.”



Tracy Latimer is lead sommelier at Callie in San Diego, CA.

intuitive approach, categorizing wines by flavor profile and emotional experience. Whites are listed under headings such as “Light, Crisp, Sea Spray, Mineral” or “Full, Floral, Orchard, Oak;” while reds are grouped under “Red Fruits, Game, Leath-

er, Earth” or “Cherry, Forest, Potpourri.” “I want guests to connect to how the wine makes them feel,” she explains. “That’s far more meaningful than memorizing grape varieties or appellations.”

This philosophy extends to staff education. Latimer teaches WSET Level 2–style courses to her team, but she places even greater value on the art of storytelling.

Her training sessions focus on conveying the human side of wine—sharing anecdotes about winemakers, vintages, and the moments that shape each bottle's journey. “Wine should be approachable, joyful, and a little bit magical,” she says. “My goal is to take away the intimidation and make it about connection.”

That much is evident in her interactions with guests, whom she often invites to trust her with recommended pairings. “It’s never about showing off,” she notes. “It’s about reading the table and finding something they’ll love—even if they’ve never heard of it.”

Latimer's collaborative relationship with Swikard plays a central role in her program's success. The two work closely on pairings for both the regular menu and special events, sharing a mutual respect for each other's craft. “Chef Travis has an incredible palate and is always open to building dishes around a wine,” she says. “That kind of trust allows us to create really special moments for our guests.”

Beyond the walls of Callie, Latimer is an advocate for making wine more inclusive and accessible. She's quick to remind others that every bottle represents real people—farmers, makers, and families. “We need more joy in the way we talk about wine,” she says. “More heart, less ego.” SJ

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ESTATE





PHOTO: C2 PHOTOGRAPHY/FOOD & WINE

Chris Radomski and Darius Rucker pour their As One Cru wines in the Grand Tasting Pavilion.

Peak Feasting

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE 2025 FOOD & WINE CLASSIC IN ASPEN, CO

by Wanda Mann

INSTEAD OF SWOOSHING DOWN

snowy slopes in winter, guests at the 2025 Food & Wine Classic in Aspen, Colorado, scarfed down tasty bites and sipped an array of top-tier adult beverages over the course of a steamy weekend in June. Still going strong in its 42nd year, the Classic continues to attract celebrity chefs, beverage luminaries, and epicurean consumers.

Aspen's high altitude isn't the only thing that leaves me a bit lightheaded and giddy; the energy at the Classic is exhilarating. And the celebrity sightings are epic: Famous faces in attendance this year included Academy Award-winning actress and director Regina King; culinary TV personalities Padma Lakshmi, Andrew Zimmern, Giada de Laurentiis, Phil Rosenthal, and Ayesha Curry; musician-turned-winemaker Darius Rucker; and recent *Top Chef* winner Tristen Epps.

This year marked my fourth consecutive time presenting at the Classic, and the attendees at my two seminars, "Let's Get Franc: The Other Great Cabernet" and "Rosé Gets a Glow Up: The World of Luxe Pink Wines," were enthusiastic and inquisitive. The Classic's beverage seminar schedule included more than 50 creative events showcasing wines, beers, cocktails,



PHOTO: WANDA MANN


SOMM Journal East Coast editor Wanda Mann leads the "Let's Get Franc: The Other Great Cabernet" seminar.

sakés, and tequilas, including "The Future of Wine Is Female," presented by June Rodil, MS; "Guess the Grape: How to Blind Taste Like a Pro," presented by Sabato Sagaria, MS, and Gary Obligation; and "GO BIG: Superstar Magnums & Beyond," presented by Mark Oldman.

Beyond the seminars, the Grand Tasting Pavilion is the beating heart of

the Classic. Located in Wagner Park in downtown Aspen, it has a breathtaking view of Aspen Mountain, which makes for a dramatic backdrop as guests indulge in offerings from over 150 wine-makers, chefs, distillers, and destinations. Noshing my way through the Grand Tasting felt like attending a reunion, as I kept running into sommeliers and vintners whom I know from all corners of the globe.

Food, drink, and fun flow in abundance at the Classic, but the festival also supports charitable partners in the community and culinary industry via the Food & Wine Gives philanthropic initiative. This year, the initiative made donations to the Southern Smoke Foundation, a national emergency-relief fund that supports workers in crisis within the food and beverage industry, and No Kid Hungry, the only national campaign dedicated to ending childhood hunger in the United States.


There's certainly no dearth of culinary festivals on the national scene, but the Classic's longevity, creativity, and prestige make it as rarified as Aspen's air. Want to experience it for yourself? Mark your calendar for next year's event on June 19–21, and for more information, visit classic.foodandwine.com. 

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Hiding in Plain Sight

IL POGGIONE IS A HUMBLE YET HISTORIC CORNERSTONE OF BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO by Lars Leicht

QUICK, NAME FIVE top Brunello producers. You are going to mess up—I would bet on it.

After all, it's just simple math: There are over 200 producers in Montalcino with a common thread of excellence that runs across the various subzones and styles. If you "round up the usual suspects," as Captain Renault directs in the movie *Casablanca*, you will see a lot of flashy names that have been the darlings of consumer publications and retailers in a cyclical fashion. But what you might not see are the wineries that fly just under the radar despite being highly regarded, especially by their peers. If I said the name, you'd reply, "Oh, yeah, Il Poggione—of course!"

So why is Il Poggione not always top of mind? Maybe because they are not chest-beaters but humble producers that consistently make some of the most appealing and classic wines of the region. Il Poggione is, in fact, an integral part of the fabric of Montalcino: It was founded in 1890, just two years after the first recorded vintage of Brunello di Montalcino

from a producer that many consider the inventor of the category (Biondi-Santi), and has been imported to the U.S. by Terlato Wines since 1977.

Even the story of that partnership speaks to the leadership behind Il Poggione. As I've heard it recounted, Anthony Terlato spent a day in Montalcino tasting through as many Brunellos as local restaurant wine lists could offer. After identifying Il Poggione as a gem, he made his way to the tiny hilltop hamlet of Sant'Angelo in Colle and knocked on the door of owner Leopoldo Franceschi. Il Poggione's winemaker answered the door and immediately told the young American that they had no interest in the U.S. market, but Franceschi beckoned him inside anyway because it was dark and raining. Over cheese, salumi, and wine, they spoke convivially for a couple of hours about everything from politics to art and music until Franceschi, impressed that Terlato had not asked about pricing, decided to sign with Terlato's company after all.

There were not many Brunellos being

sold in America at the time, so Il Poggione was a seminal brand for the market. In many ways, it played a fundamental role in the development of other Brunello producers in Montalcino. Despite much fanfare about clonal selection and research on the Sangiovese vine conducted by other wineries, Il Poggione had long been experimenting with the many local variations of the grape, sharing advice and cuttings with its neighbors since the 1960s. It has farmed organically for years but only recently started undergoing the certification process.

Consistency is a strong theme with Il Poggione. In fact, there have been just two winemakers over the past 70 years: Pierluigi Talenti and Fabrizio Bindocci, whose son, Alessandro Bindocci, is now playing an active role in winemaking as well as sales and marketing. This past spring, I sat down with the younger Bindocci at Il Poggione's winery, which was renovated in 2004 within its estate vineyards in the hills below Sant'Angelo Scalo, to taste through a range of current releases. Here are my notes.



Il Poggione 2024 Brancato

Rosato: Nestled in quintessential red-wine territory and recognized as a traditional red-wine producer, Il Poggione has had the audacity to craft a rosé since 2008. Made with 100% Sangiovese from relatively young estate vines, it sees 12–18 hours of skin contact followed by a long fermentation at low temperatures in stainless steel. Bright, full-bodied, and persistent, with flavors of currant, peach, and wild strawberry, it's the kind of rosé that pairs naturally with food, especially traditional Tuscan dishes like ribollita, pappa al pomodoro, and panzanella.

Bright, full-bodied, and persistent, with flavors of currant, peach, and wild strawberry, it's the kind of rosé that pairs naturally with food, especially traditional Tuscan dishes like ribollita, pappa al pomodoro, and panzanella.



Il Poggione 2023 Rosso di

Toscana: This expression should have a permanent spot on by-the-glass lists at any Italian restaurant in the U.S.—or any wine-driven restaurant, for that matter. A blend of 40% Sangiovese, 40% Merlot, and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, it's fermented in stainless steel with a brief passage in wood—large casks for the Sangiovese,

350-liter barrels for the Merlot and Cabernet. Crunchy cherry on entry is supported by subtle structure and tannins that could stand up to a slight chill. Great notes of spice on the finish make it an ideal pairing for classic barbecue.



Il Poggione 2023 Rosso di

Montalcino: Unlike many producers who position Rosso di Montalcino as a second wine to Brunello, Bindocci believes his stands on its own merits. “For us, Rosso di Montalcino does not have to be the poor cousin or ugly sibling of Brunello. This is not a second wine but a first selection made from 15- to 20-year-old dedicated vineyards,” he said, noting that the fruit is picked by experienced workers, many of whom are longtime employees whose parents and grandparents also worked

for Il Poggione. While the regulations for Rosso di Montalcino dictate that the wine must be aged for 12 months in the cellar without stipulating the use of oak, Il Poggione rests this wine for 12 months in wood: 70% in large casks and 30% in 350-liter barrels, one-third each new, first year, and second year. Richly concentrated and high in polyphenols, it has a beautiful nose of dark red fruit that Bindocci attributed to submerged-cap maceration. “We are not against those who make Rosso di Montalcino without wood aging, but that is the path for us,” he added.




Il Poggione sales director/winemaker Alessandro Bindocci, Terlato Wines president/CEO Bill Terlato, Il Poggione winemaker Fabrizio Bindocci, and Terlato Wines chief of staff Anthony Terlato Jr.

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Il Poggione 2020 Brunello

di Montalcino: Sourced from vines that are an average of 25–30 years old, this wine is aged for three years (one more than the minimum requirement) in large oak casks. On the nose and entry, it shows deep, brooding fruit that's followed by great salinity and freshness. Like the Rosso di Montalcino, it has a long finish with abundant spices and subtle balsamic notes. “In 2020 we had to work harder in the vineyard [because of COVID restrictions], but the wine has great freshness and elegance on the palate,” Bindocci said.


When Italians talk about a common thread, they use the French term *fil rouge*. Il Poggione has several common threads running through its fabric: older vines, a steady hand in the cellar, long-term family stewardship, and a fresh house style that makes “one glass call for another,” in Bindocci's words. Even its labels are clear evolutions from those of 60 or 70 years ago, recognizable by the red lettering—a literal *fil rouge* of its own. If you haven't tried them lately, you should (and the next time you're asked to name Montalcino's top producers, Il Poggione will be top of mind—I would bet on it). 



Il Poggione 2019 Brunello

Riserva Vigna Paganelli: This single-vineyard reserve, per Brunello regulations, sees an additional year of aging before release. By Il Poggione standards, that year in oak casks is followed by a year in bottle (twice the mandatory bottle-aging period). Hailing from the prized 12-hectare Paganelli property, which sits at 250 meters above

sea level and is planted to vines ranging from 35 to 40 years old, it's made only in optimal vintages and was last produced in 2016; elegant, long, and impressive, it's an aristocratic wine worthy of longer aging.

When Italians talk about a common thread, they use the French term *fil rouge*. Il Poggione has several common threads running through its fabric: older vines, a steady hand in the cellar, long-term family stewardship, and a fresh house style that makes “one glass call for another,” in Bindocci's words. Even its labels are clear evolutions from those of 60 or 70 years ago, recognizable by the red lettering—a literal *fil rouge* of its own. If you haven't tried them lately, you should (and the next time you're asked to name Montalcino's top producers, Il Poggione will be top of mind—I would bet on it). 

Gaining Traction

JOHN PEISER, GM/BUYER AT WALLY'S WINE & SPIRITS IN LAS VEGAS, NV, TALKS TRENDS AND TACTICS

by Ruth Tobias

AS THE GENERAL manager and buyer for the Las Vegas location of California-based company Wally's Wine & Spirits, John Peiser wears a lot of hats, from working with distributors to overseeing wine service at the retailer's on-site restaurant. It's a demanding job, but the longtime Neon City resident is more than up to the task, having honed his skills as a sommelier at José Andrés' Jaleo and as a beverage manager, assistant general manager, and general manager at Nobu. We asked him for details on his day-to-day experiences.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN PEISER



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

One of the best parts is interacting with guests, because that's what keeps the job from being redundant: Every day you come in, you don't know who you're going to meet, how they're going to be, or how your day is going to go, and it keeps things interesting. Another is the quality and the [number] of wines you get to try in a given week or month, what with the different suppliers who want to be in here and the breadth of what they show you. I mean, a week and a half ago, I went to a tasting with Harlan, where we did five vintages side by side—not something you get to do every day.

Q: What trends are you noticing in 2025?

One of the biggest things with Vegas is that Cabernet is always king, and that amazingly has not changed in many, many years. When I worked at Nobu, a Japanese sushi restaurant, our biggest seller was Napa Cab. And even here, Napa Cabs are the mover that everyone goes to. The other big thing is Burgundy's finally starting to get to where we have enough to maintain inventory. [Early in the pandemic], Burgundy was almost impossible

to get here. It was the whole supply-chain issue, and because it was such a scarcity, any time people saw it, they just bought as much as they could. So it was always a struggle to keep it in stock, but we're finally getting to a point where supply and demand are leveling out a little bit.

[With spirits,] I remember 20 years ago when [the trend] was flavored vodka, and you couldn't get people to buy whiskey. I mean, in 2009, I was using Yamazaki 12 as my well. So it's nice to see that whiskey is finally coming back around, but ... it's insane: Every week we get people coming in going, "Do you have any Pappy?" It's like, no, when we got our Pappy allocation, it was gone in 45 minutes.

Q: What do you wish would become a trend?

The battle I always fight is Sherry. I think

Sherry is one of the most diverse, exciting wines in the world, and very few people know about it. Right now I'm actually bringing in a few Sherries, mainly for myself but also to try and talk other people into it. I want ... industry people to know that we have good Sherry retail, not just the basic Sherries, and see if we can get some traction on people coming in to buy it.

[In general,] if you can get people to try Spanish wine, they're amazed by it. It's probably the best value in the world.

For people who like Pinot and that lighter style, I love the Bierzo region and playing with those kind of lighter styles, like Raúl Pérez. It's medium-bodied with a lot of bright, fresh fruit—it's almost a little like Cab Franc on the nose but [with the] mouthfeel, body, and acidity of Pinot Noir. My brain, after five years with José Andrés, defaults to Spanish wine, because at the time when I was at Jaleo, we had a ten-page wine list: Nine pages were Spanish, and the tenth was the rest of the world, and it was all expensive. So it was, "Oh, you want a California Cab? Our cheapest is \$350, or I can give you something like a Cab from Spain." So, people who like Cabs that are willing to experiment, going with Priorat or Montsant and doing old-vine Garnacha or Carineña—that's always one of the fun things that I still have to try and push people toward. **ST**



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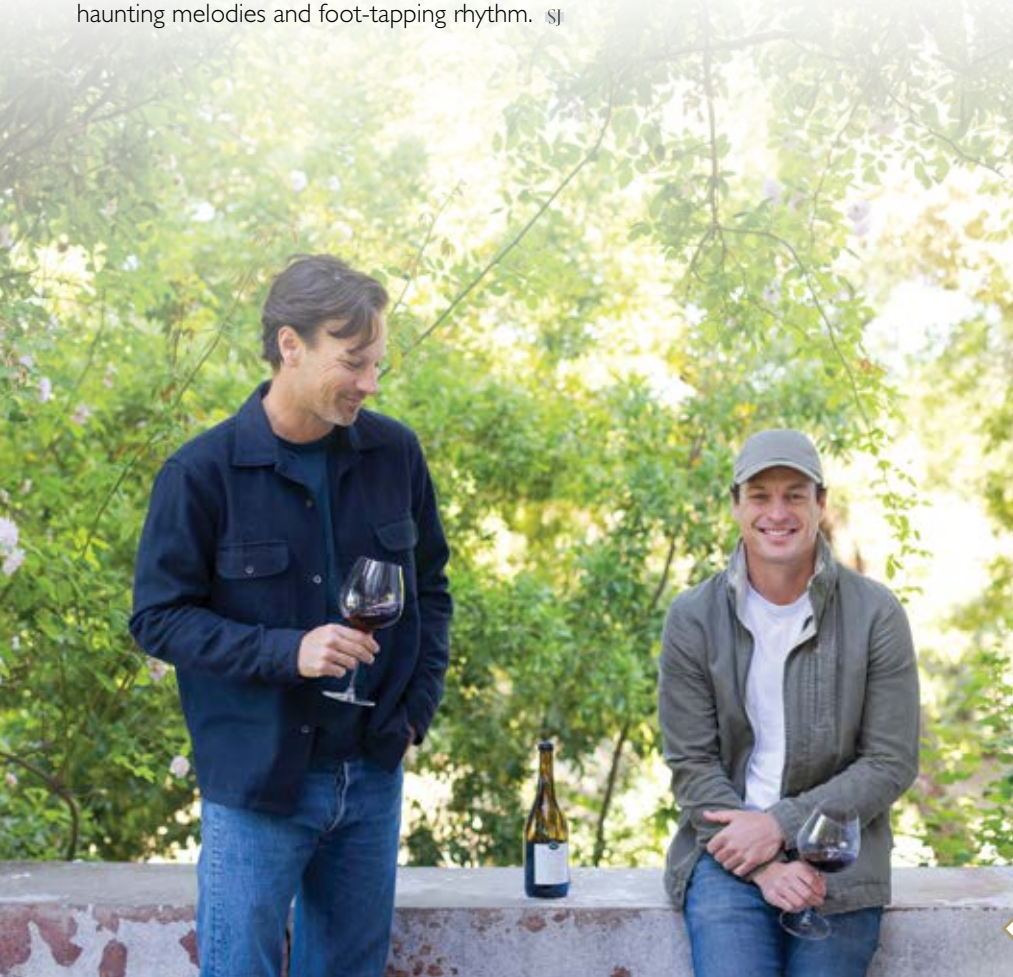
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Sound and Flavor

A GLIMPSE INTO THE HARMONIC PORTFOLIO OF THE NATURAL WINE COMPANY WITH PROPRIETOR LUKE ANABLE *by Meridith May*

CHICAGO NATIVE LUKE ANABLE has traveled the U.S.—and the world—enough to gather knowledge about the wine business from the on-premise sector to importing and distribution. An avid music fan and record collector, Anable compares the search for artists with unique sounds to the discovery of terroir-driven small-production wines. “The two share a fascinating parallel,” he pointed out during our recent meeting. “Both experiences involve exploration, appreciation, and a personal connection of culture and genres. I have a commitment to these unique, hard-to-find producers and I have a commitment to all who we represent; I am proud to call them ‘nerdy wines.’”

Anable, 40, worked in New York and was mentored by some of the greats in this industry, including importer Neal Rosenthal, whom, among other importers, he represents through the Arizona distribution business he founded in 2017, The Natural Wine Company. Eight people strong, his team finds that the growing somm population in the state is supportive of his array of wines, which offer haunting melodies and foot-tapping rhythm. *SJ*



Scribe 2023 Ode to Emil Sylvaner, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County (\$48)

This winery is owned by fourth-generation California farmers Andrew and Adam Mariani. As agriculturists, they realized the prestige of grape growing in Sonoma County and founded their winery in 2007. This wine’s name is a tribute to Emil Dresel, a viticulturist who brought vine cuttings of Riesling and Sylvaner from his family’s vineyard in Geisenheim, Germany, to California in 1858 and planted them on the slopes now farmed by Scribe. Aromas of white peach and honeysuckle linger until you dive into a saline-driven mouthful of more peach and elderflower. A light touch of lime chiffon shows length and dimension on the ethereal palate with perfectly balanced acidity. **96**



Domaine Cheveau 2023 Les Vignes du Hameau Pouilly-Fuissé, Bourgogne, France

(\$30) Aging in 80-year-old 600-liter casks brings out a preternaturally unctuous texture and the flavor of lemon oil. Fresh mango lines the palate, which salinity lifts for a glorious experience. **95**

ROSENTHAL WINE MERCHANT

Vincent Roussely 2022 Canaille Gamay, Touraine, Loire Valley, France (\$25)

This winery was founded in 1920; today its fourth-generation owners practice organic and biodynamic farming. Flint and dusty cocoa set forth on a seamless stream of cranberries that runs from start to finish. The acidity is bright, lengthening the freshness of each sip. **95**

GARBER & CO

PHOTO: CONOR HAGEN

Andrew and Adam Mariani are the owners of Scribe winery in Sonoma, CA.

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Second Nature

WITH NEW PACKAGING, **CEDAR + SALMON** HIGHLIGHTS ITS ROOTS IN THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY

by Kyle Billings

DESPITE A FAMILY LEGACY of more than 100 years in the wine business, 3 Badge Beverage Company president August Sebastiani is still exploring new frontiers. A recent package redesign for 3 Badge brand Cedar + Salmon's Willamette Valley wines serves to better showcase what Sebastiani describes as a previously underappreciated Oregon wine region.

"The parallels that we see now [between] the Willamette Valley and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest and where Sonoma and Napa were 50 years ago ... it's a little bit of a gold rush," says Sebastiani. "What really caught our attention were those parallels. Let's get in as early as we can and help to grow awareness. ... It ain't just apples, right?"

Sebastiani had a front row seat to the evolution of the American wine landscape in the 20th century. "My great-grandfather kind of started the party," he says, referring to Samuele Sebastiani, who was taught how to make wine in a monastery as a child growing up in a small village in central Italy. After immigrating to Northern California, he started a tradition of winemaking that has continued for four generations. Members of the Sebastiani line have plied their trade in numerous aspects of the business, from production to distribution and, as in the case of Cedar + Salmon, brand-building.

Launched in 2017, the two wines set to debut refreshed labels are the Cedar + Salmon Pinot Gris and the Cedar + Salmon Pinot Noir, both 100% varietal wines sourced from the Willamette Valley. The new bottles are aesthetically striking and thematically consistent, with images of cedar and ash-tree ringlets offset by an off-white background.

In short, they're a more artistic and modern reflection of the



spirit of the Willamette Valley. "The new packaging is intended to kind of move upmarket—to show the world that this is a premium brand," says Sebastiani. "We really celebrate the connection to terroir, the connection to nature, and without being too critical of the prior label, it was maybe a little too rustic. We wanted something that had a look and feel that was much more premium—that frankly had a better shelf presence. We target on-premise, but I continue to be astounded, [after] 20-plus years in this industry, [that] no matter how much of an on-premise focus you have, brands really grow off premise."

Sebastiani and the team sought to increase user-friendliness with a design that appealed at all angles. "[The previous label] wrapped around the bottle, so it could be hard to see the whole thing at one glance," he says. "We wanted

"THE PARALLELS THAT WE SEE NOW [BETWEEN] THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY AND ELSEWHERE IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND WHERE SONOMA AND NAPA WERE 50 YEARS AGO ... IT'S A LITTLE BIT OF A GOLD RUSH."

—AUGUST SEBASTIANI

something that was a little more presentable from one angle for that shelf presence where you can look at it and see the whole thing."

Of course, Sebastiani is equally keen to praise the merits of what's behind the label. "Our wine ethos here at 3 Badge is much more of an Old World sentiment, meaning we make wines that complement food—that aren't necessarily the focal point of the meal," he says. "That comes with maybe higher acidity with the whites [as opposed to] the oak bombs that Napa is known for. ... We make wines that are expressive, certainly, but not wines that are a big flavor bomb as you're sitting down enjoying a meal."

In addition to decades of experience and a distinguished pedigree, Sebastiani suggests that family ownership has been a real point of differentiation for the trade as well as for consumers in search of brands like Cedar + Salmon. "The fact that we're able to put the family touch and the intimacy of a family who's been in [the business]—that really helps to set us apart from some of our competitors," he says. "Wine is who we are. It's second nature for us." **ST**



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Old World Grandeur, New World Spirit

HOW **CHATEAU ST. JEAN** EMBODIES THE INIMITABLE STYLE OF SONOMA COUNTY

by Kyle Billings

FOR ALL ITS ACCOLADES, Chateau St. Jean refuses to rest on its laurels, continuing to invest in its vision of world-class wines and inviting hospitality in Sonoma County, California.

With a legacy that extends more than 50 years, “Chateau St. Jean is one of the original iconic number of wineries from the 1970s, dating back to 1973,” says winemaker Lisa Evich. “It was founded by two brothers and their brother-in-law and named after Jean, who was wife, sister, and sister-in-law to these three partners. Apparently, she was the only one saintly enough to keep the three of them in line.”

The château itself—a stunning, 3,550-square-foot, European-inspired structure in the town of Kenwood—is listed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In 2000, it debuted a sprawling visitor center and gardens. In 2021, it was purchased by Foley Family Wines & Spirits, which has since made significant investments in the vineyards and in rebuilding the winery, which had been shuttered for a few years prior to

the acquisition. Now, 100% of Chateau St. Jean’s wines are produced on-site using state-of-the-art luxury winemaking techniques. Today the property reflects its winemaking style—an homage to the grandeur of the Old World infused with a modern winemaking philosophy.

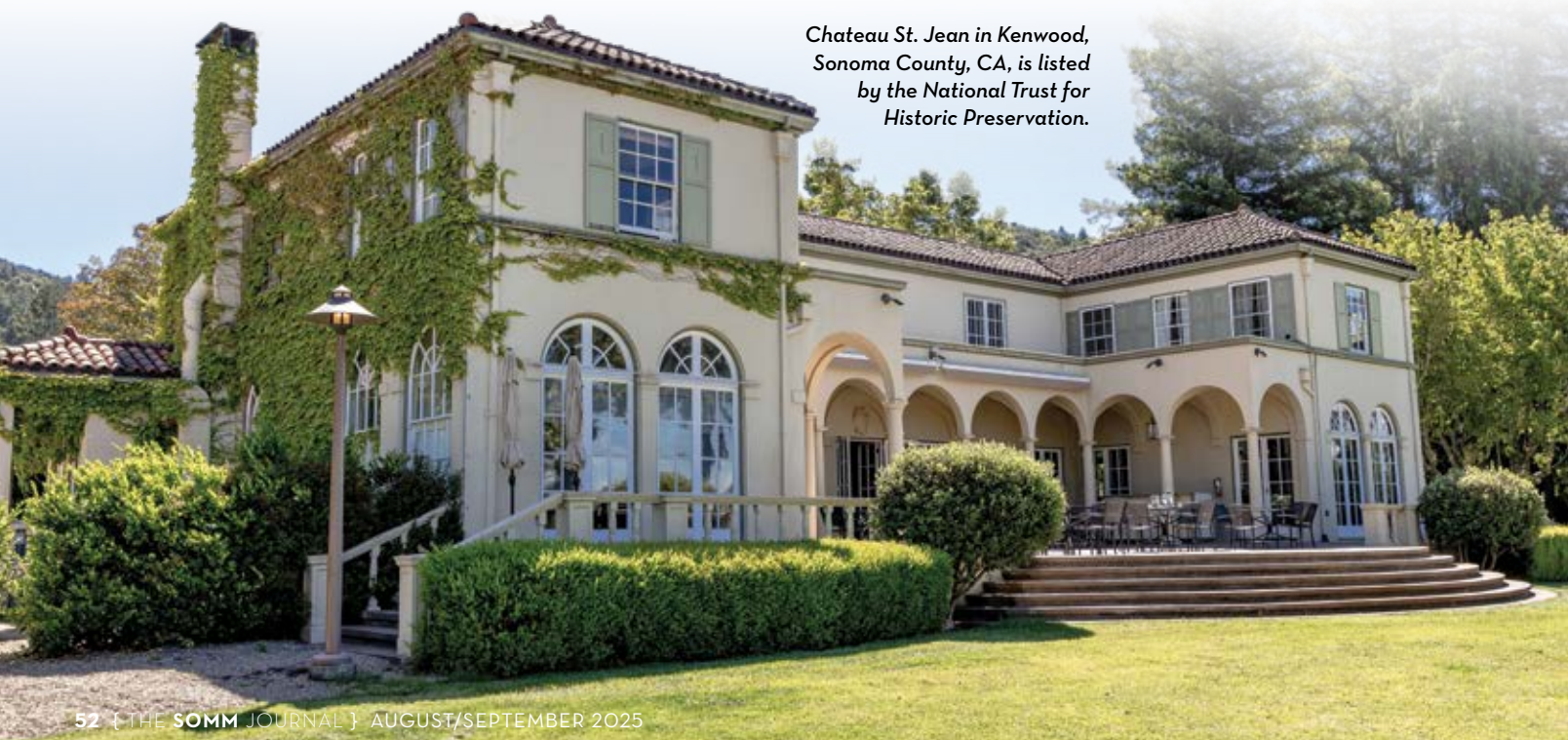
Sonoma County is home to 19 AVAs, “and each one of those is distinct in terms of its characteristics and not only the grape varieties that you can grow but the different styles of grape variety,” says Evich, a Sonoma native who has worked 25 harvests in the county. “I really think that you can say this is one of the most diverse winegrowing regions in the world.”

Three wines in the portfolio showcase that diversity. The flagship is the heralded, small-production Cinq Cépages, which debuted with the 1990 vintage and was named for its blend of Bordeaux’s five principal red grapes. “Our sourcing is hyper-focused; we’re super selective in the grapes that we pick from proven Bordeaux-style vineyards throughout Sonoma County,” explains Evich. The fruit

comes from not only the estate (which harbors 90 acres of vines) but also from other Foley vineyards in Sonoma Valley. The final blend embodies the idea that Cinq Cépages is greater than the sum of its parts.

“Blending is the most magical part of winemaking, because that’s when you really see how those components work and play together and elevate each other so much more than they do when they stand alone,” says Evich, who is methodical about the process from harvest to bottling. The berries are handpicked at night when cool to preserve freshness. The team uses an optical sorter to eliminate any unwanted material from entering the fermentation tank; “what hits the tank is really just beautiful. It looks like blueberries or caviar,” she says. They then do a three-day cold soak to extract color and aromas, followed by fermentation that is conducted at relatively high temperatures. The blend for the current vintage, the 2022 Cinq Cépages, was aged in (70% new) French oak.

Chateau St. Jean in Kenwood, Sonoma County, CA, is listed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.





Chateau St. Jean winemaker Lisa Evich.

The Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is sourced from Foley estate vines more than 30 years old in the Lookout Vineyard in the Knight's Valley AVA of northern Sonoma County, where everything from pruning to hedging to picking is done by hand. The soils here are a well-draining mixture of sedimentary and metamorphic rocks derived from nearby Mount Saint Helena, while the elevation at 1,300 feet, high above the fog line, ensures the grapes enjoy a luminous kiss from the sun. "These conditions really allow a long hang time and the structure and the ripe fruit, and the integrated tannins are really what come through," says Evich.

Further south, just north of the San Pablo Bay, the Carneros Chardonnay is sourced from cooler sites. Evich outlines the benefits of grape growing here: "The fog comes in at night; the breezes come in the afternoon. So warm days [and] cool nights allow for a long hang time, preserving the freshness and the acidity . . . and giving [the wine] a nice layered structure and heightened aromatics. We get tropical notes, we have that zesty minerality—just a lot of really nice freshness in the fruit itself." The grapes then undergo 100% barrel fermentation and complete malolactic fermentation along with consistent stirring of the lees to obtain an elegant, rich mouthfeel.

Asked about her winemaking philosophy, Evich muses, "I think that my signa-

ture is making wines that are balanced [and] have a sense of place . . . so there's not so much winemaking that you can't recognize what the wine itself is. It needs to speak to the variety and the place that it comes from and not get covered up with a lot of stuff."

She's proud that even in a time of uncertainty, the team at Chateau St. Jean hasn't lost their conviction in the magnetic power of well-made wines. "At a time when so many wineries are struggling, seeing the Foley family's commitment to a winery and a brand and . . . hospitality, and sticking with that—it means a lot to me personally," she says. "I think when people taste the wines and come here and visit the winery, they can see that and feel that too." SJ



Tasting Notes

Chateau St. Jean 2023 Chardonnay, Carneros, Sonoma County (\$45) This fog-influenced white shines with vanilla-laced lime chiffon. Strokes of sandalwood paint white chocolate and toasted coconut, revealing balanced acidity and notes of butter on a base of lemon rind. **94** —*Meridith May*

Chateau St. Jean 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon, Knights Valley, Sonoma County (\$55) The brilliant entry of plum blossom and boysenberry brims with brown-sugared cedar. Cocoa powder and sultry new leather form around supple yet chewy tannins. Well built from start to finish. **95** —*M.M.*

Chateau St. Jean 2022 Cinq Cépages, Sonoma County (\$130) The five Bordeaux grapes give this wine—a true icon in California winemaking—its name. From its inky black-carmine hue to its dusty, teeth-gripping nature, it's a muscle-bound athlete. A dynamic foundation of graphite and new leather wrapped in plum skin, espresso, and violets reveals its depth. **99** —*M.M.*

Caroline Stewart Guthrie with her husband, winemaker Blair Guthrie, and their dog, Mae, at the Yountville, CA, tasting room of Stewart Cellars.

PHOTO: EMMA K. CREATIVE



Stewart Cellars Is Fashioned for the Somm-Oriented Palate

by Meredith May

SECOND-GENERATION PROPRIETOR Caroline Stewart Guthrie and her husband, winemaker Blair Guthrie, have a gem on their hands: Stewart Cellars. They met while working for the producer's original winemaker, Paul Hobbs.

