

# THE SOMM JOURNAL

O'NEILL VINTNERS & DISTILLERS director of winemaking for the Central Coast Amanda Gorter, founder and CEO Jeff O'Neill, executive vice president of business development Breck O'Neill, chief marketing officer and executive vice president of luxury Maeve Pesquera, and their sheep in the vineyards at Robert Hall Winery in the Geneseo District AVA of Paso Robles, CA.

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*At the Miami SOMM Summit, SOMM Journal publisher/editor-in-chief Meredith May stands before the panelists at one of our seminars: Zach Mazur, district manager, Kobrand; Joe Nielson, winemaker, Ram's Gate Winery; Lars Leicht, VP of education, The SOMM Journal; Geoff Bedrosian, owner, Domaine de La Rivière; Joe Wagner, proprietor, Copper Cane Wines & Spirits; and Jonathan Walters, director of winemaking/GM, Brassfield Estate Winery.*

# Embrace the Bloom

## SPRINGING FORWARD INTO NEW OPPORTUNITIES

**NOW THAT WINTER IS BUT A MEMORY**, we're ready to spring forward into our event season, when we get to meet wine directors, somms, and wine and spirits retailers from across the country face to face during our seminars, tastings, specially curated wine dinners, and SOMM Camps.


Our first Miami SOMM Summit was a testament to our philosophy of edu-tainment, featuring winemaker-led panels and presentations on an array of international wines and ideas. Sharing this wealth of bottlings and information with a group of 25 wine directors as well as our thousands of readers across the country—look for our recaps in the June/July edition—is what it's all about.

In this issue, meanwhile, you'll vicariously have lunch with winemaker Joe Wagner at Quilt & Co in Napa; attend tastings of Maison Louis Jadot's Clos de Ursules in New York City and Los Angeles; travel to Hungary to explore its trove

of indigenous grapes; and return to the West Coast just in time to catch all the action at the auction during Premiere Napa Valley 2026.

You'll also get to know some industry VIPs along the way, including Dylan Trotter, who's burnishing his legendary father's culinary legacy with the reopening of Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, as well as such leading lights as Master of Wine and Master Sommelier Doug Frost and eminent importer Bartholomew Broadbent.

Next on our busy calendar is SommCon: We hope to see you in Washington, D.C., for the conference and beverage expo at The Westin Georgetown April 12–14. If you can't join us there, get ready for SommCon's super show in San Diego November 3–5.

Spring is a time of renewal, hope, and forward momentum. We're not just setting our clocks ahead but also moving ahead in our lives and careers: Let's all embrace new opportunities and welcome the chance to bloom brightly. 

*Meredith May*

# HAMPSHIRE Heritage

**HAMBLEDON VINEYARD**  
ENDURES AS A BENCHMARK OF  
ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE

BY JOE  
ROBERTS

**Well before English sparkling wine** became a category of international consequence, Hambledon Vineyard was testing what the climate and soils of Hampshire could deliver. Established in 1952 in South Downs, the estate is both the birthplace of England's commercial wine industry—which is now defined by sparkling production, accounting for 75% of its output—and a benchmark for how heritage, geology, and disciplined winemaking converge in the glass.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HAMBLEDON VINEYARD



*England's first commercial vineyard, Hambledon encompasses 220 acres of vines on belemnite-rich chalk similar to the chalk in Champagne's Côte des Blancs.*



*Chardonnay accounts for roughly 70% of Hambledon's plantings.*

Hambledon was England's first commercial vineyard, planted not as a novelty but as a hopeful assertion. Major-General Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones believed that the chalk beneath Windmill Down, a rural site that was home to a cricket venue in the late 18th century, could support wines of structure and longevity, and though many observers expressed doubt, his optimism wasn't unfounded: If Champagne's identity was built on chalk, then Hampshire's geology deserved technical scrutiny.

That conviction has continued to shape the estate's identity. In 2002, studies confirmed that Hambledon's 220 acres of estate vineyards sit on belemnite-rich chalk from the Newhaven Chalk Formation, dating to the Upper Cretaceous period. Its composition shares similarities with that of the chalk in Champagne's Côte des Blancs, offering natural drainage and mineral content particularly suited to growing Chardonnay. This finding prompted a clear viticultural strategy; today, Chardonnay accounts for roughly 70% of Hambledon's plantings. For the

trade, chalk is a talking point in general for the structural advantages it provides: It regulates water flow, encourages deep root systems, and supports acid retention—all pillars of top-class traditional-method sparkling wine.

In 2009, Hambledon appointed Hervé Jestin as chef de caves, marking yet another decisive chapter for the estate. A leading Champagne winemaker known for a philosophy of minimal intervention and sustainability-driven practices, Jestin focuses on producing wines that express purity, energy, and terroir. His role, in his view, is not to make a carbon copy of Champagne in England but to interpret Hampshire's chalk soils with technical precision and restraint.

Champagne remains the most influential reference point for sparkling wine in the world, but as managing director James Osborn reiterates, Hambledon's goal "is less about replicating Champagne and more about showcasing a cooler-climate, chalk-grown style that stands confidently on its own. The key point of differentiation is cli-



*Hambledon managing director James Osborn.*



**Major-General Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones (back row, third from left) founded Hambledon in 1952.**

mate. Southern England is cooler and has a longer growing season than Champagne. That extended ripening period allows for slower phenolic development while retaining naturally high acidity. The result is fruit with precision, lower potential alcohol, and very fine structural tension, a stylistic hallmark of English sparkling wine. At Hambledon specifically, the combination of free-draining chalk, south-facing slopes, and maritime influence produces fruit with pronounced linear acidity and a distinctly saline mineral profile.”

Across its vineyards, Hambledon implements regenerative viticultural practices, including minimal soil disturbance and cover cropping. In a climate where balanced fruit development can be difficult, this approach to vineyard management directly shapes structure and longevity. “From a production standpoint, we lean into that natural structure,” Osborn says. “High-acid base wines allow us to age extensively on lees—a minimum of 36 months—to build autolytic complexity without sacrificing freshness. The objective is balance: tension from acidity, precision from site, and texture from *élevage*. This combination of characteristics means that we are able to produce wines with both immediate appeal and the potential for evolution over years to come.” Notably, Hambledon remains the only English sparkling-wine producer to employ a solera reserve system in the cellar, which ensures depth and continuity in its multivintage blends, mitigating vintage variability and reinforcing the house style. Hambledon’s Classic Cuvée Brut and Classic Cuvée Rosé well reflect this approach (see the sidebar for my tasting notes).

With an on-site restaurant and bar, the estate is also well positioned to relate the stories behind its wines to guests. “Hambledon was one of the first English vineyards to open to visitors in the late 1960s,” Osborn explains. “Hospitality is not an add-on; it has been part of the business model from the beginning. The estate offers a complete ‘vine-to-glass’ experience, a rarity in England. Visitors can access the vineyards,

winery, [and] chalk cellars in the shadow of the historic Mill Down House, giving a comprehensive view of production rather than a partial or purely retail-focused visit.”

As producers of English sparkling wine seek to establish a long-term identity for the category while securing international placement, Hambledon holds a pivotal role as its standard-bearer, whose continuity can only be seen as a strength. **SJ**



**Hambledon Vineyard Classic Cuvée Brut, England (\$55)** This multivintage blend of 51% Chardonnay, 32% Pinot Noir, and 17% Pinot Meunier includes 16% reserve wine from Hambledon’s solera system and sees at least 35 months aging on the lees. It’s vibrant and floral, with boisterous aromas of pear, green apple, and red apple skin and an elegant mousse and perlage. Flavors of ripe yellow apple and white fig mark a juicy, delicious palate that’s long on refreshing minerality. Hints of bruised yellow apple, tangy citrus peel, and brioche grace the finish. **92**

**Hambledon Vineyard Classic Cuvée Rosé, England (\$55)** This multivintage blend of 82% Chardonnay, 7% Pinot Noir, and 1% Pinot Meunier with 10% red Pinot Noir ages 45 months on the lees and has a dosage of 8 g/L. There’s a fine richness to the aromas here, leading with wild raspberry, strawberry, and hints of herbs and rose petals. The mouthfeel is both buoyant and rounded, with flavors of bright red cherry and crisp red apple taking center stage. The result is a layered, versatile bubbly that can easily be enjoyed on its own but is capable of holding court with salads of all types. **92**

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APRIL/MAY 2026 • Vol. 13 No. 3



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# A NEW CHAPTER IN PORTUGUESE WINES

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## Scheid Family Wines Expands Custom Services

AS WINE BRANDS and retailers plan for the 2026 production season amid continued economic pressure and market volatility, Scheid Family Wines is highlighting its expanded Custom Services platform, designed to help partners operate leaner, scale faster, and secure high-quality supply.

Building on a recently announced expansion of its custom crush and winemaking services, Scheid's Custom Services program brings to-

gether private-label development, contract bottling, co-packing, wine finishing, bulk sourcing, and vertically integrated grape-to-bottle production. Its Brand Reputation Compliance Global Standards—certified, luxury-level winery in Greenfield, California, is 100% powered by renewable wind energy from a 400-foot-tall turbine.

"As consolidation, capacity constraints, and evolving consumer demand reshape the industry, producers are looking for strategic partners, not just service providers," said Tony Stephen, chief sales officer at Scheid Family Wines. "Our Custom Services platform was built to reduce complexity, control costs, and deliver premium results at scale. We can help our partners do more with less, without sacrificing quality."



*Scheid Family Wines' winery in Greenfield, CA.*

## Cakebread Cellars Bolsters Executive Team



*Sara Rathbun.*



*Kathy DeVillers.*

**CELEBRATED FAMILY-OWNED** winery Cakebread Cellars has announced two additions to its leadership team: chief financial officer Kathy DeVillers and vice president of sales, marketing, and direct-to-consumer Sara Rathbun. DeVillers formerly served as CFO at Gundlach Bundschu Winery, Vintage Wine Estates, St. Supéry, C. Mondavi and Family, and Allied Domecq Wines. In her new role at Cakebread, she will oversee financial strategy, inventory management, and technology/systems enhancements to support operational excellence and growth. Rathbun most recently served as senior director of marketing and direct-to-consumer at Roederer Collection; at Cakebread, she will focus on accelerating growth in the direct-to-consumer channel; fostering innovation across sales and marketing initiatives; and ensuring the Cakebread brands remain engaging, relevant, and connected to evolving consumer preferences.

Other recent appointments to the leadership team include director of Cakebread Cellars winemaking Niki Williams, director of vineyard operations Jessica Baumgartner, and director of Bezel winemaking Jane Dunkley.

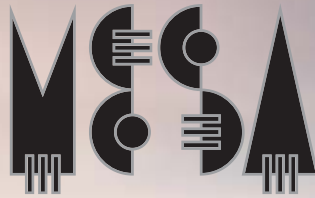
## Viña Concha y Toro Reaches Agreement to Acquire Maison Mirabeau

**VIÑA CONCHA Y TORO**, through its VCT Europe arm, recently announced the acquisition of Maison Mirabeau, a leading rosé brand from Provence and the first Regenerative Organic Certified vineyard in France. The deal, subject to approval by the French regulator, adds France to Viña Concha y Toro's production regions, which include Chile, Argentina, California, Spain, and Mexico. Mirabeau, founded in 2010 by Jeany and Stephen Cronk, is sold in more than 40 countries. The intention is to run both companies with minimal internal changes, and VCT Europe has confirmed it will respect all existing distribution agreements for Maison Mirabeau. There will be no reference to Concha y Toro in the consumer-facing brands.



*VCT Europe finance and supply chain director Andrea Mirone, Maison Mirabeau founders Jeany and Stephen Cronk, and VCT Europe general manager Simon Doyle.*

"Joining the Concha y Toro family marks an extraordinary new chapter, one that enables us not only to accelerate our commercial momentum but also to fast-track our environmental objectives and move closer to becoming a truly planet-positive business. The whole Mirabeau team is genuinely energized and optimistic about the road ahead," says Stephen Cronk, who will continue as Mirabeau's CEO. For more information, visit [maisonmirabeau.com](https://maisonmirabeau.com).



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## Troon Vineyard & Farm's Craig Camp Joins Demeter USA Board of Directors

**WINE INDUSTRY VETERAN** Craig Camp of Troon Vineyard & Farm has been appointed to the board of directors for Demeter USA, which oversees all Demeter Biodynamic farm certifications in the United States and works in conjunction with Demeter International to coordinate Biodynamic standards throughout the world. A passionate activist for the benefits of biodynamic farming and winemaking, Camp previously served on the Biodynamic Alliance Board and has been intimately involved with Demeter certifications for many years. Under his leadership, Troon converted to Demeter Biodynamic certification in 2020 and has now become the only farm and winery in the world that is both Demeter Biodynamic and Regenerative Organic Gold Certified.

Effective January 19, Camp is serving as treasurer of Demeter USA's board of directors, of which he is currently the sole member representing the wine industry—but he hopes to change that. "Biodynamic wine accounts for a large share of the Demeter Biodynamic farms in the USA, and I believe wineries can be powerful advocates for biodynamic farming," he says. "It should be our mission to bring more farms into a discipline that offers so much for the health of our planet and those of us who live on it."

## Chappellet Announces Leadership Changes

**NAPA VALLEY PRODUCER** Chappellet Winery recently announced a transition in Phillip Corallo-Titus' role as longtime vice president of winemaking to the position of senior winemaking advisor, a move that formally affirms Ry Richards' leadership as winemaker. Throughout nearly 40 years with the winery, Corallo-Titus has been a defining



Phillip Corallo-Titus.



Ry Richards.

force behind Chappellet's rise as North America's preeminent producer of mountain-grown Cabernet Sauvignon as it's earned some of the highest critical acclaim in its history, including multiple 100-point scores. Corallo-Titus will remain deeply involved in the winery's creative

and strategic planning and will continue to participate in decisions related to production and grape sourcing.

"Ry is the ideal person to lead Chappellet into its next chapter," says Corallo-Titus of Richards, who is overseeing day-to-day winery operations and the execution of Chappellet's winemaking program. "He's spent nearly 20 years learning the estate from the ground up—the vineyard, its rhythms, its culture, and its values. As Chappellet has continued to evolve and raise the bar, Ry has evolved with it. . . . I have complete confidence that he will continue taking Chappellet to new heights."

## Quintessential Names Dakota Shy as Newest Napa Valley Partner



**QUINTESSENTIAL HAS BEEN** named national distributor for Napa Valley boutique winery Dakota Shy, marking another significant addition to the family-owned wine company's growing California portfolio and reinforcing its commitment to bringing top-quality, legacy-driven Napa Valley producers to markets nationwide. "Dakota Shy represents everything we look for in a winery partner—deep roots, an uncompromising commitment to quality, and a clear vision for excellence," said Dennis Kreps, co-owner of Quintessential. "They are a true Napa Valley gem, crafting sophisticated, site-driven wines from some of the region's most respected vineyards."

Founded in 2012 on a historic estate at the base of Pritchard Hill, Dakota Shy is led by original partner and winemaker Tom Garrett alongside general manager Ryan Clark. It partners with 16 vineyards throughout Napa Valley, harnessing diverse soils, elevations, and exposures to craft complex and sophisticated wines. Two Dakota Shy expressions are now available nationally through Quintessential: the 2024 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc and 2023 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. **W**

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# Affordability Reframing

## IMPROVING REVENUE THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, PART 5

**WELCOME TO PART 5** of my series on improving revenue through the use of proven tactics derived from transactional psychology. If you have not already, I strongly encourage you to read my column in the past four issues in sequence.

Though I'd be hard-pressed to choose any one aspect of transactional psychology as the most important, if you forced me to, it might very well be affordability reframing. The concept is quite simple: Alter the way something is described in order to emphasize its value. When it comes to wine, this is incredibly easy to do, as there is built-in math working in your favor.


Enter the "rule of five," which applies both on- and off-premise. I always suggest that, when you're speaking with customers about wine purchases, you should divide the bottle price by five. This is because there are five standard glasses in a bottle of wine. And while I'm sure your uncle Larry would quip, "When I pour it, there only ever seem to be two," you understand what I'm getting at here: The point is to put the cost of the bottle in the context of its price per glass.

Let's look at a \$20 bottle versus a \$30 bottle. Retailers know that most consumers don't want to spend more

than \$19.99. The \$30 bottle is \$10 (50%) more than the \$20 one; when described as such, it's unlikely to result in a sale. However, if you describe it as only \$2 more per glass, it suddenly doesn't seem as expensive—I don't know many people who would hesitate to spend \$2 more on a superior product. This works in a restaurant setting just as easily: An \$80 or \$100 bottle might seem very expensive to some guests, but when it's described as costing only \$16 or \$20 a glass, the price is easier to swallow. (To be clear, I don't—and you shouldn't—use the rule of five merely to upsell your guests; the goal is always to recommend a bottle that complements the food they're eating.)

Affordability reframing also works incredibly well for incremental sales, especially when applied to a stepper (see my August/September 2025 column). Let's imagine that a guest is asking about a wine on the list in the \$60–\$65 range. Once I've ascertained what they are looking for in terms of style and flavor, I have no problem directing them toward a more expensive wine—provided, of course, that it is truly a better choice based on their criteria. I'll usually say something like, "That wine you mentioned certainly checks some of those boxes, but may I also point

out this bottle? For only \$3 more per glass, it's going to ensure a much more extraordinary experience for you." Words to that effect change how the guest subconsciously perceives the spend.

At the end of the day, affordability reframing puts a subjectively better bottle on the table while objectively increasing gross revenue and, most importantly, guest satisfaction. 

AN \$80 OR \$100  
BOTTLE MIGHT  
SEEM VERY  
EXPENSIVE TO  
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**THERE HAVE BEEN** scads of recent articles about the deep trouble the U.S. wine industry is in. In 2025, volume was estimated to be down a whopping 15% compared to 2024, while total revenue was down 8%. In California, winery owners are reportedly letting vineyards go fallow or uprooting grapevines to stabilize inventory, while tasting rooms are shuttering left and right. DTC sales have plummeted. These developments all make for lurid headlines that get clicks in our engagement economy due to negativity bias—but they don't provide the whole picture.

In 2003, one year before the movie *Sideways* convinced millions of new customers to experience the poetry and beauty of wine, the U.S. wine industry brought in \$22 billion a year, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article. By 2021, that figure had grown to a staggering \$53 billion, and the article directly attributed at least 90% of that quarter of a trillion of combined, year-over-year growth to the magical power of the film. Even adjusting for inflation, there is no other explanation for the stratospheric rise in consumption and sales. This isn't biased speculation on my part as the

author of the novel from which *Sideways* was adapted; this is based on a study conducted by an economics professor at the University of California, Davis. The movie was a gift to the wine industry, and as tasting rooms sprouted up everywhere and visitors poured in, producers did the smart thing: They charged. Then they tier-charged. Their avarice was on full display, but the paying public, smitten by its newfound passion, shelled out.