Assistant winemaker Brian Hurley recently met with me at their Yountville tasting room and explained Stewart Cellars' philosophy: "Our enological decisions are guided by both international styles and the deep-rooted history of our region. While wine is inherently tied to tradition and styles may evolve over time, we remain committed to crafting wines that express their origin—enhanced with our own thoughtful, understated signature. At the heart of it all, the quality of farming sets the limit, which is why we dedicate so much focus to meticulous viticulture."

The word "craft" surely applies to these lovely wines: Light on their feet, with a heavenly aura, they possess an elevated freshness ideal for a somm-oriented palate. Here are my notes on some of the selections tasted. *sj*



Stewart Cellars 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$36)

Aromas and flavors of grapefruit zest rubbed with basil and chervil set the stage for a sleek and clean white wine. Lingering grassy notes attach to a tropical twist of kiwi and gardenia. **95**

Stewart Cellars 2024 Rosé, Sonoma Mountain, Sonoma Valley (\$40)

Expressing a persistent perfume and flavor profile of rosewater and lanolin, this is a most unique blend of 98% Pinot Gris and 2% Pinot Noir. According to assistant winemaker Brian Hurley—and as recognized by my palate—Pinot Gris offers a rounder mouthfeel than Pinot Noir, Grenache, or Mourvèdre when it comes to producing rosé. Also, the grapes are picked early, retaining freshness and brightness without richness at 12.9% ABV. **94**



Stewart Cellars 2023 NOMAD Pinot Noir, Thornton Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, Sonoma Valley (\$95)

The NOMAD designation is a tier analogous to premium or reserve; in other words, it's the winery's best lot in a given vintage, used for single-vineyard bottlings. A perfume of cocoa and soil emanates from this wine, which owes its depth and clarity in part to aging in 85% 500-liter puncheons of French oak. The winemakers use the Calera and Pommard clones, and the structured contribution of 30%–40% whole cluster adds power framed by minerality and Luxardo cherry. **96**

Stewart Cellars 2022 NOMAD Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$300)

Creamy and seductive, with a sturdy hand and palate-coating notes of dark chocolate and licorice. Blackberry weaves in and out of soil, held together by dusty plum and wet stone. **96**

Stewart Cellars 2021 NOMAD Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard, St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$300)

Made with grapes planted on bale loam similar to that of To Kalon, this wine is defined by its backbone and structure. Its concentration maintains a sleek and persuasive level of finesse. With integrity and grit, it "goes the distance," comments Hurley. "It shows vitality and life force. We do everything we can to increase its longevity." **97**

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Sauvignon Blanc
The Tasting Panel

93 pts

2023 Hat Strap
Chardonnay
The Tasting Panel

93 pts

2023 Fog Swept
Pinot Noir
The Tasting Panel

92 pts

2023 Eight Spur
Zinfandel
The Tasting Panel

91 pts

2022 Rock Carved
Cabernet Sauvignon
The Tasting Panel

SONOMA AVA SERIES
SHOWCASING SONOMA'S BEST



by Julie Berge, vice president of communications
and member relations, Wine Institute

Wine Doesn't Need a Makeover, Just a Reintroduction

A FEW MONTHS into my role at Wine Institute, I found myself walking vineyard rows with a group of wine writers from around the world as part of our Wines on a Mission media tour, designed to demonstrate California's progressive leadership in sustainable winemaking. It was also part of my own reintroduction to the state's wine community, and I became fully immersed in the experience.

What struck me and my fellow travelers most wasn't just the industry's innovative ideas or climate-smart practices, though those were incredibly impressive. It was the people. The way vineyard managers talked about the soil, grabbing a fistful of earth and inviting us to get our own hands dirty. The way winery owners spoke about caring for their teams, their neighbors, their communities. California wine isn't just made sustainably—it's made with heart. By the end of the trip, we had more than information; we had a sense of connection. And that's what wine does best. It brings people together across tables, cultures, and generations.

That feeling? That spark of connection? It's exactly what the wine community is being challenged to create for a new kind of consumer—one Wine Institute has spent the past year getting to know.

Here are some key insights into millennial and older Gen Z audiences, including the zillennial segment at their intersection. These are 25- to 45-year-olds who are urban, diverse, and educated. They're culturally savvy and actively seek new experiences, including with respect to alcoholic beverages. They over-index in terms of their interest in travel, discovery, and authentic moments. They're creators and curators, sharing what they love with their circles. They don't just want to consume—they want to participate.



And the best part? Wine complements what they're interested in and often enhances what they're looking for. Therefore, it doesn't need to reinvent itself. It simply needs to reintroduce itself.

That's the purpose behind the Share Wine Co-Lab, a new digital space from Wine Institute designed to turn insight into action for the wine community. Part think tank, part test kitchen, it's a resource built to help wineries and wine professionals better connect with today's audience—especially those who haven't always felt included. Inside, you'll find a toolbox filled with short, insight-packed videos; real-world examples; and honest conversations about what's working and what's not. It's a space to learn, adapt, and share what's possible.

Whether you're looking for fresh ideas or a more meaningful way to reach your audience, the Share Wine Co-Lab

is designed to meet you where you are and help you meet today's consumers where they are. And there's no better time to begin than California Wine Month this September. As the state celebrates the beauty, bounty, and impact of our wine community with harvest underway, the Share Wine Co-Lab offers an open invitation for wine professionals to join the conversation at wineinstitute.org/share-wine-colab. [S](#)

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.

93
POINTS

2023 NORTH COAST
CHARDONNAY

WINEENTHUSIAST

DECEMBER 2024

91
POINTS

2022 NORTH COAST
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

WINEENTHUSIAST

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92
POINTS

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A Middleburg Moment

NORTHERN VIRGINIA'S **BARREL OAK WINERY** DESERVES ITS DAY IN THE SUN

by Meridith May

WHILE CHARLOTTESVILLE HAS

gained name recognition when it comes to the production of Virginia wines, the lesser-known Middleburg AVA in the northern Piedmont region of the state, just 50 miles west of Washington, D.C., is now on our radar thanks to a recent tasting with Barrel Oak Winery.

Established in 2012, Middleburg is known for its rolling hills and is just far enough away from the city to allow you to immerse yourself in the pleasures of horse country; it encompasses 200 square miles and just over 25 wineries.

Though it opened in 2008, Barrel Oak experienced a fresh surge of energy and vision when owners Kavelle and Ken Bajaj took over in 2022. Rich with talent and character in a region still striving for recognition, it's a revitalized brand on the rise. Winemaker Jeremy Ligon is helping shape its next chapter through a thoughtful approach to viticulture, cooperage, and technology. Read on for a sampling of the wines we tasted. *sj*

Barrel Oak Winery 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Middleburg, Virginia (\$29)

Jeremy Ligon compares the style of this wine, grown at an elevation of 1,000 feet and fermented and aged in stainless steel, to that of California rather than New Zealand or the Loire Valley. It's crisp and glossy, with notes of high-toned citrus, apricot, and Italian herbs. Gooseberry checks in with firm ripeness. **93**

Barrel Oak Winery 2023 Stainless Steel Chardonnay, Middleburg, Virginia (\$29)

All stainless and no malolactic yields a sleek wine that reveals itself through summer pear, elderflower, and vanilla cookie. Crisp and clean, with the scent of fresh linen and nectarine. **94**

Barrel Oak Winery 2022 Cabernet Franc, Middleburg, Virginia (\$35)

Aged 20 months in 85% French and 15% American oak, this wine exhibits an old-school, Old World persona. Plum and earthy notes of coffee and soil linger with violets and bright, just-ripened cherry. The acidity is refreshing and tannins are developed, tangling with a textured mouthfeel of plum and Mediterranean scrub as minerality adds verve. **94**

Barrel Oak Winery 2022 Meritage, Middleburg, Virginia (\$35)

This blend of 40% Petit Verdot, 35% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 10% Cabernet Franc shows value through its complex nature, coming across as savory, ripe, and spiced. Notes of sour cherry, black olive, sweet earth, and plum liqueur are European in style, gliding across the palate as liting acidity and floral tones add freshness to omnipresent tannins. **94**



"Taking the position as head winemaker for Barrel Oak Winery offered a unique opportunity to work at the heart of the Middleburg AVA—one of Virginia's most unique winegrowing regions.

The area's soil composition, particularly its granite and gneiss foundation, provides excellent drainage, backed with ideal elevation ranges and consistent airflow—all key elements that contribute to the region's exceptional terroir. But my favorite part is soaking in the views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's peaceful, inspiring, and a perfect reminder of why this place is so special." —Barrel Oak Winery winemaker Jeremy Ligon



PHOTO: JOHN RORAPPAUGH



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Leaning In

MEET THREE WOMEN LIGHTING UP THE BEVERAGE SCENE IN CHARLESTON, SC

by Helen Mitternacht

BE IT AT a restaurant with a James Beard–nominated chef, a hotel in a major tourist district, or an all-outdoor eatery, these three Charleston, South Carolina, hospitality pros are crafting beverage programs that speak to the individuality of their venues.

BETHANY HEINZE, co-owner, Vern's

Husband-and-wife team Daniel “Dano” and Bethany Heinze opened Vern’s—a modern American bistro in Charleston’s Elliotborough neighborhood—when they returned home to Charleston in 2021 after spending a few years working in the restaurant industry in Los Angeles. In 2023, Dano became a semifinalist for the James Beard Foundation’s Best Chef: Southeast Award; Bethany, for her part, continues to fine-tune the wine list that accompanies the stellar menu.

PHOTO: LIZZY ROLLINS



Q: Describe your wine list.

We opened without a spirits license, so we could serve just beer and wine. I leaned into that. I wanted an exciting wine list with a lot of diversity [in terms of] regions and flavor profiles. I view wine as an agricultural product, so the farming really matters, with no additives. I don't label it as “natural,” because that can be misleading, but we focus on organics as our baseline and have as many [wines] as possible from small, independently owned and operated producers' vineyards. I'm championing the little guys because we are that in the marketplace. The list is organized by flavor profiles and weight.

Q: What's your personal favorite?

If I reach for a bottle, I gravitate toward a really dark rosé or lightly chilled red. I think because I taste a high volume of wine, my palate gets fatigued, and I want things with bright, juicy acidity and a little bit of texture.

Sicilian wines really sing with our foods. I love things with volcanic soil. We have a little charcoal grill in the kitchen, and that subtlety of smokiness really works well with those wines.

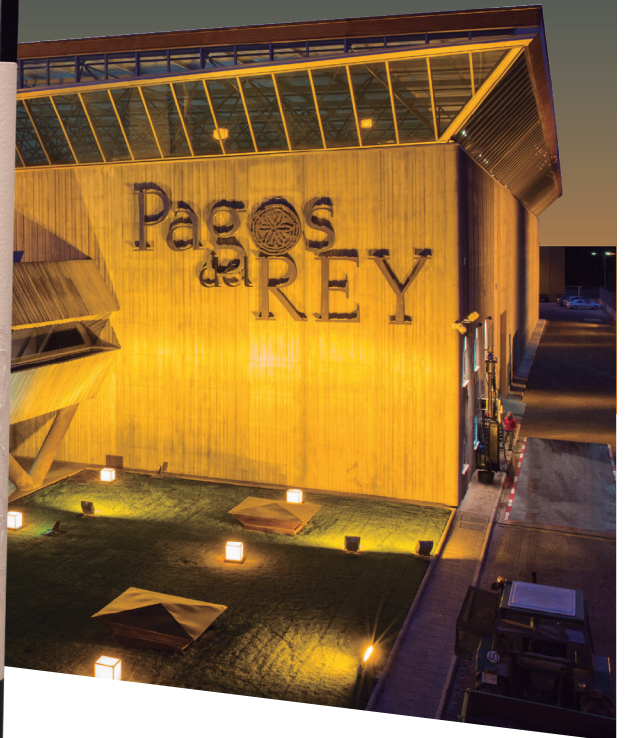
Q: Have there been any changes to the restaurant since the James Beard nomination?

I wouldn't say our ethos has changed at all. We've stayed steadfast in our sourcing. But I will say I have matured [with respect to] my own voice. I used to not give people obvious choices like Sancerre or Chablis because I wanted them to step into our world and try something different. But as a business owner, you realize you have to offer some things that make people comfortable. I now just accept that people have their own palates. It's so subjective and not everyone wants something obscure. Let's just give them something they are comfortable with [that's] within our ethos.

[Continued on page 62]



CONDADO DE ORIZA



PAGOS DEL REY

pagosdelrey.com

Ribera del Duero is renowned for its exclusive red wines, primarily crafted from the Tempranillo grape. Pagos del Rey Ribera del Duero, inaugurated in 2005, is the first winery in the expansion project of Félix Solís Avantis, following wineries in the Rioja, Rueda and Toro designations of origin. The winery has achieved significant success in national and international competitions, solidifying the quality and premium positioning of its wines in global markets.

RI
BE
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DEL
DUERO





AMANDA PHELPS, beverage manager, Frannie & The Fox

Frannie & The Fox sits inside The Hotel Emeline near the tourist-thronged Market Street, although beverage manager Amanda Phelps says that about half of the Italian restaurant's clientele is local. The restaurant opened in July 2020; despite the inauspicious timing, Phelps says the swell of people hungry to dine out again after the business closures early in the pandemic helped keep the restaurant busy. Phelps also manages beverage needs for the hotel's banquet department and helps out at Frannie's nearby sister restaurant, Hank's, known for its fresh seafood.

Q: What's your wine list like?

Our list is very Italian; when I first started, [it] was very domestic. While Frannie & The Fox isn't traditional Italian, I wanted to throw Italian influences in, down to using Italian sodas. I also throw in things that are French and domestic so that our guests can find something familiar grape-wise and can feel comfortable choosing a winegrape they may know.

Q: Are you noticing any interesting trends among guests?

I would say people are asking for more orange wine, which makes me happy. I'm such a big orange-wine drinker.

Q: How does your cocktail list reflect the Italian cuisine?

Our cocktails don't have a rhyme or reason, but I do think they tend to complement the Italian influence. I go to Chef Paolo [Rossin] to ask him about anything he may have seen growing up in Torino, Italy, that we could recreate. And we try to match the menu. Last year, we did a Panettone milk punch for the winter season. In summer, we make a Sgroppino, which is lemon sorbet, honeysuckle vodka, and Prosecco.

MORGAN COYNE, beverage director, Lost Isle

Lost Isle is on Johns Island, one of the many islands surrounding the peninsula of Charleston. The wood-fired eatery has all outdoor seating, which in the steamy South can make building a well-rounded bar program a challenge. Beverage director Morgan Coyne says her list leans heavily on cocktails, but the wines hold their own.

Q: Tell me about your cocktails.

Our cocktails are a lot like our food; I do pairings with citrus and herbs. All our cocktails are on tap and we batch them fresh every day. I would definitely say I like to play with what's in house. My personal favorite is Down the Wabbit Hole. We had carrots on the menu and I made this riff on a Margarita with fresh carrot juice, orange, Campari, tequila, [and] lime, and the rim had Tajín and smoked pepitas.

Q: Is it hard to put together a wine list for a restaurant where the experience varies with the weather forecast?

We try to get wines that, like our dishes, aren't going to feel super heavy—wines that are not super bold or in your face. We have Pinot Noir that's not overpowering, and I feel like we try and get light and crisp white wines. We don't want something so overwhelming that you don't want to eat your dinner.

Q: What's your personal favorite?

We have a Sigalas Assyrtiko from Santorini that is just delicious. 





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João Rebelo, sales manager for The Fladgate Partnership, with Zach Mazur, category specialist, Portuguese portfolio, for Kobrand Wine & Spirits.

A Port House Progresses

AT A LUNCHEON IN WASHINGTON, D.C., **THE FLADGATE PARTNERSHIP** GAVE GUESTS A TASTE OF ITS FIRST FORAY INTO TABLE WINES

story by Dave McIntyre / photos by Michael Butcher

FOR MORE THAN 330 years, The Fladgate Partnership has been a leading producer of Port, the famed fortified wine from Portugal's Douro Valley. Even as more and more Douro wineries began producing table wines beginning in the 1990s, The Fladgate Partnership continued to concentrate on its three Port houses: Taylor Fladgate, Fonseca, and Croft.

Until recently, that is. In August 2023, The Fladgate Partnership purchased Ideal Drinks, a boutique company with wineries in the Minho and Bairrada regions of Portugal. The deal included brands, vineyards, and inventory. Some of these wines are now available in the United

States through Kobrand Wine & Spirits, and a group of about 40 sommeliers and retailers had the chance to sample four of them over lunch at an event sponsored by *The SOMM Journal* during SommCon in Washington, D.C., in early June.

The wines were presented by João Rebelo, sales manager for The Fladgate Partnership, and Zach Mazur, category specialist, Portuguese portfolio, for Kobrand. Rebelo explained that purchasing existing brands had several advantages: It would not require Fladgate to divert existing vineyards from its core Port production while allowing the company to enter the still wine market without

significant startup costs. The acquisition also positioned Fladgate, which has developed a strong hospitality business throughout Portugal, to capitalize on the country's popularity with American tourists. "Ten years ago, we had 50,000 Americans visit Portugal," Rebelo said. "In 2024, there were nearly 1.4 million. Many of those visitors then return to the States as fans of Portuguese wine and want to find it here."

The first two wines presented at the luncheon were from Quinta da Pedra, located in the Monção e Melgaço sub-region of Minho in Northern Portugal. Minho is Vinho Verde territory, but, Rebe-

lo explained, these are not the quaffable, fizzy summer refreshers we associate with Vinho Verde. Made of Alvarinho, the Portuguese name for Albariño, they more closely resemble their Spanish counterparts from Rías Baixas to the north. The 2022 Graça da Pedra, which retails for about \$18, is a terrific value, fresh with citrus and stone fruit flavors and bracing

more familiar international varieties that comprise the rest of the blend, namely Merlot (30%) and Cabernet Sauvignon (20%). The wine aged 18 months in used barrels, followed by four to six years in bottle before release. Given its age and price (about \$30 retail), it seems destined to become a secret gem on restaurant wine lists or even an ambitious by-the-

Consisting of 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Touriga Nacional, and 20% Merlot, the Principal 2013 Grande Reserva aged for 24 months in new and used barriques and another eight years in bottle before release. "This is considered one of the best wines of Portugal," Rebelo said. Priced accordingly at \$150 retail, it was polished, supple, and complex, fully benefiting from its bottle age as it was just hitting its stride.

Of course, no Fladgate luncheon would be complete without some Port. Rebelo presented his guests with the Taylor Fladgate 20 Year Old Tawny, a classic familiar to most in the room, and a brand new Ruby Port called Taylor Fladgate 2022 Sentinels, which will be released in the United States this autumn. Sentinels, named for the old stone pillars that used to mark the boundaries of Port vineyards in the Douro, will be released in vintages when Taylor Fladgate decides not to re-



◀ Mazur introduces Quinta da Pedra's 2022 Graça da Pedra to attendees.

SOMM Journal associate wine editor Dave McIntyre in discussion with Rebelo.

acidity that make it ideal for a by-the-glass program and for pairing with salads or ceviche.

The second wine from Quinta da Pedra was the 2019 Milagres Alvarinho, aged for at least 12 months in old French oak barrels. Milagres—whose name is the Portuguese word for "miracles"—demonstrates how Alvarinho can develop complexity with age. Packaged in an attractive ridged bottle and priced at about \$30, it showed flavors of fresh apricots and white peach preserves as well as a silky texture from extended aging.

The other winery included in Fladgate's purchase of Ideal Wines is Principal, located in the Bairrada region just south of Porto. The property's 61 hectares of vineyards, all dry farmed, lie on gentle slopes composed of clay-limestone soils. The 2014 CalCario₃ do Principal (*calcario* is Portuguese for "limestone") features 50% Touriga Nacional, which Rebelo noted lends "a Portuguese twist" to the



glass pour for tasting menus.

"These grape varieties were chosen for this site because the property and location have similarities to Bordeaux," Rebelo explained. "It is about 10–15 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, and it rains a lot." Bordeaux winemaker and consultant Pascal Chatonnet, who counts Spain's Vega Sicilia among his clients, helps oversee production at Principal.

lease its classic Vintage Port, Rebelo said. Sentinels will therefore have the character of a Vintage Port from the producer's best vineyards, albeit with different structure and longevity.

From first sip to last, the lunch was a great introduction to the new additions to The Fladgate Partnership's portfolio and proof that the company remains a standard-bearer for Portuguese wine. SJM

THE RETURN OF RAVENSWOOD

*A NEW SPIN ON
A FAMOUS ZIN*

by KAREN MACNEIL





ALL TOLD, JOEL PETERSON HAS MADE 52 VINTAGES OF WINE,

and for most of those, he's been known as a master of Zinfandel who made Ravenswood a globally recognized brand. No other winemaker (with the exception of Ridge Vineyards' Paul Draper) has been more influential in making stunning, long-lived wines from "America's grape."

Now Peterson is at it again, this time helping Gallo, which bought Ravenswood in 2021. The goal: to revitalize the variety that put California wines on the map and kept them there for more than a century. "Zinfandel is California's history," says Peterson. "The first Zin was made here in 1852, and within 30 years, it was the state's most important red grape."

He and the Gallo team, headed by senior director of winemaking Michael Eddy-Cort, think the time is right for a Zinfandel renaissance. "The price-quality ratio is off the charts," he says. "For people who want a high-quality, terroir-driven wine, Zinfandel is the answer."

Eddy-Cort agrees. "Honestly, I think Zin has been forgotten," he admits. "We went through a time when Zinfandel was just too overripe and Port-like. But Zinfandel, grown carefully, has bright acidity and is medium-bodied. And here in California, we can make it with creativity. Zin isn't saddled with a narrow European idea of how to make it or what it has to taste like. We want to build a whole new level of excitement around Zinfandel, and there's no better person to work with on that than Joel Peterson."

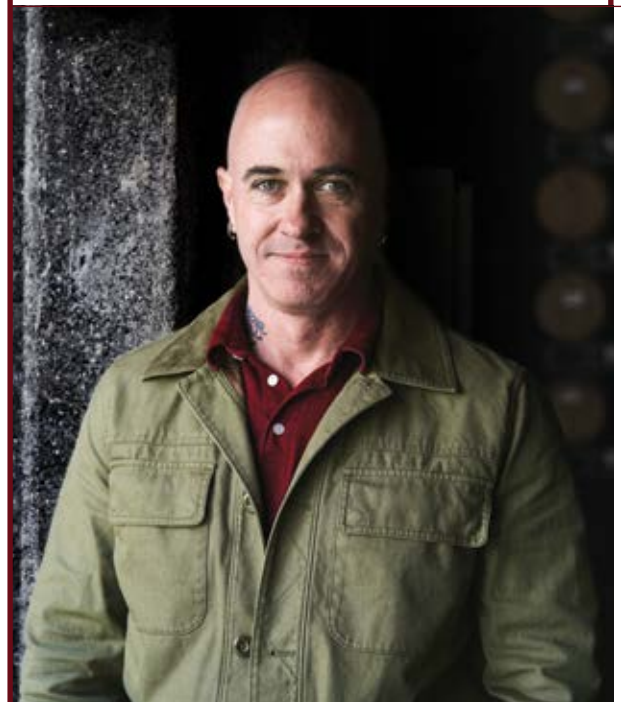
Peterson was a Berkeley research scientist planning to get a medical degree in immunology when a 1968 Zinfandel made by legendary Sonoma winemaker Joseph Swan changed the trajectory of his life. "Swan was making Zinfandel as a kind of practice for making great Pinot Noir," he says.

Peterson went to work for Swan, and the pair made wine side by side until Peterson went out on his own, founding Ravenswood in 1976. The brand was riding high on its successes, with production broaching half a million cases a year, when he and his partners decided to go public with an IPO in 1999. Two years later, in a financial twist, Peterson was outvoted by his board of directors, who decided to sell Ravenswood to Constellation for a reported \$151 million. Gallo subsequently bought Ravenswood from Constellation for an undisclosed amount and began working on a plan to reestablish the brand at the top of the Zinfandel hierarchy.

Gallo has maintained the focus on single-vineyard wines that originally made Ravenswood so famous. Three examples from the 2023 vintage have just been released: Ravenswood Teldeschi Vineyard (\$50), Ravenswood MacMurray Ranch (\$50), and Ravenswood Monte Rosso (\$70), along with the brand's bread-and-butter wine, the delicious 2023 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$27). And the company has also continued Peterson's practice of spotlighting mature vineyards, some of which still contain historic plantings of "mixed blacks"—Zinfandel plus Petite Sirah, Carignan, and other French as well as Italian varieties.

Showing off those terroirs and making layered, complex wines is important to Eddy-Cort, who says that "I want these to be very unique and different expressions of Zinfandel," as well as to Peterson, who adds, "Zin doesn't get a true terroir character until you get to 13.5% potential alcohol. But you have to be extremely careful at that point or you're on your way to raisins."

Ravenswood may have had a roller-coaster past, but its future now seems bright. "Zinfandel is a grape I love," Peterson says quietly, pulling his cowboy hat down further over his eyes. "Over the past five decades, it's the one grape that has given me sustenance."



Michael Eddy-Cort is senior director of winemaking at Gallo.

A Q&A With Gallo Senior Director of Winemaking Michael Eddy-Cort

BY RUTH TOBLAS

It's only fitting that the winemaker overseeing Ravenswood's revival is Michael Eddy-Cort, whose career has largely centered on working with storied producers. Holding a master's degree in food science with a specialization in enology from the University of California, Davis, he notes that his "passion for wine really sits within a broader intellectual interest in consumables in general; I have owned goats and made my own cheese, I've home-roasted my own coffee, I've baked bread, and what really fascinates me is trying to understand the raw materials and . . . the process [they undergo]."

As a student, he interned at Trefethen Family Vineyards in Napa Valley; upon graduation, he remained in Napa, taking his first job at the iconic Beaulieu Vineyard and eventually landing at Louis M. Martini Winery, where he worked for more than a decade. So even before arriving at Gallo, he says, "I'd already had this sense that being connected to history was meaningful, and I was already trying to really think about [the question], how do you respect history but also envision the future? Because I don't think being connected to history means you try to replicate exactly what was done. That never felt satisfying nor intuitively



MacMurray Ranch Vineyard in the Russian River Valley.

valuable to me. It's [about] how you interpret it. A lot of it boils down to inspiration. And I've certainly seen this with Ravenswood." He explains that every time his team has had a chance to meet with founder Joel Peterson, "It's visceral to see their excitement, their engagement, when they hear from him about how he built that brand and they know that they are the current executors of continuing that story, carrying on that [legacy]." We asked Eddy-Cort for details on the mission and methodology behind Ravenswood.

Why was it important for you to make a Russian River Valley Zinfandel from MacMurray Ranch?

What's important is to capture a vineyard expression that's unique and differentiated within the portfolio but also to try and get it to reflect what I consider typical of the AVA that it sits in. My senior winemaker and I happen to love Russian River Valley Zinfandel . . . and the first Zinfandel that Joel Peterson worked with was, in fact, from the Russian River. . . . There is one block of Zinfandel [set at] the highest elevation on MacMurray. We have worked with this Zinfandel for a couple of decades, but it has never had a place to really shine—it's always been kind of a blender, if you will. And so for us, to showcase something that we've appreciated for a very long time is a really cool opportunity.

Russian River Valley Zinfandel at its best to me is baked red fruit. I think of it

like a Linzertorte—it's got these baked raspberries on the top, but you also get this kind of caramelized butter. The MacMurray, I would say, is the freshest and brightest [of the three single-vineyard wines], as you'd expect from the Russian River. It's [got] a little brighter acidity and a little less tannin, so [it's] a little bit more vibrant. And the spice component takes on kind of a green peppercorn or maybe even leading to [a] culinary herbal [character]. I think it's arguably one of the most versatile in the lineup for food. We use primarily Hungarian oak—we really wanted the fruit to shine through on the MacMurray, and Hungarian tends to be more respectful, a little less dominant.

Tell us about the making of the Teldeschi Vineyard Zinfandel from Dry Creek.

Joel made a Teldeschi single-vineyard wine. He was looking for [Zinfandel] grapes and heard these Teldeschi folks might have it, so he goes to [Frank Teldeschi's] house and knocks on the door with his sample of his wine around lunchtime. And Frank is like, "No, I don't have any grapes for sale." So Joel says, "Well, thank you very much," and gets ready to leave. Frank says, "What's that in your hand?" "Oh, this is a bottle of the wine I made. I thought you might like to try it." Frank says, "Well, you know, we're just getting ready to put lunch on the table. Why don't you bring that in here?" And so they end up having this fantastic Italian-



Teldeschi Vineyard in the Dry Creek Valley AVA.

American lunch. They drink Joel's wine. Frank goes and gets some more wine. They end up with grappa, and it's an all-afternoon affair. And basically he says, "I'll sell you some grapes." Joel has to go sleep it off in his car for several hours. But he drives away and thinks, "Yeah, I'll never hear from him again." Well, in the middle of harvest, he gets a call, and it's Frank saying, "The grapes are ready." And Joel's kind of surprised: "When should I show up?" Frank says, "Tomorrow at 3 a.m." Joel says, "It's gonna be dark then." And Frank says, "Well, that's the idea. That way, the people that I have contracted won't see you picking up your grapes." It turns out that Frank was selling out from under his contract—and his contract was with Gallo. *[Laughs.]*

The Teldeschi is kind of on the opposite end of the spectrum [from the MacMurray Ranch]. This is our most exuberant, classic Dry Creek—boisterous, jammy, [with] ripe boysenberry [and] very black peppery spice . . . a big, rich, generous Zinfandel. We use American oak on that one; there's a lot of precedent for using American oak on Dry Creek Zins historically, and also it has the fruit intensity to stand up to the more assertive American oak characters—toasted coconut and that kind of thing.

What inspired the inclusion of the Monte Rosso Zinfandel in the portfolio?

That's the most obvious one for me, because, being at Martini for so many years, I made many vintages of Gnarly Vine, which is the Monte Rosso single-vineyard under the Martini label. . . . Those old vines up there are remarkable. It's just a very unique expression of Zinfandel, so that was a no-brainer to put it in this portfolio. And it also was quite interesting

because Joel was the first person outside of the Martini family to make wine off of Monte Rosso. He basically convinced Mike Martini to sell him some grapes. They were talking about business and Mike [mentioned] how he'd struggled with doing a Monte Rosso, and Joel said, "Well, you know what, Mike, I think you actually might make more money if you sold me the grapes and let me make wine." And so they did some back-of-the-envelope kind of calculation, and Mike said, "Yeah, I think you're right." So Joel was the first outside buyer, and in fact, our [2023] vintage has some fruit from the same block that Joel always made his single vineyard from. So again, there's that connection to where we've been and what he did.

I would say [the wine is] more classically structured. Coming from a hillside at

and it definitely confirmed what I had suspected. There was a lot of excitement. And I tried to tell the younger salespeople who may not have as much of a relationship with Ravenswood's history that, "Hey, you're gonna have customers who have been in the industry for a while who are gonna be ecstatic about what we're doing here." As soon as we made the announcement on social, we immediately got loads of comments from people saying, "Oh, thank God, Ravenswood's back; it's so exciting you're doing this." So there is this kind of relationship that is pretty enduring and pretty heartfelt.

[Meanwhile,] we believe in the wine we're making, and we plan to share Ravenswood with consumers through tastings at local events like Outside Lands in San Francisco.



Famed Sonoma vineyard Monte Rosso.

elevation, it definitely has some firm tannin, high acid, [and] pretty extraordinary complexity because you do get some of the minerally notes; the spice can come across as either black or white pepper, depending upon the season, and [it's] a little bit more on the red-fruited side, like cherry. And I'd venture to guess that it will be the longest-lived in bottle.

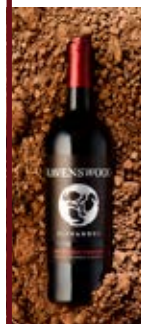
How are trade and consumers reacting to the relaunch so far?

One thing we were clear on from the start was that all of us had very favorable memories and nostalgia for what Ravenswood used to be. And we all felt quite strongly that there would be people out in the trade for whom that would resonate as well. And so in March, when we relaunched in three markets—New Jersey, Texas, and California—I traveled around talking to distributor sales folks,

Given that, what are the chances in your view for a Zinfandel comeback more generally?

If you look at the amount of Zinfandel that is crushed in the state of California and then you compare that to the domestic sales of varietally labeled Zin, the sales are in the neighborhood of a quarter or a third of the volume that is crushed in the state. What that means is that people are drinking Zinfandel, they just don't know it. It's probably mostly in red blends. So to me, the crux of the challenge is getting people to walk to that Zin set, and I'm hoping that we've communicated that to our sales staff and the distributor's sales staff so that they can influence operators on the floor to say, "Hey, have you thought about Zinfandel?" Because I think we have the brand. I think we have the wines. We just need to get them to give it a try. **SJ**

TASTING NOTES



Ravenswood 2023 Zinfandel, MacMur-ray Vineyard, Sonoma County (\$27) Streamlined notes of blackberry are seasoned with basil and rosemary, while charming flavors of white pepper and lavender also lace the palate. Vibrant and fresh. **92** —Meridith May



Ravenswood 2023 Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County (\$50) Brushy floral tones perfume the glass along with burnished aromas of black plum. On the silky and sultry palate, white pepper melds with new leather, Worcestershire, coffee, and dense blackberry. The result is elegant in its posture. **93** —M.M.



Ravenswood 2023 Zinfandel, Teldeschi Vineyard, Sonoma County (\$50) Wild strawberry, clove, cinnamon, and mulberry are intense and juicy from the first sip. Brisk acidity and a brushy midpalate create a stunning mouthfeel, while energy permeates the palate. Hibiscus tea, sweet tobacco, and spiced watermelon gelée glide across the finish. **95** —M.M.



Ravenswood 2023 Zinfandel, Monte Rosso Vineyard, Sonoma County (\$70) Meaty and broad, with concentrated notes of black pepper and graphite. The fruit is rich and expressive, including fresh and juicy blueberries. Brushstrokes of dark chocolate over cedar enhance the creamy profile. **95** —M.M.

“Only the Beginning”

HISTORIC RHÔNE VALLEY PRODUCER **VIDAL-FLEURY** REAFFIRMS ITS COMMITMENT TO THE U.S. MARKET by *Kate Newton*

Vidal-Fleury is situated at the foot of the terraced vineyards of Côte-Rôtie in the Rhône Valley.

FOUNDED IN 1781 as Maison Vidal in Côte-Rôtie, Vidal-Fleury long ago solidified its status as a vital player in the wine-making history of the Rhône Valley, where it today claims the title of the region's oldest continuously operating winery. But by the time its current general manager and head winemaker, Antoine Dupré, arrived to take the helm in 2020, the Guigal family—who purchased Vidal-Fleury in 1984, 60 years after Etienne Guigal was hired there as winemaker and cellar master—was eager to usher in a new era, albeit without losing sight of the heritage that has defined their livelihood.

Fortunately, Dupré, who holds a master's degree in international wine and spirits trade from the Burgundy School of Business and has previously worked in cellars in the French region as well as in Bordeaux and South Africa, was more than equipped to rise to the challenge. As he worked closely with the Guigals to determine effective strategies for revitalizing Vidal-Fleury's image, the producer's relationship with the U.S. market was one of the first things to be placed under the microscope; to that end, Dupré sought to partner with a new importer that would

help its wines reach a broader audience. That opportunity arose in 2021 when he met Terlato Wine Group (TWG) CEO Bill Terlato but took several years to come to fruition, as Terlato asked Dupré to seek him out again once the wines Dupré had crafted himself became available; last year, after Terlato blind tasted Dupré's wines in a lineup with other Rhône Valley producers, he told Dupré that TWG was committed to once again making Vidal-Fleury a domestic “success story,” according to Dupré: “I'm aware that it will take time to do it, but step by step we will root the brand in the U.S. market,” he says. “On my side, we have everything to make [that] success story: an impressive team; strong partnerships with viticulturists; wonderful, unique, and modern facilities in the heart of Côte-Rôtie that give me the ability to grow if needed; [and access to] roughly 20 different AOPs . . . with a very good value for money.”

Vidal-Fleury is currently offering four wines through TWG: its entry-level Côtes du Rhône Rouge and Blanc as well as its Crozes-Hermitage Rouge and Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge. Dupré notes that the lineup is intended to entice American

consumers with recognizable entry points into the realm of Rhône Valley winemaking by emphasizing well-known crus that are accessible in terms of pricing. Collectively, they also embody his emphasis on what he calls “the freshness and cleanness of the fruit,” the pursuit of which necessitated major changes to Vidal-Fleury's winemaking practices upon his arrival. Among the most notable adjustments was harvesting white grapes earlier to retain higher levels of acidity; shortening the maceration period and lowering the fermentation temperature to yield less extraction in the red wines; transitioning the Côtes du Rhône Blanc from a 100% Viognier to a blend of Viognier, Grenache Blanc, Clairette, and Roussanne to enhance complexity; and incorporating the use of new oak with low to medium-low toast into the aging regimen at levels of 10%–50%, imparting increased density, sweetness, and, above all, a sense of elegance in the finished wines.

As he aims to “juggle [between] history, classicism, modernity, [and] the rapidly evolving taste of the final consumer,” in his words, one traditional element Dupré was intent on preserving was Vidal-Fleury's packaging, recognizable for its



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIDAL-FLEURY

Antoine Dupré joined Vidal-Fleury as general manager and head winemaker in 2020.

coat of arms emblazoned with the year of the winery's founding. "I didn't want to change... the DNA of the label, so I have just changed the quality of the paper to [be] more premium, and I have revised the color to make the brand more visible on display, [which is] very important," he explains. "But not too much change: [In] 2020, let's say 80%, 90% of my market told me, 'Don't touch the label,' and it was true because it's our identity. And a traditional label reassures the consumer, [which is] very important."

American consumers are increasingly also reassured by wineries' sustainability bona fides—a subject Dupré is well versed in, having worked for producers with varying degrees of commitment to climate-conscious winegrowing and maintained Vidal-Fleury's long-term partnerships with organic- or Haute Valeur Environnementale (HVE)—certified growers. All four of the Vidal-Fleury wines being distributed in the U.S. are HVE Level 3—certified, the highest level of certification for the French program, which counts biodiversity and water resource management among its major tenets. And while Dupré supports a more needs-based approach, encouraging both growers and

fellow producers to adopt the sustainable methods that work best for their land as part of what he calls "true sustainable viticulture," he's vocal about the practices that have been effective for Vidal-Fleury in terms of not just quality but its adaptation to the impacts of climate change in the Rhône Valley, including installing photo-voltaic panels and protective nets among the vines to protect them from the heat, avoiding sourcing from and growing in dry areas that cannot be properly irrigated, and planting cover crops to maintain higher moisture levels in the soil. He also supports the Inter Rhône interprofessional organization's ongoing efforts to test new grape varieties that are more drought-resistant while advocating for a shorter adoption period for eco-conscious practices than French regulation typically allows. "In France, we analyze too long and too much to make one decision; it takes a lot of time to change it," Dupré laments with a laugh. "[But] it's only the beginning."

A sense of urgency is crucial given the extreme vintage variation the Rhône Valley and other French regions are experiencing. Fortunately, such challenges have so far not had an overtly adverse impact on wine quality, in Dupré's view: 2020, he recalls, was "exceptionally early and marked the return of fresher wines with great balance," while yields in 2021 were impacted by frost, hail, and rain and ultimately produced wines with low alcohol levels and even more freshness than the prior year. The heat and excessive drought that characterized 2022 resulted in grapes with "fantastic maturity and beautiful balance," and 2023, "marked by a rainy spring and a hot summer" with significant diurnal swings, yielded elegant wines with high acidity, smooth textures, and vibrant fruit character. While the effort required by Dupré and his colleagues to appropriately meet the moment has been significant, he's encouraged by the progress they've made on bringing his and the Guigals' shared vision to fruition. "It [takes] a long time to change the feeling of a company, of the wine. Step by step [the feedback] has started to be very positive," he says, adding, "All of the work we did and we are doing in the cellar just started to increase and to make people more curious about Vidal-Fleury." Given their own penchant for curiosity, surely American consumers will take notice. *SJ*

TASTING NOTES



Vidal-Fleury 2023 Côtes du Rhône Blanc, Rhône Valley, France (\$20) This blend of 55% Grenache Blanc, 25% Clairette, and 20% Viognier is weighty on the palate, showing an unctuous, peanut-brittle creaminess. Thanks to balanced acidity, the richness of its apricot-nectar viscosity is reined in, offering up a lovely wash of stone fruit. Midpalate notes of tangerine peel and mango, along with a subtle herbaceous quality, emerge before the finish of orange blossom. **93** —*Meridith May*



Vidal-Fleury 2021 Côtes du Rhône Rouge, Rhône Valley, France (\$20) Dark plum is amplified by a fine acid structure in this silky and bright blend of 65% Grenache, 20% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre, and 5% Carignan. Notes of coffee, bacon fat, black pepper, and rhubarb gelée are intricately staged between layers of sandalwood and tobacco. **93** —*M.M.*



Vidal-Fleury 2022 Crozes-Hermitage Rouge, Rhône Valley, France (\$50) This 100% Syrah boasts the iconic white-pepper notes of the Northern Rhône as well as aromas of incense and leather. Black plums have impact with gamy, savory notes of grilled meats and salty fig, and coffee and bramble go deep on the brooding, spicy finish. **94** —*M.M.*



Vidal-Fleury 2020 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge, Rhône Valley, France (\$75) Spiced cherry tingles the palate within a surge of white pepper and high-toned acidity, enhancing the grenadine-like quality of the fruit in this blend of 85% Grenache, 10% Syrah, and 5% Mourvèdre crafted from old vines on clay-rich soil abundant in round stones and pebbles. Grip and minerality lend focus to notes of cured meats, chocolate, boysenberry, and fennel, and earthy tones of sweet soil permeate the palate. **96** —*M.M.*

The Next Frontier

THE WINE GROUP PLANTS ITS FLAG IN CALIFORNIA'S PAICINES AVA

by Wanda Mann

COULD THE TINY and virtually unknown Paicines AVA be the next frontier in fine wine? "I've been in [the business] now for 25 years, and for years we looked outside California for what's next," says Jessica Tomei, vice president of winemaking at The Wine Group. Well, not anymore. "Paicines is really exciting because it's undiscovered for the most part in California," she enthuses. Why does she consider it "a new treasure for us to explore in our backyard"?

Just 29 miles from Monterey Bay, Paicines is tucked away on the Central Coast in San Benito County. Although it became an AVA in 1982, it lacks the name recognition of higher-profile California wine regions; however, insiders like Tomei have long been impressed by the grapes it yields and have blended them with fruit from other areas to boost quality. "In a concerted effort to improve wine quality and grape supply, we started exploring fruit from different regions," she explains.

"Obviously, quality starts in the vineyard. We dedicated a few years to sampling and working with growers in different areas in the Central Coast, exploring where we could achieve the best quality for the price." When Tomei tasted grapes from Paicines, she thought, "There's something special here."

Ideal climatic conditions contribute significantly to Paicines' grape-growing prowess. "Due to the proximity to the coast [in this] unique location, you achieve warm days and a cooling effect at night without the dampness of the fog often found in neighboring Monterey County," explains Tomei. "This balance of heat and cool, along with a long growing season, promotes robust phenolic ripeness." Consistently pleased by the fruit it was sourcing, The Wine Group began purchasing vineyards in Paicines and now owns 1,681 acres, of which 1,280 are planted with vines. "The Paicines vineyards offer a great blend of water security, scale, production,

quality, and overall value as an asset to produce coastal red and white wine-grapes for our wine programs, [which are] currently met with strong demand," says John Sutton, CEO of The Wine Group.

In addition to enjoying a favorable semi-arid climate, the Paicines properties boast an abundant range of soil types—gravel, loam, clay, and limestone—which were formed by the remnants of an ancient inland sea. "We've created four distinct vineyards due to soil diversity, climate, [and] slope exposure. There is a Goldilocks effect: Many varieties do well, specifically due to the microclimates found in the vineyard," explains Tomei.

The Wine Group currently grows ten varieties at its Iron Spur, Palisades Trail, Strike Slip, and Chalk Crest vineyards in Paicines, all four of which are sustainably farmed and SIP (Sustainability in Practice) certified. The Gabilan Mountain protects them from the impact of excessive fog and humidity.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN

The Wine Group's Strike Slip Vineyard in the Paicines AVA.



Iron Spur Vineyard

Set on 84 acres at elevations of 682–1,236 feet, Iron Spur is planted to Merlot, Malbec, Chardonnay, and Pinot Grigio. While The Wine Group has long drawn on fruit from Paicines to enhance its other Central Coast wines, the **Benziger**

2023 Running Wild Chardonnay (\$33) is its first Paicines AVA wine; the grapes were sourced from this vineyard, where

the Chardonnay blocks are on steep, sun-drenched slopes that can only be hand-harvested. The Diablo clay soil, mixed with some silty clay loam, aids in water retention and lends the wine its terroir-driven character. "It's not a super-buttery California Chardonnay," says Tomei. "It has a Burgundian taste profile, [with] the balance, the depth, [and] the structure true to the terroir of Paicines." To achieve this style, 100% of the wine underwent malolactic fermentation and bâtonnage for four months to build texture. Aging in French oak provided structure and subtle notes of spice and warm vanilla without overpowering the wine.

Iron Spur is also the source of grapes for the highly anticipated release of **As One Cru 2023 Paicines Project Chardonnay**, which aged for four months in stainless steel to retain freshness followed by eight months in oak barrels to add complexity. The Paicines Project is spearheaded by Chris Radomski, founder of As One Cru. "There are many aspects of this region that are very attractive from a climate and viticultural aspect," he says. "The weather patterns, soil structures, and elevation variations all combine for an optimum growing environment for the various varieties. This is very rare in a region; in fact, Paicines embodies elements that are found also in Napa



and Sonoma, which allow the varieties to flourish at a very high level while maintaining some regional attributes—the best of both worlds but at a lower cost."

Palisades Trail Vineyard

At 779 acres, Palisades Trail is the largest of The Wine Group's Paicines vineyards. Located between 647 and 1,271 feet in elevation, it is primarily planted to Chardonnay (374 acres) and Cabernet Sauvignon (200 acres), with smaller plots of Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, and Grenache. "At Palisades, the uniform sands of the Mocho loam are well-drained, with well-rounded sand grains. We have a variety of varieties that are grown on the vineyard, and [those] soils allow deficit irrigation techniques to restrict vigor and concentrate fruit," explains Tomei. Palisades Trail is the source of the fruit for the **As One Cru**

2022 Paicines Project Cabernet Sauvignon, which aged in barrels for 20 months: "To be able to take 25 years of Napa knowledge and DNA and apply it to our Paicines vineyards is an opportunity to redefine and put a tremendous amount of quality, value, and excitement back into wine," adds Radomski.



Strike Slip Vineyard

In Strike Slip, which encompasses 250 acres at 723–1,316 feet above sea level, "the soil is significantly dark, rich clay that bears the signature of the proximal fault and associated morphology—sag pond clays and fault gouge," says Tomei. "This is the type of clay that dries out in summer, and you can see the cracks in the earth. The vine roots are forced to search through the soil for water, putting stress on the vines, which helps to concentrate the fruit for rich flavors and dark colors. Bordeaux varieties are grown here," including Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot.



"PAICINES IS REALLY EXCITING BECAUSE IT'S UNDISCOVERED FOR THE MOST PART IN CALIFORNIA."

—JESSICA TOMEI, VICE PRESIDENT OF WINEMAKING, THE WINE GROUP

Chalk Crest Vineyard

Chalk Crest's 167 acres, ranging from 784 to 1,737 feet in altitude, are planted exclusively with five different clones of Pinot Noir. As implied by the word "chalk" in its name, "[These] marine limestone deposits were intruded and metamorphosed by the granitic rocks that correlate to the Sierra Nevada mountains. [They] have been displaced to their current location by the tectonic motions between the Pacific plate and the North American plate, but the slow weathering of the limestone deposits at uplifted elevation have resulted in the soil profile of Chalk Crest," explains Tomei, who is "especially excited" for the day when The Wine Group produces a Paicines-appellated Pinot Noir: "It has a specific profile that is unique to the area that wine drinkers need to try!"—namely a "bright expression of fresh acidity layered with red raspberries, bramble berries, ripe plum, [and] tea leaves, [along with] a supple and soft texture with a mineral finish."

Although the majority of the grapes grown by The Wine Group in Paicines are currently used to enhance its wines from other coastal regions, the Benziger Running Wild Chardonnay and As One Cru Paicines Project are pivotal steps toward a long-term goal of building a portfolio of high-quality Paicines AVA wines. "We're really looking to produce a range of luxury wines and brands that are going to reinforce the quality from an area that is the next frontier within wine," adds Tomei. §

Unbottled Emotions

AS MEERLUST WINE ESTATE CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY, IT REFLECTS ON ITS MUCH LENGTHIER HISTORY OF WINEGROWING

story by Wanda Mann / photos by Mikhail Lipyanskiy

FIFTY YEARS MAY seem like a blip on the lengthy timeline of the Myburgh family's eight generations of winegrowing in South Africa, but the anniversary of their wine label's debut represents a powerful turning point in their viticultural journey—one that merits reflection and celebration. "Fifty years is quite an emotional [achievement]," Meerlust Wine Estate owner Hannes Myburgh told a rapt audience of sommeliers, trade, and media at an exclusive springtime tasting at The

were inextricably linked to the vision and determination of the Myburghs, who in 1756 acquired what is now the Meerlust estate from the Blackenburg family (who had in turn purchased it from German immigrant Henning Huisig). Hannes' father, Nico, inherited the property in 1959, and Hannes took the reins upon Nico's death in 1988. The estate, which is a national monument, is located about 30 miles south of Stellenbosch and "5 kilometers . . . from False Bay as the crow



Meerlust Wine Estate cellar master/managing director Wim Truter, sales and marketing director Deidre Taylor, and owner Hannes Myburgh.

Modern in Manhattan. "My father started the label in 1975 with a pure Cabernet Sauvignon, so this is indeed a milestone in our history I'm very proud of."

And that pride is warranted: The Meerlust 1975 Cabernet Sauvignon Hannes shared with us still exuded impressive grace, freshness, and energy a half-century later. As the tasting progressed, it became clear that the wines in our glass

flies," said Hannes. This proximity to the coast inspired Huisig to name the property Meerlust, which "means pleasure or joy of the sea," he added.

Those refreshing sea breezes amount to more than a bucolic delight: "[The] ocean has a massive moderating impact on our climate. The farm is actually more moderate than the rest of Stellenbosch, as we don't have [the same] cool nights



or midday highs," explained cellar master and managing director Wim Truter, who joined Meerlust in 2020.

The soils across Meerlust's 210 planted acres, meanwhile, support the growth of quality grapes, namely Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay. "My dad was a very passionate and exceptional farmer, and over time he planted more vineyards and supplied various co-ops with these well-grown grapes. By 1975, he decided to create his own label, and that was the advent of the 1975 Cabernet that we are celebrating today," explained Hannes.

Working with Truter, Hannes has expanded upon his father's farming prowess by committing to a deeper understanding of the earth. "In the last couple of years, we've been doing a lot of work . . . digging into our terroir literally and figuratively," said Truter. "And the reason for this was that we realized that . . . the various varieties that we plant, they look different from the different zones on the farm." The analysis unearthed varying compositions of clay and granite within four zones: the Lowlands, Quarry, River Terraces, and



Compagniesdrift. For example, the clay soils, derived from shale, of the Lowlands are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, while the greywacke and shale soils of the Quarry support the cultivation of Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Pinot Noir. "I could try to sound clever about the winemaking and things that we do, but we're just really blessed with this incredible terroir, and it's allowed this continuity," Truter mused. "I think the Meerlust estate wines have always been blessed with elegance and balance, and it really is derived from this beautiful exposure and climate that we have."

Cabernet Sauvignon was only the beginning of Meerlust's focus on producing terroir-driven wines. In 1980, the first vintage of Rubicon, its iconic red Bordeaux blend—and South Africa's oldest—was produced. The wine was inspired by Nico's 1967 visit to Bordeaux, where he was struck by the similarities to the terroir at Meerlust. "My father was completely taken aback and inspired by what he saw in Bordeaux because of the proximity to the sea, the sunlight, and [the] terroir," said Hannes. That visit was a call to action, prompting Meerlust to become "the first farm in Stellenbosch to commercially plant Cabernet Franc," added Truter: Like Julius Caesar proclaiming "the die is cast" when he crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C., Nico was not dissuaded by naysayers who scoffed at his decision to plant Bordeaux varieties.

The Rubicon flight presented at The Modern showcased the 1980, 1995, 2001,



Author Wanda Mann at Meerlust's tasting at The Modern in New York City.

2009, and 2015 vintages, crafted by Truter's predecessors, while lunch was paired with the current 2020 and 2021 vintages that he produced. We also tasted the charming 2023 Chardonnay, the estate's only white wine. While we mused about the changing of the guard, the evolution of the wines, and their shared and unique traits, Truter reminded us of Meerlust's guiding philosophy: "We really want to make the best possible wine we can put in the bottle and create an environment like this where we can get together with great people and have great wines and great conversations."

However, just like achieving the level of complexity for which Meerlust's wines are known, Hannes acknowledged that

enduring for eight generations and reaching the 50th anniversary of its first vintage has not been without challenges. "Building the brand through times of severe political upheaval, sanctions, and embargoes proved to be very difficult, always living in the hope that things would change someday so that we could compete on a level playing field; my father always said that it was like being in a boxing ring with one hand tied behind your back," he said. "And [then] that glorious day came when South Africa became a democracy in 1994 under the leadership of our extraordinary statesman Nelson Mandela."

From the expansion of Dutch colonialism to the dismantling of apartheid, much has transpired between the 18th century, when the Myburghs became the stewards of Meerlust, and the 21st century, when their critically acclaimed wines are celebrated around the world. "We've been there through thick and through the thin and the thinner," Hannes mused. "Building the brand both nationally and internationally has been a thrilling exercise, from being an underdog in the '80s to being recognized and respected today."

Hannes lamented that his "father passed away too early for him to witness the success of his dream internationally" but credits the producer's current success to "his belief in the piece of land at the southern tip of Africa that he so loved and cherished and nurtured and his relentless commitment to quality. [This] is the reason why Meerlust wines have remained unique, authentic, trustworthy, and honest." ❧



Not a Boundary but a Canvas

EXPLORING THE DIVERSITY OF SPANISH TERROIR THROUGH **GARCÍA CARRIÓN'S PATA NEGRA LABEL** by Chris Howard

EVERY GLASS OF WINE is a story written in soil, shaped by climate, and told through the careful hands of winemakers. For García Carrión, Spain's largest wine producer and a global leader in the industry, terroir is not merely a concept but a philosophy deeply embedded in its craft. Its Pata Negra line of wines takes us on a journey across Spain's most expressive regions—from the sun-drenched vineyards of Jumilla to the high-altitude elegance of Ribera del Duero, the iconic tradition of Rioja, the heartland of Valdepeñas, and the sparkling heritage of Catalonia.

Encapsulating the interplay of soil, climate, geography, and human influence, terroir could poetically be defined as the soul of a wine, connecting the sensory attributes that tie a given expression's character to the location of its vineyards. In García Carrión's case, it serves as a canvas for expressing creativity, tradition, and authenticity. The Pata Negra range is a testament to this idea, with each DO wine crafted to honor its origin and tell the story of its region.

To ensure that, in its words, "each bottle of Pata Negra is not just a wine; it's a crafted interpretation of place," the company combines artisanal techniques with cutting-edge technology. For example, it conducts nighttime harvests in some regions to preserve freshness; employs satellite monitoring and AI to analyze vineyard conditions and optimize irrigation, nutrient application, and pest control; and utilizes temperature-controlled fermentation tanks to preserve the natural aromas and flavors of the fruit, which are separated into lots to preserve the distinct expressions of their respective soils and microclimates.

Jumilla: Harnessing the Power of Monastrell

In southeastern Spain, Jumilla's arid climate and limestone soils create ideal conditions for Monastrell, a grape known for its boldness and Mediterranean character. The region's combination of hot days and cool nights allows the grapes to develop intense flavors while retaining balanced acidity.

Pata Negra Jumilla greets the senses with aromas of ripe blackberries and sun-dried herbs plus a whisper of smoky minerality, evoking the rugged beauty of its sun-drenched terroir. On the palate, expect a bold structure with rich, concentrated fruit and a savory finish.

Ribera del Duero: The Elegance of Altitude

Dramatic diurnal temperature shifts at high elevations contribute to Ribera del Duero's reputation for refined power. Here, Tempranillo—known locally as Tinta del País—thrives, producing wines with ripe fruit, complexity, and impressive aging potential. The region's diverse soils, comprising limestone, marl, and clay, enhance drainage and provide the foundation for concentrated flavors and refined tannins.

Pata Negra Ribera del Duero enchants with notes of dark cherries, violets, and a hint of cedar, grounded by a silky texture and a long, elegant finish.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

García Carrión's Viña Arnaiz winemaking facility in Ribera del Duero.



The estate of Jaime Serra in Catalonia.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

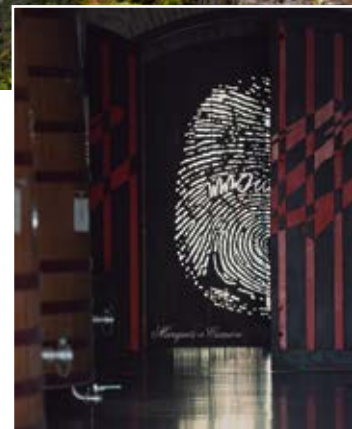


PHOTO COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

The Marqués de Carrión facility in Rioja.

Catalonia: Sparkling Heritage

With sandy soils and cooling sea breezes, Catalonia, home to Spain's celebrated Cava, is where García Carrión's Jaime Serra estate transforms coastal terroir into sparkling refinement. Native varieties like Macabeo, Xarel-lo, and Parellada produce fresh, vibrant bubbles.

Pata Negra Cava dances on the palate with bright citrus notes, crisp green apple, and a delicate floral lift, finishing with a fine, persistent mousse that captures the essence of the Mediterranean. These sparkling wines combine freshness, elegance, and a sense of place.

Valdepeñas: Tradition at the Heart

In the heart of Castilla-La Mancha lies Valdepeñas, a region where clay-limestone soils yield approachable yet noble wines. Valdepeñas has a long-standing tradition of winemaking dating back centuries, with Tempranillo (locally known as Cencibel) serving as its flagship grape; the region's winemakers, meanwhile, have preserved artisanal techniques such as aging in amphorae.

Pata Negra Valdepeñas greets the senses with inviting aromas of ripe plums, blackberries, and wild violets, accented by hints of cocoa and leather plus a touch of earthy spice. On the palate, the Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon deliver a harmonious balance of vibrant fruit and smooth tannins. A juicy core of dark berries is complemented by a savory undertone, leading to a satisfying, fruit-forward finish that highlights the warmth and authenticity of this sunlit region.



Señorio de Los Llanos in Valdepeñas.


PHOTO COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

Rioja: Tradition Refined

Few winegrowing regions in the world are as iconic as Rioja. Situated between the Atlantic's cooling influence and the Mediterranean's warmth, it produces wines of harmony and balance. The region's long history of winemaking is reflected in its traditional production of Tempranillo, aged in oak barrels to achieve complexity and depth.

As Amagoia Urteaga Ruiz de Viñaspre, wine ambassador at J. García Carrión, notes, "Rioja is where tradition and terroir come together to create wines of remarkable elegance and character." Pata Negra Rioja brings this philosophy to life, weaving together aromas of red currants, ripe cherries, and toasted spices with hints of dried roses and vanilla. On the palate, it unfolds with a velvety mouthfeel, revealing layers of dried fruit and tobacco with a subtle touch of cocoa. Balanced acidity and polished tannins lead to an elegant, lingering finish that captures the essence of Rioja's timeless tradition.

A Global Celebration of the Local

Pata Negra has become a global ambassador for Spanish wine, earning accolades at competitions like Berliner Wine Trophy, Mundus Vini, and Concours Mondial de Bruxelles as well as 90-plus scores from sister publication *The Tasting Panel*. By combining premium quality with accessibility, it has elevated the reputation of Spanish wines on the global stage. As the García Carrión team puts it, "Terroir isn't a boundary—it's a canvas"; through Pata Negra, they paint a vivid portrait of Spain's diverse landscapes. 



{ italy }

Bubbly, BRUNELLO, and BANTER

AT ATLAS BISTRO IN SCOTTSDALE, AZ, A **BANFI** WINE DINNER SHOWCASED THE PRODUCER'S PENCHANT FOR AFFORDABLE LUXURY



The evening's guests included Felicity Macdonald, sommelier and wine curator, Rift Wine Bar and Grounds on 2nd; Dylan Ayres, server/sommelier, Etta; Alley Babij, owner, Terroir Wine Pub; Shaun Adams, beverage director, Scottsdale National Golf Club; Brian Downey, lead sommelier and buyer, Lon's at The Hermosa Inn; Oscar Avila, GM and wine director, Atlas Bistro and Atlas Wines; and Jared Sowinski, director of beverage, Upward Projects Restaurant Group.

story by **JONATHAN CRISTALDI**

photos by **JILL MCNAMARA**

Banfi Vintners district manager Cliff Schupbach released the cage on a bottle of metodo classico sparkling wine from Piedmont, popped the cork, and began pouring. It was a welcome salve to the 90-plus-degree heat that had already begun baking Scottsdale, Arizona, by the time we gathered for a dinner showcasing the Italian producer's wines in April. Todd Sawyer, owner of host venue Atlas Bistro and adjacent bottle shop Atlas Wines, zipped past with a plate of arancini, offering them to the group of sommeliers and beverage buyers invited to the event. Everyone was milling about, eyeing the lineup of labels that lined Atlas' store shelves, inspiring a chorus of "Let's pop that" or "That's a killer wine." Once the last arancini had been nabbed and the bubbly was drained, we were ushered into an adjoining dining room for a multicourse meal.

Before we sat down, I chatted with Sawyer and Oscar Avila, Atlas' GM and wine director. "We have a huge Rolodex of clients who are regulars and seeking out higher-end wines. We do half a dozen to a dozen wine dinners each season to fit the clientele," said Sawyer (who is also making his own wine in Martinborough, New Zealand, set to release in 2027). "We like to keep it intimate so guests can speak to the winemaker or brand ambassador and have real conversations," added Avila, who appreciates the diversity of Banfi's portfolio. "You can find every tier—from bottles priced for someone just getting into wine up to triple-digit collectibles."

Shaun Adams, beverage director at Scottsdale National Golf Club for the past 11 years, visited Banfi in both 2014 and 2018. "When I taste wines, I'm thinking about individual clients—what they like, what they respond to," he explained. It's Adams' job to know the preferences of all 150 club members and guide them accordingly; he noted that they love Banfi for its wines' strong quality-to-price ratio.



Castello Banfi global brand ambassador Jgor Marini with Atlas Bistro and Atlas Wines owner Todd Sawyer.



Banfi Vintners district manager Cliff Schupbach with guest Paul Urness, director of on-premise sales, Breakthru Beverage Group.

Once we were seated, Schupbach introduced himself and Banfi global wine ambassador Jgor Marini. “Really, this was just an excuse to have dinner with you all,” mused the tall, genial, sports coat-wearing veteran of the wine industry who could pass for Huey Lewis in another life. The goal of the evening, he explained, was to connect around the table over thoughtfully curated pairings and showcase a few Banfi wines that “offer a fresher perspective on what Banfi is today, to highlight what we’ve done at the estate level, between the Tuscan property and the Piedmont property, and to show how intimately involved we are in creating better terroir and better places to grow wine—what we call ‘affordable luxury.’”

Banfi, owned by the Mariani family, operates two primary wineries: one on its sprawling 7,000-acre estate in Montalcino, home to not only vineyards but also 300-year-old olive groves, and the other near the village of Strevi in Piedmont’s Acqui Terme, where the focus is on high-acid whites and sparkling wines. The Marianis also own vineyards in Bolgheri, underscoring their commitment to key terroirs across Italy. “Banfi brings 70,000 visitors a year to the 5,000-person town of Montalcino,” said Marini. “And other producers have popped up making great wine too. A rising tide raised a lot of boats.”

Banfi made a pivotal move in 2019 when it handed over U.S. import rights for Riunite, a brand it had represented for over 50 years, to the cooperative Gruppo Italiano Vini (GIV). The decision signaled a deliberate shift toward prioritizing its own portfolio. Schupbach wanted to ensure that the attendees understood how these changes have shaped the current portfolio. “We’re a different organization than we were,” he said, noting that their renewed focus has brought with it a lineup of exceptionally crafted wines that are particularly well suited for on-premise programs, especially given their value.

Indeed, the expressions we tasted showed distinct personalities across price points, from \$18 to \$90, and were warmly received by the guests, who praised their classic varietal character, purity, and focus over the course of the meal. Here are my notes.

First Course



The wine: **Banfi 2020 Cuvée Aurora Rosé Metodo Classico Alta Langa DOCG, Italy (\$35)** Highly fragrant with aromas of toasty brioche and wild berry. Medium-bodied, crisp, and charming, the palate of this extra-brut expression with 5 grams per liter of residual sugar is lifted by a fine mousse that carries through to a saline mineral finish. **92**

The pairings: Duck-breast pastrami with whipped goat cheese, baby arugula, and tart pickled cherry; wild-mushroom arancini; grilled chicken satay; and cured Wester Ross Scottish salmon belly

The verdict: Given its complexity, this makes for a solid alternative to pricier Champagne; it also served as an excellent palate cleanser for those rich and creamy amuses-bouches.

Second Course

The wine: **Banfi 2023 Principessa Gavia, Gavi DOCG, Italy (\$18)** This 100% single-vineyard Cortese fermented and aged in stainless steel is intensely aromatic, with notes of lime blossom and white flowers. Saline tension and a rich lemon-oil character are balanced by refreshing acidity. **92**

The pairing: Wild ahi tuna crudo with buttermilk, roasted pineapple, sweet and sour Fresno chiles, lemongrass oil, and poppyseed aioli in a makrut lime broth

The verdict: A spot-on pairing. The crisp, citrusy wine sliced through the rich, fatty tuna, marrying seamlessly with every ingredient. The room fell silent but for the clink of spoons against plates, until Jgor Marini broke in: “The U.S. is one of our top markets for this white,” he noted, adding that it also works well with sushi.





Banfi 2023 Principessa Gavia with wild ahi tuna crudo.

Third Course

 **The wine: Castello Banfi 2022 Rosso di Montalcino DOC, Italy (\$28)**

Red berry fruit leads, accented by hints of orange zest and cacao nib. Acidity and tannins are nicely balanced, supported by a graceful frame. Aged ten to 12 months in French oak barriques and large Slavonian oak barrels. **92**

 **The pairing:** Spicy 12-hour-braised oxtail ragout over cavatelli with confit king trumpet mushrooms and basil mascarpone

 **The verdict:** The aromatic seasoning of the oxtail—including clove and allspice—brought out gorgeous minty and earthy notes in the Rosso di Montalcino, while the lime juice used for braising complemented the wine's zestiness, creating a harmonious and refreshing sensation.