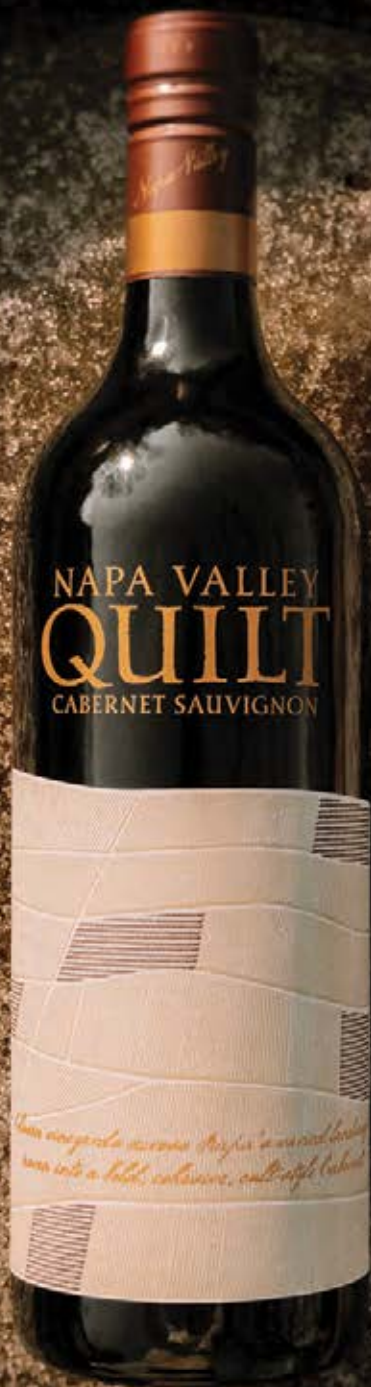
What's happening today is, in my educated opinion, a correction, not evidence of an industry on its last legs. Consider the seismic changes that occurred as the money poured in—mergers that corporatized and depersonalized the wine business while small producers were obliged to adapt to the DTC model. Tasting room staffers were encouraged, through bonuses and commissions, to aggressively push club memberships and announce discounts on cases over bottles. With too many players competing for too few customers and dollars, that affable small-production winemaker who really knew, and could expatiate on, his wines in the intimacy of his rustic tasting room had suddenly been replaced by employees who read from a script and who were

directed by upper management to sell, sell, sell, like used car salespeople. What had once been a journey of discovery in a bucolic landscape had been taken over by a numbers game that, I believe, alienated a lot of wine lovers, with ramifications for the industry at large.

What it needs, if it hopes to survive this downward trend, is a return to the kind of humanitarianism that drew those millions of newcomers to wine in the first place, which allowed for the exultation of discovery and the opportunity for intelligent and educated conversation. It needs to refrain from price gouging and hard sells and return to the amiability that drew me to tasting rooms and led me to write my novel.

Owing to the hit movie that followed, the wine industry grew too big too fast and, sad to say, greed took over. The current correction is going to hurt small wineries and DTC sales—that's unavoidable. But wine has been around for millennia, and it's not going to go extinct because Gen Zers are turning to cannabis and ready-to-drink canned cocktails or for any of the other absurdly speculative reasons that the flood of negatively biased articles portends. **SJ**

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# Unfiltered and Uplifting

AWARD-WINNING SOMMELIER **AMY RACINE** HAS AN INSPIRING SUCCESS STORY

**AMY RACINE'S JOB TITLE**, beverage director and partner at JF Restaurants, doesn't even begin to capture the breadth and impact of her work. In addition to leading the beverage programs at chef John Fraser's marquee portfolio of more than a dozen restaurants—including La Marchande in New York City, North Fork Table & Inn on Long Island, Vermilion in Boston, and the MICHELIN-starred Lilac in Tampa, Florida—she serves as the wine consultant for chef Kwame Onwuachi's acclaimed restaurant, Tatiana, in Manhattan's Lincoln Center Plaza.

From composing stellar wine lists to creating cocktails and leading teams, Racine relishes the multifaceted nature of her position. "I love having something different to do every day," she says, adding that she thrives on working with diverse teams for distinct restaurant concepts: "They allow you to flex different muscles and different areas of creativity."

Racine's love of all things food and beverage was cultivated in her hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, where wine was an important part of family gatherings, and she was allowed to taste it. "My mom's a great home cook, and she's a great baker," she notes. "And my dad is very, very interested in the culinary side [too]. . . . His side of the family is Italian American!" Accordingly, working in restaurants was always her game plan. And the proof exists in a memory book compiled by her mother: As a little girl, Racine wrote that she wanted to be a "chief" when she grew up. "I meant to say 'chef,' but I wrote 'chief,'" she recalls with a laugh.

In pursuit of her dream, Racine studied at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York. The wine curriculum there shifted her focus: Studying the science and art of pairing showed her that she could "still be a part of food" even if she wasn't behind the stove. After earning her bachelor's degree in culinary arts, she enrolled in the Accelerated Wine and



THE WINE CURRICULUM AT THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA SHIFTED HER FOCUS: STUDYING THE SCIENCE AND ART OF PAIRING SHOWED HER THAT SHE COULD "STILL BE A PART OF FOOD" EVEN IF SHE WASN'T BEHIND THE STOVE.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JF RESTAURANTS

Beverage Program at the CIA's Greystone campus in St. Helena, California.

Her work at JF Restaurants and Tatiana has earned her a growing list of accolades. She was named Beverage Director of the Year by *Esquire* in 2021, Wine Professional of the Year by VinePair in 2025, and one of Beverage Information Group's 40 Under 40 leaders this year; in January, she was also listed as a semifinalist in the James Beard Awards' Outstanding Professional in Beverage Service category.

As her fame grows, Racine is committed to making room for others at the table. In 2025, she launched Unfiltered, a monthly series of wine dinners to which she invites industry leaders to serve as guest sommeliers and donates a portion of the proceeds to their preferred charity. Past participants include June Rodil, MS, who raised money for the Southern

Smoke Foundation, and Cristie Norman, president of the United Sommeliers Foundation. "Unfiltered is about elevating the voices of hospitality leaders who are shaping the beverage culture in ways that go far beyond what's in the glass," explains Racine. She envisions it as "a chance to slow down, share a meal, and engage with the people who are expanding the definition of what hospitality can be."

Perhaps it was a prediction rather than a mistake when the young Racine wrote "chief" instead of "chef" as her future goal. But like all good leaders, she knows that it takes a village to succeed: In her words, "Teams are the ones that make it happen." *SM*

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



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Christopher Brugman is executive chef and operating partner of Heritage Kitchen + Cocktails in Scottsdale, AZ.

Brugman's grilled Spanish octopus with romesco, nduja-spiced potatoes, lemon curd, and frisée salad.

PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

# A Way of Life

FOR **CHRISTOPHER BRUGMAN** OF HERITAGE KITCHEN + COCKTAILS IN SCOTTSDALE, AZ, WINE “BRINGS EVERYTHING TOGETHER”

## WHEN CHRISTOPHER BRUGMAN

opened Heritage Kitchen + Cocktails in Scottsdale, Arizona, last October, one goal was to share his love of wine. “Wine is a way of life’ is sort of my tagline,” remarks the executive chef and operating partner. “My wife, Jill, and I love wine, and it’s really part of the fabric of our lives. It should be poured generously and revisited often at the table.”

Accordingly, Brugman personally curates Heritage’s wine list. “The menu [has] a coastal Mediterranean influence, and the wine program is in lockstep with that,” he explains. “My flavor profiles range from the spice markets of Morocco to Southern Italy and into the Iberian Peninsula—my family is from a small town in northern Spain called Asturias.”

His signature puffy Italian-style bread, served warm with charred scallion butter and harissa-spiced yogurt, is made from

a dough Brugman refined over the years he spent cooking at nearby luxury resorts like Mountain Shadows and Castle Hot Springs, while his hearth-roasted carrots are embellished with fermented honey, tahini, and labneh. Grilled Spanish octopus is accompanied by romesco, nduja-spiced potatoes, and lemon curd. And then there’s Brugman’s signature lobster paella, which features *fideos*, or thin noodles, tangled with Spanish chorizo and fennel and crowned with nuggets of sweet lobster, dollops of aioli, and a shower of fines herbes. “It’s a dish my grandma and my mom always made,” he shares. “It’s simple, but when it’s made thoughtfully, it can be transformative.”

To pair with it all, Brugman tastes roughly 50 bottles a week—“It might be the most fun part of my job,” he admits—with three guiding principles in mind: “acidity over power, freshness over

extraction, balance over dominance.” Vermentino, Txakoli, Sancerre, and Vinho Verde all excel at “enhancing flavors and texture with restraint,” he says—but he’s quick to point out that his selection isn’t exclusively Old World: A California native, Brugman considers “Napa and Sonoma close to my heart” and thus includes favorite producers such as Cliff Lede Vineyards and Harlan Estate on his list.

This hands-on approach has proven to resonate with his guests. In fact, in its first three months in business, Heritage sold nearly a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of wine, an outcome Brugman calls “humbling.” “My formative years were [shaped by] the love of food, and the connection to wine brings everything together,” he adds. “Now, as a chef, I’m able to share those memories in a modern way. It’s a lot of work and can be exhausting—but I’m having the time of my life.” SJ



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by Deborah Parker Wong



PHOTO COURTESY OF GARNACHA/GRENACHE

# Old Vines Have New Meaning

A GROUNDBREAKING STUDY CONNECTS GARNACHA VINE AGE TO WINE QUALITY

**AT THE OLD** Vine Conference's 2025 Meeting of the Minds, held from October 31 to November 4 in vineyards and other venues across Northern California, two of the most pressing questions about old vines were answered: Do wines made from old vines taste better? And is there a scientific method for establishing the age of grapevines?

José Ignacio García López, director and technical secretary of Spanish regulatory body CRDO Campo de Borja, was on hand to present the results of the Garnachas Históricas project, a four-year study conducted by the Universidad de Navarra and Universidad de Zaragoza as well as leading wineries Ainzón, Aragonesas, and Borsao with the aim of ensuring the survival of historic Garnacha vines, which are indigenous to the province of Aragón. Dr. Vicente Ferreira, head of the laboratory for flavor analysis and enology at the latter university, examined wines made from historic vineyards aged between 30 and 90 years. Using a process that quickly reveals the full expression of the varietal aromas contained in the grapes, researchers discovered these wines had a

more powerful phenolic structure, greater aromatic complexity, and more intensity with respect to expressing the characteristics of the vineyards they were sourced from. As a result, they have been shown to possess a far greater capacity to age.

The Campo de Borja DO lies in the northwestern quadrant of the Zaragoza province, which is a transitional zone between the plains of the Ebro River and the Moncayo Massif of the Sistema Ibérico. Historic Garnacha vineyards here are shown to contain more guaiacol and eugenol, which contribute to black fruit notes. Grapes from the region's eastern and southeastern municipalities of Pozuelo, Magallón, and Tabuena were found to contain more varietal thiols, vanillin, and beta-damascenone (found in raspberries), which contribute freshness and fruity aromas in wine. Grapes from the western subregions of Borja and Ainzón as well as Fuendejalón in the southeast have marked floral aromas from higher concentrations of terpenes and beta-ionone. According to Ferreira, these results validate the concept of terroir expression in wine and our understanding thereof.

The Garnachas Históricas project has also produced a scientific method for certifying the age of a vineyard. Dr. Gonzaga Santesteban, professor at the department of agronomy, biotechnology, and food at the Universidad de Navarra, and his team have discovered they can do this using a combination of data, including aerial photographs, vine measurements, and genetic samples from rootstocks.

Given that grapevines are *lianas*—or ligneous climbing plants—and that their internal structure disintegrates over time, their age cannot be determined by counting growth rings, as we do for trees. Instead, researchers closely inspect pruning cuts to calculate the annual growth rate of an individual vine that they can then compare to others within a vineyard. Historical information about the availability and prevalence of various rootstocks is also cross-referenced with genetic identification to further validate the age of a vineyard.

Proving that these historic vineyards produce more complex wines serves to increase their market value, which helps ensure their survival. **STJ**

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# Elitism or Economics?

OPINIONS ABOUND ON AFFORDABILITY'S IMPACT ON THE WINE INDUSTRY

**THE ENOSPHERE IS** at a crossroads. In the face of decreased consumer demand, grapes are being left unharvested to rot on the vines and entire vineyards are being ripped out in several winegrowing regions. A lot of digital ink has been spilled proposing solutions: Some say wine should be more fun, while others favor restoring wine's cultural significance. Many warn of rising anti-alcohol sentiment indicative of a new Prohibition movement, while many more prefer to whistle past that particular graveyard rather than try to argue for the health benefits of wine consumption.

Two recent articles caught my attention amid the noise, for opposing reasons. They weren't written in response to each other and they're not mutually exclusive, but they offer contrasting perspectives about wine and its affordability in a down market.

The first was by Robert Camuto, an American writer based in Italy who authors a Substack column, *Italy Matters*. His piece, "Wine Needs a New Social Contract," was reprinted on Jancis Robinson's website, a high-profile endorsement that

boosted its visibility. Camuto's notion of a social contract among wine producers, consumers, and the hospitality industry involves environmentally friendly farming, transparency in messaging, and moderate pricing. He is harsh on the hospitality sector, contrasting his experiences at Italian trattorias with the "contemporary art" of modern American restaurant dining: "The culinary origami of \$250 lunches, wine lists that start near \$100 a bottle and climb well into four-figures . . . and \$50 for a glass of Barolo, seem not only out of reach but preciously out of touch," he argues, adding that "high prices are a turn-off that turn wine into something elite and less than accessible." Camuto ends his essay by calling for a new definition of luxury that perhaps encompasses more than just the ability to drop a wad of money on a rare bottle of wine: Enjoying a delicious meal in good company with wine, independent of price, is in and of itself a luxury.

The contrasting argument came from firebrand Tom Wark, publicist, lobbyist, and author of another popular Substack newsletter, *Fermentation*. In "Let's Not

Complain About the Perfectly Priced \$1,000 Wines," Wark argues that the laws of supply and demand determine wine prices—and that those prices are fair: "If a Burgundy, Napa, or Barolo producer can price their wines at \$500 per bottle (or more) and if they can sell out of that wine before the release of their next vintage, then the wines are either perfectly priced or underpriced. This is simple economics," Wark writes. "What matters when we are asking whether a wine is worth the price is whether it actually sold at that price."

In a restaurant environment where costs for rent, labor, and ingredients are skyrocketing, it's natural for wine prices to rise too. There's no reason a wine list can't have trophy bottles alongside more affordable wines, though selecting the latter may require more effort and intention from a sommelier whose key concern is quality. It's hardly a silver bullet for a dynamic that's rife with contrasting opinions like Camuto's and Wark's, but such effort can go a long way toward showing restaurant patrons that their concerns are in fact being heard. *sj*





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# Out on the Border

IN ITALY, VINOUS SURPRISES AWAIT BETWEEN MONTALCINO AND MONTEFALCO

**THE ROLLING HILLS** of central Tuscany make enophiles swoon for King Chianti, big Brunello, and bulky Bolgheri. Neighboring Umbria takes no umbrage: After all, it offers sublime Sagrantino, outrageous Orvieto, and terrific Trebbiano. But somewhere between SuperTuscany and Ultimate Umbria, hidden gems await.

On the *autostrada* connecting the Tuscan town of Siena to the Umbrian one of Perugia, the border between these two regions is imperceptible but for a sign showing the upcoming region with a red slash through the one left behind. Take the back road, however, and you'll note some differences in the landscape—mostly subtle, such as soil color and contour, but a few dramatic, like the influence of Umbria's shallow yet expansive Lago di Trasimeno, Italy's fourth-largest lake.

On the Tuscan edge of this divide, Cortona has earned its own Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC), dominated by not Sangiovese but Syrah; producers must include a minimum 85% of the grape in their blends, though most choose to make monovarietal bottlings. Unlike the muscular, tannic, Shiraz-like Syrahs from central Tuscany, most Cortona DOC wines are akin to their Rhône counterparts, with hints of plum, juniper, and blackberry; tannins are present but relatively soft, and acidity is balanced and zesty. Respected producers include Bal-

detti and Fabrizio Dionisio.

On the Umbrian side, near the small town of Panicale, the distinct Trasimeno DOC also downplays Sangiovese (the maximum allowed amount is 15%) in favor



PHOTO: SIMONE MILLIOTTI

of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and, most notably, Grenache, which is said to have been introduced to the area between the 17th and 19th centuries. Oddly, it is called Gamay here, evidently due to some confusion on the part of an inattentive vigneron who mixed up the two French names starting with "G." Trasimeno DOC wine is nothing like Gamay; top examples show typicity with respect to Garnacha, offering hearty



notes of red berries, figs, cherries, and subtle spices. My go-to is La Querciolana's Gamay di Boldrino.

Meanwhile, Viognier makes surprising and charming appearances in both regions. I first encountered it at Le Bèrne, a small, family-run producer of *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, and then



discovered La Querciolana's rendition. I was expecting the opulent aromas and lush, almost tropical fruit found in Rhône and New World expressions of the grape, but *au contraire*. Le Bèrne's Borbotta, vinified entirely in stainless steel, is minerally, with subtle notes of apricot and white peach and a clean, zesty, almond-

tinged finish. La Querciolana's *Il Viognier*, for its part, is fermented with skin contact in barriques of Hungarian oak and spends time *sur lie*. Crisp yet round and persistent, it possesses a subtle floral bouquet along with pear, hawthorn, and spice notes.

Italy's wealth of indigenous varieties makes you wonder why they would plant anything foreign, yet these interlopers have been here so long they've gone native. To paraphrase the Eagles, being out on the border can bring some peace of mind—and outstanding wine. **SJ**



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# From Barcelona and Madrid to Bologna and Modena

**FOR THE FIRST TIME** since its inception in 2017, this column is two pages long. I needed the extra space just to list all the accolades that the respective owners of Mar Bella Wine Bar and Dear Emilia have racked up for their other ventures over the past few years. Recognition isn't everything, of course—countless wonderful restaurants survive for decades by catering to their communities in relative obscurity—but it certainly helps to explain the major buzz surrounding the two concepts, both of which opened in Denver in January.

been named a finalist for the James Beard Foundation's Best New Restaurant award and received a star from the MICHELIN Guide, which simultaneously granted Curiel its Young Chef/Culinary Professional Award, but the couple had gone on to open Cozobi Fonda Fina (now a Bib Gourmand recipient) in Boulder and Alma's next-door neighbor, Mezcaleria Alma, which earned its MICHELIN star in 2025. That same year, they opened Alteaño (you guessed it, MICHELIN-recommended) in the very hotel that Mar Bella calls home. Press coverage in every major

## MAR BELLA WINE BAR AND DEAR EMILIA OFFER NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE OLD WORLD



*Fonda Fina Hospitality director of wine Justin Mueller (left) with Mar Bella Wine Bar general manager Alexa Pearson and assistant GM/sommelier Ben Deibert (right).*

Mar Bella is a Spanish spot in the Cherry Creek neighborhood run by Guadalajara-born chef Johnny Curiel and his wife/partner, Kasie—whom most local foodies had likely never heard of prior to the launch of their first solo project, LoHi Mexican restaurant Alma Fonda Fina, in December 2023. Rest assured they have now. Within a year, not only had Alma

publication from *Bon Appétit* to *The New York Times* (which included Mezcaleria Alma on its 2025 list of America's Best Restaurants) goes without saying, as does Curiel's nomination for James Beard's Best Chef Mountain 2026 award. (Did I mention Alma also made the list of North America's Best 50 Restaurants? I wrote that blurb—just saying.)



PHOTOS: SHAWN CAMPBELL

*Mar Bella Wine Bar's tortilla de patatas.*

Despite such stunning success, Curiel admits, "getting from point A to point Z" with Mar Bella proved a challenge, "because I had to put my Mexican heritage aside—the lime, the chiles, all the spices that we use. But we fell in love with traditional Spanish food, and I was like, 'I'm not going to bastardize it,' and I think it ended up being amazing." That it is. Though Mar Bella also offers tapas a la carte, I opted for the eight-course tasting on my first visit, not least for the opportunity to explore pairings with assistant GM/sommelier Ben Deibert and Fonda Fina Hospitality director of wine Justin Mueller. Featuring 33 wines by the 3- or 5-ounce pour and more than 100 by the bottle, the list "focuses just on Spain and

Continued on page 32 ►

# TROPICAL

BY LUCA BOSIO

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southwestern France: Basque Country, Catalunya—Madrid and north, basically,” explains Mueller. The average consumer’s unfamiliarity with these regions, adds Deibert, “forces us to be better stewards . . . and have more intentional conversations with our guests to get them into a glass that they ultimately enjoy, which is really exciting for us, and I think it’s more exciting as an experience.” Mueller gives an example: “If someone says, ‘I like oaky Chardonnay,’ we can go, ‘Well, here’s an oak-aged Verdejo from Rueda that’s going



**Dear Emilia’s anolini stuffed with braised beef cheek in Parmigiano crema.**

to scratch that itch,’ and they’re like, ‘Wow, I didn’t even know this existed.’”

I for one was smitten by two French picks: the mineral-tinged Domaine Bellegarde 2023 Pierre Blanche Jurançon Sec with Curiel’s luscious, otopo-topped blue crab croquetas and the Château de Saù 2001 Rivesaltes Rancio accompanying a dessert of “Spanish French toast” with goat’s milk caramel, which Deibert calls “a home-run pairing.” But next time—after at least one cider- and saffron-laced Spanish Martini—I’m going with Deibert’s suggestion to pair the Albet i Noya 2014 El Corral Cremat Brut from the Alt Penedès with the solomillo de res, “a rich filet with mole negro demi-glace and foie gras—it’s ridiculous with a crazy, ten-year-lees-aged crémant.”

As for Dear Emilia, it’s an aptly named “love letter to the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna,” in the words of wine director

Scott Thomas, who also oversees the wine program at sister Italian establishment Restaurant Olivia. In addition to being recommended by the MICHELIN Guide (which bestowed its 2025 Colorado Service Award on co-owner Heather Morrison), the latter is a 2026 semifinalist in the James Beard Awards’ Best Hospitality category; no doubt that similar acclaim will be swift for the former, as the team—which also includes chef/partner Ty Leon and partner Austin Carson, Morrison’s husband and a stellar beverage professional in his own right—is operating at the top of their game, as my inaugural visit indicated.

Although Leon’s *tigelle* (griddled flatbreads) stuffed with bison mortadella mousse and pistachio butter practically made me swoon alongside a glass of Lambrusco, Thomas points out that a “classic” pairing for the region’s famed red sparkler is *gnocco fritto*, or savory fried dough, here perched atop a dollop

really helps break it down in a way that makes it super luscious—and served with peach preserves” that echo the “peachy, tropical nose” of the little-known indigenous variety, he notes, while “the tannin in Albana, which is one of Italy’s most tannic white grapes, helps break down the fat component.”

That’s just one of many uncommon finds on Thomas’ all-Italian list of about 90 wines by the bottle; others include orange Zibibbo from Calabria, Ligurian Rossese, and Prié Blanc from the Valle d’Aosta. But perhaps most charming of all is the visciola he offers guests with dessert. This sweet wine from Le Marche is a co-fermented blend of Lacrima and sour cherries; the red grape is “big and dark and inky, so [there’s] this harmony between [its] tannic structure and the beautiful aromatics of the cherries,” he explains. “And that plays into our program, which is an element of discovery. We want to bring these very traditional



**Scott Thomas is wine director at Restaurant Olivia and Dear Emilia.**

of pear mostarda beneath a crown of domestic prosciutto. In fact, he likes to serve the dish with a flight of “all three Lambrusco varieties, Sorbara, Salamino, and Grasperossa—you can have a journey with each sip with a dish like that, something that’s fried and salty and fatty. The Lambrusco just softens that down, and the salt helps soften the tannin in the Grasperossa [in turn].”

Also spot on was Thomas’ suggestion of Ancarani’s skin-macerated, concrete-aged 2022 Romagna Albana Santa Lusa with the maiale al latte. The pork shoulder is “braised and marinated in whey—which

and/or undiscovered wines that don’t necessarily have a voice or presence in the market and bring light to them.”

As at Mar Bella, I utterly failed to sample a cocktail, though several caught my eye—including the Negroni di Casa featuring Colorado gin and a house vermouth made from Lambrusco infused with black peppercorns and dark chocolate courtesy of a Cameroon-born, locally based chocolatier. But I figure there’s plenty of time for that: Mar Bella and Dear Emilia may be brand-new, but their staying power will undoubtedly prove commensurate with their star power. SJ

PHOTOS: AUSTIN CARSON

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# Heard It Through the Grapevine

AT THE INN AT MATTEI'S TAVERN IN LOS OLIVOS, CA, **DANIEL GEIGER** PORTRAYS WINE AS "LIVING POETRY"

by Cindy Rynning



PHOTO COURTESY OF DANIEL GEIGER

**WITH A BACKGROUND** in theater and philosophy and a strong love of poetry, Daniel Geiger is a modern Renaissance man. He also happens to be the lead sommelier at The Inn at Mattei's Tavern, an Auberge Collection property in Los Olivos, California, that's home to an elevated farm-to-table restaurant; there, he oversees the lauded wine program with an eye toward inspiring, connecting with, and empowering his guests. On the floor, he strives to "dismantle preconceptions and expand [people's] awareness of the world, their taste, and their being," in his words. "If I am able to do that, I've done my best work and then some."


Geiger's journey into the wine industry began with a job as a barista, which fueled his passion for terroir. The manager of the coffee shop suggested he explore a career in the wine industry. He found what he was looking for at Brick Barn Wine Estate in Buellton, where he became a host and then an associate when he was 21 years old. WSET Level 2 certification

followed, and so did a junior sommelier position at Mattei's Tavern, after which he was promoted to assistant sommelier. Two years later, he was promoted to his current role and is in the process of completing his WSET Level 3 certification.

The exceptional wine list at Mattei's Tavern features nearly 500 producers that emphasize a sense of place. While it's "meant as a love letter to the Old World," Geiger adds that he also aims "to pay respect to regional pioneers and trailblazers from Santa Barbara County and the Sta. Rita Hills, among other stellar vintners in California." Of particular importance to him, he adds, are biodynamically grown wines that are "produced with low intervention and have a lighter, leaner style." He has a gift for relating to his guests when discussing such bottlings, eschewing unnecessary jargon in favor of more thoughtful, natural language. "'Simplicity is the greatest luxury' is an idea we try to live by at Mattei's," he states.

That said, he's careful not to foist his

preferences on diners, whom he's recently noticed are looking for wines with "a bit more power—a bit more dimension, complexity, intensity, richness," he says. "The pendulum that swings between 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles is finding its way to a lovely middle ground." And he's glad to see his colleagues taking similar care: These days, he observes, "Many sommeliers are guiding guests toward a range of wines as opposed to telling them what they should enjoy."

This year, Geiger is treating patrons of Mattei's Tavern to "an exploration of wine through intentional experiences" such as comparative tastings and dinners dedicated to specific wine regions as well as through numerous by-the-glass options. "Wine is deeply human, deeply subjective," he remarks. "It remains one of the only art forms that can bring people to wax poetic and speak in heightened language in their day-to-day lives. Wine demands it of us, inherently. . . . [It's] living poetry in a glass." 

# LOW-ALCOHOL

WINE FROM LA VIEILLE FERME





FROM  
**SHOWRUNNER**  
TO  
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This column traces author **David Schulner's** life-changing journey from television writer to sommelier and back again. Schulner is also the co-writer, with Darren Star, of *Uncorked*, a show about winemakers in Napa that's currently in development at Netflix.

# Hollywood and Wine

IN WHICH A TV WRITER REACHES A CAREER CROSSROADS

**FADE IN.** It's 2023. I'm at the top of my game in Hollywood. *New Amsterdam*, a TV show I created, just ended its five-season run on NBC. I had an overall deal at Universal, which meant a steady paycheck. I had an office, an assistant, and a development executive, all working to create my next series with me. Then the networks and streamers failed to negotiate a fair contract with the Writers Guild of America (WGA), which voted to strike. Suddenly my overall deal, my paycheck, my assistant, and my development executive—all of it—went away.

I've been a television writer for 25 years, so I'm used to these boom-and-bust cycles. I've been hot—receiving an Emmy nomination, two Golden Globe Awards, and the Norman Lear Award—and stone-cold (my first show was the lowest-rated premiere in broadcast history). I've learned to save during the booms to get me through the busts.

And I'd participated in a previous WGA strike. Financially and professionally, I was prepared for this moment. Yet mentally, I suddenly found I was not.

I was now walking in circles (literally and metaphorically) in front of Netflix with a picket sign for three hours every day, as required by the Guild. I believed in our cause, but after it became clear the battle was going to be a protracted one—and I had gotten enough steps in to last a lifetime—I decided I desperately needed something else to do. Something fulfilling. Something creative. Something, anything, that could make the days count and give this phase of my life some kind of meaning.

There was just one problem: The only thing I loved as much as writing was wine. Maybe because storytelling and wine are very similar. They share the same structure: Just as a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, wine has a front

palate, a midpalate, and a finish. They both require tension to hold that structure together; to keep us engaged, to keep us wanting more. And the best wines, like the best stories, resolve in surprising yet inevitable ways.

All my vacations (before I had kids) revolved around wine. I once walked the entire Côte d'Or, from Marsannay to Santenay, because strolling through vineyards, drinking wine, and eating multicourse lunches (that you burn off with all that walking!) was and is my idea of heaven.

So after much soul searching (three hours a day, every day), I decided I would get a job as a sommelier at a MICHELIN-starred restaurant. How hard could it be?

*(Cue laugh track)*

**FADE OUT.**

To be continued . . .



# Adonna

VINEYARDS & WINES

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY



BEAUTY BLOOMS  
WHERE INTENTION  
TAKES ROOT.

Adonna is the story of Japanese American vintner Donna Kato, who returned to the land with a dream decades in the making. Adonna's 2023 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, a pure and singular expression of this AVA's cool coastal climate, arrives with a quiet refrain Donna returns to often: "Beauty blooms where intention takes root."

[ADONNAWINES.COM](http://ADONNAWINES.COM)



PHOTO: LANEWILKINSON

Marcello Palazzi, front, with his team of Naples Winter Wine Festival (NWWF) service volunteers.

# BIDS FOR THE KIDS

THE **2026 NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL** RAISED MORE THAN \$30 MILLION FOR CHILDREN IN COLLIER COUNTY, FL

by Wanda Mann

**THE OPERATIONS TEAM** for the 2026 Naples Winter Wine Festival (NWWF), held in Naples, Florida, from January 30 to February 1, did not allow the glitz and glamour of the affair to distract attendees from the mission at hand: raising significant funds to support vulnerable children in Collier County. Their mantra to bid high and bid often was exceptionally effective: The 2026 NWWF live auction at The Ritz-Carlton Naples, Tiburón, raised more than \$30 million for nonprofits that provide education, health care, and

social services in the community. Since its inception in 2001, the NWWF has raised more than \$336 million to benefit 385,000 children.

The raucous auction was a friendly competition for the 650 wine lovers in attendance, who feverishly raised their paddles to outbid each other for extraordinary prizes. In addition to luxury cars, fashions, and vacations, the 51 lots up for sale included exceptional vintages from such iconic producers as Vega Sicilia, Argiano, Trimbach, Cardinale, Staglin Fam-

ily Vineyard, Château Lafite Rothschild, Gaja, and Catena Zapata, among others. The vintners on hand naturally felt a sense of pride in watching their wines serve as catalysts for changing lives. "We were certainly pleased with the [bidders'] support of our live auction lot generating \$600,000 for the children's charities of Collier County," said Garen Staglin, co-founder of the aforementioned Staglin Family Vineyard in Napa Valley, whose auction lots have raised almost \$10 mil-

*Continued on page 40* ▶

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PHOTO COURTESY OF WANDA MANN



PHOTO: WANDA MANN

**Author Wanda Mann, right, with Argiano CEO/winemaker Bernardino Sani.**

**NWWF volunteer Jonathan Eichholz, MS, with Staglin Family Vineyard co-founder Garen Staglin.**

lion over the course of the festival's 25 years in existence.

To keep expenses down and maximize the amount of money that goes directly to beneficiaries, the NWWF draws on a large cadre of wine professionals who volunteer at the event. Throughout the festive weekend, I saw renowned sommeliers racing around the live auction to replenish bottles and leading service at exclusive wine dinners. The pace was intense, but they all seemed to be loving every minute of it. "Considering all the wine events throughout the year, the NWWF is one of my favorites," said Jonathan Eichholz, MS. "I love attending this event as it combines three fantastic elements: an amazing cause for charity, top sommeliers, and fantastic winemakers from around the world. Whether it's connecting with the winemakers . . . or


spending time with old sommelier friends or making new ones, it is a weekend that is always more rejuvenating than work."

Including Eichholz, there were seven Master Sommeliers on the team of 17 featured professionals. Bruce Nichols, a respected former wine retailer who serves as the NWWF's vintner and sommelier liaison, explained that he looks for sommeliers "who are really at the top of their game, but most of all they're enthusiastic. They put all the accolades and fancy titles aside, and they get the job done."

Providing additional support is a team of about 80–90 wine service volunteers led by Marcello Palazzi. Palazzi's day job is managing partner and director of operations at Campagna Hospitality Group; however, he donates his time to the event for the simple reason that "I

love community," in his words. Living in Naples with his family, Palazzi said that his connection to the NWWF has been strengthened by firsthand experience with how it helps those around him: "I didn't know for many years that I knew friends who were benefiting from something I was a part of."

From the children of Collier County to the vintners and sommeliers supporting the event, the NWWF seems to impact everyone in its orbit positively; just ask volunteer sommelier Lindsey Fern, director of wine and spirits at Nemaocolin in Farmington, Pennsylvania. "The amount of money raised in a few hours is extraordinary," she marveled. "Everything is so well planned and organized, which makes it a pleasure to be a part of . . . and it's for the kids!"

To learn more about the NWWF, visit [napleswinefestival.com](http://napleswinefestival.com). 

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{ leadership }



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY

▲ Brassfield Estate Winery president Chris Baker.

Brassfield Estate Winery VP of national sales Billy Ayer and chef/restaurateur Jim Stump at Shepherd & Sims in Los Gatos, CA. ▶



# Hospitality and Positivity

HOW CHRIS BAKER AND BILLY AYER OF BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY INSPIRE THEIR TEAM TO ACHIEVE GROWTH WHILE PROMOTING THE HIGH VALLEY AVA

by Randy Caparoso and Ruth Tobias

**WHY ARE THE** life stories of Chris Baker and Billy Ayer—president and VP of national sales, respectively, of Brassfield Estate Winery in Lake County, California—pertinent to everyone in wine-related fields? Because they're about people who cut their teeth in the hospitality industry. To these gentlemen, the priorities of a winery that aspires to become a widely respected brand are the same as those of a restaurant that aims to make an impact nationally or even internationally: providing quality, promoting authenticity, and practicing both sound business judgment and good old-fashioned decency.

In just the past three years, Brassfield Estate—founded by Jerry Brassfield in 2000 following his purchase of property in what is now the High Valley AVA in 1973—has expanded its distribution from 12 to all 50 states and achieved double-digit growth in sales (49% of which are on-premise). In 2025 alone, depletions of Brassfield wines across the country shot up 58%. These are outrageous figures considering the current shape of the wine market. So what's behind Brassfield Estate's apparent ability to defy the odds? That question was at the root of our recent conversation with Baker and Ayer; their answers revealed the importance of positive leadership in challenging times.

## Q: What's your background in hospitality?

**Chris Baker:** I started in the restaurant industry at 14 years old in order to purchase my first motorcycle: "Welcome to Burger King, may I take your order please?" Fast-forward to 1979, when I worked in a casual restaurant [as a dishwasher,] prep cook, salad maker, bartender, waiter, and general manager. After five years, I was offered a position at a new fine-dining restaurant and jazz club as a waiter and, eventually, wine steward (no somms back in the day) and general manager. [I spent] around eight years in the industry.

**Billy Ayer:** I started at my godfather's restaurant as a dishwasher when I was 14 years old and worked my way up from there to busboy,



server, barback, and bartender, and that's where the journey really began. I then headed to San José State [University], got in the hospitality management program, and graduated with a hospitality degree and a minor in marketing. . . . After college, I owned a restaurant and bar with a few friends for a few years, then got out of that business and found my way into the wine business, starting at Brassfield Estate in September 2004. I was the first salesman hired back then, so I was basically a junior salesperson. We had two states at that time: California and New York. I didn't know much about the distribution side of things, but I knew a lot about sales and hospitality, [which] really helped drive me and helped me progress over time.

**Q:** What are some key lessons you learned there that apply to the wine business?

**Baker:** The true meaning of hospitality—focusing on the customer and making them happy—[as well as the importance of] engaging with your team and recognizing that every day is a journey and an opportunity to learn.