Castello Banfi 2022 Rosso di Montalcino with cavatelli in oxtail ragout.



Fourth Course


 **The wines: Castello Banfi 2019 Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, Italy (\$75)** Elegant notes of red berry, cedarwood spice, rose, and graphite. Light, bright, and medium-bodied, with smooth, integrated tannins and blood-orange acidity. **94**


Castello Banfi 2020 Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, Italy (\$75) The 2020, of which our group got a surprise preview, is effortless and smooth, with beautiful fruit purity, elegant spice, and seductively supple textures. Medium- to full-bodied, it shows depth, complexity, and superb balance, all underscored by refreshing acidity. **95**

Castello Banfi 2020 Brunello Summus Red Wine Toscana IGT, Italy (\$80) A blend of Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Syrah vinified separately in French oak barriques for up to 14 months, then blended and aged another 12 months. Full-bodied, soft, and round, with red and black fruits layered with notes of pine forest and hints of white pepper and currant leaf. Suave tannins are seamlessly integrated. **94**

Castello Banfi 2019 Poggio alle Mura Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, Italy (\$85) This full-bodied, powerful wine shows kirsch and mulberry fruit, muscular tannins, and lengthy mineral tension. **95**

Castello Banfi 2018 Excelsus Toscana IGT, Italy (\$90) This blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Merlot was vinified separately in French oak barriques for up to 14 months, then blended and aged in oak for ten more months. It's full-bodied and intense, with plum and currant; chocolaty depth; and smooth, velvety tannins. Spiced notes of tobacco, coffee, and toffee add complexity. **94**

 **The pairing:** Westholme wagyu beef cheek atop blue cheese polenta with poblano chiles, charred sweet corn, crispy shallots, and horseradish in peppert jus

 **The verdict:** The somms preferred the 2019 Poggio alle Mura with the beef, which "brought out more fruit and complemented the silkiness of the wine," said Shaun Adams as Etta sommelier Dylan Ayres nodded in agreement. "The fattiness of the beef marries well with the acidity of the Poggio and balances it out nicely," chimed in Felicity Macdonald, sommelier and wine curator at Rift Wine Bar and Grounds on 2nd. The 2020 Brunello was a favorite for Lon's at the Hermosa Inn lead sommelier and buyer Brian Downey as well as Ayres, who posited that the wine would "be so great to revisit a decade from now to see how it's held up." **SJ**

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

EXPLORING THE MANY FACETS OF PASO ROBLES
THROUGH A LINEUP OF BOUTIQUE PRODUCERS

BY KATE NEWTON

ANYONE WHO'S SET FOOT in Paso Robles in recent years with the intent of exploring its ever-expanding wine scene has likely heard the phrase "Cab is king" bandied about; they've also likely paid a visit to at least one of the major producers that have distinguished themselves as the heavy hitters helping to elevate Paso's profile on an international scale. But if they've delved beneath the surface of what this pillar of Central Coast winemaking has to offer, as I did on a recent visit, they've found there's much more than meets the eye—and plenty to pique the palate of every type of wine drinker. Read on for a roundup of some boutique producers carving their own niche in the region.

The Calcareous Vineyard estate boasts sweeping views of Paso Robles' west side.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CALCAREOUS VINEYARD



CALCAREOUS VINEYARD

Set atop a hill at 1,800 feet above sea level on Paso Robles' west side, Calcareous Vineyard is a destination for the wines it crafts with fruit primarily grown in its two estate vineyards and pairs with its seasonally driven culinary program. It claimed the name Calcareous for its brand to reflect the region's famed limestone-derived soils long before most were aware of the role this distinctive geology plays in the character of the wines—but that has certainly changed as Paso's popularity has soared. "If you look at our pre-2015 wines, there was a phonetic spelling on the back," says Jason Joyce, who's marking his 15th year as Calcareous' winemaker. "Now, I say half the people that come up here know exactly what that word means." It's a reflection of how consumer tastes and education levels have evolved as they embrace drier, more nuanced expressions abundant in acid and tannin that are built for enjoying with food: "It's a good feeling right now [that] the people who are coming here want much more complex wines, [and] we can produce those," he adds.

While Calcareous produces a range of reds with Bordeaux and Rhône varieties—among them its well-balanced and velvety York Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon and its rich yet refined Moose, a Syrah-dominant blend that's an homage to late founder Lloyd "Moose" Messer—Joyce has established himself as a white wine specialist, incorporating the use of concrete eggs for fermentation and aging to impart a fresh character and soft mouthfeel in wines like the stone fruit-driven Lily Blanc, a blend of Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, and Picpoul Blanc. With an annual production of 9,000–12,000 cases a year depending on vintage conditions, Calcareous embodies "the beauty of a boutique winery [in] that we're allowed to be vintage-driven," Joyce says, adding, "The season dictates what my job is. . . . It's a deeply human experience, and I hope people get that from our wine."

PHOTO: KATE NEWTON



DILÉCTA WINES

Dilécta Wines has a decidedly family-owned feel: Situated on 11 acres off a quiet segment of Vineyard Drive in the Adelaida District sub-AVA, it's run by mother-and-son team Paloma Bilson and Andre Minassian, the latter of whom oversees the annual production of roughly 3,000 cases that are largely sold direct to consumer, through their wine club, and at their tasting room. The hearts that ubiquitously appear on their striking labels featuring both Bilson's and local illustrator Betty Wick's artwork are a nod to the inspiration behind the winery's name—a play on the Latin word for "beloved"—and a charming reflection of the labor of love that is the Dilécta portfolio.

"The first Paso wine I tasted, it was like [something] out of a movie. This is what real wines taste like?" recalls Minassian, who over the past several years has developed a house style that often favors the spice character and "green essence" that whole-cluster fermentation yields in wines like the Tiller, a 100% Grenache with notes of strawberry, dried fruit, and leather. "[With] the tannins, you can feel it almost hugging your tongue," he says. "It doesn't speak to everyone, but the ones that it does speak to, people love." Other standouts include the "off-the-wall" and incredibly aromatic 2020 Unorthodox, a blend of Syrah, Grenache, Carignan, and Graciano that "hits every part of the palate while still staying nice, light, and acid-driven," and the 2019 Zurita, a 100% Zinfandel that's approachable and surprisingly light on its feet for being over 16% ABV. The winery also produces

PHOTO COURTESY OF DILÉCTA WINES



Dilécta Wines winemaker Andre Minassian and his mother, CEO/proprietor Paloma Bilson.

several expressions featuring Paso Robles' signature Bordeaux varieties, including the Devotion, whose 2021 vintage is a blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Malbec, and 25% Petit Verdot, and the Infatuation, a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Later this year Dilécta will open a new social club and event center equipped with a commercial kitchen that will enable it to turn its already warm sense of hospitality up another notch. It all amounts to the start of "a family legacy. And, you know, hopefully I can have enough kids to work the vineyard one day," Minassian says with a laugh.



Rava Wines founders Chad and Lauren Rava with their children, Jade and Sterling.

RAVA WINES

Another family legacy in the making can be found at Rava Wines, with ample room to grow: Third-generation farmer Chad Rava and his wife, Lauren, currently cultivate roughly 25 different varieties, including traditional Bordeaux grapes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot, across 1,200 acres both at its main estate in Paso's El Pomar District and in Monterey County. As they renovated the El Pomar property—formerly an Arabian horse ranch—they realized its potential as a wedding and events venue, and given their access to cool-climate varieties from Monterey, a simple question led them to a new calling, according to Lauren: "What better to pair celebration with than sparkling?" The category now comprises roughly 80% of Rava's portfolio in the form of nearly 20 mostly small-lot SKUs made in the méthode Champenoise, and the winery leases out its specialized equipment to other brands seeking to make a similar leap. "We're trying to make sparkling in Paso something serious," notes Lauren. "It matches the weather and it's so food-friendly."

While sparkling winegrowing can be a challenge in Paso's warm climate, hardy grapes like Negroamaro, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Meunier are picked early so that they retain the high levels of acid necessary to achieve balance in the wines, according to winemaker Sherrie Holzer. With such a versatile toolkit to draw from and no strict regulations in terms of blending, "we have the luxury to experiment" and be selective about which wines they want to produce in a given year, Holzer adds, noting that Rava's status as a DTC- and tasting room-driven brand also shields it from the whims of the wholesale market.

As a result, Rava's wines range from the more recognizable (such as the full-bodied yet crisp Grenache Blanc, the alluringly aromatic Cinsault Rosé, and the softly tannic still Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon) to the more esoteric (like the Lambrusco-style Sparkling Negroamaro), but they're crowd-pleasers regardless of which camp they fall under. Attracting a clientele as effervescent as their wines has been an added benefit of building a reputation for quality sparkling: Jokes Lauren, "No one's angry when you're opening bubbles!"



Dining al fresco at Cass Winery in the Geneseo District.

CASS WINERY

Just north of Rava in the Geneseo District is Cass Winery, which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary and cultivates a dozen Bordeaux and Rhône varieties on its 145-acre estate vineyard, selling roughly two-thirds of its California Certified Sustainable fruit and channeling the rest into its annual production of approximately 12,000 cases. Its winemaker, Sterling Kragten, gained experience in New Zealand and at fellow Paso producer JUSTIN Winery but was drawn to Cass for the "flexibility and freedom," in his words: Just two years after Kragten joined Cass, it won Winery of the Year at the 2015 Central Coast Wine Competition, which earned him the ultimate endorsement from owners Steve Cass and Ted Plemons. "[They told me], 'Oh, you can do whatever you want, as long as the wine turns out,'" Kragten says with a smile, adding, "So I'm always experimenting with different ways of making some of the wines. A lot of it is trying to improve, but it's a little selfish, because . . . if I tried turning out the same thing every year, I'd go crazy."

Considering Cass has claimed the title twice since Kragten assumed the role of head winemaker, his variable approach has undoubtedly been a success. The recognition has only prompted him to probe even deeper into the fascinating characters that his experiments with such techniques as small-lot blending, barrel toasting with lava rocks, and using unconventional aging vessels like Russian oak and acacia can yield in his wines. The ultimate destination of every adventure, though, is elegance: "I want [the wines] to be approachable to pretty much everyone but [something] that the highest-end somm will appreciate as well," he says. Among the wines that embody that style are the 2022 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon—a robust blend of 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot, and 4% Syrah—and Kragten's personal "go-to," the Oasis Rosé, a blend of 63% Mourvèdre and 37% Grenache; for the 2024 vintage, Kragten used the stabulation technique often used in Provence for the first time on the Grenache portion, heightening its aromatics while emphasizing the wine's creamy texture. When he's not carrying out experiments in the cellar or the vineyard, he has plenty to keep him busy: "I'll just go hang out behind the bar and pour for people—I think you see that a lot around Paso."

ALLEGRETTO WINES

A fixture on the local hospitality scene since opening in 2015, Allegretto Vineyard Resort is adorned with hundreds of eye-catching artworks and artifacts gathered by owner Douglas Ayres during his global travels. Yet from the moment guests arrive, the resort—home to not only the tasting room of Allegretto Wines but also one of the producer's three biodynamically farmed and California Certified Organic Farmers estate vineyards—immerses them in the spirit of Paso Robles.

Don Burns, formerly of Saxum Winery and founder of Turtle Rock Vineyards, recently joined Allegretto as winemaker and now leads the winery with a focus on continued quality. "We are excited about the future and where Don Burns' excellence in producing award-winning wines will take us," says tasting room manager Rory Longley. Having farmed its estate vineyards for over a decade, Allegretto crafts wines rooted in its commitment to biodynamic practices, highlighting a distinctive, terroir-driven approach that allows the character of the vineyards to shine through in its small-lot production.

Cabernet Sauvignon will remain a cornerstone of Allegretto's new vision, and tasting a pair of expressions from the on-site Allegretto Vineyard, located in the Estrella District on the region's northeast side, and the westside Willow Creek Vineyard is a lesson in how much a difference an 11-mile distance can make. More restrained and "smoother than your traditional Cab," according to Longley, the 2021 vintage from the latter site hails from dry-farmed calcareous soils and derives flavors of dark plum, black currant, and cardamom from ample sun exposure; the well-structured 2021 Delle Vita Cabernet Sauvignon, meanwhile, draws its "bigger and bolder," Bing cherry-tinged character from vines that struggle in higher temperatures and sandy loam soils that see minimal irrigation.

The region's dramatic diurnal swings and diverse microsites are what make the Allegretto Rosé, a 100% Malbec from the cooler estate vineyard that's crafted using the saignée method, such a standout in the tasting room. "More people are looking for rosés year-round as an alternative to bold red wines. We're proud to offer an estate rosé as part of our portfolio of single-varietal and blended red and white wines," says Longley, reinforcing that Allegretto is nothing if not a gracious host.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLEGRETTO WINES



Allegretto Wines biodynamically farms three estate properties in Paso Robles.

CONTINENTAL WINE COLLECTION

Undergoing a similar transition period is Continental Wine Collection, home to Broken Earth, whose wines range from roughly \$20 to \$55, and the highly allocated CV Wines, a luxury label with a trio of offerings—a single-varietal Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc and a red blend named Studium—only made



PHOTO COURTESY OF CONTINENTAL WINE COLLECTION

in exceptional vintages. Later this year, its tasting room is set to open at its new winery in the Templeton Gap District as the 45 acres of vines on that property join the family-owned company's total vineyard area of just under 800 acres on its Continental Vineyard home ranch in the Estrella District, originally planted in 1973. "Back in the '70s, [you had] the big influx of people that were planting fruit in Paso Robles. Our vineyard was the largest-scale commercial vineyard . . . and winemakers throughout California would try all the different varieties [to] see what [the region] was capable of. We've continued on in that tradition today," Continental Wine Collection general manager and vice president Justin Tooley explains. "We have over 25 different varieties, hedging for the future" with not only the new facility but the recent completion of a full replanting of Continental Vineyard.

In addition to heat-resistant grapes such as Touriga Nacional and Tempranillo, perhaps the variety that stands to benefit most from that overhaul is Cabernet Franc; in production winemaker Tyler Kollmann's opinion, the deep, dark-fruited CV Reserve Cabernet Franc "is the best thing we make. . . . Traditionally, Cab Franc has some of those green characters, but Paso Robles is one of those really unique places that can just get anything ripe, so it really thrives here." Being entirely estate-grown also ensures complete control over the precise harvest windows ideal for each variety: "I can't even quantify, really, how important that is to our winemaking," Kollmann says.

As Paso's wine scene continues to expand, Kollmann is all too aware that "you really have to be on your game to stay competitive," but he believes the region's approachability remains its strength: "You [have to] meet people where they're at, [and] I think that's encompassing of our entire portfolio of brands," he says. "There's something in it for everyone." S



George & Gather general manager/wine director Patrick Kemmesat.



Faroe Island salmon with fingerling potatoes, roasted beets, horseradish cream, arugula, and citrus vinaigrette alongside Presqu'île Winery's 2023 Chardonnay from Santa Barbara County.



George & Gather is a market and coffee shop as well as a restaurant.

Gather 'Round

AT **GEORGE & GATHER** IN CHANDLER, AZ, A SOMMELIER TRADES THE ROAD FOR ROOTS

story by Christina Barrueta / photos by Grace Stufkosky

SOMETIMES THE STARS align in the most unexpected ways. After years of crisscrossing the country as a corporate trainer for Mastro's Restaurants, sommelier Patrick Kemmesat found himself at a crossroads as a new father: "While I was very happy at Mastro's, we had had a baby, and it no longer felt like I could be on the

road for two or three months," he explains. As it happened, someone had been hoping for exactly that shift in priorities. For two years, Amber Kovarik had been trying to lure Kemmesat, a family friend whose brother was the best man at her wedding to Mike Kovarik, from California to Arizona for her passion project.

"I'll never forget the day he said yes, because I was so surprised and overjoyed," recalls Amber. "Getting him to run the ship at George & Gather was when it felt like things were really clicking into place." After two decades in the mortgage business, she had decided to take a leap thanks to a nudge from her husband during an anniversary hike. "He looked at me and said, 'You deserve to chase your dreams; let's do this,'" she remembers. What began in college as a series of dining adventures with her father, which they chronicled in a journal of restaurant ideas, had evolved into a calling that she describes as being "placed in my heart a long, long time ago."

When George & Gather debuted last March, Kemmesat stepped into dual roles as general manager and wine director at a restaurant whose very name captured what the Kovariks were trying to build. With an address on Washington Street, Mike's nickname of "George" for the former autobody shop they had renovated paired naturally with Amber's vision of "gathering" to reflect their shared vision of a community hub. To that end, in both the restaurant and its attached coffee shop and market, "we try to use as many local produce companies and vendors as we can," Kemmesat notes. That same thoughtful approach carries over to how he runs the operation: "I have my hands in everything, from staff training to coordinating events, but building a wine list from scratch for the first time is the most fun."

"Because we're so community-driven, I started with local distributors and wine reps to build a list that was affordable with not-so-typical bottles," he further explains. "Our reps have fantastic portfolios, and I was able to find a lot of vineyards that are very meaningful to me . . . and wines that go well with our food."

Ask him for suggestions, and he might steer you toward Champagne producer Pierre Péters' Cuvée de Réserve Blanc de Blancs with Grana Padano-dusted fries dunked in truffle aioli; Gomez Cruzado Rioja Crianza alongside sausage-stuffed, bacon-wrapped dates on a bed of piquillo pepper purée; or Passopisciaro Passorosso Etna Rosso with a spicy pizza loaded with pepperoni, sausage, and ricotta atop a sourdough crust made with 130-year-old starter beneath a drizzle of local honey. "The Passopisciaro is from the north side of Mount Etna, and it has this beautiful ashy, savory quality to it," he explains. "I honeymooned in Sicily eating pizza and drinking those reds. That wine puts a smile on my face every time."

For Kemmesat, recounting such moments tableside is when the real magic happens. "It's about connection and sharing," he says, "and that's my favorite part of this business. I've visited many of the vineyards on our list and met the people who work there. When I see our guests get excited about the wine list, it brings back so many memories, and I love to share them. It's when I'm passionate that I think I'm at my best."

This enthusiasm for discovery extends



Amber and Mike Kovarik are the owners of George & Gather.

beyond the daily menus. Kemmesat's Vibe & Vine series brings in guest sommeliers and winemakers to visit tables and share their stories, with recent labels including Napa's Bevan Cellars, Sonoma's Aperture Cellars, and Langtry Farms Vineyard & Winery in Lake County, California. "The idea actually started with Victoria De Crescenzo of Bevan Cellars," he explains. "She said, 'I'll pour my wines for your guests and talk about our vineyard. I never get to work the floor in restaurants anymore and it's one of my favorite things to do.' I loved the idea right away. People can come in and try a new winery without committing to a \$200-per-person wine dinner. And for many of us, working the floor is the best part of the industry, so it's a lot of fun for everyone."

A similar spirit of collaboration defines George & Gather as a whole. "We just work so well together," says Amber. "I love seeing Patrick get so passionate and excited about the wine program that he's building and the compliments we get from our guests. We trust him implicitly. He wants to see this restaurant be successful just as much as my husband and I do, and I can feel it and see it in everything that he does."

"It's so nice that we're friends and get to do this together," agrees Kemmesat. "Mike is technical and Amber is all passion, so they're the yin and yang, and it's really wonderful working with them. When there's a trust factor, you make the best decisions together, and that's just a nice dynamic to have in any business." ❧

THE ROAD LESS *traveled*

by LARS LEICHT

A friend once described driving in Italy as a blood sport. Indeed, whether you're navigating the autostrada's slaloms, the narrow streets of hilltop towns meant to thwart invaders, or the twisting back roads with more curves than a Sophia Loren caricature, the term *white-knuckle ride* takes on literal meaning. I've navigated these paths for the better part of four decades; they are not for the faint of heart, nor do they often conjure poetry. But the day I made my way to the Tuscan estate of Tenuta di Biserno, I had Robert Frost in mind: "Two roads diverged in the

wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by."

Maybe that's a little dramatic for my actions that day. All I did was to consciously choose the longer route and take advantage of the extra 45 minutes I had at my disposal for having woken up early. Rather than zip along the coastal highway, the path of an old Roman road that was, typically, straight as an arrow, I wanted to get a better understanding of the divide between the rolling hills of central Tuscany and the hillock-speckled



plains of Alta Maremma on the northern part of the region's coast where the Tyrrhenian and Ligurian seas converge.

Rather than Florentine or Sienese Tuscany, this is Livornese Tuscany. My host, Niccolò Marzichi Lenzi, complimented my route choice and confirmed the distinctiveness of the microclimate that surrounds his family's property in Bibbona, just north of the more renowned Bolgheri. He told me that from Rosignano about 12 miles to the north to Follonica about 21



TENUTA DI BISERNO FINDS ITS WAY UNDER FAMILY LEADERSHIP

miles to the south, there is a horseshoe-shaped area that seems to be protected from heavy rainfall. About 10 miles to the east, there is a ridge—the one I crossed on my circuitous route—that blocks the Apennines from cold winds.

Some of the impact of that microclimatic influence was immediately obvious to me on this early April day. As I drove around the estate, I quickly noticed that the vines were budding significantly ahead of the vineyards I had passed in the Brunello and Chianti zones, their first short, bright green leaves popping out against the brown earth. This bright

harbinger of renewed life was also contrasted a few meters on by the sight of vineyards where vines had been uprooted, resembling a battlefield massacre. But I quickly reasoned that this was another harbinger: that of a vigneron willing to make sacrifices, owning up to prior planting mistakes in order to move forward. I had heard of Marzichi Lenzi's bold moves to take Biserno to the next level, and here before me was proof.

Marzichi Lenzi co-founded the winery in 2001 with his uncles Piero and Lodovico Antinori of Super Tuscan fame and his mother, Ilaria Antinori. Despite



Piero, Ilaria, and Lodovico Antinori.

having grown up in a storied wine family, he had no wine industry experience, so he went through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust program and spent a few years living in the U.S. to work the market. Not having the Antinori surname was sometimes a challenge, he found. "I was just an Italian fellow trying to sell some wine," he told me. "I had plenty of doors closed in my face."

BRAND BUILDING

In 2014, Marzichi Lenzi was appointed CEO of Tenuta di Biserno. He has since made key adjustments involving rootstock and clones (hence the uprooted vineyards) as well as choices in cooperage. He foresees continual evolution for the winery, especially in the context of climate change. "There's nothing like winemaking and agriculture to make you humble," he pointed out. "The priority is quality. Optimization of all aspects without losing quality has been my main focus from the beginning."

Unlike much of Tuscan wine country, the Maremma is not Sangiovese-driven. Here, international varieties flourish; Tenuta di Biserno produces three red wines with them. *Insoglio del Cinghiale*, the estate's flagship entry-tier offering, is a



Niccolò Marzichi Lenzi is CEO of Tenuta di Biserno.

blend of mainly Syrah with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc. Il Pino di Biserno contains predominantly Cabernet Franc along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and a small amount of Petit Verdot (the percentages vary by vintage). Biserno is likewise made predominantly from Cabernet Franc with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and a small amount of Petit Verdot.

In addition to a different price point and market position, Marzichi Lenzi believes that each wine must offer a clear expression of its terroir, varietal composition, and winemaking style. The most complex of the three, Biserno is what he calls “a slow release. It needs time to reveal itself.” Il Pino is made with fruit from younger vineyards and represents the typicity of Bibbona. Insoglio del Cinghiale comes from a vineyard separate from the main estate whose soils consist mostly of sand and a little clay, which tends to endow wines with more elegance and immediate drinkability. “Insoglio is more versatile,” he said. “It needs to be like a buddy, always there and never deceiving.”

Marzichi Lenzi is a firm believer that wine is made in the vineyard; he prides himself on sustainable farming with the help of a highly trained team that can avoid blanket treatments by catching and spot-treating fungi and other maladies at their inception. “Because we made the decision to go sustainable, we need to react quickly,” he pointed out, adding that

in the winery, he applies “the same maniacal obsession and attention to detail.” He uses state-of-the-art presses and stainless-steel fermenters, though it’s his view that his barrel regimen is the key to his wines. “I think there is a lot of progress to be made in the choice of wood that is suited not only for the wine style but also for the vintage,” he said. “This is something that we have been working very hard on; these wines need wood, especially Cabs, in our case. . . . It adds complexity, but it needs to be a complement and not dominant, which is easy to say but not so easy to do.”

Marzichi Lenzi noted that in Biserno’s earlier days, his team tasted the wines in November, just after fermentation, to determine barrel-aging protocol. But they often found that their rankings changed after time in oak: Top choices in early winter were not rated as highly in the spring. “Either there was a misjudgment in November or the wood was not suited,” he observed. “So close to fermentation, the wines still have so much going on that you can end up covering up their tannic structure to a certain extent. They give you a sense of sweetness which is not necessarily there [and] there’s a lot of CO₂ in the wines, so you have a lot of elements involved.” So the team decided to push the decision on oak aging to the new year, when the wines were further removed from the residual effects of alcoholic and malolactic fermentation and could be better understood.

“Consider that most of the barrels had to be purchased before the harvest, when you have no idea of the style of the vintage,” he continued. “If you want something to be an addition, you need to know what you are looking for. You don’t have a crystal ball. So we honed our techniques and partnered with coopers whom we found over the years were capable not only of giving us the type of wood we needed but [of] working hand in hand in order to find that balance and also deliver the barrels at a period of the year when we had a better idea of the wine. The end result has given us more precision in the wine.”

He compared the impact of oak aging on a wine to a person’s use of perfume or cologne. “It’s hard to find the right balance, but when you do, it’s part of your branding,” he pointed out. “Wood . . . needs to be part of the overall complexity of the wine.” In cooler vintages, when wines may have some sharpness, the right type of wood, barrel size, and amount of aging time can endow them with appropriate softness. “It either needs to compensate or *accompagnare*, go hand in hand, as we say in Italian,” said Marzichi Lenzi.

As he continues to tailor the wines of Biserno, his intention is to keep production volume steady while increasing distribution. “It is key to not be greedy and to resist the temptation of producing more bottles,” he told me. His dream, he added, “is that Biserno will be perceived as a small jewel with wines that have their own personality and people look forward to enjoying them.” He told me the story of a frustrating travel day that turned into one of great satisfaction. He was wearing a Biserno-branded vest en route to his gate to catch a delayed flight when an American traveler came up to him and asked if he worked for Biserno. Marzichi Lenzi tentatively said yes, and the American proceeded to say it made his favorite wine, one he intended to open for friends and family when they gathered for his upcoming birthday. That made Marzichi Lenzi’s day, as they say.

“There is a form of masochism in winemaking because you know you are chasing a rainbow [to try to produce a] wine of instant gratification,” he acknowledged. “It’s like a runner’s high; it’s what keeps us going. . . . People need gratification—wine and food give you a sense of gratification.”

THE LURE OF A LEGACY

Marzichi Lenzi's "aha" moment with wine came as a teenager growing up in France, when a friend came over for dinner while his mother was away. Though he was more interested in beer at that point, the friend suggested they have wine with their meal, and he obliged. Delving into his mother's cellar, he found plenty of noteworthy Antinori bottlings, but he didn't want to risk opening something special; then he spotted an unusual label that he thought might do the trick. "It was dusty and there were five bottles left from a six-bottle case, so I figured she tried it and didn't like it, so it would be OK to take," he recalled. "I uncorked it, and being brought up on wine I knew what to look for; I said to myself, holy crap, that is good!" Turns out it was a 1982 Château Haut-Brion that he enjoyed that day in 1994.

Marzichi Lenzi went on to pursue a career in equestrian show jumping, successfully competing with the Italian national team and winning medals in the junior and young rider categories. He worked in the meantime for Dutch Olympic medalist Jan Tops, selecting, training, promoting, and selling horses. By the time he was 24, he was ranked in the world's top 100 showjumpers. But the call of 26 generations of the wine trade on his maternal side was strong, as was the opportunity to partner with his uncles, being leaders and legends in the business.

Now, at 48 years old, Marzichi Lenzi considers himself young and still learning, especially given the experience of his family. In our conversation, he credited his uncle Piero with inspiring his passion and dedication; praised his uncle Lodovico for his creativity, vision, intuition, and curiosity; and commended his mother for her empathy, emphasis on education, and ability to see the big picture. And he has taken to heart the emphasis his grandfather Niccolò Antinori, for whom he was named, put on reputation: "I remember how much resilience, discipline, and pride he exhibited in bringing the Antinori name where it needed to be. He would say, 'I want people to buy an Antinori wine for \$10 and be happy, and then if they spend \$30 on another of our wines they will be pleased too.' He believed the entry-level wine was most important for making the first impression."

I asked Marzichi Lenzi what he would pour if he had the chance to have a glass of wine with his grandfather again, and his eyes welled up. Would it be his château wine, Biserno? No, he said, recalling the elder Antinori's lesson. "Biserno logically will be good, but the entry level makes the first impression. I believe that I would love to share a bottle of Insoglio with my grandfather. I would probably ask him whether he feels I'm living up to

his expectations—and what he thinks I should still be working hard to improve. It's a question I find myself asking almost every day."

He also draws inspiration from his formative years in showjumping. "There are so many parallels between sport and agriculture, starting with the fact that both require immense passion and humility," he said. "The moment you think you've achieved something, life tends to send you a wake-up call that brings you right back down to earth. In showjumping, that usually means ending up on your ass—literally. In winemaking, it might be a disastrous harvest or a big mistake in the cellar." Conversely, it was Tops who instilled in him the necessity of having confidence in decisions well made.

Marzichi Lenzi added that both careers have been intense, demanding, and fulfilling. "What I've learned above all is discipline, determination, and resilience," he said. "If you dream big, you have to be ready to put in the work and make the necessary sacrifices to reach your ambition. . . . I [thought I] was never meant to work in this industry, which is why it almost feels like God's calling."

He fondly recalled his grandfather adding a little wine to his water as a child and "stimulating all the grandchildren to be involved in wine, though I [thought I] wasn't meant to be on that road." As winding as it may have been, Niccolò Marzichi Lenzi took the path less traveled by, and that has made all the difference. *sj*

Marzichi Lenzi initially pursued a career in equestrian show jumping.



Letting the Land Speak

DAVIS BYNUM COMMEMORATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY WITH A NEW COLLECTION OF RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY WINES by Francis Castillo, WSET Level 3

THIS IS THE MANTRA that guides the creation of Davis Bynum's wines behind the scenes: "Let the land speak." It resonates through time back to the winery's inception in 1973. The late Davis Bynum, a journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who made the leap to winemaking in the 1960s, emerged as one of the visionary pioneers to lay the foundations of sustainable winemaking practices in Sonoma County before the establishment of the Russian River Valley as an AVA. He was also among the first to see the potential of the area's unique microclimate for growing world-class Pinot Noir; at a time when Cabernet Sauvignon dominated California's wine landscape, Bynum dared to focus on Burgundy's most delicate and temperamental variety.

His guiding principles are being followed with immense respect by winemaker Greg Morthole, with whom I had the opportunity to converse about the evolution of Davis Bynum Wines over the past 52 years. It all starts with the observation of nature in detail, from selecting the right varieties for the vineyard and the planting of cover crops that support healthy soil structure to monitoring the level of moisture in the air in an effort to

limit unnecessary irrigation. These initiatives aim to preserve a thriving wildlife habitat in the vineyard, contributing to Sonoma's ecosystem.

In the wake of its 50th anniversary, the winery is reinforcing two main axioms:

- **The production of small-lot, terroir-driven wines**—namely Pinot Noir and Chardonnay—from vineyards within Russian River Valley. Morthole's approach is down-to-earth and pragmatic as he stays away from late picking and the overripe finish that can result in that instance. Mostly native yeasts are employed in fermentation to ensure the final results showcase all aspects of the terroir. This translates to richness and incredible balance on the palate.
- **Environmentally responsible farming** as certified by the Sonoma County Green Business Program; the vineyard and winery are also certified sustainable, receiving audits every year to maintain their certification. Davis Bynum Wines is carbon neutral as well.

A Half-Century of Russian River Valley Excellence

In the heart of the Russian River Valley,



Davis Bynum, founder of Davis Bynum Wines, with winemaker Greg Morthole.

where fog-laced mornings give way to sun-drenched afternoons, a legacy was born half a century ago. In 1973, Bynum became the first winemaker to produce and label a single-vineyard Pinot Noir from the now-renowned Rochioli Vineyard. That single act didn't merely set the tone for Bynum's career but also helped establish the Russian River Valley as one of the premier Pinot Noir regions in the world.

When Bynum released the 1973 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir, it was groundbreaking. Not only was it the first to carry the Russian River Valley designation, but it also spotlighted the idea of single-vineyard bottlings—highlighting the nuance and individuality of a specific place in keeping with the ancient practice Cistercian monks instilled in Burgundy almost 1,000 years ago. This philosophy, now commonplace among premium wineries, was revolutionary at the time for the region.

Today, under the guidance of Morthole in a state-of-the-art facility, Davis Bynum continues to produce wines that speak clearly of their origin, serving as a benchmark for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay around the world. In 2023, the brand celebrated its aforementioned 50th anniversary—a golden milestone in a region rich with history. To honor this occasion, it has now released three commemorative wines that embody its commitment to terroir, elegance, and a pioneering spirit: the 2023 Dutton Origin Chardonnay and the 2023 Bacigalupi Vineyard Pinot Noir as well as the 2023 Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir.



nance, allowing the wine's natural freshness to shine.

What sets this wine apart is its harmony. Rich without being heavy, structured without being sharp, and luxurious without sacrificing its varietal character; it's a Chardonnay that invites contemplation but is accessible enough to enjoy with a simple dish of roasted chicken or creamy pasta.