**Ayer:** I learned at a young age that the customer is always right. . . . We have to treat our customers like gold, because without them, we wouldn't be here; we have to support them and try to make their jobs a little bit easier. It's my job to make sure that restaurants are profitable with the items that I am selling them [so that] they can continue to pour that wine and believe in me as a supplier to them. . . . Understanding the hospitality industry, [I know] how fragile it is at the end of the day. With the way the economy is, we have to make sure that they survive this downturn [as well as that] we survive. [We do that by] being authentic and putting our best foot forward every day.

**Q:** How would you describe your leadership style?

**Ayer:** I think my leadership style is side-by-side. I try to let everybody know that while I lead by example, I'm also their partner in this. Going into battle each day, I'm right there with them. . . . Everybody is rowing the boat in the right direction, and we're all working toward the same goal. That's something that Chris has taught me: We are all successful if we all work together.

**Baker:** Selfless.

**Q:** What in your view are the keys to building and maintaining a successful team?

**Baker:** Care, honesty, compassion, safety, and empathy. Hire right the first time; be honest about your expectations for the position; trust the person; and understand that many folks have work trauma from being micromanaged and help them develop skills and confidence. Strive to motivate by sharing the vision and the mission while continually reminding them that we are always in process: Even when they are told "no," we emphasize that "no" is just the first two letters of "not right now." We will figure it out together. . . . Also, make sure that they see their leadership team working as hard as they do.

**Ayer:** [Foster] continuity with your team, making sure everybody gets along. [There should be] a little competition [but also] a lot of support of one another; [we] make sure that we can reach out and help somebody who's having a tough time in the Northeast or the Southwest. And [cultivate] communication: I try to get my team together on a Zoom once a month, and they can have all their successes that we talk about but all their struggles they can talk about as well.



**Q: Why do you think that team has managed to achieve growth for Brassfield in a struggling market?**

**Ayer:** Positivity. We opened a lot of new markets that had never seen our wine [in 2025], and it's just by going out each day and [doing] what I call old-school blocking and tackling: supporting your distributors, supporting your restaurateurs and retailers, calling on those accounts. I just spent the past two days kicking off a market by myself in Idaho, because we don't have somebody that's running that market. So I'm going to run it for the time being. And I felt like the luckiest person in the world to go out and just sell wine for two days. I think it's just a matter of being positive and not buying into all the negative noise that's out there right now. You know, we could all commiserate and talk about how bad everything is, or we can go out and we can talk to people. The younger buyer and drinker out there today wants a story, so I lead by talking about [the fact that] our bottles are 100% estate-grown and -produced. And then [terroir] comes right behind that. . . . If you look at vineyards around the world, only 1% . . . are planted above 1,600 feet. Every one of our vineyards is planted above 1,800 feet. . . . There's so much to tell about the place, about the microclimates and the macroclimates that we have there, the volcanic soils, the 17 different varieties we have planted there. I could talk for two hours about how authentic Brassfield Estate is . . . and how proud and profitable our customers would be if they carried the brand.

**Baker:** We have handpicked a team that has many, many years of experience along

with trust and equity in their respective markets. Each of them has that rare streak of entrepreneurship and the work ethic to take a brand from zero accounts in a market to hundreds of placements in a year by identifying our unique selling and value propositions. . . . This team understands the meaning of a partnership, and they are not afraid of the hard work. Quite simply, customers like to do business with folks they know, like, and trust, and that's what our team is about. I am extremely proud of them and would do anything for them, as they would for me.

**Q: What skills are required to promote not only a winery but a whole growing region?**

**Baker:** I believe you must be able to see how the winery as well as the region fits into the scope of the wine world. Once you have that worldview, you have to start the long journey of education, remembering that every famous wine-growing region or winery was unknown at one time. You have to believe that you deserve your place at the table and be relentless in your pursuit to educate the world on your unique attributes. You also have to be slightly off your rocker, because this is hard and not for everyone.

**Ayer:** Chris and I, and also our VP of vineyard and winemaking operations, Jonathan Walters, spend a lot of time educating our team about High Valley and also the rest of Lake County. We have a bigger point of differentiation than most, because High Valley AVA is a transverse valley, which is very uncommon for Northern California. . . . Look at the rise of Paso and what happened there; I think we're

on the verge of that rise as well, because something a little different is happening in Lake County. We can overdeliver on the product that we are giving . . . [which means that] people can be profitable in their restaurants.

**Q: What are your goals for yourselves and your team in the near and long-term future?**

**Ayer:** Our short-term goal is that we are very account-driven, and that is how we are spreading the message of the brand across the U.S. . . . [In the long term,] it's about building a team that is sustainable for the future. It's not "I," it's "we" as we go forward [and maintain] long-lasting relationships. That's one thing that I've had for many years in the business, and Chris does as well. [Take South Bay-based chef/restaurateur] Jim Stump. He was the second restaurateur ever to purchase Brassfield wine and sell it by the glass, and he has been in my life for over 21 years. That [speaks to our] customer service.

**Baker:** There are many. Giving back, being in the service of others—continuing to mentor our team to ensure we are developing the leaders of the future in this industry. My goal is to be able to eventually retire a third and final time, to not stand in the way of the next generation, plus leave a positive mark on an industry that has given so much to me and my family. [I want] to put the High Valley AVA and Lake County in a place it deserves in the world of grape-growing and world-class winemaking, inspire our team about what is possible, [and] continue the company legacy that Jerry Brassfield built, instilled with integrity and value and quality. S



*Brassfield Estate's vineyards overlooking Clear Lake in the High Valley AVA in Lake County, CA.*

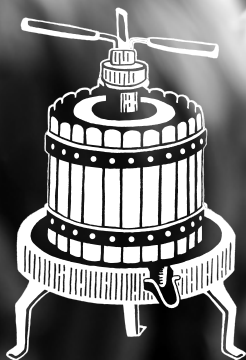
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*Herzog Wine Cellars' Prince Vineyard is located in California's Clarksburg AVA.*



# A Living Lineage

THE **HERZOG** FAMILY'S STORY IS STILL BEING WRITTEN, WINE BY WINE by Chris Howard

**ROWS OF GRAPEVINES** stretch across the Clarksburg landscape, their parallel lines gently curving where the land rolls toward the Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta. Here, in the Prince Vineyard, Chardonnay digs deep into alluvial soils shaped by water and sediment over millennia. The word “lineage” takes on dual meaning in this layered place, alluding both to nine generations of Herzog family winemakers across two centuries and to the estate vineyards they oversee across several California appellations, yielding wines in which genealogy and terroir converge.

The Herzogs' winemaking history traces back to 1840 in Slovakia, where Rabbi Menachem Herzog founded a winery, brewery, and distillery. Within a generation, Herzog wines were being poured at the Austro-Hungarian court of Emperor Franz Joseph. But history has a way of bending even the most established lines. The family survived Nazi occupation, then fled the Communist Party's 1948 takeover of Czechoslovakia, arriving in New York with little more than their knowledge and sheer resilience.

PHOTO: DAVID WHITTEMORE



*The Camelback Ridge Vineyard in Lake County's Red Hills is among the sources of Herzog Wine Cellars' Lineage range.*



***Cabernet Sauvignon is one of six single-vineyard, single-varietal wines in the Lineage collection, which also includes a red field blend, a rosé, and two sparkling wines.***

Eugene Herzog found work on Manhattan's Lower East Side as a sales manager, truck driver, and winemaker for Royal Wine Company. Within a decade, he owned it. In 1985, the Herzogs launched their namesake California brand, Herzog Wine Cellars, sourcing grapes from premier growers. But sourcing wasn't enough—not for a family whose winemaking philosophy had been refined over nearly 200 years.

Quality stems from control, which entered a new phase in 2010 when the Herzogs purchased their first vineyard in Clarksburg. This set in motion a push toward the production of estate-grown wines that now involves four vineyards spanning over 500 acres across Clarksburg, Lake County, and Napa Valley. "We have 100% control of the farming. We can nurture the grapes to reach the exact level of quality we want for the wine," says director of winemaking David Galzignato, who has worked in the industry for 28 years, not only in Napa, Sonoma, and Paso Robles but also in Washington and Italy. The Herzogs have invested roughly \$2 million in these vineyards, showing a commitment that speaks to permanence: "Nine generations—Herzog's not going anywhere," Galzignato adds.

From these estate holdings comes the aptly named Lineage range, designed to represent California's diverse terroirs. In addition to six single-vineyard, single-varietal wines—Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Malbec, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Sauvignon—there's also Choreograph, a red field blend; a rosé; and two sparkling wines, Momentus Blanc and Momentus Rosé, all retailing for around \$22. Each is crafted with consistency, rather than uniformity, in mind to express the specific character of its appellation. Production per expression hovers between 1,000 and 4,000 cases per vintage—not quite boutique but far from industrial. It's a scale that allows for attention to detail while ensuring accessibility.


The Lineage Chardonnay, from the aforementioned Prince Vineyard, undergoes nine months of barrel aging, emerging with lush notes of pineapple and pear accented by lime zest and brûléed vanilla. It occupies what Galzignato calls "the middle of contemporary taste"—enough oak to satisfy those who want it, enough acidity and minerality for Chablis lovers.

The Sauvignon Blanc tells a different story, one written in the volcanic soils of Lake County's Red Hills. Made with the aromatic Musqué clone, it bursts with freshly cut lime, roasted pineapple,

and honeysuckle—and tastes as though it should cost more than it does. Lake County, directly adjacent to Napa, also yields the bold Lineage Cabernet Sauvignon, which displays notes of black cherry, boysenberry, and tobacco alongside soft tannins that make it versatile and food-friendly. "The Cabernet is our most popular wine and our best value," says Galzignato. "When you're looking for Napa-style quality at this price point, that's what we're offering."

Herzog Wine Cellars' production is guided by a philosophy of letting the vineyard speak, but of course no vineyard—or family—is an island unto itself. The Herzog story is one of close ties: with the land, with growers, and with the people who work harvest after harvest under the California sun. "It's all about relationships," explains Galzignato, "[and] relationships fail, but you learn from that." Galzignato strives for his own healthy relationship with failure; at a recent tasting in New York, someone asked how he made wines that met his standards. His answer: "by failing many times." Some call this "fleaming"—learning by failing—and it's a refreshingly honest perspective in an industry often obsessed with critical acclaim. "The focus on the score also obscures the team behind the wine," Galzignato observes. "There are people behind those bottles—not just the people who work in the vineyards and cellar but *their* people. For two months during harvest, you don't see your family."

The Herzogs made their name producing wine for an emperor's court nine generations ago. In the 21st century, with Lineage, they're bringing that depth of expertise to wines whose quality-to-price ratio challenges assumptions about what \$22 can buy. Call it luxury for the people: "I remind my team that we're . . . making wine for the consumer, not for ourselves," Galzignato says.

As golden hour approaches the Prince Vineyard in Clarksburg, those parallel rows radiate a different light. Beyond yielding grapes every autumn, the vines are living lines connecting past to present, Slovakia to California. The layered expressions of the Lineage range trace these connections—nine generations; 500 acres of estate vineyards; and a deep commitment to quality, accessibility, and, above all, relationships. 

# Innumero Has Our Number

by Meridith May

**LED BY PROPRIETOR/GENERAL MANAGER** Sheree Thornsberry, Innumero Wines has just experienced another year of exceptional growth, achieving a 72% sales increase in the premium category in 2025 even as overall wine consumption continues to decline. This success reflects her and her husband Brian's unwavering commitment to crafting wines that capture the soul of Sonoma County, one that involves "a relentless focus on quality and a business built on genuine, lasting relationships with our customers," in her words. "At Innumero, extraordinary experiences are born where people, place, and passion meet," she adds.

Innumero focuses on single-vineyard, single-clone Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Russian River Valley and Green Valley of Russian River Valley AVAs. "We've been fortunate to enjoy exceptional growing conditions over the past four vintages," notes Innumero winemaker Ashley Herzberg. "Combined with access to world-class Sonoma County vineyards cared for by dedicated, multigenerational grower families, it allows our wines to shine with minimal intervention." ❧

*Brian and Sheree Thornsberry have seen tremendous growth for their wine brand, Innumero, over the past year.*



**Innumero 2024 Bootlegger's Hill Vineyard Chardonnay, Green Valley of Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$75)** The bright, fragrant juice caresses the palate with streamlined flavors of caramel apple, lemon chiffon, and ripe pineapple plus a touch of jasmine. **97**

**Innumero 2024 Norstar Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$75)** Earth-laden notes of forest leaves, summer rain, trumpet mushroom, and thyme meld with black cherry in aspic. Juicy berries are framed by cinnamon and clove, while spirited acidity informs the tart yet well-balanced finish. **96**

**Innumero 2024 Bootlegger's Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir, Green Valley of Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$80)** This 100% Pommard clone Pinot Noir exhibits focused energy with a slight tension. Glossed by red currant, raspberry notes are bright and just tart enough, while roses are spiced with clove and cedar. **97**

**Innumero 2024 Barrel Select Family Reserve Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$90)** Exotic and floral-toned, this wine offers cranberry and rose petals lifted by a finely tuned acid structure. The complex layers of flavor on the elegant and focused palate include red tea, beet, candied apple, and baking spices plus hints of white pepper. **98**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF INNUMERO

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## GROWING UP NEAR CHICAGO,

Neal Wavra admits, he and his family focused much of their energy on food: "Meals in our house were spent talking about the next meal," he recalls. After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York—where he was a recipient of the Commanderie de Bordeaux Andre Crispin Travel Scholar Award and the R.C. Kopf Student Achievement Award—he worked at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee, before moving to Virginia, where he eventually opened his own establishment, the farm-to-table-themed Field & Main Restaurant in Marshall. Holding a Level I certification from the Court of Master Sommeliers, Wavra also serves as the director of the Loudoun Wine Awards and as a final-round judge for the Virginia Governor's Cup. I recently caught up with him to learn a bit about his business philosophy and practices.

### Q: What is Field & Main's mission?

At Field & Main, we see hospitality and service as the operating system for life, and food and drink are the tools we wield in the pursuit of our practice of hospitality. Our mission is to use local food and drink to connect with people and to foster community.

### Q: You are a staunch supporter of Virginia's wine industry. Why do you believe the state's wines deserve recognition on the national stage?

Virginia is one of the country's oldest wine regions, [where] star varieties include Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, and Petit Manseng. I was a fan of Virginia wine long before I became a wine professional, and now [that I am] located in Virginia wine country, it's about supporting local



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEAL WAVRA

[producers]. Imagine traveling to the Loire Valley and dining in a restaurant where the wine list did not have Chinon, Vouvray, or Muscadet!

### Q: Describe some key aspects of your wine program.


Our global wine program centers around producers that are like us: small, family-run, rooted in a place. When we approach a table, we ask a series of questions related to what the guest is looking to experience, what they tend to enjoy, and how much they would like to spend. Then we bring three bottles to the table, present their stories, and [explain] how these wines adhere to the parameters given by the guest. The guest then selects a wine to enjoy with their meal; oftentimes, they buy glasses of all three. . . . Finding a wine that suits a person's desires for a given evening, especially when they cannot articulate

what they would like, is one of the finest experiences a wine professional can have.

### Q: What advice would you give those seeking a career as a sommelier?

I think wine is a wonderful career path, imbued with true meaning and purpose. Start at the best place you can. Be willing to do everything, ask unending amounts of questions (at the appropriate time), take radical responsibility for yourself, and own as many details as you can manage. Lastly, begin saving some of every paycheck for a time when you will no longer be active in the field.

### Q: What do you think people might be surprised to find out about you?

That I worked for the U.S. Department of Commerce and am certified in conflict resolution by The Hague. 

# Sip into Marlborough Sunshine

92

POINTS  
THE TASTING PANEL  
MAGAZINE

Tropical flavors of citrus, figs, melon, and passion fruit blend with floral notes and crisp acidity, creating a vibrant and aromatic New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.



# VICTORY *among the* WINES

**ROBERT HALL WINERY'S  
REGENERATIVE ORGANIC  
CERTIFICATION IS A WIN FOR THE WINE  
INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE**

*Robert Hall Winery  
in the Geneseo  
District sub-AVA  
of Paso Robles is  
home to 140 acres of  
Regenerative Organic  
Certified (ROC)  
estate vineyards.*



At first glance, the estate vineyards at Robert Hall Winery in the Geneseo District sub-AVA of Paso Robles appear much like others in this corner of California wine country.

Cabernet Sauvignon vines stretch across gently rolling hills, rooted in silty clay-loam soils. Warm afternoons give way to the cool evening winds that sweep through the Templeton Gap, creating the dramatic diurnal shifts that have long defined the region. It's familiar terrain, yet beneath the surface, something transformative has been unfolding—the realization of a vision championed by Jeff O'Neill, founder and CEO of O'Neill Vintners & Distillers.

For more than two decades, O'Neill has challenged the wine industry to rethink how vineyards are farmed. Long before sustainability became a common industry talking point, he was advocating for responsible farming practices in California's Central Valley, subverting the status quo by encouraging growers to adopt methods that improved soil health and, ultimately, long-term vineyard resilience.

Today, that philosophy is driving one of the most ambitious regenerative-farming case studies in American winegrowing. In December 2024, Robert Hall Winery achieved certification through the Regenerative Organic Alliance's Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC) program following a rigorous three-year transition period. Introduced in 2017, ROC goes beyond existing organic frameworks to integrate soil health, animal welfare, and social fairness into a holistic agricultural certification model; Robert Hall is among just a handful of wineries worldwide that have met its standards to date.

For O'Neill, the certification represents a continuation of the work he began long ago. "We've always believed that great wine begins in healthy vineyards," he says. "But regenerative farming challenges us to go a step further, to farm in a way that actively improves the land over time. If we can leave the soil healthier and more alive for the next generation than we found it, that's real progress."

Under his leadership, O'Neill Vintners & Distillers has placed not only sustainability but



**Robert Hall is launching the world's first commercially available Regenerative Organic Certified Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc, which can be found exclusively at Whole Foods Markets nationwide as of April 1.**

transparency and continuous improvement at the center of its operations. The company became a certified B Corporation in 2022 and has invested heavily in water conservation, waste reduction, and open-source agricultural trials designed to advance industry knowledge.

That spirit of openness and collaboration is reflected in O'Neill's deep-rooted work with initiatives like the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation's One Block Challenge, which encourages growers to experiment with regenerative practices and share results openly. As a result of such efforts, Robert Hall has become a proving ground for regenerative viticulture, a living laboratory for the future of winegrowing, in Paso Robles and beyond.

### ***A Culture of Experimentation***

Among the team that helped lead Robert Hall's regenerative journey beginning in 2020 was executive vice president of winegrowing Kryss Speegle, MW, who oversaw the integration of regenerative practices across the company's Central Coast vineyards. Working closely with Amanda Gorter, director of winemak-



*Kryss Speegle, MW, is executive vice president of winegrowing at O'Neill Vintners & Distillers.*

ing for the Central Coast, she and her colleagues set out to test whether these practices could deliver measurable benefits both in the vineyard and in the wines themselves. Thanks to O'Neill, who dedicated a portion of the Robert Hall estate to long-term experimentation—setting aside productive acreage for research and empowering them to let data guide their decisions—they designed a five-year trial on a 48-acre parcel adjacent to the winery, planted primarily to Cabernet Sauvignon clones 15 and 47 along with a small amount of Petite Sirah.

The plan was deceptively simple: 43 acres would be farmed regeneratively, while a neighboring 5-acre block remained under conventional management as a control. Both sites would be closely monitored, allowing the team to track changes in soil health, water retention, yields, and fruit quality over time. In essence, two vineyards would tell one story.

### *Restoring Balance*

In the conventional block, farming followed the established playbook: systemic herbicides for weed control, fungicides

to manage mildew pressure, and targeted pesticides where necessary. In the regenerative parcel, by contrast, the goal was not to suppress nature but to restore balance within the vineyard rows.

For starters, a diverse cover crop mixture of 15 plant species developed specifically for Paso Robles terroir through the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation's One Block Challenge was planted between the rows. The seeds quickly became a catalyst for collaboration within the local wine community. "When the seed arrived, growers from across Paso came here to pick it up," Gorter recalls. "It became a hub where people were sharing ideas about how to implement these practices."

Over time, the 43-acre parcel began to look and function differently. Winter cover crops now protect the soil and feed microbial life. Sheep are brought in much earlier in the season to graze and naturally fertilize the vineyard floor. Instead of traditional tillage, a Clemens weed knife gently manages growth beneath the vines, causing minimal disruption to the soil microbiome. And pest management is more ecologically sound: When mealy-



*In addition to being certified by the Regenerative Organic Alliance, Robert Hall Winery is a certified B Corporation.*

bugs, the vector for leafroll virus, appear in the vineyard, a natural predator is deployed via a drone using GPS mapping for precise application. The need for such interventions, however, has become less frequent: "With healthier soil and greater biodiversity, we're seeing much better balance in the vineyard," says Gorter. "That means fewer pest pressures overall."

The measurable outcomes reinforce her observations. In three out of four years, the regenerative organic block delivered higher yields than did the conventional block, averaging 0.32 more tons per acre, with the 2024 harvest alone showing a 12% increase.

"One of the most exciting outcomes of this trial," notes Speegle, "is proving that we can improve vineyard health and outcomes without sacrificing yield, a direct reflection of Jeff's visionary approach to regenerative winegrowing."

### **Technology Meets Tradition**

Although regenerative farming draws heavily on traditional agricultural principles, modern technology plays a critical role in quantifying the results. In 2023, sensors developed by agricultural monitoring company Agrology were integrated into Robert Hall's trial to track soil carbon levels, temperature, microbial activity, and respiration; these key metrics are not only required for ROC certification but essential for understanding how the system is performing in real time. The data provides the vineyard team with early insight into subtle shifts in soil function and vine stress, allowing them to respond before issues manifest visibly in the canopy.

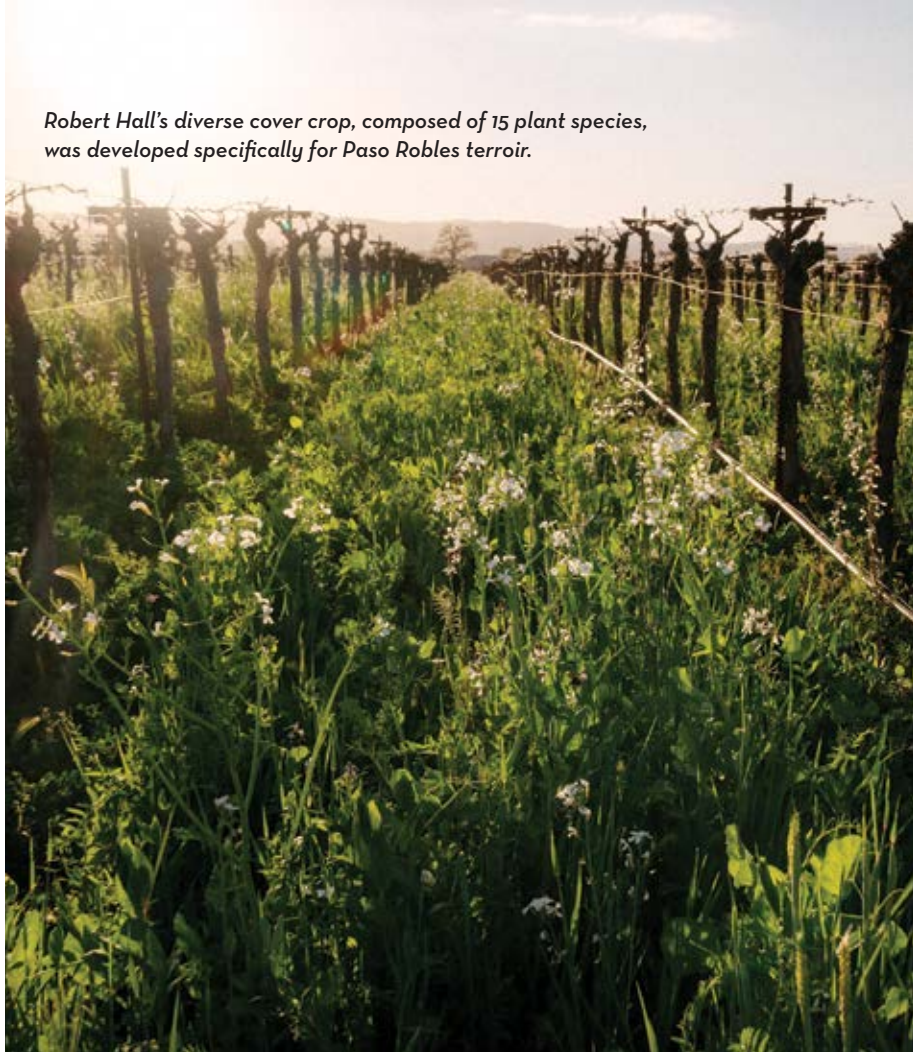
As soil respiration increased and microbial activity strengthened in the regenerative block, measurable gains followed, most notably a 0.65% increase in soil carbon sequestration, with the regenerative parcel absorbing 192% more CO<sub>2</sub> than the conventional control block.

The confidence in these results led the team to convert the remainder of their 140-acre estate vineyards in Paso Robles to regenerative management, scaling the approach from experiment to broader operational strategy.

### **A Blueprint for the Future**

Ultimately, the success of any vineyard practice must be reflected in the glass. Bottled in early 2025, the wines from the

*Robert Hall's diverse cover crop, composed of 15 plant species, was developed specifically for Paso Robles terroir.*



experimental blocks were produced in exactly the same way as those from the control parcel, undergoing ambient yeast fermentation and aging in neutral oak. Yet the differences were striking. Across multiple vintages, the regenerative wines displayed brighter fruit expression, more aromatic lift, and a refined tannin structure. The 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance, offered vivid red fruit and pronounced floral aromatics, while the 2023 vintage revealed layered complexity with notes of black tea, licorice, and dark fruit framed by supple tannins. By comparison, wines from the conventionally farmed block leaned toward darker fruit profiles and heavier textures. Notes Speegle, "Regenerative fruit tends to arrive at the winery healthier and less desiccated. That allows us to capture more texture, more freshness, and ultimately more complexity in the wine."

Now that proof of concept is no longer confined to research blocks or internal data, Robert Hall is officially bringing it to the marketplace by launching the world's first commercially available

Regenerative Organic Certified Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. Debuting exclusively at Whole Foods Markets nationwide on April 1 in honor of Earth Month, the releases signal a milestone moment for regenerative viticulture. By putting ROC-certified wines on a national platform, O'Neill Vintners & Distillers is demonstrating that regenerative farming is not a theoretical framework: It is operational and scalable and can therefore meet the demands of consumers. At a moment when wine regions around the world are grappling with climate volatility, water scarcity, and declining soil health, the data emerging from Robert Hall carries weight beyond its home region. The results suggest that regenerative systems can enhance vineyard resilience, stabilize yields, and elevate fruit quality while strengthening the long-term value of the land.

In the end, the study that began with two neighboring vineyard blocks has become something much larger: a working blueprint for the future of sustainable winegrowing. **SJ**



Dylan Trotter greets guests at a pop-up dinner held on the once and future site of Charlie Trotter's in Chicago.

# Chicago Cub

AFTER A SERIES OF POPULAR POP-UPS, DYLAN TROTTER IS REOPENING CHARLIE TROTTER'S IN THE WINDY CITY by Meridith May

**YOU MAY HAVE** heard from some sources that *The Bear's* Carmy Berzatto was fashioned after legendary Chicago restaurateur Charlie Trotter. Whether or not that is true, Carmy does share certain traits with the late chef, including an intense commitment to hospitality standards and culinary perfectionism.

Charlie Trotter's opened in 1987 and closed in 2013. But this is a story about his son, Dylan Trotter, who over the past year has organized 12 pop-up dinners at the restaurant's old Armitage Avenue location in Lincoln Park, which occupies

a 5,300-square-foot space in an edifice built in 1881. Joining him have been some of the country's most renowned chefs, among them Charlie Trotter's alum Bill Kim, Sam Jett of Audrey in Nashville, James Beard Award winner Sean Sherman of Owamni in Minneapolis, and Sujan Sarkar of Indienne in Chicago—all in exhilarating anticipation of his plan to reopen the restaurant permanently later this year.

While "The Bear" is often characterized by his tempestuous persona, Dylan's approach is to keep a laser-like focus on

substance over spectacle. This could resonate with a new generation of chefs who value collaboration and mentorship over competition. "Trotter's is an institute for the restaurant community, like the James Beard House in New York," he commented during our recent conversation. "Chefs and somms feel the energy here, now and from the dinners in the past. It's pretty much a step back in time for many of us."

When I asked about the comparisons made between Charlie Trotter and *The Bear's* main character, Dylan noted that

his father, like Carmy, wanted to change his menu every night. "But unlike Carmy, my dad was the sole owner and operator; he didn't have money guys watching over him," he pointed out. "To him, this business was not about compromise but gaining a competitive advantage by attaching the top line in everything he did."

The pop-ups have also brought Chicago sommeliers together with wine experts and educators from around the country. "Many of the guest sommeliers used to work at Trotter's," Dylan explained. For the dinner held on the 38th anniversary of the restaurant's grand opening, there were seven Master Sommeliers working the floor. One of those was Serafin Alvarado; now the director of education for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, he was employed there from 1999 to 2007. "Charlie Trotter gave me my first opportunity in this business," said Alvarado. "He believed in me, and I achieved my Master [diploma] during the time I worked with him. When Dylan approached me to run the floors as a somm for the pop-ups, I answered with an instant 'yes' from my heart. Walking back in that space was a flashback of the good times, the difficult times, and mostly the generosity I experienced working for Charlie."

"Dylan's vision is not just turning back the clock to bring this restaurant back to its original format but adding to it, with a level of commitment that comes from his soul," Alvarado continued. "Surrounding himself with the right people, from



*Master Sommelier Serafin Alvarado, now the director of education for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, started his career at Charlie Trotter's.*



*Famed chef Charlie Trotter was "a philosopher at heart," according to his son.*

food to wine to cocktails, will only add to his ability for success. The community is rooting for him."

Dylan was 21 years old when Charlie Trotter's closed, and he didn't think he wanted a career in hospitality at the time. Meanwhile, his father sold his collection of wines to Christie's auction house, decided he wanted to hike in the Yukon, and was accepted at the University of Chicago, where he planned to obtain a master's degree in philosophy. "He really was a philosopher at heart," Dylan mused. "He was always pushing people with questions such as 'What do hospitality and service mean?' and 'What are we striving to make people feel, and what satisfaction do we attain from that?'"

The rebirth of Charlie Trotter's represents Dylan's intention to not only honor but enrich his father's legacy, ensuring it remains relevant and impactful. §

{ tastings }



*All Character,*

NO EGO

**COPPER CANE WINES & SPIRITS' DIVERSE PORTFOLIO IS  
DESIGNED TO ENGAGE A BROAD CONSUMER BASE**

*story by Stacy Briscoe / photos by Alexander Rubin*



*Pictured at a recent luncheon hosted at the Quilt & Co tasting room in Napa, CA, are Michael Jacinto, beverage director, Sequoyah Country Club; Allison Yonto, owner, Tahoe Wine Collective; Lisa Gomez, proprietor/wine director, The Vine Wine and Tapas Bar, Folsom and El Dorado Hills; Lily Yu, sommelier, The Progress, San Francisco; Stacy Briscoe, contributing editor, The SOMM Journal; Joe Wagner, owner/winemaker, Copper Cane Wines & Spirits; Caylin Castner, wine category manager, BevMo! and Gopuff; Liam Barker, sommelier, Morton's The Steakhouse, Sacramento; and guest Sonya Matsuzaki.*



## **On February 3,**

*The SOMM Journal and Copper Cane Wines & Spirits hosted their first collaborative event at the latter's Quilt & Co tasting room in downtown Napa, California. Sommeliers and buyers from major restaurant groups and retail outlets as well as independent shop owners and private wine consultants attended to taste through a series of wines from founder/winemaker Joe Wagner's portfolio, accompanied by an indulgent lunch courtesy of chef Cameron Bouldin.*

*Basking in the warmth of the sun shining on Quilt & Co's rooftop, guests were greeted with glasses of Belle Glos Blanc de Blanc, a zero-dosage sparkling wine that Wagner described as his take on grower*

*Champagne. Though mineral-driven and crisp with bracing acidity, the palate also showed a creamy, leesy backbone—the result of allowing the base wine to go through full malolactic conversion as well as of the two and a half years the finalized wine spent en tirage.*

*We then sojourned to the main dining hall, where the first course of creamy shrimp bisque was served alongside two Sauvignon Blancs. Quilt's 2022 The Grace of the Land Fumé Blanc proved a standout in its category, as barrel fermentation and aging provided a delicately nut-fleshy, savory character. "I don't like to make wines in the style of someone else or try to emulate other regions," commented Wagner, "but I do love Sancerre—a style of Sauvignon Blanc that pulls back on the grassier elements and pushes forward more mineral tones." Additionally, the Fumé expressed ripe melon, guava, cantaloupe, and gentle white blossom, all joined from start to finish by sinewy, citrusy acidity.*

*"We took those learnings from our Fumé Blanc and brought [them] to the Threadcount," he added, referring to the label's 2024 Sauvignon Blanc. Though much sharper in terms of its acidic structure, it still had a fleshiness, making for a plush and lush drinking experience. "This is what I'd call a Tuesday night wine," said Wagner. "It provides a similar experience [to the Fumé] at a more accessible price point, if [you're] trading down from our luxury wines to something more casual. . . . Having a cohesive build-up and move-down within the portfolio is so important."*

*The Böen 2023 Chardonnay served with the salad course gave off classic California aromas: ripe stone and orchard fruit, cheesiness and leesiness, butterscotch and caramel. Yet on the palate, that richness was cut through by tart acidity, which Wagner said was a testament to his penchant for sourcing fruit from coastal areas. "That cool climate means long hang time and maintaining the integrity of the fruit and thus the integrity of the wine," he said, referencing Napa, Sonoma, Monterey, and Santa Barbara. "I love the [wine's] playability with food because of its diversity in texture, aroma, and flavor."*





*Wagner is a fifth-generation winemaker.*



Yet the real crowd-pleaser was a surprise off-list pour of Quilt's 2024 The Mark of the Land Big Beautiful Chardonnay (BBC). Whereas the Böen boasted generous acidity, the BBC was driven by ripeness, malolactic conversion, and oak treatment to provide that rich, full-bodied expression so popular with many consumers—as well as the industry guests around the table. Most were in agreement that it was the perfect accompaniment to the tart buttermilk- and Meyer lemon-based dressing.



The aforementioned Belle Glos label is arguably one of Wagner's most iconic, with its red wax seal hinting at the glossy red wine within—a juicy accompaniment to smoked, grilled pork. "A lot of people don't realize that these are all single-vineyard bottlings," he said as the 2023 Dairyman Pinot Noir was poured around the table. While the wine spoke of its origins in the heart of Sonoma County's Russian River Valley, combining rich fruit ripeness with an earthy savoriness, he added, "Our style is a bit more expressive than most of the Old World styles of Pinot Noir. California has the ability to give us ripeness and richness and weight, so why not maximize what Mother Nature is giving us?"



Even so, the Quilt 2024 Pinot Noir from the cooler AVA of Carneros offered an alternative, leaner style expressive of just-ripe tart red fruits. The wine “showcases a ‘filling out’ of the brand,” said Wagner. “Consumers can play within the different styles, from our big bold reds to lighter styles like this one.”

Speaking of big and bold, the last two wines we tasted were just that, served alongside a hearty braised short-rib pop tart. The Westhoff Pioneers 2023 ITA, a blend of Sagrantino, Nero d’Avola, Teroldego, and Negroamaro, is a comment on Wagner’s Italian heritage as well as an ode to the Italian immigrants who brought their native varieties to California. “It’s representative of the melting pot that is America,” said Wagner. “It’s about generations upon generations who came from other countries and what mark they

left on the wine world and our modern wine culture.” He described its profile as “garage style”: “There’s a grittiness to it, an authentic character.” The Westhoff Pioneers line also includes FRA, a French-style GSM blend, and USA, a California-inspired blend of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Last but not least, the Quilt 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, sourced from



**Cameron Bouldin was the chef behind the luncheon.**

seven sub-appellations within Napa Valley, is Wagner’s love letter to classic Napa Cabs. “The goal was to create a cult-style Cabernet Sauvignon without ego or elitism but instead driven by character and quality,” he explained.

For me, that was truly the takeaway of the tasting: Wagner’s ability to make distinctive wines at different price points so that they’re accessible to all is inspiring. As Lisa Gomez, proprietor/wine director of The Vine Wine and Tapas Bar in Folsom and El Dorado Hills, perfectly stated at the end of our meal, “This is great for us as buyers—we can carry Belle Glos, Threadcount, Quilt, and Westhoff all at the same time . . . each with [its] own label, story, and price point, [which] means I can carry multiple options from one producer and still serve a broad audience of customers.”