History Meets Elegance

The Bacigalupi Vineyard holds a special place in California wine lore: Chardonnay from the site helped Chateau Montelena win the famed 1976 Judgment of Paris. But it's not just Chardonnay that thrives here—Pinot Noir from Bacigalupi offers a uniquely refined expression of Russian

River Valley fruit.

The 2023 Bacigalupi Pinot Noir is a wine of poise and subtle complexity. Aromas of amaretto cherry, raspberry, cranberry, and forest floor rise from the glass, interwoven with hints of clove and tea leaf. On the palate, the wine is supple and graceful, with a silky mouthfeel and nuanced layers of red fruit, mushroom, and spice. The acidity is bright, giving the wine lift and backbone, while round tannins provide gentle structure. This Pinot Noir is a fitting tribute to the vineyard's storied past and a testament to Davis Bynum's ability to coax character and charm from exceptional sites.

ripe strawberry, and dried rose petals underpinned by a whisper of earthy brown spice and minerality. On the palate, it's both expressive and restrained, with notes of toasted marshmallow, baking spices, and creamy oak gracefully supported by bright acidity and fine-grained tannins. The finish is elegant and persistent, echoing with red fruit and a subtle smokiness that invites another sip.

In short, it's more than just a nostalgic nod; it's a declaration of enduring relevance. It proves that, 50-plus years later, the Rochioli Vineyard still has stories to tell—and Davis Bynum is still the one best equipped to tell them.

A Study in Balance

While Pinot Noir may be the winery's calling card, Davis Bynum has always had a deft hand with Chardonnay as well. The 2023 Dutton Origin Chardonnay exemplifies as much. Sourced from Dutton Ranch—a site renowned for producing high-quality Chardonnay—it offers a pristine expression of Russian River Valley fruit.

On the nose, it presents aromas of lemon zest, orange blossom, and fresh white peach. There's a hint of flint and wet stone, promising structure and vibrancy. The palate follows through with ripe stone fruit, apple pie, gingersnap, and subtle vanilla plus a creamy, lees-driven texture. Aging in French oak, two-thirds new, imparts finesse rather than domi-

Looking Ahead

As Davis Bynum marks its 52nd year, it does so not with grandeur but with quiet confidence. The anniversary wines are not bombastic declarations; they are thoughtful expressions of history, place, and vision. In a region that's become crowded with newcomers and marketing flash, Davis Bynum remains grounded in authenticity. Morthole sums it up best: "These wines aren't just about where we've been—they're about where we're going. They reflect five decades of learning, growing, and staying true to our roots."

In a world where trends come and go, Davis Bynum's 50th anniversary collection is a reminder of the enduring power of great terroir, great winemaking, and great storytelling—in every bottle. **SJ**



Morthole says that Davis Bynum's 50th anniversary wines from the 2023 vintage "aren't just about where we've been—they're about where we're going."

Coming Full Circle

The Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir is the cornerstone of Davis Bynum's legacy. With the 2023 vintage, the winery celebrates its roots while demonstrating how far it has come. This wine is a seamless blend of heritage and precision, opening with captivating aromas of cherry,


{ sonoma county }

**From
Hidden
Gem to**

Headliner

**NOTRE VUE ESTATE WINERY & VINEYARDS
REDEFINES ITSELF WITH EDGE AND ELEGANCE**

story by David Ransom / photos by Alexander Rubin



*Notre Vue Estate
Winery & Vineyards
is located just outside
Windsor in Sonoma
County, CA.*



The Notre Vue team in the vineyard.



Nestled in the hills just outside the California town of Windsor lies what may have been one of the best-kept secrets in Sonoma County's rich history of viticulture, until now: Notre Vue Estate Winery & Vineyards.

Home to two labels, Notre Vue Estate and Balverne Wines, this vast and historic property has largely flown under the radar since owner Renée Brown Stein and her late husband, Bob, purchased the financially struggling Balverne Cellars winery in 1992. The ensuing years found them quietly digging in and streamlining the business while making crucial decisions regarding estate development, long-term farming philosophy, and winemaking style. Now, Renée and the tight-knit team she has in place, including son and co-owner Jared Stein, believe this hidden gem in Sonoma's heartland is finally ready for its close-up.

A Bit of History

Originally led by John Kongsgaard and Doug Nalle as Balverne Cellars in 1972 with vines supplied by famed grower Richard Kunde, the 710-acre estate straddles two AVAs: the Russian River Valley and Chalk Hill. Living up to Kunde's prediction that "Balverne will not just be a vineyard but a showplace and an asset to the North Coast wine industry—a vintner's and connoisseur's rare discovery," the Balverne name enjoyed considerable renown in the early years and up into the 1980s, gaining coveted spots on wine lists at top restaurants throughout the country, among them Spark's Steakhouse in New York City and The Brown Derby in Los Angeles. Balverne was even served at multiple state dinners in the White House alongside other notable wines such as Jordan and Caymus.



But the producer was at a financial crossroads when the Los Angeles–based Steins, who had extensive business acumen but no experience in the wine industry, agreed to purchase the full estate outright and take control of the winery. “We only knew we were instantly charmed by it and that Balverne—all of it, intact—needed to be part of our own future,” says Renée. “We had always been passionate and driven by new projects.” To that end, they started what remains a decades-long process to update and replant the vineyards while growing both the grape-growing and winemaking sides of the business into a profitable venture.

Today, the estate’s grape contracts make up the bulk of the income by design. “We’re in a unique place in that we are scalable and can produce more wine from our own fruit as demand grows and dial back production and increase grape supplies to our customers in leaner times,” says estate manager Geoffrey Thompson. “[It’s] all in all a very comfortable place to be, and though the goal is really to increase wine production continuously to fill markets as we expand distribution, we’ll always do both.”

A “Forever Wild” Property

Back when Balverne was first planted, staking roughly 700 contiguous acres in the heart of Sonoma County was not unheard of, as the region was still somewhat off the beaten track. Not much changed in the years leading up to the Steins’ purchase. Grapes were planted mostly

in small plots throughout the property’s undulating hillsides, a functional winery was built, and life moved forward.

One thing that the Steins did from the outset was designate a 350-acre parcel in the center of the property to remain wild, free of cultivation or development. That parcel was then gifted to the Sonoma Land Trust and is referred to by the Notre Vue team as “Forever Wild.” Of the remaining 360 acres, about 175 are planted to organically farmed vines, with the balance dedicated to the winery’s various facilities, unutilized (for now) vineyard land, and open spaces that add to the unique biodiversity of the property. “We felt it important to keep Sonoma’s natural beauty intact,” says Renée. “The open space on not only our property but the neighboring ones will never be developed.” Adds Jared, “The Forever Wild nature preserve is the backbone of the identity of our Balverne brand and a cornerstone of the Notre Vue experience.”

The State of the Estate

Today, the Notre Vue experience remains understated, with no fancy winery or sculpture collection to wow visitors. A visitor center and tasting facility was once in the works, and Renée, an interior designer by profession, had created plans for an add-on to an existing cellar. Sadly, in 2019, an electrical fire took out the cellar building along with the winery’s offices, lab, tasting room, and entire inventory, including its library of old vintages; that same year, the estate was also impacted by the

Kincade Fire, putting the expansions temporarily on hold. In essence, Renée had to start over. But the winemaking facility was luckily spared, and as plans evolve to rebuild, a lovely outdoor tasting terrace overlooking the breathtaking Russian River Valley has been erected near one of the winery’s original vine plots to welcome visitors and club members.

As for how the brands are selling on the market, both are currently growing while reaping well-deserved accolades from wine writers, sommeliers, and retail and on-premise customers across the country. (Sister publication *The Tasting Panel* awarded the Notre Vue 2021 Pinot Noir 94 points, calling it “one of the most elegant Pinot Noirs we’ve tasted.”) Balverne is more widely available due to it being produced in larger quantities, whereas the Notre Vue wines tend to sell more to restaurants as well as to tasting room visitors and club members. However, there is increasing demand for both as word spreads.

“We have carried the wines at the store since my return from the Russian River Valley Pinot Forum in 2023, and [they’ve] done well for us,” says Jim Stephens, wine buyer and sommelier at Susan’s Fine Wine and Spirits in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a wine shop and bar that currently stocks a total of six wines from both labels. “We tend to hand-sell here, and wines like the Balverne Sauvignon Blanc and Notre Vue Pinot Noir, which I recently stocked, do very well. My bestseller is likely the Chardonnay, which at \$35 I find to be a very

Notre Vue winemaker Molly Lippitt, estate manager Geoffrey Thompson, founder Renée Brown Stein, co-owner Jared Stein, and vineyard manager Victoria Torres.






This map shows not only the range of varieties planted on the estate but also the extent of its open space.

good value for quality Russian River Valley estate-grown Chardonnay, but my favorite is clearly the GSM blend, which is an absolute showstopper and is worth every wine appreciator's time and affection. In all, we've found a steady return customer base on these wines and are beyond excited to continue to carry them."

Across the country in New York City, Olivier Lavielle, wine director and manager of the legendary Upper East Side restaurant Orsay, agrees. "We are a classic French bistro, so most of our wines are French, with a few American wines to round out the list," he says. "I sell about three cases of the Balverne Sauvignon Blanc per month from my list and will be looking to expand the line with the Chardonnay in the near future. I really try to focus on terroir-driven wines, and sometimes with American wines it's not easy to identify their origin. . . . What I like about the Balverne wines is that they seem to portray a real sense of place—Chalk Hill's volcanic soils show beautifully in the Sauvignon Blanc, and it also comes in at a good price."

The Notre Vue and Balverne labels are available in major markets nationwide and by special order. See the sidebar for a list of select wines and visit notrevueestate.com for more information. 

Tasting Notes



Balverne Sauvignon Blanc, Chalk Hill, Sonoma County Perfect for pairing with fish and summer salads, this wine is 95% stainless-steel fermented and 5% fermented in French oak barriques. Following a classic nose of bright citrus and tropical fruits, the palate shows hints of lemongrass and honey layered in a crisp and vibrant profile tempered by a slight creaminess from the barrel fermentation.



Balverne Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County Barrel fermented in lightly toasted new French oak, this Chardonnay shows aromas of green apple, citrus, and butterscotch followed by a palate with hints of ripe melon, more citrus, and a hint of spice. Full-bodied yet still showing nice acidity due to just 20% malolactic fermentation, it's the perfect bottling for al fresco summer meals.



Balverne Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County This Pinot Noir is open-top fermented with daily punchdowns using only native yeasts; it then spends eight months in barrel and is further aged in tank and bottle for two years. The result is a versatile, fruit-driven wine well suited to a variety of food pairings, with a pretty deep-rust color; ripe, elegant, soft tannins; and classic notes of earth and red fruit.



Balverne Cabernet Sauvignon, Chalk Hill, Sonoma County Fruit grown in volcanic soils at high elevations in the Chalk Hill section of the property gives this wine a beautiful minerality and a soft, approachable character marked by notes of blackberry, cherry, graphite, chocolate, and spice. An elegant Cabernet meant for consuming now, it will also develop with more time in the bottle and would be best paired with game or roast chicken.



Notre Vue Estate Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County From the predominantly clay-based soils of the Russian River basin, this wine is a blend of different Pinot Noir clones grown on the estate. Ripe and elegant, it undergoes a five-day cold soak and natural yeast fermentation on the skins prior to 12 months of aging in a mix of new and used French oak barriques with light and medium toast. Silky tannins and notes of cherry, strawberry, cocoa powder, and forest floor make it a perfect wine for duck, lamb, or mushroom dishes.



Notre Vue Estate GSM, Chalk Hill, Sonoma County The grapes for this classic Rhône-style blend of 40% Grenache, 40% Syrah, and 20% Mourvèdre co-ferment in a single open-top tank. Twice-daily punchdowns, a cool fermentation, and 18 months of aging in new and used French oak barriques give it a soft yet full-bodied presence that would be a perfect match for cassoulet and other rich foods. Dark cherry, plum, sandalwood, rose petal, and pink peppercorn are hallmarks of the velvety palate.



Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon is winemaker at Champagne house Louis Roederer.

Clearly ABOUT TIME

TASTING A VERTICAL OF **CRISTAL** IN NEW YORK CITY

story by Lars Leicht / photos by Mikhail Lipyanskiy

*T*rade tastings can be daunting for the organizer—this I know from experience. So when I was invited to a master class on Champagne in midtown Manhattan on a rainy Monday in mid-June, I empathetically pictured the usual stragglers with excuses about the traffic and weather; the likely late start with seats yet to fill, and, of course, the dreaded no-shows. This was New York City, after all; everyone has places to go and people to see.

I should have known better for four reasons:

- **The organizer:** Importer Maisons Marques & Domaines has a stellar portfolio and a sterling reputation, thanks to a top-notch team on the street and in the back office.
- **The venue:** The Modern, a MICHELIN-starred contemporary American restaurant housed in the Museum of Modern Art, is known for its A team of sommeliers.
- **The speaker:** Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, a native Champenois who became Champagne's youngest chef de caves when he joined Maison Louis Roederer in 1989, is a resolutely hands-on winemaker, terroirist, and champion of organic viticulture.
- **The wine:** Cristal, the flagship of Louis Roederer, is a cuvée of 45 plots across seven Grand Cru vineyards that was created in 1876 on the 100th anniversary of Roederer's founding, when it was made exclusively for Tsar Alexander II of Russia.

Given that, it should have been no surprise that nearly half of the guests showed up about 15 minutes early to be welcomed with Roederer Collection 245, a multivintage cuvée based predominantly on the 2020 vintage. By the time Lécaillon started speaking at precisely 11:30 a.m., a full house had already been seated for close to five minutes.

Lécaillon's presentation—really more of a discussion—revealed much of his own methodical style as Champagne's premier winemaker, historian, and visionary. He described Cristal as "a wine for special events and moments of life," sourced from the aforementioned vineyards set on chalky white soils "where you can grow grapes to make a balanced, seamless



blend of ripeness, freshness, and acidity,” in his words. These mid-slope plots were highlighted in André Jullien’s *Topographie de tous les vignobles connus*, published decades before the first Bordeaux classification in 1855.

If Jullien gave Roederer a literal map of the best spots, the phylloxera blight gave the producer the opportunity to acquire them when others thought it best to sell. “Every time there was a crisis,” Lécaillon pointed out, “each generation invested. We have a duty which has been evolving year after year.” Roederer, today run by the seventh generation of its founding family, created the first private nursery in France to propagate its own vines and rootstock through massal selection. “You must not only maintain your heritage but develop it,” Lécaillon said, calling organic farming “another good way” to do so because it teaches the vines to develop natural defenses to diseases. High-density plantings and severe canopy management are counterintuitive measures that result in small vines with deep roots and yields lower than those allowed for Champagne. “Our soils are poor; the vines are not vig-

orous,” he said, adding, “We grow bonsai. We don’t want to dilute the fruit.”

Lécaillon called Cristal a quintessential “terroir wine,” as the fruit from each vineyard is vinified separately before blending; only in two vintages—2002 and 2015—did all 45 plots make the final cut. The blend generally reflects the makeup of the vineyards at 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay.

Lécaillon organized the tasting to consist of three flights:

FLIGHT 1

Cristal 2002: “It was a glorious year,” Lécaillon declared. “I call it a gift, my first gift from nature. It was perfect. . . . There were storms to the south and storms to the north, but we were very lucky in Champagne.” He said the vines ripened with “no pressure of any kind; it was not too cold, it was not too wet, and so on. It wasn’t nature that decided when it was time to pick; I decided when to pick because I had no pressure.” The wine has a pronounced bouquet of red flowers and delicate fruit; on the palate it is round, soft, and lively, belying its age.



Jean-Remi Barbier, business development manager for Roederer Collection Import, pours for attendees.

Cristal 2012: In terms of conditions, this vintage was the polar opposite of 2002, according to Lécaillon. “There was a lot of pressure,” he admitted, “especially with the Chardonnay.” The wine was made in much the same way as the 2002, with two subtle differences: In 2012, Roederer lengthened



Maisons Marques & Domaines senior communications manager Cyprien Roy welcomes guests to the tasting at The Modern in New York City.

barrel fermentation for the small portion that sees oak in order to “stretch the elegance,” Lécaillon said. And the 2012 has a lower dosage: just 7.5 grams per liter as opposed to 10. The result is sharper and more linear than its counterpart but still elegant and long, with great concentration.

Overall, Roederer has reduced the sugar in the dosage by nearly half over the past 25 years. “This helps the terroir speak more in the wine,” Lécaillon added.

FLIGHT 2

Cristal 2008: The 2008 vintage is praised as one of the best in Champagne, but Lécaillon credited its success less to weather conditions than to a learning curve that gave him a chance at redemption. “It is rare in the life of a winemaker to be able to replay a vintage,” he said. “You can never fully apply the lessons learned because every year is different, but 2008 was the same as 1996, with high acidity and low ripeness.” He and his fellow winemakers in Champagne were “all there in 1996, and so we remembered our mistakes,” which he identified in retrospect as picking too early, aiming for only 10% total alcohol, and deploying neither malolactic fermentation or oak fermentation. “In 1996 we should have made the best vintage ever; but by winter we were disappointed. Our wishes for the full generosity of the vintage were



not showing—the wine was not ripe but complex and low in intensity. That made us think in particular about aiming at 10% alcohol,” he explained. Records from 1860 to 1882 showed that some vineyards had been picked at 11.5%–12% potential alcohol, so in 2008 he waited an extra week to raise it to 11%. He induced malolactic fermentation for about 19% of the wine and fermented a third of it in oak to add roundness. He also lowered the dosage to 8 grams (versus 11 in 1996).

“The 2008 is really a beautiful wine,” he declared. “When I launched the vintage I called it the Cristal of Crystals. It gives you a feeling of the soils, calcium, and acidity; it really is what Cristal is all about.”

Cristal 2016: “Not many people see 2016 for as fantastic a wine as it is,” Lécaillon stated. “Coming off the 2015, which was ripe and round, 2016 was a difficult year, like 2012, with a lot of rain and mildew. But '16 had the summer fruit.” He said that heat waves in July and August

were particularly beneficial to the Pinot Noir, bearing some responsibility for the wine’s sapidity, freshness, and texture. “It is a wine that has a natural beauty,” he asserted. “Because the Pinot Noir was so textural and powerful, we added a little more Chardonnay than usual. Chardonnay is always the balance in response to the strength or weakness of the Pinot Noir. Everything is done for the Pinot Noir.”

FLIGHT 3

Cristal Rosé: In 1974, Lécaillon noted, sixth-generation owner Jean-Claude Rouzaud wanted to celebrate the house’s upcoming bicentennial by creating what he dubbed a “super Cristal.” He selected five of the best plots in the Cristal vineyards—three of Pinot Noir and two of Chardonnay—that gave the ripest fruit and integrated some skin contact to give the wine more complexity. After a cold soak to make the skins more resistant to the subsequent “infusion,” batches were macerated for varying amounts of time before racking and then blended with Chardonnay must. “The contrast of the full ripeness of Pinot Noir with the freshness of Chardonnay makes the wine sing,” Lécaillon said. “It is not first a rosé but first a Cristal, so it has to have all the freshness of Cristal.”

Cristal Rosé 2013: “This is probably one of the best Cristal Rosés we have made recently,” Lécaillon said, calling it “a benchmark of Cristal Rosé.” It shows a silky spectrum of flavors ranging from bright stone fruit, including wild peaches, to ripe berries.

Cristal Rosé 2014: Aromatic with subtle peach notes, this is a more delicate wine from a challenging vintage in which the chalky soils played a key role in draining away excess water from summer rainfall so that the fruit could finish ripening in the hot, dry September that followed.

In a vertical tasting like this, “you see the full beauty of Cristal, which is always precision and purity, [but with time] it starts to evolve greater dimension,” Lécaillon pointed out. “Cristal is a wine we make to blossom with time.” And even on a rainy Monday in Manhattan, that is worth being punctual for. **SJ**

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Digging Into

WEST COAST GEOLOGY

**A DEBRIEFING
ON BRASSFIELD
ESTATE WINERY'S
HIGH VALLEY
VOLCANO CAMP**

STORY BY *John Szabo, MS*
PHOTOS BY *Alexander Rubin*



Outside tight-knit circles of volcanologists, receiving an invite to a “volcano camp” is surely not a regular occurrence. In fact, I’ve been researching and tramping volcanic vineyards worldwide while tasting the wines they yield for well over a dozen years and I’d never even heard of a volcano camp, let alone participated in one.

But this past spring, Brassfield Estate Winery in the High Valley AVA of Lake County in California’s North Coast organized and hosted just that: an immersive, in situ volcanic-wine experience. Owner

Jerry Brassfield and president Chris Baker dreamed up the idea, partnered with *The SOMM Journal*, and sent out invitations. Eight undaunted wine professionals from across the U.S. accepted and traveled to the alarmingly active Clear Lake Volcanic Field in the shadow of the Mount Konocti and Round Mountain volcanoes to see what it was all about. I too was invited, and I wasn’t about to miss the chance to join in the learning and sharing.

What exactly is a volcanic wine? Let’s start with a definition. In my 2016 book, *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit, and Power* (which was recently reissued in e-book and paperback), I define the category quite broadly as wines made from grapes grown on “soils derived from parent volcanic material.” For the most part, that means soil formed from extrusive igneous rocks—lava in all its colorful variations—plus all the rest of the fragmented materials that get ejected from



Brassfield and author John Szabo, MS.



Brassfield Estate Winery is located in the High Valley AVA of Lake County on California’s North Coast.

The group visits a soil pit dug in Brassfield's Volcano Ridge Vineyard, one of many throughout the High Valley AVA.



volcanoes, collectively called *tephra*. It also means soils heavily laced with volcanic ash, even if they're not sitting on a volcano, and volcanic alluvium and colluvium—that is, volcanic rocks that have washed or tumbled down hills into valleys.

As the participants of the inaugural High Valley Volcano Camp learned, Lake County has a bit of all this volcanic stuff. Dr. Seth Burgess, a research geologist with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) California Volcano Observatory, was fortunately on hand to sort through the staggering complexities of West Coast geology, which he described with uncommon enthusiasm and entertaining analogies.

"We're standing on the Pacific Ring of Fire," he reminded us on the first morning of camp as we stood at the base of Round Mountain Volcano, referring to the 25,000-mile horseshoe that stretches around the Pacific Ocean basin from Patagonia to New Zealand, where routine volcanic and seismic activity occurs. California, Burgess told us, had been a

"subduction zone"—an area where one tectonic plate sinks underneath another—for the better part of 200 million years. In this case, the Farallon plate under the Pacific slammed into and sank under the North American plate, giving rise to a volcanic arc, the erosion-exposed roots of which can be found today as the extensive granites in the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

During this nearly 200-million-year period of plate collision and subduction, the leading edge of the North American plate was also scraping material off the downgoing Farallon plate. "Imagine a piece of bread," Burgess suggested. "That's your ocean crust, which is mainly volcanic rock. Then you put some mayonnaise on it. And some hummus, and M&Ms, and peanuts, and, and . . ." he continued, drawing an analogy for the complex composition of the ocean floor resulting from continental runoff, volcanism, and sedimentation. "Then take that piece of bread and scrape it under the edge of a table—the North American continent.



A geologist's hammer atop one of the non-volcanic soil types found in the High Valley AVA.

Jonathan Walters, Brassfield's VP of winery and vineyard operations, displays a diagram of subduction and divergent plate tectonics.



That stuff, volcanic and other, that is slapped onto the edge of the continent during subduction is called the Franciscan Formation and is what makes up much of California's Coast Ranges."

But the tectonic action really changed some 30 million years ago, when the spreading center separating the Farallon and Pacific plates began subducting beneath North America. At this point, subduction was partially replaced with translation, to use the term for one plate sliding laterally past another, giving rise to rather spectacular volcanism—causing lavas to squirt out like a string of magma fountains above the subducting spreading ridge—and to a series of enormous

faults that still haunt California to this day; the San Andreas is the most famous but hardly the only one. It's this convergence of three tectonic plates that has enormous potential for damage.

Zeroing in on our present location, Burgess told campers that Lake County is western California's youngest volcanic region at barely 3 million years old and still active (it's considered a "high" potential threat by the USGS). "Heat associated with the volcanic field in this area powers a geothermal plant that could supply power to nearly a million homes per year!" he said animatedly.

Cobb Mountain to the south, the highest peak in the Mayacamas Mountains at 4,724 feet, is a volcano formed by the eruption of silica-rich lavas called rhyolite and dacite, while ever-looming Mt. Konocti (*kah-NOCK-ti*) is not a single strato-volcanic peak but rather what Burgess described as "a series of volcanic domes and flows that were squeezed up like toothpaste out of a tube" as recently as 11,000 years ago, essentially the geological blink of an eye.

The group came to stand around a soil pit dug into Brassfield's aptly named Volcano Ridge Vineyard. "Here we can see the actual explosive material—lapilli—ejected from the cinder

cone, which is rad!" Burgess enthused. "We're standing on the mousse of the Champagne from the explosive stage of the eruption, while the lava that streamed out closer to the cone is the flat Champagne that was left in the bottle and poured out more slowly."

Down in the pit I could see Adrienne Bennett, wine director at Mastro's Ocean Club in Los Angeles, running her hands through the "mousse" and picking up larger pieces of stone with obvious fascination. "I love this geology!" she exclaimed. "Feeling and touching the rocks—it's unforgettable!"

But, enthralling as the geology is, what most campers ultimately wanted to know is what it means for grapevines and the wines they produce. Jonathan Walters, VP of winery and vineyard operations, filled in the gaps. "These are deep soils with no horizons, and water runs right through them," he explained. "There's no layer of clay to catch and hold the water." This means that soil compaction from tractors—which can suffocate a vine's root system in clay-rich soils—is not an issue here. But it also means that fertility is low. "Here we get 3–5 tons per acre of fruit," Walters noted, "whereas on the [more fertile] valley floor we're getting 6–7 tons." He shared that other local

Volcanic soil from Round Mountain.





Tasting through a lineup of international wines from volcanic soils.

growers thought their decision to plant this site in 2003 was misguided, claiming that vines would never grow there. “Well, it worked!” he said with a smile. “But the vines do struggle.”

Viticultural consultant Jeff Gleaves, who had joined our volcanic safari, added that a nitrogen spray must be applied early in the growing season “just to get enough shoot growth” and phosphorus must also be used: “Otherwise, the canopy doesn’t develop, and the leaves turn red.” But the nutrient shortages end there, as the soils have an abundance of active elements, including potassium, calcium, and especially iron, which, as we would soon learn, has important ramifications for wine color stability and longevity.

The temperature had crept up by the time we left the soil pit behind and drove up to the top of Round Mountain under a piercing blue sky. The Brassfield team had set up a tasting under an awning to shield us from the bright sunlight and its penetrating UV radiation, another feature of growing grapes here, where Volcano Ridge reaches an elevation of 2,150 feet. Grapes develop particularly thick skins, rich in the purple color pigments called anthocyanins, that protect them from the sun’s rays, the way our own skin does when it tans.

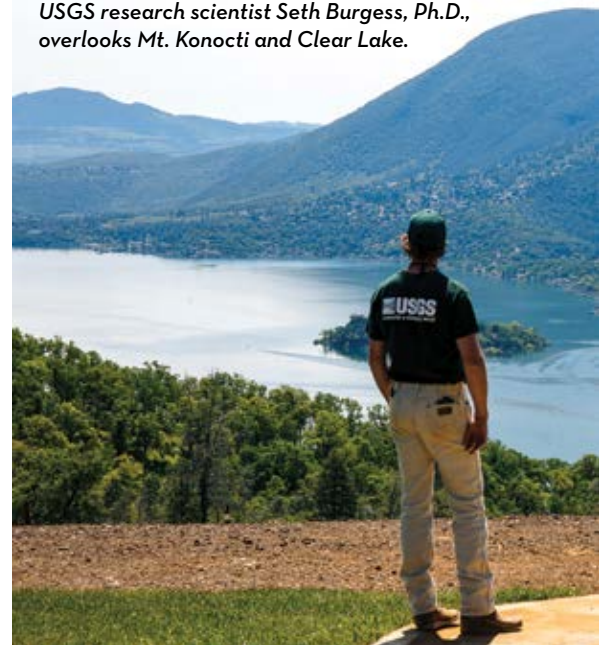
That much was evident when we tasted through a range of densely colored reds sourced wholly or in part from Volcano Ridge, starting with the signature red blend called Eruption (described by

Walters as a “Rhône red with friends,” among them Syrah, Malbec, Petite Sirah, and Zinfandel), which was followed by a Petite Sirah, Estate and Reserve Cabernet Sauvignons, and a pure Malbec. During the tasting, Brassfield winemaking consultant David DeSante—who, along with his partner, Katherine, has made wine for multiple producers throughout Northern California and abroad, including their own project in the Napa Valley—elaborated on the unique chemistry of volcanic wines from High Valley.

“It’s a bigger block of marble to carve at the start,” he began, referring to the generally abundant stuffing in Lake County grapes. He shared some laboratory analyses to prove the point, comparing several varieties grown in Napa and Sonoma with their counterparts from Brassfield Estate. Brassfield Cabernet Sauvignon from the 2021 vintage, for example, measured 35% higher tannin concentration compared to a well-known Cabernet from Napa, while Brassfield Merlot from the same vintage measured even more tannin, 40% higher, than a celebrated Napa Merlot. In other words, “the tannins are more demonstrable,” said DeSante. “They have to be tamed.” He described the tannin profile of High Valley wines as “having more layers that develop slowly over time in the glass. The wine you start your meal with is not the same as the one you’ll finish with.”

DeSante attributed the more “reactive and dynamic” tannins of volcanic wines

USGS research scientist Seth Burgess, Ph.D., overlooks Mt. Konocti and Clear Lake.



to the abundance of active, assimilable elements in red volcanic soils, like the soil we had just dug our hands into in Volcano Ridge. Iron in particular appears to play a key role. Not only does it give the soil a red color when present in high concentrations (due to oxidation), but it’s also an element that vines tend to “luxury consume”—that is, absorb as much of as possible, as compared to other elements that the vine takes up only in necessary quantities.

This means that winemaking techniques must be properly adapted to the soils to avoid overly tannic wines, examples being gentler extraction and greater exposure to oxygen to encourage some polymerization. “At Brassfield, we have long understood our wines’ need for additional air during fermentation and aging,” said DeSante.

The campers nodded in agreement as they tasted through the wines, noting their great structure. “I really picked up on the phenolic mouthfeel/texture,” Elizabeth Kowal, buyer for Geneva Wine Cellars in Geneva, Illinois, told me later that evening over a glass of Brassfield Sauvignon Blanc meant to refresh the palate. This was Kowal’s first tour to a volcanic region, and yet the wines’ sense of place was not lost on her. “They were so true to what I imagined a volcanic wine to be and reinforced what I thought,” she said. “They are so distinctive.”

High iron content also impacts wine by allowing it to hold its deep purple color



John Szabo pores over a selection of international wines grown in volcanic soils.

for longer. Iron binds to the oxygen that inevitably makes its way into wine, making it less reactive, and thus slows the oxidation of anthocyanins that eventually turns the purple-red pigments a garnet-brown hue. DeSante has also measured this effect, showing us data that compared Pinot Noir from Brassfield with an example from the Russian River Valley. The Brassfield wine showed much deeper color (indicating a higher anthocyanin concentration), as did the Eruption compared to a similar red blend from Sonoma. It's perhaps one of the worst-kept secrets in the California wine industry that no small measure of Lake County Cabernet finds its way into bottlings from famous appellations further south to add both structure and color.

The ageability of High Valley wine was then put to the test during a tasting of Brassfield library wines, ranging from the 2014 Eruption to an almost 20-year-old Malbec from 2006. Camper Jeff Chow, lead sommelier at Orla by Michael Mina in Las Vegas, said that he has naturally gravitated toward volcanic wines over the course of his career, adding that he was struck by how slowly Brassfield's reds evolve. "I did not know how long-lived these wines could be. That 2006 Malbec was still ruby!" he pointed out with a mix of admiration and incredulity.

A deep understanding of wine requires context and comparison, a fact that was not lost on the organizers of the Volcano Camp program. "The goal is to provide

education not only on what our High Valley volcanic soil gives to [Brassfield Estate] wines but also [on] how they compare to other volcanic wines," Chris Baker told us. To that end, he and Walters had asked me to select a range of volcanic wines from around the world for participants to explore.

Over a lunch at the estate's Horton House, with its stunning view of Clear Lake, campers enjoyed wines from several iconic volcanic regions, including Spain's Canary Islands; Santorini in Greece; Italian regions such as Campi Flegrei, Vesuvius, Greco di Tufo, Soave Classico, Alto Piemonte, and of course Mount Etna; the Itata Valley in southern Chile; Tokaj and Somló in Hungary; and, closer to home, the Dundee Hills in Oregon's Willamette Valley. "This was an eye-opening experience," said Bennett later—"a great illustration of the differences within the category of volcanic wines to a level I would not have expected. Rarely do you get an opportunity to see such a direct connection between soil, rocks, vine, and wine."

These differences are perhaps not a big surprise given the vast range of varieties, climates, and techniques the wines represented, not to mention the wide variations in volcanic soils themselves. And yet, by the end of the two-day experience, attendees seemed to converge on a set of characteristics shared by volcanic wines. "Definitely racy acidity; a laser focus; and a saline, savory finish," summed up Sunhee

Park, sommelier at the West Hollywood EDITION hotel, echoing much of what I'd overheard during the previous two days. "Salt, grit, and power!" added Kowal.

Keith Mattrick, sommelier at F.L.X. Table in Geneva, New York, later captured the overall experience as such: "Innumerable conversations with passionate and knowledgeable professionals laid the foundation for a much better understanding of everything from plate tectonics [and] vineyard management [to] winemaking, painting a beautiful picture of the unique situation of High Valley and its wines. It is experiences such as this that encourage us all as students of the world of wine and reinforce the utter magic of our endeavor. What a Volcano Camp it was!" Indeed, the participants all left with a sense of excitement to share what they witnessed with their customers and colleagues.