**The Westhoff Pioneers 2023 ITA, a blend of Sagrantino, Nero d’Avola, Teroldego, and Negroamaro, was served alongside a braised short-rib pop tart.**

# *From Hand- Sell to* SENSATION

AUSTRALIAN GRENACHE  
OFFERS A COMPELLING  
NARRATIVE FOR DINERS  
WITH DIVERSE TASTES

BY DAVE MCINTYRE

*Grenache was one of the first  
vinifera grape varieties planted in  
South Australia in the 1850s.*

**S**everal years ago, Steven Poe, MS, hosted a dinner at Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach, California, where he serves as sommelier, pitting wines from the Southern Hemisphere against counterparts from north of the equator. Some of the juxtapositions that accompanied each course were expected: a Sancerre versus a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, a Chassagne Montrachet against a Chardonnay from South Africa. But for a dish of pressed chicken, Poe sought to take “the customers out of their comfort zone of Pinot Noir or Cabernet Sauvignon,” in his words, by matching an Aloxe-Corton Premier Cru Burgundy with an old-vine Grenache from Australia.

“I thought the Grenache would work with the pressed chicken because it has a bit more body than Pinot Noir and a signature white-pepper spice that adds complexity and uniqueness,” Poe recalls. “It was interesting to hear people talk about which wine they preferred by itself versus with the food, and the Grenache stood up in both categories.”

Hailing from Blewitt Springs Vineyard in McLaren Vale, that surprising bottling was Thistledown Wine Co.’s The Vagabond, and its success at the dinner earned it a permanent spot on Poe’s list. He admits it’s a hand-sell, and he often offers it by the glass with specific dishes on his menu to encourage diners to give it a try. But such effort is a part of the profession and adds value to the dining experience, he says: “I think it helps ensure our jobs as [artificial intelligence] becomes more prominent if we sommeliers get passionate about specific grapes paired with different entrees. We can talk about it and share our enthusiasm with the customer.”

Old vines give Australian Grenache color and body akin to that of Pinot Noir but with enough tannin to appeal to Cabernet lovers, Poe explains, noting that it also has a New World exuberance that translates to what he calls “yumminess.” “If people are focusing more on deliciousness in the glass than the label on the bottle, then Grenache is going to win more often than you think,” he adds.



*Blewitt Springs Vineyard in McLaren Vale is among Thistledown Wine Co.’s sources of old-vine Grenache.*



*Southern Starz co-founder John Gorman believes Australian wine is poised for a comeback in part led by the lighter style of Grenache: “They’re showing the opportunity that exists beyond the obvious,” he says of the winemakers driving the category.*

## **Beyond “Weight and Power”**

Understanding the category as it exists now requires a shift in expectations, according to Mark Davidson, Wine Australia’s head of education for the Americas. “We mostly thought of Grenache as either rich, full-bodied, and quite high in alcohol or simple, candied, and structureless,” he says of the grape’s reputation, but “we now have medium-weight wines with vibrant fruit, perfumed aromatics, and structural integrity. This has fundamentally changed the gastronomic profile, which opens up far more wine and food possibilities. [There’s] so much flexibility now for restaurants to experiment,” as this modern style appeals to diners looking for freshness and fruit without heavy oak or sweetness.

Grenache was one of the first vinifera grape varieties planted in South Australia in the 1850s, but over time it was used mainly to produce cheap fortified dessert wines and basic red blends. When Australia’s fine-wine boom began in the 1970s, Grenache was out of favor, and many vineyards were ripped out as part of a government-sponsored campaign to replace them with more lucrative grapes. Then, in

the late 1980s, producer Charles Melton made the first blends of Grenache, Shiraz, and Mataro from its home region, the Barossa Valley. Slowly, vintners began realizing the potential of the old vines and remaining vineyards were left intact, and over the past two decades, Clarendon Hills, Yangarra, Yalumba, S.C. Pannell, and Aphelion have solidified their status as notable producers of the grape.

Seeking to hark back to that fine-wine boom, Englishman Giles Cooke, MW, was working in wine distribution when he established Thistledown in 2010. "I was frustrated by the misconception that Australian wine is all big, alcoholic, sweet, jammy, industrialized production without nuance," Cooke says, adding that he wanted to craft balanced and food-friendly wines with medium weight. After combing the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale and finding old-vine Shiraz too expensive, he decided to go with the underdog: Grenache.

Thistledown's Grenache offerings come from bush-trained, own-rooted, and dry-farmed vineyards, most planted in the aftermath of World War II. Making



*"I was frustrated by the misconception that Australian wine is all big, alcoholic, sweet, jammy, industrialized production without nuance," Giles Cooke, MW, says of his decision to found Thistledown in 2010 as an outlet for crafting balanced and food-friendly wines—primarily Grenache.*

top-quality wines from these vineyards "comes down to picking a lot earlier, so the fruit is a lot healthier and you get wines that are vibrant, bright, and true to the sites," Cooke says—in other words,

treating the grapes more like Pinot Noir than Shiraz. "People are beginning to wake up to the fact that Australia isn't just about weight and power. It can be about nuance and site."

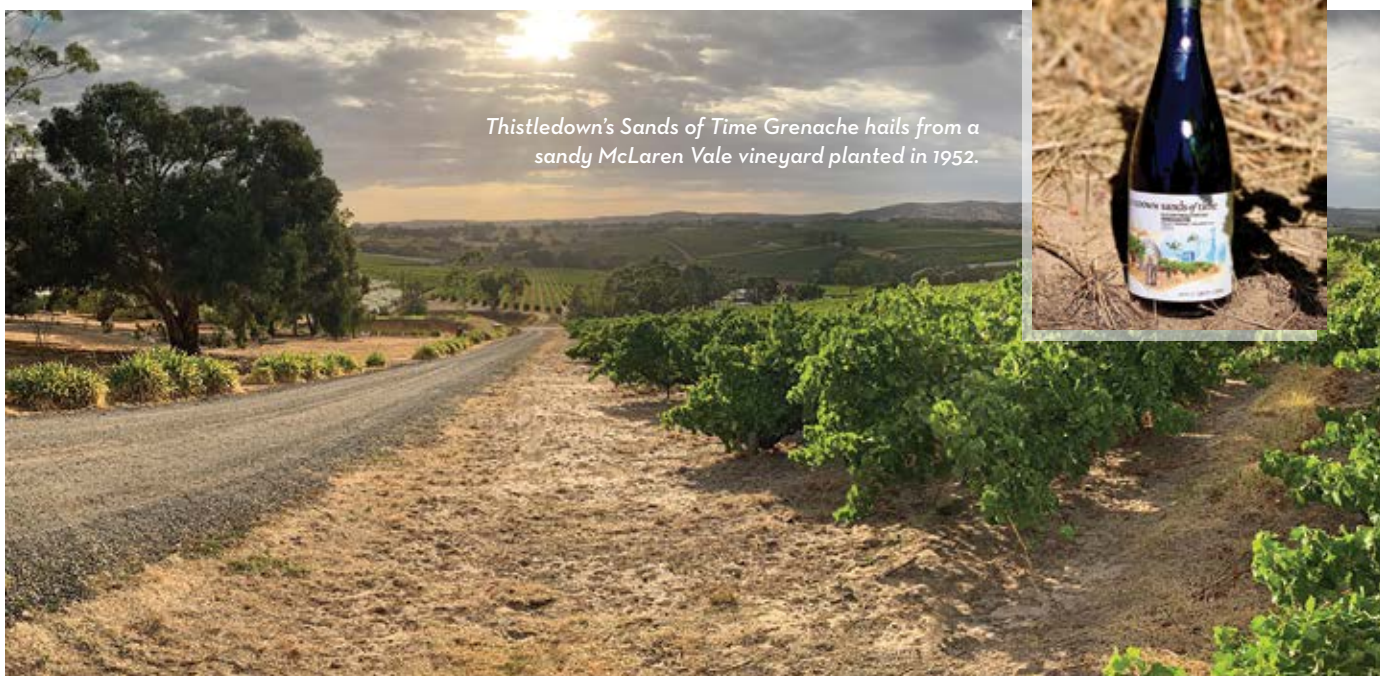


*Cooke and fellow Thistledown Wine Co. co-proprietor Paddy Gilhooly.*

He gives his wines whimsical names such as Sands of Time, a Grenache from a sandy McLaren Vale vineyard planted in 1952; She's Electric, in reference to a bird that got fried on a power line and fell among the vines, igniting a fire that destroyed half the vineyard; and Gorgeous Grenache, an exuberant blend from several regions that's priced for by-the-glass programs. The 2024 vintage of Thistledown's This Charming Man Single Vineyard Clarendon Grenache from McLaren Vale was recently named the 2026 Wine of the Year by Halliday Wine Companion, Australia's leading wine guide.

discover the delights of this new style. Among its representatives in the wine program at Blackberry Farm, a destination resort in the Great Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee, is Yangarra's High Sands Grenache and Aphelion's Wait Vineyard Grenache, both from McLaren Vale. Says Kelly Schmidt, the resort's assistant wine buyer, "Sometimes Australian wine is over the top and hits you in the head, or else it's just fruity and big and the texture's not very interesting. With these old-vine Grenaches, there's a Goldilocks texture. It's not intense, but it's there. It makes you pay attention"—and diners at

old-vine material" and their relatively low price compared to old-vine wines from other parts of the world. "[They have] this elegance and purity of flavor where the structure of the wines isn't covering it up," he says, adding, "For people who appreciate red Burgundy or Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Australia can play in that same sandbox—and [it's] a whole lot less expensive than Châteauneuf-du-Pape, I'll tell you that." Hinkle also notes that fans of



*Thistledown's Sands of Time Grenache hails from a sandy McLaren Vale vineyard planted in 1952.*

## “Opportunity Beyond the Obvious”

Another vocal proponent of Australian Grenache is John Gorman, who co-founded import company Southern Starz in Huntington Beach, California, in 1999 when Australia's wines were booming in the U.S. market, led by powerful, ripe Shiraz. That boom ended with the financial crisis of 2008, but Gorman, whose portfolio includes Thistledown, sees evidence that Aussie wine is poised for a comeback, led by the lighter style of Grenache as well as by dry Riesling. "They're beginning to show the full bandwidth of what they can do," Gorman says of Australia's winemakers. "They're showing the opportunity that exists beyond the obvious."

Poe is not the only sommelier to

the resort certainly are proving receptive, as the wines' floral qualities as well as said texture enable them to pair well with cuisine that relies heavily on the fermentation and preservation of farm-grown ingredients. "Our guests love the opportunity for an experience versus just pointing to something on a list," Schmidt adds. "If you're passionate about it and you stand behind the wine, guests are willing to break out of their comfort zone and go on that journey with you."

The wines also do well at steakhouses. Travis Hinkle—corporate beverage manager for 30 Del Frisco's Double Eagle, Del Frisco's Grille, and Strip House restaurants, part of Texas-based restaurant group Landry's Inc.—is "very bullish" on Australian Grenache, in his words, because of the "incredible heritage of

California's old-vine Zinfandels are often eager to try Australian Grenache because of the shared story of legacy vineyards.

Meanwhile, at Mastro's Steakhouse, a 24-outlet branch of Landry's, Australian Grenache also serves as a "bridge wine" for parties sharing a bottle with entrees ranging from steak to chicken or fish and pasta, says Robbi Jo Oliver, divisional vice president for wine and spirits. Echoing Poe, Oliver admits they can be a hand-sell, requiring enthusiasm from the staff to encourage diners to take a chance on something unfamiliar; she also sometimes features them by the glass as limited-time offerings to give them extra visibility on the menu. "It's definitely something you have to turn guests on to," she says, "but once they discover it, they absolutely love it, especially the [ones made from] old vines." **SJ**

*Pablo Prieto Sánchez is the new winemaker for Viña Carmen's Gran Reserva range.*

# “A Constant Drive to Evolve”

**VIÑA CARMEN'S CARMEN GRAN RESERVA LINE WELCOMES PABLO PRIETO SÁNCHEZ AS ITS NEW WINEMAKER**

by Dave McIntyre

CHILE'S VITICULTURAL MAP is framed by the Pacific Ocean's cool Humboldt Current, the Andes, and the Atacama Desert, creating conditions that radically differ from one valley to the next. Viña Carmen has staked its identity on exploring that diversity through its Carmen Gran Reserva line of wines.

Founded in 1850, Viña Carmen is one of the oldest wineries in South America and a pillar of Chilean wine history. The Gran Reserva range expresses that heritage by showcasing specific grape varieties from the regions where they shine brightest: These single-vineyard, estate-grown wines give a geography lesson much more interesting and delicious than that of any textbook. Chardonnay from the limestone soils of the Limarí Valley in northern Chile stands beside Sauvignon Blanc from cool, foggy Casablanca to the south. Cabernet Sauvignon and a new Cabernet Sauvignon–Cabernet Franc blend represent Maipo, Chile's undisputed heartland for Bordeaux

PHOTO COURTESY OF VIÑA CARMEN

varieties. Carmenère chimes in from Colchagua, and a Carignan from the Maule Valley hails from head-trained old vines planted in the 1950s and dry farmed in the arid interior of the Melozal subregion.

The lineup epitomizes terroir-first winemaking, involving a gentle touch that enables each wine to be defined by its variety and origin above all; French oak adds structure and complexity without overwhelming the fruit. The resulting wines sell for around \$18 at Total Wine & More, a price point that has made them consistent bestsellers since the national retail chain began stocking them in 2018.

As of December 2025, Carmen has entrusted the Gran Reserva range to a new winemaker: Pablo Prieto Sánchez, 29, who has been with the winery since the 2022 vintage. His appointment signals not a change in direction but an affirmation of the line's existing mission.

Prieto Sánchez grew up steeped in wine culture: His parents founded Chile's first dedicated wine magazine, *Guía de Vinos de Chile*, in 1996, the year he was born. By his mid-teens, he had decided that someone in the family should make wine rather than write about it, so he studied viticulture and enology at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, then worked harvests in California, Burgundy, and Chile; stints followed at Ledson Winery & Vineyards, Domaine Seguin-Manuel, Kingston Family Vineyards, and Viña Tabalí, where he came to appreciate the Limarí Valley's potential for world-class Chardonnay.

When he joined Carmen's wine-making team, he began studying the full scope of the winery's portfolio, from entry-level wines to high-end labels. Five vintages later, he describes the experience as foundational. "You need time to [explore] the places that you're working in, the grapes that you're vinifying, in order to fully understand them," he says. "Gran Reserva embodies the essence of Carmen: tradition, consistency, and a constant drive to evolve."

Prieto Sánchez's goal is to preserve freshness and varietal

precision without sacrificing complexity. "Gran Reserva wants to show the variety in the right place in Chile, showing the freshness and the delicacy of the variety without losing the elegance and weight," he explains. The viticulture team is a central part of that equation; as harvest nears, Prieto Sánchez spends significant time traveling among the winery's far-flung vineyard sites, tasting grapes as they ripen.

ert heat, and calcium-rich limestone soils that are rare in Chile—conditions that produce tightly wound, mineral-driven whites with notable aging potential. They remind Prieto Sánchez of his experience in Burgundy. "Chardonnay from Limarí is just outstanding," he says, noting with evident delight that a bottle of such quality can leave a store shelf for under \$18.

The United States is a critical market for Viña Carmen; the winery is posi-



One development worth watching is the aforementioned Cabernet Sauvignon–Cabernet Franc blend, which Prieto Sánchez helped champion from his first harvest at Carmen. The inaugural 2022 release was an 85/15 split; the soon-to-be-released 2023 vintage, by contrast, is 50/50 to give Cabernet Franc more room to assert itself. Prieto Sánchez is an unabashed evangelist for the variety. "I would keep an eye on Chile and Cabernet Franc," he says, touting the grape's ability to bring structure, freshness, a hint of herbal complexity, and what he calls "backbone"—the quality he prizes above all in a wine.



His personal favorite in the Gran Reserva lineup, however, is the Chardonnay. The Limarí Valley, roughly 400 kilometers north of Santiago, sits at an unusual intersection of marine influence, des-

tioned as the leading premium Chilean brand in the country, and the Gran Reserva line is its flagship offering in the all-important value-premium segment. Prieto Sánchez spends part of his year visiting U.S. retailers, sometimes pouring wines for consumers on the shop floor. "I spend days on the road giving tastings to people," he says, "and I think it makes a difference."

With a young winemaker who grew up inside Chile's wine world now steering the Gran Reserva range, Viña Carmen is betting that delivering authenticity and clarity of terroir at an honest price will project the range into its next phase, strengthening its relevance in its home country while boosting its international presence—especially among Prieto Sánchez's Gen Z peers, whose search for wines with vibrant profiles defined by freshness and acidity aligns perfectly with his aforementioned goals in his new role. *SJ*



*J. Lohr winemaker, white wine,  
Kristen Barnhisel.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES

*Free-run Chardonnay juice at J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines' white winemaking facility in the Arroyo Seco AVA of Monterey County, CA.*

# California Cool

**J. LOHR'S COMPLEX CHARDONNAYS REFLECT THE TERROIR OF THE ARROYO SECO AVA** by Jonathan Cristaldi

**MONTEREY COUNTY HAS** quietly become one of the most important sources of Chardonnay in the United States, with over 15,000 acres planted to the noble Burgundian grape—more than any other county in California. Chardonnay vines here experience persistent marine winds, cooling fog drawn inland from Monterey Bay, and one of the state's longest growing seasons. These conditions are well suited to the variety's slow, balanced ripening curve.

The region's centerpiece is the Arroyo Seco AVA, where pronounced diurnal temperature shifts and gravelly alluvial soils contribute both freshness and texture to Chardonnay. Few producers have been as closely tied to the appellation as J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines. Recognizing the promise of its cool maritime climate and those soils, founder Jerry Lohr planted his first vineyard in the area in 1972, including 28

acres of Chardonnay. Today, more than five decades later, the company's Home Ranch in Arroyo Seco comprises 16 sustainably farmed vineyard blocks with more than 1,000 acres of Chardonnay.

Arroyo Seco's climate remains its main advantage: afternoon winds funnel through the Salinas Valley from Monterey Bay, moderating daytime temperatures, while fog extends the cool weather throughout the growing season. The result is a notably lengthy hang time for Chardonnay, often stretching into late October.

As J. Lohr white winemaker Kristen Barnhisel explains, "In other regions, you might have higher acidity one year, or you might get different textures in different vintages. What I love about the Arroyo Seco is that we get acidity and texture every year. In Monterey, you can let the fruit ripen as long as you need to. To have the cool weather without damaging fall rains

is a recipe for successful Chardonnay."

Arroyo Seco's aforementioned soils add another important dimension for the area's winegrowers. Sandy loams layered with cobblestones—deposits left over centuries by the Arroyo Seco River—promote excellent drainage; vine vigor is naturally limited as roots encounter dense river stones just a few feet below the surface, moderating canopy growth and helping concentrate the fruit on the vine. These factors shape what many now recognize as the classic Monterey Chardonnay profile: vibrant acidity, generous fruit expression, and textural richness.