But they also agreed that there is much more to learn—a feeling that might be remedied by future camps. "We're aiming to create a greater awareness of volcanic soils in the High Valley AVA," said Baker, "and Brassfield has committed to providing this educational opportunity to the somm community as well as journalists wanting to learn more. But it's only just the beginning. We will repeat this, hopefully with other producers in Lake County and from other regions. Collaborations are in the works." Perhaps future invitations to Volcano Camp won't be so rare for wine professionals after all. SJ

Unity in Diversity

AT MASTER CLASSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY,
THE WINES OF VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA, REVEALED
A WIDE RANGE OF REGIONAL RICHES

Mark Davidson, author of The Wines of Australia, led Wine Victoria master classes in four cities: Denver, CO; Scottsdale, AZ; Houston, TX; and Atlanta, GA.



PHOTO: JILL MCNAMARA



Davidson leads a master class at Ocean Prime in Denver, CO.

Denver, Colorado

story by **Ruth Tobias**

photos by **Lucy Beaugard**

Here's a thought experiment: If you could only drink wine from one region for the rest of your life, which would you choose? Victoria, Australia, might not be the first place that comes to mind—but, insisted *The Wines of Australia* author Mark Davidson as he led a master class hosted by Wine Victoria at Ocean Prime in Denver, Colorado, last April, “You would not be bored. Everything that you could possibly want in terms of wine style exists in the state of Victoria: unbelievably delicious, light sparklings; complex, ageworthy sparklings; light, perfumed aromatic whites; full-bodied whites; light reds; brilliant Shiraz; majestic fortified wines. . . . Diversity’s the big discussion [among sommeliers], but it is 100% true of Victoria,” which despite being the country’s second-smallest state is home to more distinct growing regions—21 in all—than any other.

The ten wines we tasted proved as much, starting with the Zilzie 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, which was typical of

the variety as grown in Australia in that it showed “more sort of tropical-slash-passion fruit . . . rather than that straight sort of herbaceous, gooseberry [character] that you get from New Zealand,” said Davidson, who then introduced a pair of Rieslings: Fowles 2023 Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch and Best’s Great Western 2024. The former hails from the Strathbogie Ranges, which Fowles Wine proprietor Matt Fowles described as “genuinely alpine country” that’s generally even cooler than the rest of relatively cool Victoria. There, Fowles—“a very keen ethical hunter,” in his words—crafts his Riesling to “go well with wild game, so we’re looking for intensity of aroma and a silky texture.” As for the Best’s version—from a historic estate established in the Grampians in 1860—Davidson noted that compared to the “lemony-limey” Australian Rieslings most somms are likely familiar with, “it’s a little bit more mouth-filling, a little bit rounder, a little bit softer.” Agreed attendee Logan Silbert, owner of Few & Far Wine Co., “When you think of Aussie Riesling, you think Clare Valley, [but] I just love being able to

taste Riesling from other regions made with intention.”

Introducing the next two wines—Yering Station 2021 Chardonnay and De Bortoli 2023 Chardonnay, both from the Yarra Valley—Davidson acknowledged that, in Australia as in the U.S., there was a time when Chardonnay was so heavily oaked that “I was picking splinters out of my teeth.” Now that producers have pulled back from that approach, he continued, the Yarra is emerging as “a beautiful place” for obtaining “a nectariney, white-peach quality that seems to be consistent. [They’re] medium weight—you’re not going to get the bigger, richer, full-bodied styles out of the [region].”

Moving on to reds, we sampled Hand-picked Wines’ 2020 Collection Pinot Noir from the Mornington Peninsula, which Davidson referred to as “Pinot Central,” with 50% of its vineyard land dedicated to the grape. As its name suggests, the region is surrounded by water—specifically the Bass Strait, which leads to the Southern Ocean (aka “the air conditioning unit that cools down the southern part of Australia”). While “freshness, lightness, and liveliness”



Logan Silbert, owner of Few & Far Wine Co. (center), and sommelier Maia Parish (right) sample the goods at the walkaround tasting.

are according to Davidson a hallmark of Victorian Pinots, Silbert nonetheless observed that the wine's "midpalate weight" made it a standout: "That density of fruit and earth is, for me, only found in Premier Cru or higher red Burgundy."

From one of Victoria's warmer pockets, Heathcote, came the Tellurian 2020 GSM we tasted next. The paradoxically named Cambrian greenstone, a type of red soil over limestone that's key in the region, contributes an "iron-like" quality to the wine, ensuring that, while it may show "the richness and intensity that you get in Barossa, the flavor profile from Heathcote is 100% different," asserted Davidson. The same went for Mount Langi Ghiran's 2022 Talus Shiraz from the Grampians, which reminded him of what Australian Shiraz can taste like at its best: "intense and powerful yet fragrant and delicate." As one guest piped up, "Victoria should be the gatekeeper for Shiraz right now—this is indicative of what it should be."

The same could perhaps also be said of Victorian Cabernet Sauvignon; as we tried the Buller 2021 Balladeer Cabernet Sauvignon from Rutherglen, Davidson mused, "It's got richness, it's got ripeness, but there's still that structural thing"—an assessment he wasn't alone in. "The biggest surprise for me," Tavernetta sommelier Connor Fowler told me after the walkaround tasting that followed the seminar, "was honestly how much I

liked the Cabernets, a variety that I don't usually gravitate toward. Australian—let alone Victorian—Cabernet Sauvignon is something that I'm very inexperienced with, so it was a lot of fun seeing different expressions of the grape that were varietally pure and well balanced. The ones I tasted were full-bodied but not overpowering, with a great balance of herbal notes and black fruit."

That said, Rutherglen is best known not for table wine but for fortified sweet wines. Another historic estate, All Saints, has been producing Rutherglen Muscat since 1864 in a castle filled with old 5,000-liter casks that comprise a modified solera system, yielding expressions averaging from seven to 100 years old; while we savored the former in class, sales and marketing director Angela Brown also brought the latter for guests to try at the walkaround. "Great dessert wine is such a treat to experience," enthused Fowler; "and this was no exception, with the butterscotch and exotic spice on the nose matched on the palate, still with a distinct fresh finish. That was unbelievable."

Of course, the hope for everyone involved in an event like this—hosts and guests alike—is that the latter will be introduced to bottlings they actually want to buy and sell. That was certainly the case for Miles David, director of liquor operations at Leever's Locavore: "Mark's approach and knowledge of Victoria cre-



Guests Zach Alas, sommelier at Frasca Food and Wine, and Lexie Moore and Connor Fowler, sommeliers at Tavernetta.

ated a fun and engaging experience that easily put Victoria's wine on our radar—and wine bar menu," he shared with me, adding that the gourmet market and eatery planned to add the Zilizie Sauvignon Blanc to its menu as soon as possible. In the end, Davidson's claim that he "would not be unhappy" if he were able to drink only Victorian wines for the foreseeable future seemed not only plausible but a humble understatement.



Lisa Lambertus, North American manager, Rathbone Wine Group; Kate Kriven, U.S. program manager, Wine Victoria; and Angela Brown, marketing director, All Saints, with guests Jared Sowinski, beverage director, Uptown Projects, and Benjamin Higgins, sommelier, Toca Madera Scottsdale, at Mastro's Steakhouse City Hall in Scottsdale, AZ.



A lineup from Handpicked Wines.

Scottsdale, Arizona

story by Christina Barrueta

photos by Jill McVamara

As in Denver, the gregarious Mark Davidson took the stage, this time at the Mayor's Office, a private dining room at Mastro's Steakhouse City Hall in Scottsdale, Arizona. "I want you to understand the diversity and complexity of Victoria, Australia," he invited, gesturing toward the map on the screen. "The cooling breezes of the Southern Ocean and the elevation—every 100 meters you go up makes a massive difference—make Victoria the coolest wine-producing state, but there are also pockets of warmer areas. What this equates to is a region where every conceivable style of wine exists."

That stylistic spectrum was on full display in our lineup, which mirrored the first leg of the tour, beginning with the Zilzie 2023 Sauvignon Blanc. "I prefer this style over the grassy, bell pepper notes of New Zealand-style Sauvignon Blanc," remarked guest E. John Banquil Jr., president and CEO of Ling & Louie's Asian Bar and Grill. "The tropical fruit flavors were very clean and refreshing."

The two Rieslings that followed also made an impression. Fowles Wine owner Matt Fowles shared insights into his 2023 Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch from the Strathbogie Ranges, noting the unique aspects of his property. "The altitude, be-

ing on one of the world's largest granite batholiths, and our small crop load of no more than 3 tons per acre all build aromatic intensity," he explained. Michelle Wrobel, director of operations at The Westin Phoenix Downtown, was sold. "This was hands down my favorite," she enthused. "It was dry with minimal residual sugar and unlike any Riesling I've had. I also appreciated learning that the terroir has the oldest granite on the planet and how they use bats to control the moth population." The Best's Great Western 2024 from the Grampians offered a different personality, and sommelier Ben Higgins of Toca Madera appreciated the contrast. "It's a lot more fruit-driven than Fowles on the nose and on the palate—the perfect Riesling for Thai food," he shared.

Davidson then led us to the Yarra Valley for the final two whites. "Here we have two Chardonnays, one with a bit of age and one a little bit younger," he said, introducing 2019 De Bortoli Estate and 2021 Yering Station. "I found the De Bortoli Estate Chardonnay well balanced, while the Yering Station was fuller-bodied, with lovely acidity carrying through the finish," observed Higgins.

Our tasting of red wines began with Handpicked Wines' 2020 Collection Pinot Noir from the Mornington Peninsula, winning praise from Banquil. "It's vibrant and lively, with a bit of chalkiness and bright red fruit," he said, naming it among

his favorites of the day. Next came Tellerian's 2020 GSM, shaped by Heathcote's ancient Cambrian soils. Higgins described the contrast: "Loved the fun change-up! The ripe strawberry and candied cherry nose gave way to savory with black pepper, basil, and rosemary on the palate—lots of character."

Moving to the Mount Langi Ghiran 2022 Talus Shiraz, Davidson pointed out that "this style is very different from what you might be accustomed to, and Victoria is a lovely place to reset your compass for what's going on with Shiraz." "It wasn't the jammy fruit bomb-style Shiraz," agreed Banquil. "It's savory, almost meaty, with hints of spice, pepper—another favorite."

Davidson then shifted the focus to Rutherglen with the Buller 2021 Balladeer Cabernet Sauvignon, illustrating that while the region is celebrated for its fortified wines, its Cabernets are just as notable, being "medium-bodied with freshness and liveliness." At the same time, All Saints marketing director Angela Brown highlighted those legendary sweet wines with a pour of NV Classic Rutherglen Muscat and a savvy suggestion for the attending wine professionals: "These days, a lot of people aren't eating dessert, so a glass of this at the end of the meal is a nice send-off."

"Were any of these surprising to you? Were there any favorites?" asked Davidson, and the responses came quickly. "Chardonnay," volunteered one attendee.



Guest Mark Rink, wine director at Belmont Kitchen & Cocktails, with Matt Fowles, proprietor of Fowles Wine.

“Pinot Noir,” “Riesling,” “Shiraz,” added others. Opinions were as varied as the wines, a theme that continued during the walkaround tasting that followed.

Guests grazed from a table laden with crudités, shrimp cocktail, mini-crab cakes, and beef-gorgonzola crostini while revisiting their favorite pours and exploring new ones. Banquil returned to Hand-picked Wines’ table for more Pinot Noir, noting, “I really enjoyed the differences and nuances of each tier, from the Collection to the Single Vineyard offerings.” Maria Reyes-Smith, owner of Marivinera Wine Experiences, found herself “discovering many expressions of Chardonnay, my favorite being Patrick Sullivan Bull Swamp. Redbank Prosecco was also a pleasant surprise, as you hear ‘Prosecco’ and usually think Italy. And the 100-year-old-average-age solera from All Saints was so smooth, with its notes of caramel, honey, and raisins, that I felt like I was on the set of the [Apple TV+] show *Drops of God*, lucky enough to taste such an exquisite wine.”

As the last glasses were swirled, Wine Victoria had clearly made its case. Upward Projects beverage director Jared Sowiński summed up the experience: “I was quite impressed by the overall quality to price ratio of the wines presented . . . and [the event] was a great representation of the current status of the state’s wine industry. This region is really shining right now, and it’s wonderful to see the quality and passion coming out of Victoria.”

Houston, Texas

story by **Stefanie Schwalb**
photos by **Tracy Eason**

The theme of diversity continued on the Houston leg of the Wine Victoria tour, held at steakhouse Prime 131, but Mark Davidson’s flair and attendees’ big Texas energy lent the event its own rhythm.

The tasting opened with what Davidson called the “fun, affordable, easy-drinking” Zilzie 2023 Sauvignon Blanc from Murray Darling. Noting that a lot of Sauvignon Blanc is being drunk in Australia, he was quick to point out that, while many people lump the country together with New Zealand, they are not the same, and neither are their wines. Kevin F. McCormick, wine specialist at retailer Spec’s, agreed, finding the Zilzie “clean, refreshing,” and “definitely a departure from all of the New Zealand styles that the typical wine consultant gets overwhelmed with.” We then tried the Fowles 2023 Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch Riesling from the Strathbogie Ranges, a region Davidson described as “Victoria’s answer to the Clare Valley.” Proprietor Matt Fowles jumped in to speak a bit about the wine-making process. “This wine is not a very typical example for Australia,” he said. “Yes, it’s dry, but we ferment in 5,000-liter oak casks—wild fermentation majority. We have it on yeast lees; [the time] depends on the vintage, but in this case, [it was] around eight weeks. I think the thing you see is those beautiful aromatics, which is



Stanton & Killeen owner/manager Wendy Killeen addresses master class attendees at Prime 131 in Houston, TX.



The white wines tasted during the seminar.

a real feature of the Strathbogie Ranges.” The result, according to McCormick, was “more generous compared to either domestic or German Rieslings” in terms of mouthfeel, making it “much more appealing [for] a wide range of foods.”

Next on deck was supposed to be the Stanton & Killeen 2023 Arinto from Rutherglen, but unfortunately, the wine didn’t arrive in time. However, managing director Wendy Killeen was on hand to talk about the region’s importance as the birthplace of Australian fortified wine. The winery she now runs planted its first vines in the 1870s; because Rutherglen is warm compared to much of Victoria, she added, her family brought in varieties that



As we turned our attention to reds, Davidson revealed that Pinot Noir was the reason he became a sommelier, and Mornington Peninsula—the source of Handpicked Wines’ “light, fragrant” 2020 Collection Pinot Noir—“is among the places where the very best Pinot has come out of Australia.” On the “richer” side was the Tellurian 2020 GSM from Heathcote; he noted that wines from this region tend to have “weight, body, and intensity . . . along with dark fruit flavors.” McCormick named it one of his favorites, remarking that “Australian GSMs don’t quite get the exposure that they should, but any type of cuisine that features pork, lamb, or veal would be a wonderful match with this.”

Mount Langi Ghiran’s 2022 Talus Shiraz from the Grampians followed; Davidson referred to it as a “lovely snapshot” of

which Davidson called a good, “not too herbaceous” example of “the full extent of what’s happening in Victoria,” as well as the fortified All Saints Estate Rutherglen Muscat NV. “The Rutherglen Muscat is certainly something unique to Australia,” said All Saints co-owner Angela Brown. “It’s . . . got a real sense of place because it’s been [made] in the old castle building on our property since 1864.” With 230 grams of residual sugar, the wine is “intense in color and flavor,” she added, but “it’s still got that beautiful acidity.”

As the event came to a close, Trent Hart, sommelier at The Library Wine Bar, summed it up perfectly: “This was one of the best tasting and educational events I have attended,” he enthused. “It managed to showcase a wide range of what Victoria has to offer without becoming overwhelming.”

Atlanta, Georgia

story by *Stefanie Schwalb*
photos by *Mimi Leake*

At fine-dining venue White Oak in Atlanta, Georgia, Mark Davidson acknowledged that the average American wine consumer is unfamiliar with Victoria as a whole, never mind with its impressive breadth of wines; as Robin Austin, CEO of Afinity Imports, put it, “Generally when you think of Australia, you don’t think it’s a big wine region. . . . Usually people just think of the Barossa Valley or the big



Guests *Justyna Brewczyk*, owner of *Wine Witch*, and *Trent Hart*, sommelier at *The Library Wine Bar*, at the walkaround tasting.



would do well in the heat—Portuguese grapes among them.

Patrick Sullivan’s 2023 Bull Swamp Chardonnay from Gippsland was the first of three Chardonnays we sampled to showcase the variety’s range, followed by De Bortoli 2019 Chardonnay and Yering Station 2021 Chardonnay, both from the Yarra Valley. The Sullivan, hailing from volcanic soils, had in Davidson’s words a “savory, interesting character to it.” The cooler Yarra Valley, meanwhile, produces wines of restraint: The De Bortoli showed stone fruit and some mature characteristics compared to the Yering Station, which featured more citrus and tropical notes.

“savory fragrance, dark fruit, and spice.” The conversation then veered into a spirited riff on the “Shiraz conundrum.” While brands like [yellow tail] have shaped the U.S. market’s perception of the variety, Davidson argued, “Australia has the oldest Shiraz vines on the planet; there’s nowhere else . . . that can demonstrate the full spectrum of what it’s capable of showing.” Praising the Talus’ layers of flavor and touch of spice, McCormick asserted, “This should probably be the benchmark in terms of changing Americans’ views on exactly what Australian reds should drink like.”

We returned to Rutherglen with the Buller 2021 Balladeer Cabernet Sauvignon,



Umi Sushi sommelier Joon Lim participates in the walkaround tasting at *White Oak* in Atlanta, GA.



▲ Guest Robin Austin, CEO of Afinity Imports, with All Saints marketing director Angela Brown.

▼ Cuts Steakhouse sommelier Jonathan Mattson samples one of the five reds presented at the master class.



Shiraz producers.” “It’s interesting because part of the problem in Australia is the vernacular *around* Australia,” Davidson theorized. “We say things like ‘I love Australian Shiraz,’ but would you ever say, ‘Pass me some American Cabernet?’” He aimed to flip the script for attendees by drilling down on Victoria’s diversity; for instance, he said, “You can get the full spectrum of what goes on with Shiraz—more full-body styles, more medium weight, more savory—then you can go up to the Rutherglen and have some of the greatest, most unique sweet wines.”

Following the Zilzie 2023 Sauvignon Blanc that continued its streak as a crowd favorite, Matt Fowles returned to discuss his Fowles 2023 Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch Riesling and the legacy of its source, the Strathbogie Ranges: “There’s not one speck of soil in France that’s as old as this region; if you take the view that wines are made in a vineyard, that’s a relevant detail.” Marked diurnal shifts allow him and his team to produce a wide range of Riesling styles; the one we tasted featured intense aromas and a well-built midpalate from aging on the lees. It was followed by Best’s Great Western 2023 Riesling from the Grampians, which showed hints of apple and petrol along with a good balance of acid. Davidson noted that he stayed at the Best’s winery, which was established in the 1800s, while writing his aforementioned book and was able to sample some very old bottlings on-site, including a 1988 Traminer.

Returning to the De Bortoli 2019 Chardonnay and Yering Station 2021 Chardonnay, Davidson noted that in Australia overall, there’s a need to manage

the variety’s ripeness: “So that means go to the regions that are cooler [like Yarra] and to the sites within those regions that are cooler.” Contrary to some beliefs about Australian Chardonnay, he added, its “beautiful structure and complexity allows these wines to age a long time.” That came as a surprise to Austin: “The whites were more restrained [than I anticipated],” she said. “When you first start drinking wines, you’re not really knowledgeable, so you go for those big over-the-top flavors, but the Chardonnays and Sauvignon Blanc had such elegant flavors.”

Moving on to Handpicked Wines’ 2020 Collection Pinot Noir, Davidson reiterated that Victoria is the state people should turn to if they are interested in experimenting with Australian Pinot Noir; the Mornington Peninsula is especially ideal because of the aforementioned cooling influence of the Southern Ocean. Davidson said that what he has loved about Pinot ever since it first captured his imagination is its aroma and texture: “That’s the beauty of it, and time [in bottle] helps with that in wines [like Handpicked].” Meanwhile, the Tellurian 2020 GSM prompted him to point out that Central Victoria is in Australia’s Northern Territory, where “there’s definitely continentality and warmer days,” resulting in richer, fuller wine that nonetheless retains acidity thanks to diurnal shifts as well as showing spice that’s easy to love.

Of the Mount Langi Ghiran 2022 Talus Shiraz, Davidson remarked that its framework reminded him of a wine from Barossa: “I’m not always reaching for bigger, fuller, richer wines all the time, but when I do, I want balance and precision.”

Hailing from the relatively warm Grampians, this wine served as a good example. “Just because the region’s warm doesn’t exclude [a wine] from having precision and being beautifully bright, pure, and fresh,” he said.

As we tasted the Rutherglen wines—Buller 2021 Balladeer Cabernet Sauvignon and All Saints nonvintage Rutherglen Muscat—All Saints’ Angela Brown was enlisted to talk about the region as a whole, which is located on the border between Victoria and New South Wales and features rich red loam and alluvial clay soils on the Murray River flats. Though it’s known for fortified wines, it also makes table wines like the Cabernet, which Davidson called “good, affordable, and really easy drinking.” As for the Muscat, Brown said, “We leave the fruit on the vine for a very long time, ferment, and then fortify. We add a neutral grape spirit—everyone [in the region] uses this neutral grape spirit—so we’re keeping everything similar; then it’s on to the blending.” But, she adds, it’s the aging process that’s critical for maintaining the house style.

In the end, Wine Victoria’s mission to showcase its stylistic range and change assumptions about the region is one attendees like Eduardo Porto Carreiro, vice president of Rocket Farm Restaurants, found successful. “The seminar was an immersive tour of Victoria highlighting a slate of singular wines that would not only appeal to a broad swath of drinkers but easily illustrated what a special winegrowing region this truly is,” he said, singling out the Handpicked Pinot Noir for praise. “This is a corner of the wine world that definitely deserves more attention.” SJ

Alceño

BODEGAS DESDE 1870



Alceño 12
Monastrell Syrah
94 - Somm Journal



Alceño Blanco
Sauvignon Blanc
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Victor Fuentes is general manager of Grupo Barón de Ley.

An Eye for Detail

GRUPO BARÓN DE LEY HAS THE VISION TO MATCH ITS SIZE

by Wanda Mann

VICTOR FUENTES, general manager of Grupo Barón de Ley, wasn't being braggadocious when he told me that the company's El Coto de Rioja winery is "the biggest Rioja wine brand in Spain by far." Given its 1,804 acres of vineyards, he was simply stating a fact. However, during our recent meeting in New York, it became clear that he wasn't referring just to physical size but also to a willingness to invest in a big vision: "Every year, we have an ongoing investment process, and as long as things make sense and are just-



fied, reinvestment is not an issue." He added, "The company and employees always come first, and then secondary is the shareholders. Our way to give value to the shareholders is giving them a company that is stronger, that is better, that is more efficient and is delivering better results and has a brighter future."

Since its founding in 1970, El Coto has become a reference point for Rioja in 70 countries. Granted, Grupo Barón de Ley also produces the Barón de Ley and Finca Museum brands. But they

are not derivative carbon copies: "Each winery has its own identity," said Fuentes. "El Coto was born . . . with the aim of producing a style of Rioja that would be partly traditional, partly oriented to focus on the fruit, which was new at the time. And the biggest specialty of the house was the Crianza." Now, Fuentes asserted, El Coto is also staking its claim as "a specialist of Gran Reserva" with its Coto de Imaz range of wines. He conceded that "if you talk to critics and you ask them who are the most relevant producers of Gran Reserva, we've never been there. But nowadays, we can actually claim our position. And we're going to show you



Old vines in the Finca Museum vineyard in Spain's Cigales appellation.

our credentials today." Those credentials included the 2018 and 2012 vintages of Coto de Imaz Gran Reserva Rioja.

The current vintage of Coto de Imaz Gran Reserva Rioja on the market is 2018; as Fuentes noted of the category, "Not many regions are marketing wines that are seven years old as the fresh vintage. So that's already something for the consumer that makes a difference." The blend of 90% Tempranillo and 10% Graciano from estate vineyards throughout Rioja's subregions was aged in American and French oak barrels for a minimum of 24 months, followed by at least 36 months in bottle. It is complex and silky with an impressively long finish. The 2012 vintage followed a similar aging regimen and serves as an example of the wine's elegant aging capacity. "2012 for us is probably the vintage where we actually switched something in our heads, and we started to believe that we are a

major producer of quality Gran Reserva, because 2012 was a vintage with very healthy grapes, and we got to the best quality ever," explained Fuentes.

With the company's prowess in the reds of Rioja fully established, Fuentes considers complex whites "the next frontier" and described Barón de Ley Tres Viñas Blanco Reserva Rioja, a blend of 85% Viura with 10% Malvasia and 5% Garnacha, as "a white that dreams of becoming a red." He explained that although Viura is not super aromatic, it is a "rich variety" with "very good roundness" and "a great ability to age in barrel [and] in bottle." Our tasting of the Tres Viñas 2021 and 2008 were delicious proof of his thesis. Aged in American oak for 12 months and a minimum of ten months in bottle, the 2021 was both fresh and complex, with a sultry oakiness. The acidity in the 2008 was still bright, with a strong backbone and tertiary flavors



of dried nuts and honey. Fuentes recommends the label as a great pairing for notoriously difficult artichokes as well as for Iberico ham: "Most people tend to match Iberico ham with red wine, and no, it's a mistake. Sherry is the best, and then after Sherry, an aged white."

In 1999, the group set its sights beyond Rioja and established Finca Museum in the Cigales appellation just north of Ribera del Duero, which is known for its deeply hued rosé wines. Enchanted by the plethora of old vines, ranging in age from 40 to 50 years old, the company's art-loving chairman, Eduardo Santos-Ruiz, declared that it looked more like a museum than a vineyard—hence the name. The team set out to produce what Fuentes called "a very elegant, mineral, gastronomic rosé" that was paler than traditional Cigales rosés and made using free-run juice via direct pressing rather than by the saignée method. A blend of Tempranillo (48%) and Garnacha Tinta (25%) with a 27% mix of Verdejo and Albillo, Finca Museum Rosé fulfills the company's goal of producing "a serious rosé with freshness, with . . . minerality, white flowers, white fruits, and also [a] very delicate [character]," explained Fuentes.

Intertwined with Grupo Barón de Ley's focus on creating premium, terroir-driven wines is a commitment to sustainability, including organic farming practices and efforts to reduce its carbon footprint through the use of solar energy and waste reduction. "In our view, it's very important that the wines are honest in the sense that they are produced with good, sustainable practices, that they have a quality background and a quality effort—and that the price is also a price that is honest and is a fair proposition to the consumer," said Fuentes. "Being big doesn't mean that we don't pay close attention to little details." **SJ**

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- Judd Wallenbrook – Priest Ranch
- Pedro Garcia – Felix Solis

Blind Taste Like a Master of Wine

- Lindsay Pomeroy, MW – Wine Smarties

Educating Your Palate: Tasting Techniques

- Jesse Rodriguez – KHK Wine
- Ralf Holdenried – Black Stallion

Pinot Family, Old World And New

- Alan Tardi – New York Wine Studio

Putting the Super in Tuscan

- Jessie Birschbach – The SOMM Journal

The Experience Multiplier: How Sensory Branding Can Future-Proof Your Wine Business

- Neeta Mittal – LXV Wine

Wine, Water & Food Pairing Harmonization

- Fana Monché – Nestle Premium Waters

Your Brain On Wine

- Maurice DiMarino – Cohn Restaurant Group

Trends & Insights

Navigating Cannabis & CBD Infused Beverages in Hospitality

Part 1: Shifting Tastes: How Multiple Generations Are Reshaping the Beverage Landscape

- Erik Segelbaum – Somlyay LLC, Swig Partners, Goodsomm

Part 2: Gen Z Speaks: Redefining the Future of Wine & Spirits

- Indigo Zuber – The Sexy Roman

Understanding Temperance Movement: A Call to Action For The Beverage Industry

- Monika Bielka-Vescovi – Women For WineSense

Roundtable Discussions

High-Volume National Buyer: Trends, Challenges & Tactical Solutions

- Larissa Dubose – Paradies Lagardere/Vino Volo

Independent Buyer: Sourcing, Scaling & Staying Nimble

- Maurice DiMarino – Cohn Restaurant Group

Supplier: Growth, Grit & Game Plans

- Angela McCrae – Assc. of African American Vintners

Supplier Education

Navigating The Three-Tier System: Insider Strategies For Launching Successful Alcohol Brands

- Dave Moore – SCHUG Winery

What Investors Want: Positioning Your Beverage Brand For Growth and Acquisition

- Quinton Jay – Bacchus Consulting Group

Professional Development

Failing Faster To Lead Better: Embracing Growth Through Setbacks

- Rawnica Dillingham – New Riff Distilling

Floor to Feed: How Wine & Spirits Pros Are Building Influence Online

The Buyer's Balancing Act: Budget, Vision & The Unexpected

- Dan Cools – Juniper and Ivy
- Hayden Stewart – Pauma Valley Country Club
- Jessica Solomon – Bluebridge Hospitality
- Kaylan Wedemeyer – Seneca
- Kelly Kohlman – Oliver McCrum Wines & Spirits
- Nate Black – Blue Bridge Hospitality

The Power Of Five: Advocates, Influence & Leadership In Wine

- Jennifer Thomas – Rooted Connections, LLC

Certifications

2-Day Champagne Specialist Certification

- Tanya Morning Star – Cellar Muse

2-Day French Wine Scholar Course

- Lindsay Pomeroy, MW – Wine Smarties

2-Day Somm Intensive Course

- David Glancy, MS – San Francisco Wine School

Production + Technique

The Future of Regenerative Organic Viticulture: New Insights And Advancements

- Aron Weinkauff – Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery
- Ivo Jeramaz – Grgich Hills Estate
- Joseph Brinkley – Bonterra Organic Estates
- Samantha Cole-Johnson – JancisRobinson.com

Regional Explorations

Itata Reimagined: Exploring Chile's Oldest Wine Region

- Pablo Ugarte – Catad'Or World Wine and Spirits Awards

The Wild Heart of Italy – Unveiling Terroir, Tradition, and Innovation

- Tanya Morning Star – Cellar Muse

Nizza Exclusive: A Tasting of Barbera From The Piedmont DOCG

- Erik Segelbaum – Somlyay LLC, Swig Partners, Goodsomm

San Diego Wine: A Regional Exploration

- Alysha Stehly – Stehly Grove & Mira Costa College
- Kiara Boccia-Fenlason – Mia Marie Vineyards
- Linda McWilliams – San Pasqual Winery
- Miriam Valdez – Granite Lion Cellars
- Ross Rizzo – Bernardo Winery
- Tami Wong – Wine Wise

The Colors of Languedoc: Picpoul de Pinet & AOP Languedoc

The Wines Of Irpinia – Greco Di Tufo, Fiano Di Avellino, Taurasi

- Thomas Hyland

Wines From Top Chinese Regions

- Tommy Lam – Asia Wine Institute

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*Two Perspectives
on an Age-Old
Question at the
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PLACE *or* PROCESS?



Moderator Lars Leicht, VP of education, The SOMM Journal; Nick Reinell, winemaker, Copper Cane Wines & Spirits (Belle Glos Pinot Noir); Alan Crawford, VP, luxury estates, education, Foley Family Wines & Spirits (Chateau St. Jean Cinq Cépages); Laura Hochrein, state manager MD/DC/DE, The Wine Group (Benziger Running Wild Chardonnay); Andrew Wilson, winemaker, Goose Ridge Vineyards; Fatiya Laymoun, sales director, Heritage Collection, Trinchero Family Estates (Quattro Theory Sauvignon Blanc and Bravium Pinot Noir); and Michael Franz, co-moderator and lead wine reviewer, The Tasting Panel.



The “Technique or Terroir” Debate Continues

story by *Dave McIntyre* / photos by *Michael Butcher*

There’s an existential question wine aficionados love to debate: Is wine truly made in the vineyard, or is it crafted in the winery by skillful winemakers? (In short, is it the land or the hand?) Not surprisingly, the question prompted a spirited discussion at a presentation sponsored by *The SOMM Journal* at the SommCon DC Summit in Washington, D.C., on June 3, titled, “Technique or Terroir: Which Matters More?” Spoiler alert: The five panelists as well as the audience reached no definitive conclusion, as terroir and technique each play important roles in creating our favorite wines.

“Whenever we visit a winery, we start in the vineyards, where we see the soils and the care going in, and the vineyard manager tells us wine is made in the vineyard,” said moderator Lars Leicht, VP of education for *The SOMM Journal*. “Then we go in the winery and the winemaker shows us all his whiz-bang equipment, all the bells and whistles [such as] presses and the optical sorter. What’s going on here? We’ve never fully answered the question, but we certainly have a lot of thoughts, and those get better after a couple glasses of wine.”

Michael Franz, a retired professor of political philosophy as well as the editor of *WineReviewOnline.com* and chief wine reviewer for *The Tasting Panel*, *The SOMM Journal*’s sister publication, likened the question to the debate surrounding nature versus nurture in social science. “People in psychology and sociology still are constantly teasing out both sides of that question,” Franz said. “Nobody argues that it’s all one or the other. And I’ll be surprised if any of our panelists want to maintain it’s all terroir or all technique.”

Initially, at least, sentiment tipped toward terroir as the panelists presented six wines to the audience of about 40 retail and restaurant professionals. First up was Fatiya Laymoun, sales director for the Heritage Collection of Trinchero Family Estates. “Trinchero is focused on partnering with families that are true stewards of the land, so I am taking the position of terroir in our discussion today for the two wines I’ll be presenting,” she said.



Quattro Theory 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley

Laymoun’s first wine, the Quattro Theory 2023 Sauvignon Blanc (\$30), was made from grapes grown in Mary’s Vineyard in the Calistoga AVA of Napa Valley. “The vineyard sits on a really high water table,” allowing for dry farming as the vines are able to access water relatively easily, she noted. “When you have a little bit of strain and stress, it makes the vines focus energy on ripening the grapes rather than the green parts of the vine.”

Even before she turned to the winemaking, Laymoun described how winemaker Landon Donley adjusted canopy management in the vineyard to limit sun exposure, which prevents the grapes from over-ripening. She then described Donley’s use of various techniques to achieve maximum expression of terroir in the winery, such as cold stabulation—extended maceration on the fruit lees before fermentation—to enhance the juice’s aromas.



Benziger Family Winery

2022 Running Wild Chardonnay, Paicines, San Benito County

Laura Hochrein, state manager for D.C., Maryland, and Delaware for The Wine Group, presented Benziger Family Winery’s 2022 Running Wild Chardonnay (\$33). While inspired by the rugged nature of Benziger’s Sonoma estate, it’s made with fruit from the Paicines AVA in San Benito County on California’s Central Coast. “I initially leaned into terroir for this wine,” Hochrein said, “but then I came full circle back to technique because of the Benziger family and everything they do.” She described how the vineyard, situated on steep slopes at an elevation of 1,200 feet in the shadow of the Gabilan Range, has a semi-arid climate and benefits from diurnal temperature shifts and cool breezes off Monterey Bay. This terroir helps preserve acidity and guards against late-season heat waves, Hochrein said, going on to describe how winemaker Lisa Amaroli employed full malolactic fermentation, lees stirring, and aging in French oak to add creaminess and spice. “So I’m going to have to go with 60% terroir and 40% technique,” she concluded.



Bravium

2022 Wiley Vineyard Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, Mendocino County

Laymoun then returned to present the Bravium 2022 Wiley Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40) from Anderson Valley in Mendocino County, an area known for sparkling wine. Grapes with thick skins derived from cool temperatures and an elevation at the fog line about 8 miles from the Pacific Ocean yield a wine with firm acidity, and winemaker Derek Rohlffs harvests yeast from the vineyard to use during fermentation before aging in Hungarian oak. “That contributes to terroir, because it’s a yeast strain unique to this environment that’s enhancing a special quality in the fruit,” Laymoun said.



Belle Glos

2022 Las Alturas Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County

The presentation then ventured to the southernmost part of the Santa Lucia Highlands for the next wine, the Belle Glos 2022 Las Alturas Pinot Noir (\$55). In this vineyard, hot, arid days are cooled

by late-afternoon fog from Monterey Bay, according to winemaker Nick Reinell of Copper Cane Wines & Spirits. “So you always get the most densely structured and high-color, high-phenolic Pinot Noirs, almost getting to a violet spectrum,” he said.

And the technique? “Knowing that we have such a concentrated, big Pinot Noir, we kind of want to amplify that, so we do a 100% destemmed fermentation,” Reinell explained. “We’re also not shy about using new French oak, which gives that big cherry . . . depth of color and intensity as well as notes of vanilla and cola.”



Goose Ridge

2022 G3 Merlot, Columbia Valley, Washington

Andrew Wilson, winemaker at Goose Ridge Vineyards in Washington’s Columbia Valley, emphasized technique when discussing his 2022 G3 Merlot (\$15). All Goose Ridge wines come from a vineyard the Monson family has farmed for nearly 50 years in a hot area near Red Mountain, he said. Merlot is planted on north-facing areas, which are slightly cooler, and Wilson starts harvesting as soon as the grapes shed any unripe flavors. “Because we have our one site, the focus is definitely on terroir,” he said. “But in my 12 harvests at Goose Ridge, I’m always trying to refine the techniques we use to express what we have. Merlot is quite distinctive for our site and for Washington in general. It’s really fun to work with.”

In the winery, Wilson’s methods include cold-soaking the grapes for a few days before gradually allowing fermentation to start and heat up, then pressing the fruit into barrel to finish fermenta-

tion, “just to hold on to all of that flavor and color without getting overly structured.” He admitted there was a learning curve, but the resulting wine revealed his success in that regard, showing aromas of cherry cola, blueberry, and raspberry with a hint of toastiness; on the velvet-textured palate, notes of plum and cherry gained contrast from a touch of minerality on the fresh finish.



Chateau St. Jean

2022 Cinq Cépages, Sonoma County

The final wine, the Chateau St. Jean 2022 Cinq Cépages (\$130), is a famous Cabernet Sauvignon–dominant blend with the four other red Bordeaux varieties; hailing from vineyards in the Sonoma Valley and Alexander Valley AVAs, it veered from the pattern of single-vineyard expressions. “Five grape varieties from different places—certainly the winemaker has to lean in,” said Alan Crawford, VP of luxury estates and imports for Foley Family Wines & Spirits. “I’d be hard-pressed to say that technique doesn’t have a very strong influence on this wine.”

That said, he then leaned back toward terroir: “First and foremost, if you got it wrong in the vineyard, you can’t get it right in the winery,” he added. “The winemaking becomes the balance of getting all those flavors right.”

The discussion then expanded to the audience, who asked questions regarding wine styles, how best to communicate terroir and technique to consumers, and the thin line between technique and manipulation. The answer to each inquiry was essentially “to be continued”: As Leicht concluded, “Those are topics for future seminars.”

The “Wine Quality and Character” Seminar Uncorked Perspectives From Around the World

story by Stefanie Schwalb / photos by Michael Butcher



Lars Leicht, VP of education for The SOMM Journal (right), led the panel discussion with speakers Michael Smoley, U.S. market manager, Boatyard Gin; Tony Apostolakos, U.S. director, Masi Agricola (Masi Costasera Riserva Amarone della Valpolicella Classico); Chris Baker, president, Brassfield Estate Winery (Eruption Red Blend); Aaron Crespin, U.S. national sales director, Santa Rita Estates (Santa Rita Casa Real Cabernet Sauvignon); Kurt Eckert, national manager, Maison Louis Jadot, Kobrand (Château des Jacques Morgon); Theo Rutherford, director of wine and spirits education, Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits (The Calling Fox Den Vineyard Pinot Noir); and Jacob Gragg, Ca' del Bosco and portfolio wine senior manager, HERITA USA (Ca' del Bosco Vintage Collection Satèn Franciacorta).

Does geography entirely shape what's in your glass, or does winemaking technique play a role? That's what a recent SommCon DC Summit seminar set out to explore in early June. Held at Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab, “Wine Quality and Character: Is There a Continental Divide in Wine?” brought together seven industry pros with one mission in mind: to explain what exactly determines the character of a wine (or, in one case, a spirit). Over the course of 90 minutes, each of them provided behind-the-scenes insights to an audience of 40 on- and off-premise wine buyers and sommeliers from the Washington, D.C., area.



Ca' del Bosco 2019 Vintage Collection Satèn Franciacorta, Lombardy, Italy

HERITA USA Ca' del Bosco and portfolio wine senior manager Jacob Gragg started off the session with Ca' del Bosco's 2019 Vintage Collection Satèn Franciacorta, a style that proved just as unique as the region it comes from. While Franciacorta shares with Champagne the traditional method of sparkling wine and the use of Chardonnay, Gragg noted that “after that, everything's different.”

The region stands out for its well-drained soils, which he said make it different from other sparkling wine regions around the globe that are set on water-retentive soils. The climate in Franciacorta, too, is defined by diurnal shifts that make it more like that of Northern California than of Northern France. The end result? Extra-brut wines that are ripe and fresh. “The region as a whole has this climate where grapes don't get overripe, but they do get fully ripe, and you taste this in the wine,” Gragg said.

Made mostly from Chardonnay, Satèn—a Blanc de Blancs—is a distinctive style that Ca' del Bosco was the first to produce. “Instead of having 6 atmospheres of pressure like a normal Franciacorta or many other bubbly wines in the world, it has only 5 atmospheres of pressure,” Gragg explained. The winery is also one of the few in Franciacorta that consistently uses Pinot Bianco, including in its Satèn. Attendees tasted the 2019 vintage, which featured 85% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Bianco, and half a gram of residual sugar. While the wine's richness, roundness, and fullness is not something you typically see in this style of winemaking, it's something that sets Ca' del Bosco apart as a producer within the region, according to Gragg, just as Satèn sets Franciacorta apart on the world stage of sparkling wine producers. As for the name, Ca' del Bosco helped come up with it in the early 1990s to replace the use of Crémant; it's meant to invoke the idea of the silkiness of satin. “It's a fantasy name that we trademarked not for us as a producer,” Gragg concluded, “but for our region, and it has effectively become the hallmark style.”

The Calling

2019 Fox Den Vineyard Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County

Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits director of wine and spirits education Theo Rutherford took the mic next with The Calling's 2019 Fox Den Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley, a single-vineyard wine that's focused on both place and precision. Reminiscing about his start in the hospitality industry, Rutherford recalled that Sonoma Merlot used to be a number-one seller where he worked—until the day everyone came in and started



asking for Pinot Noir following the release of *Sideways*. Since then, the global appeal for the variety has only continued to increase, and in producing their versions, the winery team has to consider not only which style they want to convey but what they want to express in terms of terroir, according to Rutherford: "Pinot has two strange camps, right? Typical, very terroir-driven Pinot or the kind that tastes like Merlot." And The Calling doesn't want to do the latter. Instead, it focuses on what Sonoma does best: producing Pinot Noir that truly reflects the distinct character of its site.

Fox Den Vineyard, Rutherford said, is a favorite. Located near the coast, it sits at the inversion layer; as a result, it's one of the first to clear of fog each morning and one of the last to cool down at night. That extended sun exposure allows the fruit to stay on the vine longer, developing phenolic ripeness and natural balance—two qualities that define the wine's style, according to Rutherford, who noted that the team is always mindful of making the necessary adjustments in the cellar to keep the wines from becoming overly ripe or sweet.

The name of the vineyard itself is worth noting: When the Smith family, the original owners of the property, settled there in 1976, they intended to convert an old barn into a home, only to discover they'd have to share it—a family of foxes had already claimed the space as their own.



Château des Jacques

2022 Morgon, Côte du Py, Beaujolais, France

Next up was Kurt Eckert, national manager of Maison Louis Jadot for Kobrand, who presented the Château des Jacques 2022 Morgon Côte du Py from Beaujolais. Noting that the winery entered its modern era about a century ago, he kicked off his presentation by offering a quick snapshot of the wine: "14% ABV, 3.48 pH, 3.79 total acidity." Composed of 100% hand-harvested Gamay from 45-year-old vines, it's sourced from two parcels of roughly 5 hectares each between 325 and 350 meters of elevation: One faces due east, the other due south.

What truly defines the site, Eckert revealed, is the presence of rare volcanic diorite—some of it blue diorite—and schist subsoils dating back roughly 350 million years. These subsoils aren't found in other Beaujolais crus, but according to Eckert, they contribute notable structure and minerality to the wine.

Addressing the longstanding debate between terroir and technique, Eckert argued that both play a vital role, noting that ultimately "the intent is to express and amplify the place and deliver it into the bottle. Then it falls to people like me and my colleagues to figure out how to communicate that and how to get the wine moved through the market."

Santa Rita

*2021 Casa Real Cabernet Sauvignon,
Maipo Valley, Chile*

Santa Rita Estates U.S. national sales director Aaron Crespin introduced the next wine: the Santa Rita 2021 Casa Real Cabernet Sauvignon from Chile's Maipo Valley. To highlight the country's unique geography, he noted that Chile averages about 165 miles wide and is 2,700 miles long: "To put that in perspective, if you superimposed it over North America, it would stretch from almost the Arctic Circle down to Cancún." The result is a diversity of climates throughout the country, which also sees a major maritime influence. "There's a terroir for every single *Vitis vinifera*, and the Maipo Valley is an outstanding place for Cabernet," he added.

Though it experiences temperatures in the high 90s during the day, the Maipo sees a significant diurnal shift of 35–40 degrees at night, which gives grapes time to rest and develop some complexity. Its elevation, meanwhile, is 1,500–1,800 feet on average, which helps with the development of natural acidity and brightness.

Casa Real is the winery's flagship; Crespin called the 2021 one of the best vintages of the past 15–20 years in Chile and the Maipo Valley specifically. Boasting concentration, aromatic lift, and a finish that lingers for nearly a minute after each sip, it comes from two vineyard blocks planted in the mid-1970s in 4–5 inches of clay loam that sits atop big, round river rocks and gravel with excellent drainage. What sets it apart? "The winemaker's intent is to show that freshness and purity of Cabernet," he said, noting that a 100% Cabernet wine is rare in Chile—especially for a flagship bottling. These two vineyard blocks are planted using massal selection, creating a unique clone of Cabernet that is specifically adapted to this exact soil type.

While global trends in wine often swing between riper, sweeter styles and leaner, drier ones, Crespin emphasized the importance of remaining rooted in a sense of place. "It's imperative for wineries to stick with their vision of their vineyard and what they're trying to communicate to the consumer," he said. For Casa Real, that means letting the character of the Maipo Valley shine through rather than chasing outside expectations.



Brassfield Estate Winery

*2021 Eruption High Valley Red Blend,
Lake County*

Brassfield Estate Winery president Chris Baker presented the Brassfield Estate 2021 Eruption High Valley Red Blend from Lake County, California. A self-proclaimed student of wine for 47 years, he emphasized that one principle has remained consistent for him throughout his career: quality. "To this day, it still does," he said. Introducing the High Valley AVA located on California's North Coast, Baker noted that while the region may be a bit under the radar, he believes it has the potential to stand alongside some of the world's best. From there, it's a matter of educating consumers.

Brassfield Estate is based on owner Jerry Brassfield's 25-year-old vision of producing 100% estate-grown, -produced, and -bottled wine. Eruption—named for the volcanic soils of its source, the Volcano Ridge Vineyard—exemplifies that mission. "So if it's good, it's our fault; if it's bad, it's our fault," said Baker. "We control everything about this wine." Nicknamed a "GSM with friends" by the winemaking team, the wine features Malbec, Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, and a bit of Petite Sirah. The exact blend changes annually, but the intent always remains the same: to reflect the character of the site and the stylistic vision of the winemaking team. "We had to learn the land first, and then what grape varieties would do," Baker revealed.

To that end, Brassfield hired Napa-based consulting firm Crop Care Associates to conduct a two-year study of the estate's soils and growing conditions. The findings revealed that the property falls between Regions III and IV on the Winkler scale—making it especially well-suited for the grape varieties used in Eruption. Originally launched in 2005 to appeal to American consumers' preference for sweeter reds, Eruption has since evolved into a more balanced, site-driven wine that aligns with the brand's current identity. Baker, who came out of retirement to join Brassfield, believes that authenticity is what consumers are looking for now. "People buy from people they like and trust," he concluded. "Our job is to create something they can be proud of." (For more on Brassfield, see page 102.)



Masi

2018 Costasera Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Riserva, Veneto, Italy

Tony Apostolakos, U.S. director of Masi Agricola, presented the Masi 2018 Costasera Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Riserva, which hails from Veneto, Italy. It's a wine whose richness is rooted in tradition: For eight generations, the Boscaini family has championed the region's indigenous varieties and the process of *appassimento*. "The drying of the grape has been done for thousands of years, since the third century B.C.," Apostolakos said, adding that tradition alone doesn't guarantee a wine that's polished or compelling. While Valpolicella has always had the right grapes and techniques to set it up for success, he continued, the intent to create wines with structure, balance, and broader appeal is a more modern evolution: "In the past, you just made the wine and consumed it," meaning it wasn't about style or strategy.



In fact, it has only been in the past few decades that producers like Masi have shifted perspective. While remaining committed to the traditional Valpolicella blend of Corvina, Rondinella, and Molinara—often referred to colloquially as the "grandmother's recipe"—the winery, under the leadership of Sandro Boscaini in the 1980s, began modernizing its approach, namely by introducing new fermentation techniques, upgrading drying facilities, and selecting specific yeast strains to improve consistency. The result? A wine that retains its character but gains elegance and drinkability.

The new fermentation regimen was particularly fruitful. "It used to take a year to 18 months," Apostolakos said. "[Now] it suddenly took only 40–75 days." This enabled the production of an Amarone that was rich and ageworthy but also more accessible even when young, whether or not it was paired with food. "We always believed Amarone could fit that bill," he added.

It should be noted that the Costasera Riserva includes a fourth grape: Oseleta, which is an older variety also known as the "Cabernet of the Veneto." It was rediscovered by Boscaini when he was visiting a friend's vineyard. "We resurrected it," said Apostolakos, "and now it's allowed to be put into Amarone." For Masi, the mission remains clear: protect the grapes, honor the region, and preserve what's typical of the area while making wines that are desirable to drinkers today.

Boatyard Double Gin

Northern Ireland

To close out the seminar, attendees were reminded that terroir and technique aren't the purview of the wine industry alone, as Boatyard Double Gin from Northern Ireland was presented by U.S. market manager Michael Smoley to offer a distilled take on a sense of place. "Both of those things are in the DNA of Boatyard," he said, acknowledging the brand's pride as a product of the country.

The distillery, set along the shores of Lough Erne in scenic County Fermanagh, takes its name from its lakeside location. Founder/owner Joe McGirr's goal was to craft a London Dry-style gin that would be a perfect base for the best Martinis in the world as well as other classic cocktails. While it's made with eight common botanicals beginning with juniper, it's the production process that sets Boatyard apart, Smoley said. In a custom-built still, he explained, the juniper macerates for 18 hours before it passes through a second column with adjustable plates, where the distillers can adjust it to the desired ABV. But that's not where the journey ends. There's actually a third chamber filled with juniper and fresh citrus peels in which the vapor is infused a second time; that's why they call it "Double Gin." Other botanicals in the recipe include coriander, lemon, angelica, orris root, licorice, grains of paradise, and sweet gale, the latter of which is grown on McGirr's family farm. "Anyone could use our recipe," Smoley said, "but they're not going to come up with what we've got in the bottle here. That comes down to the skill of our team and our master distiller, Órlaith Kelm."

Although its 46% ABV is relatively high, the gin drinks smooth, with a mouthfeel that's truly unique. "We use so much juniper in this gin that all the oil comes off it through the still, contributing to the texture," Smoley concluded, "and along with the sweet gale, it gives almost a resinous quality." With a local soul and the ambition to expand into new markets stateside (it's currently available in 13 states), Boatyard proves that gin can tell a story of place—no vines required. *sj*



Over 40 members of the hospitality industry attended the seminar.



Our San Diego speed tasting panel included Ricardo Zarate Jr., wine director, Haven Farm + Table; Dan Valerino, partner, Bottle Boon and Finca; Advanced Sommelier Lisa Redwine, founder, Women's Wine Alliance; Cat Evans, wine buyer, The WineSellar & Brasserie; Tracy Latimer, lead sommelier, Callie; and Christophe Bureau, director of outlets, Estancia La Jolla Hotel & Spa.



story by **RACHEL BURKONS**
photos by **RAFAEL PETERSON**

Bringing together a group of wine professionals always feels something like hosting a family reunion: When *The SOMM Journal* recently gathered some of San Diego's top wine professionals for a recent blind speed tasting, the energy in the room was similar to that of a holiday dinner. As they entered buzzy new restaurant Vincenzo Cucina & Lounge in Little Italy, they greeted each other with hugs and selfies, taking time to catch up before settling into their seats to sample 12 wines made in nine regions around the globe.

It wasn't surprising to see that familial warmth extended as well to the brand representatives who soon joined them to reveal and present the wines, greeted as they were by hearty laughs, handshakes, and even invitations to sit and join the tasting—united not by blood ties but by a shared love of wine and an understanding of the world through the lens of a glass. Read along to join this vinous tribe on their journey, bottle by bottle.

THE PLACE: PRIORAT, SPAIN

THE WINE: CELLER VALL LLACH 2022 EMBRUIX



"Trinchero is one of the largest family-owned wine and spirits companies in the U.S., and we're proud to partner with like-minded family-run wineries around the world. It's about shared values, not just shared labels," said Ralph E. Perrotta, regional manager for Trinchero Family Estates' Heritage Collection.

That global reach extends today to the small village of Porrera in Priorat, Spain, where in the early 1990s singer-songwriter Lluís Llach, "who was like the Bob Dylan of Spain, and his friend Enric Costa . . . came not to build a big winery but to build the town back up. They built schools, businesses, housing. That was their first focus. Today, Enric's son Alberto is the proprietor and winemaker," said Perrotta.

Further proving that the world of wine is, in fact, one small family, panelist Dan Valerino, partner at Bottle Boon and Finca, chimed in: "I did a harvest with Alberto in 2016 and drank the Vall Llach Mas de la Rosa on my wedding night in 2017. This is a special wine from a special place." Made from a blend of Cariñena, Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah, EmbruiX offered complex notes and a robust profile that Perrotta called "a gateway to Spain for consumers. From there, we can start weaning them off Cab," he said with a laugh.



Ralph E. Perrotta, regional manager for Trinchero Family Estates' Heritage Collection, brought limestone samples from the Celler Vall Llach estate for the panelists to take home as part of his presentation.

TASTING NOTES

Floral and licorice aromas with flavors of ripe red fruit and chaparral. Distinctive. —Dan Valerino, partner, Bottle Boon and Finca

Pink reflections on the rim, with flavors of spiced cherry and teriyaki. Light-bodied and savory, with fried sage and coriander. A slight grip on the finish marks its power and finesse. —Tracy Latimer, lead sommelier, Callie

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



THE PLACE: MONTEREY COUNTY

THE WINE: CHALONE 2022 CHARDONNAY

"While the Chalone story at Foley started in 2016 when we purchased the winery from Diageo, this wine has a really long history if you look at it through the lens of the Western and Pacific plates smashing into each other, building the benchland near Pinnacles National Park that is the backdrop to this particular wine," began Alan Crawford, VP luxury and trade education for Foley Family Wines & Spirits. "In 1919, Charles Tamm found himself in Monterey, looking up at the mountains and their abundance of limestone, and thought it would make a good homestead, with terroir similar to Burgundy and Champagne from his native France."

Tamm planted 2 acres of Chenin Blanc that the winery still farms today; a year later, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Blanc were planted. The next owner of the property, William Sevear, exclusively sold fruit to the who's who of the early 20th-century California wine industry: "Grapes were sold to the Wentes, Georges de Latour, Paul Mason, and other notable winemakers of the time," noted Crawford, adding that in 1960, the Chalone winery was founded before transitioning to the stewardship of Richard Graff in 1965, who "laid the course. He introduced malolactic fermentation to white wines in California and [aging] in French oak barrels to guide the winery to one of the top two American producers at the Judgment of Paris."

THE PLACE: MONTEREY COUNTY

THE WINE: IMAGERY 2022 PINOT NOIR



As Megan Casserly, national accounts sales director for The Wine Group, revealed the Imagery 2022 Pinot Noir, the panel reacted with audible surprise; many admitted they mistook the wine for a Nebbiolo. “A fun surprise!” quipped Casserly in response.

Helmed by second-generation winemaker Jamie Benziger, Imagery’s Sonoma winery carries on her family’s well-known legacy of land stewardship while crafting expressive wines that embody their character-rich vineyards. Imagery is also known for its focus on the arts, with an on-site gallery in its Sonoma tasting room featuring over 700 rotating pieces of art by more than 400 artists. While it sources fruit from across California, its vineyard in Monterey Country is reflective of the best plots the region has to offer.

“Monterey gets the cool Pacific Ocean climate, and this site is just perfectly positioned slightly inland at a 1,700-foot elevation,” explained Casserly. “All of [the fruit] is hand-harvested, then [undergoes] 100% malolactic fermentation and 48-hour cold-soaking to enhance the extraction. Jamie is using some really great clone varieties and loves to mix it up.” The result is a compelling wine that’s nationally known in both on- and off-premise channels.

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Megan Casserly, national accounts sales director for The Wine Group, presented the Imagery 2022 Monterey County Pinot Noir.

TASTING NOTES

Ripe notes of blueberry, tart cranberry, and mocha, with well-integrated oak tones. Vivacious. —*Advanced Sommelier Lisa Redwine, founder, Women’s Wine Alliance*

Clove, Morello cherry, and white pepper frame fine acidity. Juicy and fresh with lots of personality. —*Tracy Latimer*

THE WINE GROUP



Alan Crawford, VP luxury and trade education for Foley Family Wines & Spirits, presented the Chalone 2022 Chardonnay.

Chalone was awarded its own appellation in 1982, an indication of its distinct terroir. “In addition to its high-elevation site at 1,800 feet, we get an incredible diurnal shift, and we’re up on the mountain with limestone and volcanic-soil bedrock,” said Crawford. With three Chardonnay blocks planted in 1974, 1979, and 1984, Chalone remains a key figure in the history and ongoing legacy of California white wine. Today, winemaker Greg Freeman guides the winery with a “very specific” set of standards, Crawford added: “Greg knows that in the book of California wine history, Chalone has a chapter, and it is important to him that the sense of place comes through crystal-clear.”

Today, nearly a decade after joining the Foley Family portfolio, the brand proudly reflects on the significant strides it has made to revitalize its vineyards and achieve their optimal health. “This area is pretty extreme because of how remote it is; we didn’t even have running water or electricity until the 1980s,” said Crawford, adding that today, Chalone’s certified-sustainable practices are designed to maximize quality while minimizing inputs, proving its commitment to environmental stewardship of the land.

TASTING NOTES

Bright lemon, with refined acidity and striking stone-fruit aromas. Wonderful mouthfeel. —*Christophe Bureau, director of outlets, Estancia La Jolla Hotel & Spa*

Sophisticated and pretty, with a presence of minerality, white flowers, and bruised yellow apple. A light toast and a long, satisfying finish. —*Lisa Redwine*

FOLEY FAMILY WINES & SPIRITS

THE PLACE: PASO ROBLES

THE WINE: J. LOHR 2022 HILLTOP CABERNET SAUVIGNON



Paso legend J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines has spent the past 50 years putting Bordeaux-style wines from the region on the map. Beginning in the 1960s, founder Jerry Lohr underwent a quest across California to find the state's ideal grape-growing regions; at a time when the eyes of trade and consumers alike were trained solely on Napa and Sonoma, he turned to the Central Coast. After planting Chardonnay in Monterey County in 1972, he set his sights on Paso Robles as a source of Cabernet Sauvignon in the early 1980s.

Today, J. Lohr sustainably farms over 2,700 acres of estate fruit in Paso to produce seven different collections, including the J. Lohr Vineyard Series of limited-release wines that showcase the best of this fruit. The Hilltop 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon

comes from the winery's highest-elevation holdings across Paso Robles, above all the J. Lohr Shotwell Vineyard, located in the cool, Templeton Gap—influenced El Pomar District sub-AVA. "This vineyard is a really unique site," explained Kerri Chappell, regional sales manager for the brand. "The winds really just come whipping through there, giving a 50-degree diurnal shift throughout the day, which, combined with cool evenings, provides a very long ripening season. This vineyard also sits above the fog line, so it gets lots of sunshine."

Additional fruit for the Hilltop Cabernet—which is aged in (70% new) French oak for 16 months—is sourced from the J. Lohr Beck Vineyard, situated at 1,700 feet in elevation on the La Panza Range in the Creston District, and the winery's ranches in the Adelaida District. Together, these sites produce wines with dark fruit; robust, intense flavor; and resolved tannins.



J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines regional sales manager Kerri Chappell presented the J. Lohr 2022 Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon.

TASTING NOTES

Well rounded, with grip. Approachable tannins soften further to reveal luscious dark fruit. —*Christophe Bureau*

Blue fruit is the star, with suede tannins releasing notes of cinnamon, nutmeg, and umami. Creamy and elegant. —*Cat Evans, wine buyer, The WineSellar & Brasserie*



THE PLACE: PASO ROBLES

THE WINE: DAOU VINEYARDS 2021 SOUL OF A LION CABERNET SAUVIGNON

"Paso Robles is in the middle of an incredible boom that shows the potential of this region," said DAOU Vineyards brand ambassador Laura Reynolds. "There are over 60 varieties grown in the region, and producers are making some incredible wines." Among them is DAOU Vineyards, which has quickly made a name for itself as a leader in the production of bold, expressive reds like Soul of a Lion: A standout in the portfolio, it's reflective of the brand's confident approach. "When Daniel and Georges Daou went to Paso in 2007 with the intention of [emulating] First Growth Bordeaux, they were not very welcome in a Rhône and Zinfandel region, but they became key in educating both the industry and consumers on what Cabernet Sauvignon could do in Paso," Reynolds added.

The Daou brothers helped found the Paso Robles CAB Collective in 2012 with a vision of elevating the reputation of Bordeaux varieties in the region. "This helped commercialize Cabernet Sauvignon in a way we hadn't seen before in Paso," continued Reynolds. "Suddenly, consumers were coming to Paso for Rhône but leaving with a few bottles of Cabernet in their suitcase as well, showing consumers that these wines can compete with Napa Valley and stand toe to toe with some of the best in the world."

THE PLACE: LIMARÍ VALLEY, CHILE

THE WINE: SANTA RITA 2022 FLORESTA CHARDONNAY



"Santa Rita Estates was founded in 1880 in the heart of the Maipo Valley" by Chilean businessman Don Domingo Fernández Concha, explained Aaron Crespín, U.S. national sales director for the company. "At 27 miles long and 170 miles wide, the Maipo is filled with lots of pockets of microclimates, so we have a lot of interesting fruit to work with." The winery was an early playground for French winemakers in the region, who utilized centuries-old techniques to begin crafting world-class wines in the New World. Today, said Crespín, Viña Santa Rita is focused on "purity of fruit and purity of place."

Santa Rita Estates holds vineyard properties across multiple regions, but it's homing in on what Crespín calls a "region to keep an eye on" for its

Chardonnay: Limarí Valley in northern Chile, which abuts the southernmost part of the Atacama Desert just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean. "This position is really unique," said Crespín. "[It's] warm and dry but benefits from cooler coastal temperatures. In January, the hottest month of the year, temperatures reach 68–70 degrees, allowing for a slow, long ripening season. We source fruit for this wine from a single vineyard block just under 18 miles from the ocean; as part of the Atacama, there is very little mildew pressure, very little need for sulfates. It's a nice, cool, pure place for Chardonnay." Offering good drainage, the alluvial soils here are rich in calcium carbonate, which Crespín calls "rare for South America but one of the holy grails for wine."

This terroir results in a wine Crespín proudly called a "wine-geeky Chardonnay," and the reaction from our panelists proved his point, as they chatted among themselves to call it "stunning" and "killer."



Aaron Crespín, U.S. national sales director for Santa Rita Estates, presented the Santa Rita 2022 Floresta Chardonnay.

TASTING NOTES

Intensely aromatic with dried herbs, hay, guava, pineapple, and Oro Blanco grapefruit. Round with some flinty notes. —Tracy Latimer

A beauty: floral perfume with a backdrop of salty flint. Silky mouthfeel and high acidity; fresh and lively with tropical fruit and gardenias. —Dan Valerino

SANTA RITA ESTATES

With that market position established, "Soul of a Lion is a gorgeous Bordeaux blend for the luxury market," Reynolds explained. "It's 82% Cabernet Sauvignon and an even distribution of Cab Franc and Petit Verdot, and it's intended to be a true representation of what a Bordeaux wine is." Key to maintaining balance in the wine is the Adelaida District vineyard's unique position at 2,200 feet above sea level and 14 miles from the ocean, where it's 8–10 degrees cooler than in downtown Paso Robles. "That's great for humans and for grapes," she asserted. "You're not going to get that big, overripe fruit, and it allows us to really [focus] on balance and acid."

Technical winemaking expertise adds to the terroir, she added, pointing to the winemaking team's quest to find the perfect yeast to use in fermentation: "They went through 112 different strains to find the one, D20, that is most resistant to higher temperatures in fermentation and allows the creation of long-chain tannins. We're only macerating on skins for five to seven days to get that color. It's important at DAOU that we keep experimenting"—after all, anything they try has the potential "to be a big rock star."

One experiment that's clearly paid off is the producer's commitment to sustainability: Its vineyards are already certified sustainable and organic, its operations are powered by 100% renewable energy, and it's aiming to reach net zero emissions (Scope 1 and 2) by 2030. "Our perspective is 'I'm going to die, but the vineyard doesn't,'" said Reynolds. "It's an approach that really drives our commitment to this special place and land."



Brand ambassador Laura Reynolds presented the DAOU Vineyards 2021 Soul of a Lion Cabernet Sauvignon.

TASTING NOTES

Big blue-fruit notes with cinnamon and nutmeg. Sturdy, with a soft finish and well-balanced tannins. —Cat Evans

Luscious notes of boysenberry and dark chocolate. You can taste the earth. Expressive right through to the finish. —Lisa Redwine

THE PLACE: NAPA VALLEY

THE WINE: QUILT 2018 THE GRACE OF THE LAND RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON



“Do you all know Joe Wagner?” began Paul Schneider, broad market manager for Southern California at Copper Cane Wines & Spirits. The room nodded in obvious agreement, and for good reason: Wagner is a fifth-generation winemaker and farmer whose experience at legendary labels like Caymus and Belle Glos precedes him. Quilt has been quickly adding to his renown, winning accolades that are setting the sixth generation up to continue his legacy. “Joe wanted to show his dad, [Caymus founder Chuck Wagner,] he could make a great Napa Valley Cab and wanted something he could pass down to his children, and so Copper Cane was born in his grandmother’s garage. Belle Glos is named in her honor, and she is an integral part of the Copper Cane story,” Schneider said.