Within this landscape, Barnhisel works with an unusually broad palette of Chardonnay clones planted across J. Lohr's vineyards in Arroyo Seco. Ten selections—clones 4, 5, 17, 76, 95, 96, 548, and 809 along with Hyde-Wente and Mt. Eden—make for a wide range of aromatic

and structural components in the finished Chardonnays, from brightness and mineral lift (clone 548) to stone-fruit richness (clones 4 and 5), floral aromatics (clone 809), and textural weight (clone 95).

Because “we own [our] sustainably farmed and certified vineyards,” notes Barnhisel, “we get to have complete quality control all the way through [to bottling].” Key to that control is the fact that J. Lohr’s white winemaking facility is also located in the appellation and is home to a barrel program refined over decades. Multiple cooperages from France, Hungary, and the U.S. are evaluated each year, with historical trial data guiding future selections. Alongside traditional barriques, larger oak puncheons and concrete eggs are used to shape texture while preserving freshness.



The Arroyo Vista blocks at J. Lohr.



This map shows J. Lohr and the Arroyo Seco AVA’s proximity to Monterey Bay.

Located among the vines in the Arroyo Seco AVA, the winery houses more than 21,000 barrels, most providing the *élevage* for the J. Lohr Chardonnay portfolio. Senior marketing director Dave Muret comments that “it’s all about constantly improving quality. The Lohr family and J. Lohr team are committed to that vision—all reinvestment goes toward that end.” Noting that three of J. Lohr’s flagship Chardonnay wines—Riverstone, Arroyo Vista, and October Night—are fermented and aged in oak, he adds, “Because we own our own vineyards, own our own wineries, we’re able to invest in true differentiators such as an at-scale, authentic barrel fermentation and aging program. The end result? Truly exceptional, character-filled, Arroyo Seco–grown Chardonnays at attractive price points—whether on a retail shelf or an on-premise by-the-glass program.”

J. Lohr Estates Riverstone, first released in 1987, has become one of the most widely recognized expressions of Arroyo Seco Chardonnay, consistently deliver-

ing strong critical scores and dependable value. More limited in production are the two Vineyard Series bottlings, Arroyo Vista and October Night, which come from smaller vineyard parcels and feature specific clones. The former, anchored by clone 76, is intended as a New World interpretation of Burgundian style. The latter highlights Musqué Dijon clone 809, prized for its pronounced floral aromatics. Recently introduced to the J. Lohr portfolio is Paperwhite, an unoaked Chardonnay fermented in stainless steel without malolactic conversion to offer a brighter, more fruit-driven expression of Arroyo Seco.

Taken together, these wines show the breadth of Chardonnay expression possible from the Arroyo Seco AVA. Yet they maintain a shared identity born of fruit shaped by a cool maritime climate and a long growing season. More than 50 years after Jerry Lohr’s first plantings, that combination continues to define both the region and J. Lohr’s enduring Chardonnay program. *SM*

## Tasting Notes



**J. Lohr Estates 2024 Riverstone Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$14)** Following a luscious entry of buttered popcorn, a spray of just-squeezed lemon spritzes a fruit salad of melon and guava, reining in this wine’s richness. Creamy nectarine continues through the long finish. **91** —*Meridith May*

**J. Lohr Estates 2024 Paperwhite Unoaked Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$14)** The leesy mouthfeel of this refreshing and vibrant wine is generous with nectarine and melon. Notable acidity leans into key lime and meringue. **91** —*M.M.*

**J. Lohr 2024 Arroyo Vista Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$25)** Spiced apples and pears are sparked by a stony mineral tone in this leesy and fresh expression with a crisp finish of key lime pie. **92** —*M.M.*

**J. Lohr 2024 October Night Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$25)** Toasted almond, maple, and chamomile combine for a rich profile, while salted, honeyed lemon blossom adds to this wine’s vibrant floral character. **92** —*M.M.*




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# Staying Gold

**CHALONE VINEYARD** COMMEMORATES ITS ROLE IN THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS WITH THE RELEASE OF ITS 2024 ESTATE CHARDONNAY *by Kate Newton*

**EQUIPPED WITH 50 YEARS** of evidence, one can assert without argument that the impact the Judgment of Paris, which unfolded May 24, 1976, at the InterContinental Hotel in Paris, France, had on the California wine industry cannot be overstated: Many would argue it's the very day that put Napa Valley and Monterey County on the world wine map. Those who attended the fateful event would undoubtedly agree—among them the late British wine merchant Steven Spurrier and *Time* reporter George Taber, the sole journalist present. (The apt subtitle of Taber's 2006 book on the Judgment of Paris—*California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting That Revolutionized Wine*—summarized it well, and if not for his reporting, the aftermath might have been the proverbial tree falling in the forest.)



Before delving into the reverberations that continue to ripple from this revolution, here's a quick retelling of facts that could now be recited by virtually every modern wine professional the world over: In an effort to spotlight California's then—relatively nascent winegrowing community in celebration of the United States Bicentennial, Spurrier and Patricia Gallagher, a colleague at his Paris-based wine school, Academie du Vin, worked tirelessly to gather a selection of the state's Chardonnays and Cabernet Sauvignons for a group of French luminaries to taste blind side by side with a lineup of white Burgundy and red Bordeaux wines. (Spurrier and Gallagher also went to great lengths logistically, as actually transporting the bottles to Paris proved a challenging feat—but that's another story.) When the votes

*Chalone Vineyard is located in the Chalone AVA near Pinnacles National Park.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOLEY FAMILY WINES & SPIRITS

were tallied, a shocking verdict was delivered, with California claiming first place in both categories and three of the top five slots among the Chardonnays.

"May 1976 certainly did a lot for California wines," wrote Spurrier with his signature restraint in a 40th anniversary retrospective in the April/May 2016 issue of *The SOMM Journal* (for which he long served as London correspondent). "I became persona non grata in Bordeaux for a while and was physically thrown out of Ramonet-Prudhon's cellars in Chassagne-Montrachet, but the results of the tasting remained. . . . For me, the importance of the Paris Tasting was to create a template whereby unknown wines of quality could go up against the recognised benchmarks

participate, instead representing Monterey County; its eponymous AVA was established in 1982, and it remains the sole winery within its borders.

Interestingly enough, the vintners who have called the Chalone estate home over the decades were drawn to its remote location bordering Pinnacles National Park and the Gabilan Range precisely because of its similarities to Burgundy. Frenchman Lucien Charles Tamm established the property in 1919 (today it remains the oldest producing vineyard in Monterey County), planting Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Blanc in soils composed of well-draining limestone and decomposed granite. "For me it's all about the soils in the Chalone AVA,

Dick Graff sought to channel in their own renditions from the vineyard. Chardonnay distinguished itself as a worthy focus, and Graff produced his first vintage under the Chalone Vineyard label in 1966, perhaps content to toil in relative obscurity as long as he could share his food-friendly wines with friends like famed chef Julia Child (allegedly, Chalone's Chardonnays were the only domestic wines Child drank).

But ten years after that inaugural wine, the Judgment of Paris vaulted Chalone and its California peers to levels of publicity previously unheard of while serving as a catalyst for tremendous industry growth statewide. It was hardly a flash in the pan for Chalone, which has produced many acclaimed wines since, nor for Monterey



PHOTO: BELLA SPURRIER

**An archival photo from the Judgment of Paris in May 1976, where Chalone's 1974 Chardonnay claimed third place and ushered in a new era of acclaim for the producer—and for the entire California wine industry.**

and, if judged successful by an authoritative panel, would see their region and their brands getting the recognition that they deserved."

Judged successfully and recognized they were. Among the triumphant producers who shared a piece of California's victory was Chalone Vineyard, whose 1974 Chardonnay placed third after Chateau Montelena and Domaine Roulot's submissions from the prior vintage. Chalone's place in the winner's circle was even more surprising considering it was the lone California winery—of which there were then fewer than 350 versus today's 6,000-plus—outside of Napa to par-

as they're so truly unique. The elegance of the wines they yield mimics those . . . of Burgundy and has continued to influence the way we shepherd the grapes during harvest. We're very careful not to be too heavy-handed and allow the wines to unfold themselves," says Mari Wells Coyle, VP of winemaking at Foley Family Wines & Spirits (FFWS), which has been Chalone's parent company since 2016. These soils, combined with the elevation of 1,800 feet, high diurnal shifts, and low annual rainfall of fewer than 15 inches, yield wines with a strong mineral backbone and that aforementioned elegance, qualities that subsequent owners like vintner

County at large: The region has grown over the years to outpace Napa County's tonnage by about 40% and produces roughly 15% of the state's Chardonnay tonnage as part of the roughly 200,000 tons of winegrapes it yields annually.

Though it changed hands several times before it was acquired by FFWS, the estate—by this point known widely for not only its Chardonnay but its Pinot Noir—has remained in touch with its rustic roots. In 1986, Chalone constructed both its own utility lines and an 8-mile pipeline for water, as it was previously powered by several generators and had to bring in water deliveries by truck; communica-



**Mari Wells Coyle is VP of winemaking at Foley Family Wines & Spirits.**

tions, meanwhile, long consisted solely of a radiotelephone in a pickup truck. Perhaps that's why the recently released Judgment of Paris 50th Anniversary Edition Estate Chardonnay feels less like a nod to nostalgia and more a natural continuation of a straightforward mission: to craft wines representative of their rare terroir. "To retain the essence of the Chalone AVA, we are careful to select oak barrels that work with the wine to show off the minerality and hints of salinity found under the fruit. Incredible attention to detail is important, along with an artful approach to each vintage," notes Wells Coyle.

Equipped with a gold-accented label reminiscent of the winning 1974 vintage that details Chalone's role in the Judgment of Paris, the toasty yet mineral-driven, medium-bodied wine was made with grapes hailing from some of the producer's oldest plantings, dating as far back as 1972, and aged nine months in French oak barrels; it's available with a \$33 SRP at retailers nationwide and online at [foleyfoodandwinesociety.com](http://foleyfoodandwinesociety.com), with a limited production of 1,500 cases. The wine is debuting amid a bittersweet chapter for Chalone, commemorating its achievement in the wake of a re-

cent announcement that the producer would cease winemaking operations at its on-site winery in favor of transporting grapes to another production facility operated by FFWS.

Chalone has expanded the anniversary celebration to events beyond California this spring, including, fittingly, the Wine Paris trade show, but upcoming events close to home include Pebble Beach Food & Wine in April, where the wine will be showcased at a dinner featuring fellow Judgment of Paris winners, and a May gathering at Chalone's tasting room in downtown Carmel-by-the-Sea that's tailored to wine club members and fans of the brand who have followed its trajectory over the years. "Chalone's estate vineyards are the enduring treasure behind the brand, which are now certified sustainable by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance. Foley is proud to be the stewards of this historic land and legacy and will continue to craft this celebrated wine into the future," says Wells Coyle.

Whether it features man or nature as its protagonist, a good narrative has a way of enduring. As *SOMM Journal* associate wine editor Dave McIntyre put it in his APRIL/MAY 2026 column, "Wine would have improved around the world anyway" if not for the Judgment of Paris, "but the story would be much less interesting." On that point, we can all agree—Old and New World alike. *—SJ*

**Chalone 2024 The Judgment of Paris 50th Anniversary Edition Estate Chardonnay, Chalone, Monterey County (\$33)**

This bottling celebrates a lauded achievement for its producer, whose wine landed in the top-three awarded Chardonnays at the historic Judgment of Paris in 1976. Its billowy mouthfeel offers a creamy base upon which crème brûlée, banana, mango, and lemon cookie batter make a rich statement. A fine line of acidity reins in the weight, yielding an elegant and pure white. **95** —*Meridith May*

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# Waiting for Jadot

A TASTING OF **CLOS DES URSULES** IN LOS ANGELES REVEALED  
THE BURGUNDIAN PRODUCER'S REMARKABLE HISTORY

story by Jessie Birschbach / photos by Cal Bingham

In many of his works, playwright Samuel Beckett asks us to face existential uncertainty, and I found myself doing just that while attending an extravagant library tasting of Maison Louis Jadot's Clos des Ursules at Wally's Beverly Hills in Los Angeles on January 30, when the country seemed to be unraveling around us amid the national protests being held that day. Perhaps some of the 18 sommeliers and buyers in attendance had a similar experience, well versed as they are not only in wine but also in the art of hospitality—of which kindness is a major tenet.

Yet by the end of the luncheon, I was glad I'd honored my commitment to go—and it wasn't just because the extraordinary Beaune Premier Cru wine in my glass had gently whittled away at my edges. More importantly, the intimate introduction to the story of Louis Jadot gave me a much-needed purpose. Despite the fact that it's one of Burgundy's most eminent producers, I'm not sure whether many wine professionals are privy to the producer's history.

That history begins with Clos des Ursules and continues today with the three families—the Kopfs and the Gageys as well as the Jadots—who have since endeavored to build upon this sacred ground, "sacred" being the operative word: The 1.26-hectare plot added to the Louis Jadot estate in 1859 was originally cultivated by Ursuline nuns, whose Catho-



lic order was dedicated to educating young girls. By 1700, hundreds of Ursuline convents had spread throughout France, boarding and educating up to 12,000 students, including, uncommonly, poor children. Is it possible, then, that the good karma they engendered partly accounts for the fact that Clos des Ursules remains a top Beaune Premier Cru site? I'd like to think so, especially these days.

There are other reasons, however, of which we are certain: Soon after Jadot was established, the domaine began to expand its estate. Today, Jadot's land holdings total roughly 120 hectares in the Côte d'Or, an uncommonly large amount of property for a Burgundy producer, thanks to the aforementioned families. Hosting the lunch was importer Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits' French category

specialist, Rachel Macalisang, and Thibault Gagey, Maison Louis Jadot's managing director and grandson of André Gagey, who was appointed managing director in 1962. "My family has been involved since the '50s, when my grandfather was hired by the third Louis Jadot to make the wine before he later took over the management of the winery," explained Gagey. "My father joined in the '80s and ran Jadot for 33 years; I joined myself ten years ago."

Gagey guided us through seven wines: the Louis Jadot 2022 Beaune Greves Le Clos Blanc followed by the 2023, 2022, 2021, 2018 (poured from magnum), 2011, and 2005 vintages of Louis Jadot Beaune Clos des Ursules in that order. Along the way, he described the producer's careful winemaking process (for details, see Michael Apstein's account on the follow-

ing pages) and its commitment to organic farming, which it has been practicing for over two decades; the 2024 vintage marks its official certification—no easy task given the size of its land holdings. But he would inevitably circle back to the topic of family: Sipping on the bright Le Clos Blanc, he proudly noted the reference to “Familie Gagey” on its label, an indication that the wine is made from the roughly 45 hectares of Louis Jadot’s estate holdings that his family owns.

The Kopf family, who owns Kobrand as well as 60 hectares of Jadot’s holdings, has been importing Jadot into the U.S. “since the end of Prohibition, so there has been a long-term relationship between the Jadot and the Kopf families,” said Gagey. When the former decided to sell their business in 1985, then, it was the latter, their most loyal customer, who was entrusted with their legacy. The Jadots currently own 15 hectares of vineyards and therefore maintain close ties with the company: Wine made from those sites bears the phrase “Héritiers Louis Jadot” on the label, including Clos de Ursules, which is “basically the most iconic of the Jadot wines,” added Gagey. “Domaine Louis Jadot” appears on the label of wines made from the Kopf family’s properties.

“It’s important to mention that we are three families with three estates farmed organically, all started 200 years ago with the Beaune Premier Clos des Ursules,” said Gagey. When one of Burgundy’s largest producers is framed this way, it somehow seems smaller yet much more meaningful.



**Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits’ French category specialist, Rachel Macalisang, with Thibault Gagey, Maison Louis Jadot’s managing director.**

## What the Somms Had to Say



*Luncheon guests included Jessie Birschbach, senior wine and beer editor, The SOMM Journal; Razmik Petrosyan, manager, Little Corner Cafe; Rick Arline, wine director, Jacaranda; CJ Lin, wine director, Wing Hop Fung; Courtney Venable, wine director, Gwen; Maria Haro Jimenez, managing partner, Fleming’s Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar; Thibault Gagey, managing director, Maison Louis Jadot; sommelier Alan Neri; Idean Hashemian, wine director/sommelier, Vin Folk; Rachel Macalisang, French category specialist, Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits; Teron Stevenson, owner, Offhand Wine Bar; restaurant consultant Anthony Alvarez; David Schulner, sommelier, Gwen; Matthew Shaffner, captain/sommelier, Bourbon Steak Los Angeles; Carlos Mejia, manager/sommelier, M Grill; Adrienne Bennett, wine director, Mastro’s Ocean Club; and Marcus Voglrieder, corporate beverage director, Nobu Restaurants.*

- “While tasting through the vintages of Clos de Ursules, it was obvious how important terroir and sense of place is to Louis Jadot. I tasted the power of the clay soils [and] the acidity of the limestone, and one word kept popping up in my head in every vintage: ‘freshness.’ . . . Sometimes great wines are more than just a combination of flavors and smells—they are a feeling, and through the entire flight, the wine felt fresh, balanced, and finessed.” —*Matthew Shaffner, captain/sommelier, Bourbon Steak Los Angeles*
- “Clos des Ursules clearly expresses both vintage and age while still holding on to that unmistakable Beaune signature. Tasting through the different vintages side by side really highlighted the elegance and consistency of Jadot’s approach, especially how the wines evolve with time. . . . The 2018 and 2005 Clos des Ursules were particularly memorable, showing beautiful depth, balance, and a sense of place that made the lunch feel both educational and indulgent.” —*Marcus Voglrieder, corporate beverage director, Nobu Restaurants*
- “What struck me most was how the wines evolved over time—from silky to savory, clear and bright to deep and soulful.” —*David Schulner, sommelier, Gwen*
- “Clos des Ursules spoke transparently across the vintages we tasted, all somehow showing the same restraint and confidence.” —*Idean Hashemian, wine director/sommelier, Vin Folk*
- “All of the wines were truly impressive, with beautiful black and blue fruit and powerful sapidity that ran through them all. I’m so glad we got to taste them side by side; they were brilliant.” —*Rick Arline, wine director, Jacaranda*
- “The 2018 and 2011 vintages were stellar out of the gate—complex and well developed compared to the recent vintages we tasted. Although a ‘baby,’ the 2021 opened up and became expressive. You could see the potential and how it would progress like the older vintages if cellared. . . . Hearing of [Louis Jadot’s] origins and how its three families are connected and still have pride and ownership in their land and products was moving for me—a bit romantic and reminiscent of times past.” —*Courtney Venable, wine director, Gwen*



*Clos des Ursules is the 1.26-hectare upper portion of a larger Beaune Premier Cru, Les Vignes Franches.*

## A VERTICAL TASTING IN NEW YORK CITY TRACED THE TRAJECTORY OF **MAISON LOUIS JADOT'S CLOS DES URSULES** OVER THE COURSE OF TWO CENTURIES

story by Michael Apstein / photos by Mikhail Lipyanskiy

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the acquisition of its first vineyard, Clos des Ursules, Maison Louis Jadot sent its technical director, Frédéric Barnier, to New York City in February to conduct a vertical tasting that spanned nearly a century. Kurt Eckert, general manager for Jadot at importer Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits, welcomed guests to host venue Palladino's Steak & Seafood, located in Grand Central Terminal, with the promise of "an iconic wine in an iconic setting." "It is our DNA, our flagship," Barnier confirmed with his signature broad smile.