Named for his mission to “bring the patchwork of sub-AVAs in Napa Valley together,” Quilt seeks to paint a full picture of the region. Containing fruit from Copper Cane’s vineyards in six AVAs, Quilt undergoes an innovative frozen cold soak, thanks to a happy accident that became a cornerstone of the winemaking process. “When we were a young company, dry ice accidentally got mixed in with the wines in a storage facility we were using. This acted like frostbite on the finger, [giving] the wine a beautiful deep red color. Now, we do an extended frozen cold soak for two weeks, followed by a 30-day fermentation and the best of the best of the best barrel program,” noted Schneider, pointing to the use of a secondary fermentation in new French oak barrels.



Paul Schneider, broad market manager for Southern California at Copper Cane Wines & Spirits, presented the Quilt 2018 The Grace of the Land Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

TASTING NOTES

This wine possesses great structure and velvet-lined tannins. Dark, concentrated black cherry with balsamic, black olive, and rosemary. —*Christophe Bureau*

Ripe dark cherry and black pepper within an earthy core. Savory notes of tomato leaf, black olive, balsamic, and Italian herbs. Dynamic. —*Dan Valerino*

COPPER CANE WINES & SPIRITS



THE PLACE: BEAUJOLAIS, FRANCE

THE WINE: CHÂTEAU DES JACQUES 2020 MOULIN-À-VENT CLOS DU GRAND CARQUELIN

As the panelists tasted through this wine blind, Tracy Latimer, lead sommelier at Callie, offered one of the most interesting tasting notes of the day: “bruschetta turned into wine.” The quip earned chuckles of agreement from her fellow panelists, some of whom guessed they were sampling a Mexican Cabernet Sauvignon. As the presentation would show, this wine has purely French roots—but our guests’ confusion didn’t surprise Rachel Macalisang, French category specialist for the Western United States at Kobrand. “This is a very difficult wine in a blind tasting,” she acknowledged after walking them through the Court of Master Sommeliers’ tasting grid. “It’s such a complex and surprising wine for many people, partly because Beaujolais still doesn’t get a lot of love. We should be supporting these little regions that are showcasing unique and interesting wines.”

“Château des Jacques has thoughtfully been producing Beaujolais wines with beautiful structure and Burgundian precision for a very long time,” commented co-presenter Tasha Elkovitch, district manager for Kobrand. Made from 100% Gamay, “Moulin-à-Vent Clos du Grand Carquelin is the

THE PLACE: NAPA VALLEY

THE WINE: PRIEST RANCH 2022 ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON



"At the end of the day, what makes us special is our fruit," said Ron Smith, key account manager, Southern California, for Priest Ranch. "We have 250 planted acres of estate fruit and own just under 1,700 contiguous acres total on the estate, and we're not going to get much bigger. We're a small-production family-owned winery located in a remote, very special location above the fray of Napa Valley. We're 30 miles up a windy road in the eastern hills of [the region], and all of our vines are hillside [and] low-yielding. The consistency of our vineyards speak volumes, which is another reason we're not going after that high production."

A historic Napa property established in 1869 by gold rush prospector James Joshua Priest, the winery began its modern journey in 2007 with its inaugural releases of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah crafted by founding winemaker Craig Becker. Today, under the stewardship of winemaker Cody Hurd, Priest Ranch's estate fruit showcases pure Napa terroir. A Cabernet specialist, Hurd taps into diverse elevations and exposures to craft fine-tuned blends that showcase precision and clarity of terroir.

The 2022 Priest Ranch Estate Cabernet Sauvignon is sourced from 22 distinct blocks across the estate. "Having sold as many Napa wines as I have over the years, this wine really stands out," commented Smith. "It's a unique property, and this wine offers great value." Our panelists agreed enthusiastically, with Cat Evans, wine buyer at The WineSellar & Brasserie, noting, "You're in two of our wine clubs this month! I love these wines, and so do my customers."

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Ron Smith, key account manager, Southern California, for Priest Ranch, presented the winery's 2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon.

TASTING NOTES

Perfectly classic Napa Valley Cab. Dark chocolate and black fruit line the mouth with roasted coffee and leather. Powerfully elegant. —Ricardo Zarate Jr., wine director, Haven Farm + Table

It possesses an appealing, sweet ripeness of plum, currant, and cherry. Generous in its delivery of toasted coconut, cacao, and cracked pepper. Lingering finish of leather and oak. —Tracy Latimer



Rachel Macalisang, French category specialist for the Western U.S. at Kobrand, presented the Château des Jacques 2020 Moulin-à-Vent Clos du Grand Carquelin.

crown jewel of Château des Jacques, and [its] work in this region is important for pushing for Premier Cru designation," she added.

Fruit is sourced from a walled vineyard with about 12 different soil types, including pink granite with alluvial salt that "forces these vines to struggle, giving them intensity that translates into spectacular flavor," said Elkovitch. "Vines are trained on cordon and [farmed] with a focus on biodiversity and organic practices, all of which contribute to this wine's complexity."

TASTING NOTES

A high-toned, perfumed single-vineyard Gamay with sweet herbs and tomato leaf. Elegant, with supple tannins [and] noticeable tension. —Tracy Latimer

Old World acidity and earthy aromas. Powerful, with persistent tannins. Brambly notes and red fruit are enhanced by a fine acid structure. —Ricardo Zarate Jr.

KOBRAND



To support their future travels around the wine world, VinGarde Valise gifted each of our panelists a suitcase that carries up to six bottles of wine.

THE PLACE: TUSCANY, ITALY

THE WINE: CASTELLO BANFI 2020 BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG



A wine presented by a producer acclaimed by critics as the “builders of Brunello” will certainly grab your attention. Castello Banfi is a leading winery in Montalcino, founded in 1978 by the Mariani family, proprietors of leading U.S. wine importer Banfi Vintners. As fine wine merchants since 1919, their national reputation and worldwide reach was a key factor in building the international reputation for Brunello di Montalcino, which was a little-known niche wine prior to the 1990s.

Banfi district manager Jamie Schmidt pointed out that the winery is known for its research on the cultivar of Sangiovese used exclusively for Brunello. Castello Banfi registered over a dozen unique clones adapted to different microclimates in Mon-

talcino’s distinct clay and rock soils, which are ideal for producing full-bodied, long-aged wines. Finding the 225-liter barrique too small and the 500-liter tonneau too big, it customized a “Goldilocks” 300-liter barrel deemed just right for Brunello. It was also among the first to substitute French oak for Slavonian oak in the traditional large casks used in the denomination. Banfi sources wood for the casks and barrels directly from forests in France and ages the staves on its estate before handing them over to the cooper for customized crafting. The producer even developed a fermenter that is a hybrid of stainless steel and wood. Most importantly, in a rare magnanimous gesture for the Old World, it shared the results of its research and practices with neighboring producers.

Castello Banfi’s top-of-the-line Brunellos include the cru Poggio alle Mura, the single-vineyard Marrucheto, and the single-vineyard riserva Poggio all’Oro, but its flagship Castello Banfi Brunello is a reliable, approachable benchmark for the region. Schmidt presented the 2020 vintage, acclaimed in the area for producing wines with great balance between structure and silkiness, showing fruit-forward character that is seductive now but sure to reward long aging.

TASTING NOTES

Plush, luxurious, and balanced, with notes of cigar wrap, Medjool date, and red summer plum. —*Dan Valerino*

Sweet fruit perfumes the glass. Sandalwood, currant, and blackberry are partnered with a juicy, balanced character. Opulent, with a crushed stone midpalate that speaks to its earthiness. —*Christophe Bureau*

BANFI VINTNERS

Banfi Vintners district manager Jamie Schmidt presented the Castello Banfi 2020 Brunello di Montalcino DOCG.



THE PLACE: RIBEIRA SACRA, SPAIN

THE WINE: ALVAREDOS-HOBBS 2021 MENCÍA

A collaboration between acclaimed winemaker Paul Hobbs and Galician viticulturist Antonio López Fernández, the Alvarados-Hobbs 2021 Mencía was also rooted in a sense of place. “This wine is made from terraced vineyards along the winter route of the Camino de Santiago, a famed pilgrimage route that crosses Ribeira Sacra,” began Trish Toye, regional sales manager for Paul Hobbs Selections. The region was originally planted to grapes by the Romans on steep hillsides above the Río Sil. “Today, this wine honors the historical significance of the Camino, and our goal is to make lovely, delicious wine and for people to purchase the wine—but it’s also to bring up this community and village. There are only 15 families in Alvarados, and Paul wanted to . . . help restore the vineyards and shine a light on this remote area,” she added.

Today, small parceled vineyards on steep, south-facing slopes are hand-harvested using a practice called *viticultura heroica*, or “heroic viticulture,”

by the local community. Alvaredos-Hobbs works with indigenous grapes, including Godello, one of the oldest white varieties on the Iberian Peninsula, and Mencía, known for its thick skins; dark fruit; and herbal, floral characteristics.

In short, the presented wine tells a story of ancient sites, indigenous grapes, traditional techniques, and guidance from one of modern winemaking's biggest names. "I love the packaging on this," enthused Toye, pointing to a series of gold cross-shaped spires on the bottle's label, a reference to the Romanesque architecture prevalent throughout Ribeira Sacra. "These are symbolic of the history and an homage to the region. This is a wine that's a little bit different and a perfect fit for accounts that want something unique"—but only if you can find it: "We only make 400 cases, and not a lot get exported to the U.S. You don't see it everywhere." But according to our panelists, if you do, you should buy it. "I like this very much," chimed in Valerino. "Oh, yes," agreed Latimer. "Everything is exactly where it should be [with this wine]."



Trish Toye,
regional sales
manager for Paul
Hobbs Selections,
presented the
Alvaredos-Hobbs
2021 Mencía from
Ribeira Sacra,
Spain.

TASTING NOTES

Generous red fruit, with a touch of petrol on the nose. Grippy tannins but beautifully integrated with bay leaf, blackberry, olive, and minerality. —*Cat Evans*

Herbal notes of sage and clove surround dark plum and blackberry. Earthy and perfumed with savory notes of olive and charcuterie. —*Ricardo Zarate Jr.*

PAUL HOBBS SELECTIONS



THE PLACE: CAMPANIA, ITALY

THE WINE: FEUDI DI SAN GREGORIO 2024 SAN GREG AGLIANICO CAMPANIA ROSATO IGT

"This is a wine designed to capture aperitivo hour/ après-ski culture. This is a new label and a new look for Feudi," noted representatives from Terlato Wines' Southern California team of the bottle, whose clean, pretty design is patented by Feudi and was made in collaboration with a New York-based Italian artist. "The label is usually dark and serious; this is lighter, more fun, more expressive," showing that the wine is "meant for beachside, poolside—[a] rosé by the sea."

Lighthearted as it may be on the palate, the Feudi di San Gregorio 2024 San Greg is still a serious wine: It's made from Aglianico grapes grown at high elevation in Campania's Irpinia subregion, where limestone and sandy soils yield grapes that maintain high acidity and minerality. Irpinia sees more rainfall than other parts of Campania, resulting in lush and diverse vegetation that adds to the soil's biodiversity.

"We're capturing the vibe of a Provençal rosé while still staying true to Italy," they continued. "It's very much rooted in Italian tradition." *SJ*

TASTING NOTES

Wild strawberry aromas burst from the glass. Notes of fennel, wet stone, tart cherry, and white tea are expressive. —*Cat Evans*

Talc, lavender, and white raspberry aromas and flavors meld together: It tastes like a bouquet of roses grown by the sea. —*Tracy Latimer*

TERLATO WINES



"Techniques of Tasting" panelists Christine Hanna, president, Hanna Winery; Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker/general manager, Chimney Rock; Jacob Gragg, Ca' del Bosco and portfolio wine senior manager, HERITA USA; moderator Lars Leicht; Aaron Fishleder, vice president of operations, Cakebread Cellars; Jesse Fox, winemaker, Sequoia Grove; and Harry H. Wetzel IV, director of operations/family partner, Alexander Valley Vineyards.

PHOTO: DEBORAH PARKER WONG

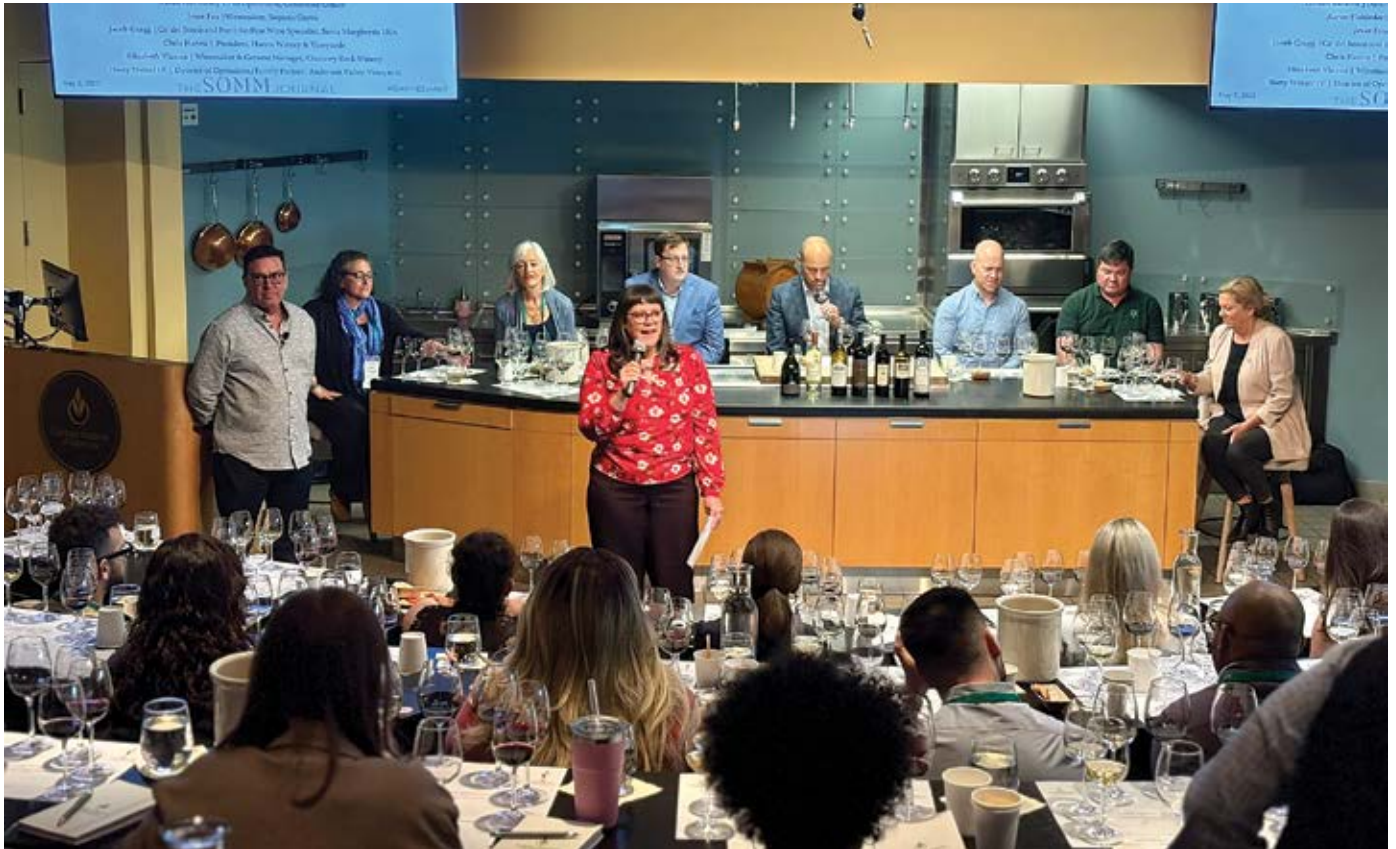
TALKING TASTING *TECHNIQUE*

THE SOMM JOURNAL
HOSTED A DYNAMIC
SESSION AT THE
CULINARY INSTITUTE
OF AMERICA'S
ANNUAL WINE &
BEVERAGE SUMMIT

by DEBORAH
PARKER WONG

The theme of this year's Wine & Beverage Summit, a two-day event that ran May 5–6 at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) at Copia in Napa, California, was "Business Savvy for the Wine Professional." Moderated by *SOMM Journal* vice president of education Lars Leicht, a dynamic panel composed of two sommeliers and five winemakers helped jump start day one of the summit with a session titled "Techniques of Tasting with *The SOMM Journal*." Leicht brought a laser-like focus to the hour-long discussion as the panelists took a fast-paced yet deep dive into the sensory evaluation of seven memorable wines.

In his opening salvo, Leicht quoted the Latin maxim *De gustibus non est disputandum*, which roughly translates to "When it comes to taste, there is no argument." "However," he said, "when it comes to tasting wine, there's always an argument, because everyone has personal style, personal tastes, and their own perspective." While the audience composed of CIA students and wine professionals sipped along, Leicht invited each panelist to describe their wine's sense of place, share their techniques, and divulge their tasting "secrets."



Jennifer Breckner, director of programs and special projects for the Strategic Initiatives Group at the Culinary Institute of America, welcomes attendees to the seminar.



Jacob Gragg is Ca' del Bosco and portfolio wine senior manager for HERITA USA.

Jacob Gragg, Ca' del Bosco and portfolio wine senior manager for HERITA USA, introduced the first wine of the session: the 2016 Annamaria Clementi Dosage Zéro Riserva from Franciacorta, which aged eight years. "In evaluating sparkling wine, one of the first things to look at is the carbonation level: Is the wine fully sparkling—at 6 atmospheres of pressure—or less so?" Gragg asked. Along with Franciacorta (not including Satèn), Gragg cited Champagne, Cava, French Crémant, and domestic sparkling wine as examples of fully sparkling expressions and Prosecco as a Charmat-method wine bottled under lower pressure due to its production technique. He also pointed to fruit character and dosage level as key markers, noting that the balance point—his expression for the overall impression of a wine derived from its production style, level of sweetness, and origin—for tasting Franciacorta is different from that of Champagne. "Every wine we make right now has less than 2 grams of sugar in the dosage, and that's across nine different sparkling wines we produce. We haven't made a wine that had more than 6 grams of sugar in it for 25 years," he added.

As it has one of the longest aging requirements in the world, Franciacorta will typically show significant autolysis, often exhibited by bready, yeasty flavors. For Gragg, detecting that autolytic level is important when blind tasting, as Franciacorta can be quite difficult to identify, requiring a holistic view of the grapes utilized, the wine-making technique, and the climate: "If you were to taste ten different Franciacorta wines aged for about the same amount of time, they would all be wildly different. Some would have wildly different blends, and they'd show very different characteristics," he said.



Christine Hanna is president of Hanna Winery in the Russian River Valley.



Christine Hanna, president of Hanna Winery, began her winemaking journey by her father's side at the tender age of 14, making wine at their 12-acre farm in the Russian River Valley long before it became an AVA; the Hannas eventually hired Merry Edwards as a consulting winemaker and formally started their business. "Now, we have two wineries, one in the Russian River Valley and one in Alexander Valley, and five vineyards across Sonoma County," Hanna noted.

She began her portion of the tasting with an exploration of the aromatic characteristics present in the 2023 vintage of the producer's flagship Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc. "What we've got in our glasses is loaded with aroma compounds; we've got esters, we've got thiols, and then we've got kerosene or petrol notes," she said. While continuously swirling her glass, Hanna cited the importance of volatilizing the aroma compounds that are key markers for Sauvignon Blanc: "Esters contribute fruity and floral aromas with lemon, citrus, and apple, but those aromas could be pointing to almost any white variety—Chardonnay, Fiano, Falangina, or Chenin. Thiols like grapefruit and lime zest are the tell with Sauvignon Blanc." She noted that the thiols that produce passion fruit aromas are harder to coax out of the fruit, attributing their presence to timely picking decisions and

savvy winemaking choices like appropriate yeast selection and cooler fermentations.

Hanna appreciates low levels of pyrazines for the fresh, grassy, summer-herb qualities they contribute to a wine but cautioned that high levels of these compounds produce pungent aromas of green pepper and jalapeño: "Pyrazines can [dominate] the wine's aroma profile; we're not really interested in bell-pepper water." She considers managing pyrazines in the vineyard easier than trying to coax out elusive thiols and the right kinds of esters in the winery. Pyrazines and passion fruit thiols are more typically found in wines from New Zealand, while California leans more toward stone and tropical fruits.

Process of elimination is her preferred method when blind tasting cool-climate expressions of the variety. "Typically, Sauvignon Blanc doesn't have vanilla or lactones that have a coconut quality, so there's no obvious evidence of oak in the wine. You're not going to get any sort of butter from malolactic fermentation," she said, adding that she advises paying particular attention to retronasal aromas—or aromas perceived in the act of eating and drinking—which will mirror the orthonasal aromas detected by the nostrils: "You will taste what you smell." As we sipped, Hanna noted that developing midpalate texture in Sauvignon Blanc is essential to

avoid what she refers to as a "phantom wine" that disappears on the palate: "To get the required concentration of fruit, you've got to leave some fruit on the ground and not overcrop." Naturally high acidity is another marker of cool-climate Sauvignon Blanc, and conditions on her estate in the coolest parts of Russian River Valley are often 10 or more degrees cooler than in Alexander Valley.

Leicht introduced the third wine, the Chimney Rock 2023 Elevage Blanc, with a reference to Monty Python, calling it "something completely different." It's crafted by Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker/general manager at Chimney Rock, which is approaching its 40th vintage. "In many ways, we are a quintessential American winery, owned by an Italian descendant family with French-inspired Cape Dutch South African architecture and an all-Latino winemaking team," Vianna noted, adding that white Bordeaux served as the inspiration for Elevage Blanc when she began developing the wine in 2002. "We wanted a white wine that could age and, at the time, [then estate director] Doug Fletcher had tasted Sauvignon Gris from Chalk Hill." The variety is a mutation of Sauvignon Blanc that retains its natural acidity even in Napa's heat; it boasts slightly copper-colored skins and richer, spicier aromatics. Chimney Rock



Elizabeth Vianna is winemaker/general manager at Chimney Rock in Napa.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEQUOIA GROVE



Sequoia Grove winemaker Jesse Fox.

Laundry, Fox also gained winemaking experience in cellars in the Finger Lakes of New York, France, and California. "It was relatively easy to transition to winemaking. I worked for Harlan Estate, Ram's Gate Winery, and Amici Cellars before joining Sequoia Grove almost four years ago," he said.

The Tonella Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon has been sold direct-to-consumer for 18 years and is being released in limited national distribution for the first time this year. Tonella lies next to the historic Georges de Latour Vineyard and was part of Beaulieu's original

Georges de Latour blend; the property was inherited by Ray Tonella, the adopted nephew of J.J. Ponti, one of Beaulieu's first general managers.

Fox highlighted the phenolic structure of the wine, attributing it to the increased heat summation in Rutherford, which is located in the widest part of Napa Valley: "I've been measuring phenolics in wine for almost ten years now, and one thing I want to dispel is the fact that color doesn't mean anything in terms of taste." He cited the way anthocyanin interacts with tannins in wines like Cabernet Sauvignon, requiring a great deal of attention both in the vineyard and during fermentation, pressing, and blending. "One of the best things we do with Cabernet Sauvignon here in California is build midpalate structure and weight in the wines. This is something that can point you to origin and even to specific sites like Rutherford. Specifically . . . the top of the midpalate is where I feel that silky texture from long-chain tannins first," he said, noting that he picks based on anthocyanin and flavor development and monitors how they are binding during fermentation. When blending, he prioritizes building the palate with structure and weight and then framing it with aromatics from Petit Verdot and Merlot, yielding a wine with black forest fruit on the nose, savory flavors, and a distinct mineral expression on the finish. Fox attributed the wine's freshness to the

planted 1.6 acres on clay soils deemed ideally suited for aromatic whites in Rutherford.

After experimenting with it, Vianna opted to use it as the predominant variety in the blend. "If you transition from [Chris Hanna's] wine to Elevege Blanc, you'll notice that there are some thiols present, but it's a little more subtle. It's not quite exploding in your glass," she said of the 2023 vintage, a blend of 66% Sauvignon Gris and 34% Sauvignon Blanc with aromas of grapefruit and boxwood as well as floral notes of tropical and stone fruit contributed by the Sauvignon Gris. While there's good acidity, the wine is slightly voluptuous and round on the finish, with hints of vanilla and light caramel on the nose. Vianna attributed this to a small percentage of barrel fermentation and an aging regimen of one-third new French oak, one-third used or neutral barrels, and one-third stainless steel.

Vianna encouraged the audience to consider the texture of the wine for clues to the practices she may have used. "In effect, we're stealing two techniques that are traditionally used more with Chardonnay," she noted. "We're stirring the barrels as well as barrel fermenting, so we're getting a little bit of the structure from the lees contact and a little bit from the oak as well." She described the wine as thought-provoking, noting that its name

stems from Chimney Rock's original proprietary red blend, Elevege, in turn named after the French term for raising a wine like you would a child. "We're challenging consumers to think about Sauvignon Blanc and its relatives with a white wine that can age well. With aromatic whites being one of the fastest-growing categories today, consumers are more open to tasting an intriguing wine," she said.

Before the presentation transitioned to a comparative tasting of four Cabernet Sauvignon wines, Leicht praised the aromatic quality of Elevege Blanc while holding the glass near his heart, explaining that, years prior, legendary Alto Adige winemaker Giorgio Grai had taught him to swirl wine in front of his chest and smell the bouquet from above, with head raised; he asserted that, while it doesn't work for all wines, the technique truly enhances the experience of tasting certain intensely aromatic wines.

The second half of the tasting commenced with the Sequoia Grove 2021 Tonella Estate Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemaker Jesse Fox spoke to the winery's 50-year history in Napa Valley, where it farms 120 acres of estate vineyards, roughly two-thirds of which are located in Rutherford. Working in kitchens in Chicago, New York, and France before moving west to cook at The French



Cakebread Cellars vice president of operations Aaron Fishleder.



Harry H. Wetzel IV is director of operations/family partner at Alexander Valley Vineyards.

tannin structure derived from the heavy volcanic soils found on the eastern side of the Valley.

On the opposing side of Napa Valley lies Cakebread Cellars, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023. Vice president of operations Aaron Fishleder introduced the 2021 vintage of its Benchland Select Cabernet Sauvignon. "I've tasted almost every wine the winery has made, and there's a theme here that I hope you're getting in your glass," Fishleder said, elaborating that from the beginning, founders Jack and Dolores Cakebread's philosophy was to produce wines intended to be enjoyed with food.

Fishleder noted that the wine currently sees 57%–58% new oak, which imparts a sweet character that radiates through the fruit, but "we're tinkering with oak a bit now so that it's not as prevalent when you're first tasting the wines." In addition, the winery is experimenting with different fermentation vessels, including massive conical concrete vats. In comparison to the darker berries in Sequoia Grove's Tonella, Benchland shows red currants, blackberries, and other mixed berries on the nose and palate.

Fishleder encouraged the group to try Cakebread's new vintages as they are released, noting the continued emphasis

on fruity, food-friendly flavor profiles. In a nod to the winery's sustainability commitments, he closed with saying, "Now that we're a member of the International Wineries for Climate Action, we've agreed to get our ourselves down to zero [emissions] as quickly as we can by 2026. In the meantime, we still want to make wine that everyone loves, and that's the experiment."

Representing the fourth participating winery marking 50 or more years, Harry H. Wetzel IV, director of operations/family partner at Alexander Valley Vineyards, summarized the history of the Wetzel family's estate, which spans 700 acres bordered by the Mayacamas to the east and reaching west of the Russian River: "My grandfather bought the historic Cyrus Alexander homestead in the 1960s and planted grapes. They grew grapes for ten years, making wine just for the family. It was my father, Hank, who began making wine commercially in 1975, and he has now completely retired."

The Alexander Valley Vineyards 2020 CYRUS, named for Cyrus Alexander, marks the winery's 26th release and is a blend of 64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc, and 2% each Malbec and Petit Verdot; the goal of the

wine is to feature the best of the winery's Bordeaux varieties in a given vintage, unlike the estate Cabernet Sauvignons, which are made to be consistent year to year. The aging regimen for CYRUS is dictated by the final blend: "We age the components separately for about one year using a mix of French and American oak while we're figuring out what the final blend will be. Once we have the blend, it goes into 25% new French oak and the remainder in second-use oak for a second year," Wetzel said, recalling that, during college, he was assigned to write a paper on how to market a new brand or label. At a loss for ideas, he started telling his parents about the assignment over dinner one night, and his father proposed the concept for CYRUS that in turn became the subject of Wetzel's paper; little did he know that his father had already made the wine but had not yet released the first vintage.

In addition to the telltale notes of cassis and dark berries, something that makes Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon distinct for Wetzel is that it tends to express purple fruit as well as an herbal undercurrent. When blind tasting, he has also consistently detected characteristics of leather or tobacco regardless of vintage or aging regimen.



Gillian Ballance, MS, is director of wine education for Treasury Wine Estates.

Gillian Ballance, MS, expressed appreciation for the varietal typicity and expression of place of all of the wines presented: “I would love to encounter any of these wines in a blind tasting, because first and foremost, I always try to evaluate sight.” . . . Her advice to aspiring tasters was to “incorporate all of your senses.”

To bookend the session, Gillian Ballance, MS, director of wine education for Treasury Wine Estates, talked strategy, taking the opportunity to speak briefly about the two most common rubrics used for analytical tasting: the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) Systematic Approach to Tasting (SAT) and the Court of Master Sommeliers' tasting grid. “I wish that I could combine the Court of Master Sommeliers' grid with WSET's SAT because I'd like to use pieces from both of those grids at the same time,” she lamented, noting that she appreciates the SAT's focus on defining primary, secondary, and tertiary aromas and flavors; as for the grid—with its approximately 42 observations that must be quickly identified—“you have to internalize [it], know it stone cold, and really listen to yourself as you work through it,” she said. Alluding to the ways in which we might convince ourselves we're tasting one thing while overlooking clues that it's another, she added, “This is where you can really get down a rabbit hole that you can't back out of. It took me three years to be successful at the Master Sommelier tasting exam because I ignored some of those pitfalls along the way.”

Ballance expressed appreciation for the varietal typicity and expression of place of

all of the wines presented: “I would love to encounter any of these wines in a blind tasting, because first and foremost, I always try to evaluate sight.” She admitted to missing Pinot Gris several times on a blind-tasting exam because she wasn't looking for its copper tint, noting that her advice to aspiring tasters was to “incorporate all of your senses.”

In evaluating DAOU Vineyards' 2021 Soul of a Lion, she noted the depth of color and opacity of the wine, which was staining the tears and providing clues to the grape varieties used. Taking the vineyard's location on a high-elevation site in Paso Robles into consideration, she immediately began eliminating varieties. Moving to the nose, she found an authentic ripe-fruit character that was neither jammy nor stewed, noting currant, blackberry, and violet aromas. “I've already eliminated varieties like Pinot Noir and Grenache and am focusing on the primary fruit characteristics and any secondary characteristics from winemaking that might be layered on top of them,” she explained; in doing so, she identified vanilla, baking spice, and sweet oak aromatics pointing to the use of new French oak and sought consensus from the audience. “The Daou brothers have never stopped in terms of finding the right barrel regardless of the cost in their search for just the right amount of oak and the perfection behind that approach,” Ballance continued.

When detecting just a touch of pyrazine, Ballance pointed to the importance

of theoretical knowledge of vintages: “This is a 2021, which was a particularly cool vintage for Paso Robles. The average daytime temperature actually never got above 70 degrees during the month of August, and the result was a very long hang time for the fruit and full development of the phenolics.” The resulting wine is a blend of 82% Cabernet Sauvignon; 12% Cabernet Franc, which contributed beautiful aromatics; and 8% Petit Verdot, which imparted notes of black pepper.

Ballance noted that DAOU's founders, brothers Daniel and Georges Daou, fled Lebanon during the first civil war and eventually ended up in California, where they purchased the site that they'd name DAOU Mountain in 2007; boasting soils of calcareous limestone, it was previously known as Hoffman Ranch and had been planted in the late 1970s by Dr. Stanley Hoffman. “I think of Ridge, Montebello, Calera—the few spots in California that are pure limestone. The combination of altitude, soil, and proximity to the ocean through the Templeton Gap are the three things that convinced Stanley and then the Daou brothers to plant Bordeaux varieties,” Ballance noted. In fewer than 20 years, DAOU's Soul of a Lion—crafted by Daniel, who serves as chief winemaker, and intended to be a tribute to the brothers' father, Joseph—has put the Adelaida District and Paso Robles on the map for world-class Cabernet Sauvignon.

After a rousing question-and-answer session, Leicht concluded the panel with a round of applause for the presenters and an expression of gratitude for the opportunity to have conversations that educate us and help us hone our skills. **§**

Languedoc

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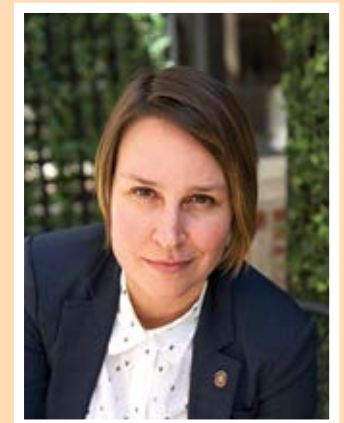
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SAVOR THE COLORS OF TIME

ÉTOILE, THE ULTIMATE WINEMAKER'S SIGNATURE

AS SEEN BY ETIENNE FRANCEY

DOMAINES

Ott★