While Jadot, as one of Burgundy's top négociants, today owns plots in many red

Grand Cru vineyards, including Chambertin-Clos de Bèze and Bonnes Mares, I agree with Barnier that Clos des Ursules is the producer's flagship red wine. Some might find that surprising: After all, although wines from Beaune Premier Cru vineyards can be excellent and certainly represent superb value, few rise to the level of Grand Cru quality. Clos des Ursules does so by consistently delivering more than you'd expect from a Beaune Premier Cru, as this tasting demonstrated.

Spoiler alert: The wines were sensational, even those from so-called "lesser" vintages like 2021 and 2017. Despite the enormous variation in growing conditions, they shared a mid-weight profile

and showed a mineral elegance that testified to the strength of the terroir: Even the more powerful wines from riper vintages such as 2023, 2020, and 2018 displayed vivacity and finesse. One of the essential signs of a great wine is how it develops over time: The 1988, 1976, and especially the 1964 and the 1959 vintages proved that Clos des Ursules is just that. Jin Ahn, sommelier and managing partner at noretuh in New York City's East Village, agreed with me that Clos des Ursules is Jadot's greatest vineyard given the wine's consistency over the decades. (By the way, the stunning 2022 is still readily available at retail for about \$120 a bottle.)

## A Vineyard Overview

The name Clos des Ursules comes from the Order of Saint Ursula, a Catholic group dedicated to educating girls. A branch of these Ursuline nuns (*ursuline* means “little female bear”) settled in Beaune in 1626 and acquired the vineyard 50 years later.

Many sources mistakenly describe Clos des Ursules as a 2.15-hectare site composed of two parts separated by a narrow road: an upper section fully enclosed by walls and a smaller, lower section. However, Barnier clarified that only the former, at 1.26 hectares, is actually Clos des Ursules; though both portions lie within the Beaune Premier Cru Les Vignes Franches, grapes from the lower parcel are not included in the Clos des Ursules bottling. Similarly, many sources claim that Jadot acquired the vineyard in 1826, but in reality, Jadot was taking poetic license by hosting a 200th anniversary tasting. The true story, according to Barnier, is that one Monsieur Moreau purchased Clos des Ursules in 1826. It wasn't until 1859, the year Maison Louis Jadot was founded, that it obtained the parcel as part of the dowry of Moreau's daughter upon her marriage to Louis Henri Denis Jadot.



In 2011, France's National Institute of Origin and Quality finally recognized the uniqueness of Clos des Ursules by proclaiming it to be a standalone Premier Cru—Beaune's 42nd—apart from Les Vignes Franches. Prior to that year, Jadot's label read, “Beaune Clos des Ursules, Appellation Premier Cru Vignes Franches Contrôlée.” Currently, it reads “Beaune Clos des Ursules, Appellation Beaune Premier Cru Contrôlée,” without refer-

ence to Les Vignes Franches. The word “monopole” also appears on the label to indicate that Jadot owns the entire vineyard—a rarity in Burgundy, where most sites are divided among many vigneron. (Sharp-eyed readers will notice, based on the photograph above, that most of the bottles from vintages prior to 2011 carry the new appellation. That's because they came directly from Jadot's cellars, where they had rested without



*Kurt Eckert, general manager for Jadot at importer Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits, welcomes guests to the tasting at Palladino's Steak & Seafood. (Seated to his right is Joe Janish, Kobrand's senior director of PR.)*

labels lest they disintegrate in the humid conditions. Prior to the tasting, Jadot affixed new ones.)

Barnier considers the location of Clos des Ursules on a mid-slope that faces east—as do most of Burgundy’s red Grand Cru sites—to be “classic.” He noted that the soil here, in the southern part of Beaune on the border with Pommard, is more complex than that in the northern part: The topsoil is thin at only about 60 centimeters deep, which means that the region’s iconic Jurassic white limestone is near the surface, while water-retaining clay and iron result in more full-bodied wines that are generally less expressive when young. On average, the vines are between 55 and 65 years of age, though some are as old as 100.

Barnier described winemaking at Clos des Ursules as “standard.” The team destems the grapes entirely, including no whole bunches (at least for now). The juice undergoes a long maceration along with twice-daily pigeage to ensure a gentle but thorough extraction. It then spends just under two years in oak before bottling—the second year in 500-liter foudres, which Jadot notably substituted for the standard 228-liter Burgundy barrel in 2020 to adjust for climate change and maintain freshness in the wine. This aging regimen has evolved over the decades, but Jadot’s philosophy has remained constant: Express a unique sense of place.

Jadot typically produces about 20 barrels (6,000 bottles) of Clos des Ursules in good vintages such as 2017, 2018, 2022, and 2023, according to Barnier.

## Tasting Notes

Here are my thoughts on 15 vintages of Maison Louis Jadot Clos des Ursules Beaune Premier Cru.

**2023:** Paradoxically, robust yields saved this hot vintage from producing over-the-top wines: With a smaller crop, Barnier explained, all the vines’ energy would have been concentrated on producing overripe grapes. The dark color of the 2023 presages its generosity on the palate. Great acidity imbues it with vivacity, keeping it fresh and in balance. Fine tannins and an overall charming aspect make it surprisingly approachable. It showed beautifully when I tasted it in barrel in November 2024, and it has evolved nicely since then. I suspect it will close down in a year or two, so drink it now or wait a decade. **93**

**2022:** Alluding to the Winter Olympics, Barnier claimed that the 2022 deserved a place “on the podium.” To me, it’s a clear gold. It was marvelous when I tasted it from barrel in Jadot’s cellars in 2023, and it has just exploded since then: “Harmonious” is a good descriptor, because there’s a bit of everything and not too much of anything. Although there’s plenty of concentration, this wine wows with its elegance, silky texture, and length, not its power. Drink 2032–2072. **97**

**2021:** This was a cool year, exacerbated by frost that reduced the crop by 80% in many places. As in 2023, however, the yield saved the vintage, albeit in the reverse: A larger yield never would have ripened. The 2021 showed well from barrel in 2022 and has continued to expand. Despite its lighter profile, its site-derived elegance and minerality show



clearly; an alluring herbal aspect adds to its appeal. Further aging will allow the tannins to harmonize with the other elements, so drink 2031–2051. **92**

**2020:** Barnier explained that a hot, dry summer led to Jadot’s earliest-ever harvest, starting on August 19. Reflecting those conditions, the 2020 is concentrated and dense but not overdone, displaying balancing acidity; the tannins are ripe and supple, lending a suave texture to this youthful beauty. Muscular yet elegant, it is, as Barnier put it, “built for aging.” Drink 2030–2060. **95**

**2018:** This was another hot vintage saved by generous yields, according to Barnier: When I tasted it from barrel in 2019, it was all about power; since then, its finesse has come into focus. Although perhaps a little chunkier and less elegant



Maison Louis Jadot technical director *Frédéric Barnier*.



*Jin Ahn*, sommelier/managing partner of New York City restaurant *noreetuh*, was among the attendees.



than the 2020, it possesses uplifting acidity on the finish that keeps it fresh and lively. A few more years to allow the tannins to settle down will serve it well—drink 2030–2060. **93**

**2017:** This vintage was panned by many at the outset; indeed, when I tasted it from barrel in 2018, I found it to lack charm. Oh, how it's blossomed! A brick-like color and a hint of leafiness on the nose accurately suggest some maturity on the palate. Fragrant and floral, the mid-weight beauty is quintessentially Burgundian, offering what I call "flavor without weight." It's a delight now, but because it's still fresh and shows no sign of fatigue, drink now through 2035. **94**

**2012:** Plagued almost biblically by frost, mildew, hail, and poor flowering, this vintage birthed small amounts of firm, concentrated wine. Served from magnum, the 2012 Clos des Ursules fits that profile, displaying a youthful combination of floral touches and dark minerals, all sitting atop noticeably firm tannins. Drink 2030–2070. **94**

**2010:** The fresh and fragrant 2010 is just gorgeous. Precise and focused, this mid-weight delight explodes and then dances on the palate without a trace of heaviness before a firm, long, lovely finish. Barrier described the vintage as "old-time," featuring lower alcohol. For me, it's another example of Burgundy's aforementioned hallmark, flavor without weight. Drink now through 2070. **96**

**2005:** Barrier said that this "firm" vintage was the first to hint at the climate

change to come: Poor flowering and a few weeks of heat resulted in a smaller, more concentrated crop. As beautiful as the 2010 is, the 2005 is even more thrilling, providing just a touch more stuffing without sacrificing subtlety or elegance. The firm tannins evident in its youth have been transformed and now provide supple structure. Drink now through 2070. **98**

**1997:** Jacques Lardière, Jadot's technical director for some 40 years prior to Barrier, always loved the 1997, a vintage abhorred by most everyone else. Rain fell just before harvest, forcing producers to either pick early and make wine from unripe grapes or wait and hope the vines dried before rot set in. Lardière waited, and rot indeed destroyed 75% of the crop—but he made fabulous wine from the remainder. Fully mature, the weighty 1997 coats the palate with an alluringly savory, meaty, and dried-leafy character atop a firm (but not hard) base. Enlivening, freshening acidity keeps you coming back for more. Drink now through 2036. **95**

**1988:** Barrier noted that this vintage produced wines of good ripeness following a "classic end-of-September harvest." Fragrant and muscular, the 1988 Clos des Ursules still has a hint of the brooding tannins it showed in its youth, but not enough to throw it out of balance. More youthful than expected, it will benefit from additional bottle age; drink 2030–2070. **94**

**1976:** Barrier reminded us that this was a severe drought year, yielding grapes with

thick skins and lots of tannins. Emblematic of the site, the wine retains life and freshness though it's clearly mature, with savory, leafy elements enveloping the senses. The barest hint of drying tannins appears on the finish to remind you of the drought. Drink now through 2035. **93**

**1964:** Although most critics consider 1964 to be an outstanding vintage for red Burgundy, Barrier, in his characteristically understated way, pronounced it simply "good." Regardless, this wine is magnificent, offering a perfectly balanced panoply of fruit and savory flavors. While Erin Healy, chef sommelier at New York City's Restaurant Daniel, detected hints of coffee and delicate caramel, I was struck by its silky texture, abundant nuance, and enormous length. Drink whenever you can (I initially gave it 100 points but had to revise it after tasting the 1959). **99**

**1959:** Lardière once cautioned me that, sometimes, trying to describe a wine diminishes it. After tasting the 1959 Clos des Ursules poured from magnum, I understand what he meant. As exceptional as the 1964 was, this was, well, even better. No rush—drink it whenever you can. **100**

**1929:** There's no question that the 1929 would have received a higher score had it not followed the exceptional '64 and '59. Less explosive and complete, it seemed to be on the downside of its life. That said, at 94 years of age, it was damn good. Drink now—should you be so lucky! **93** *sj*



*The annual Premiere Napa Valley auction—hosted by the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in St. Helena, CA, in February—raised \$3 million in support of local environmental, youth development, and health care programs.*

# Stirring Momentum

**PREMIERE NAPA VALLEY 2026** BRINGS THE TRADE TOGETHER ON ITS 30TH ANNIVERSARY by Jonathan Cristaldi

**AMID A RAPIDLY** changing global wine market, more than 1,000 members of the wine trade from at least 25 U.S. states and 12 countries participated in Premiere Napa Valley 2026, with additional buyers joining the live auction online. From lively preview tastings to conversations between vintners and attendees, the February event served as a gathering point for the industry, reinforcing the collaborative spirit underpinning the Napa Valley community's relationship with the trade.

The auction marked the culmination of the festivities, with bidders vying for one-of-a-kind, limited-production wines crafted exclusively for Premiere, most

from the 2024 vintage. According to Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), it raised \$3 million in support of local environmental, youth development, and health care programs.

"We're grateful to every trade partner who came out, who raised a paddle, and who continues to believe in Napa Valley," said Grounded Wine Co. owner/winemaker Josh Phelps, who served as co-chair of the event alongside his father, Chris Phelps, winemaker and founder of Ad Vivum. "The week provided a surge of momentum, and it was pure joy to be surrounded by so many people who are passionate about wine and about Napa Valley."

Among the most sought-after red-wine lots were offerings from Duckhorn Vineyards, Robert Mondavi Winery, Shafer Vineyards, Quintessa, Silver Oak Cellars, Alpha Omega Winery, Pym-Rae, Revana, Fairchild Napa Valley, JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, and Reynolds Family Winery as well as a collaborative lot from Davies Vineyards, Diamond Creek Vineyards, Diamond Mountain Vineyard, Dyer Vineyards, and Lokoya. Leading white-wine lots included Hudson, Schramsberg Vineyards, Chandon, Paula Kornell, and Lail Vineyards.


Another major highlight of the event was the debut of the 2024 Napa Valley vintage, presented to the trade for the



PHOTOS: CHESTER COOLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

*Hossfeld's CCF Estate Blend was among the featured lots.*

first time at tastings. My early impressions suggest that the wines may follow closely on the heels of the widely praised 2023 vintage. They show a slightly richer profile than those of the latter, with darker fruit character and a plush mouthfeel framed by ultra-fine tannins that are supple, generous, and almost immediately approachable.

If the energy of this year's edition was any indication, Premiere Napa Valley remains one of the wine trade's most important gatherings—a moment when buyers, sommeliers, retailers, and producers come together not only to taste and purchase rare wines but to exchange ideas and strengthen the relationships that sustain Napa Valley's global impact. The next Premiere Napa Valley will take place February 24–27, 2027. It will be chaired by the team at Amici Cellars, namely John Harris, Melissa Devore, and Tony Biagi, who will lead the Valley's vintners in welcoming the wine trade back once again. 

## A First Look at Napa Valley's 2024 Vintage

During a whirlwind tasting session among the barrels of the coveted Premiere Napa Valley auction lots, I worked my way through dozens of one-of-a-kind wines crafted exclusively for the event. Several Cabernet Sauvignons stood out in a room full of top-class reds designed to wow. JennaMarise Wines and Robert Foley Vineyards' Lot #49 delivered layered dark fruit with loamy earth notes and beautifully integrated tannins built for cellaring, while Silver Oak's Lot #50, called The Beauty Beneath, opened with red apple skin and black cherry before revealing a stony mineral core within a tightly coiled structure. Vineyard 7 & 8's Lot #46 Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon showed how the slightly warmer 2024 season softened that region's famously firm mountain tannins, offering freshness, tension, and impressive density; St. Supéry's Lot #44 brought Rutherford's signature dusty red-earth minerality; and Shafer's Lot #43 leaned toward lifted aromatics and velvety, fine-grained tannins. Other highlights included Merryvale's Mount Veeder Cabernet (Lot #144), packed with mineral tension and ultra-fine tannins, and Pym-Rae's Lot #163, Le Sommet, a beautifully compact wine layered with dark fruit, mint, and bay laurel.

Cabernet Franc also shone across a handful of unique lots. B True Wines' Lot #47 from the Viader Vineyard showed dark fruit and tobacco spice framed by finely knit tannins, while Crocker & Starr's Lot #48 Goddess Franc balanced blue fruit and espresso notes with a firm structural core. Inglenook's Lot #14, Gio 1998—a standalone bottling of a wine typically reserved for blending into Rubicon—impressed with its freshness and powdery tannins.

Among blends, Julien Fayard's Lot #38, Grand Sire, was sourced from five vineyards to deliver dark fruit, spice, and chewy grip, while Lot #33, a collaboration between Corison, Gallica, and Matthiasson, offered a fleshy, mouth-coating Cabernet with a deep fruit profile. Ghost Block's Lot #31, Maratona, and Revana's Lot #125, Six of Hearts, showed generous spice and robust tannin structures, while Hossfeld's Lot #152 CCF Estate Blend impressed with bright red fruit and loamy nuance. Among whites, Hourglass' Lot #156 MABON Chardonnay provided a delightful counterpoint to the reds—plush, expressive, and as stylish as winemaker Tony Biagi's signature Gucci scarf.

# Swimming Upstream

HOW IMPORTER **BARTHOLOMEW BROADBENT OF BROADBENT SELECTIONS** HAS DEFIED THE ODDS IN AN EVOLVING MARKET by David Furer

**AS A YOUTH** growing up in London, England, renowned importer Bartholomew “Bollew” Broadbent of Broadbent Selections was inspired to enter the wine business by the camaraderie he observed between his parents and the guests they hosted at numerous gatherings. His father, noted wine writer Michael Broadbent, MW, hadn’t implored him to do so, “but he neither encouraged me to do anything else,” says Bollew, explaining that the elder’s contacts at Cognac company Hennessy gave him his first summer job in France as a bilingual tour guide for visiting English speakers. In his late teens, he worked a harvest at Rothbury Estate and Yalumba in Australia, which led him to conclude that he indeed wanted to join the industry, albeit on the business side. “The hard work of winemaking . . . wasn’t my idea of fun,” he recalls, and he returned a month earlier than planned for a job with a wine merchant.

In 1986, Bollew crossed the Atlantic Ocean to spearhead the Symington family’s North American importing venture, Premium Port Wines Inc., in Toronto before relocating to Sausalito, California, to establish its U.S. office (which it shared with Lebanese winery Château Musar). Bollew’s work in the venerable fortified category became elemental to a resurgence of Port consumption in the U.S. “It was in 1989, when giving a presentation on Ports to a group of receptive single women aged 21–32, that I was convinced that there was a future in it,” he says, and upon leaving the employ of the Symingtons, he launched his own label, Broadbent Port, as well as his namesake importing and marketing company in 1996.

Rheinhessen winery Louis Guntrum joined forces with Bollew early on. “As his first table-wine supplier,” shares Konstantin Guntrum, “I spent a year and a half in the U.S. living out of my suitcase



PHOTO COURTESY OF BROADBENT SELECTIONS

. . . to sell my wines!” Given the initiative Bollew showed in working the market with Guntrum, it’s no surprise that Château Musar joined a year later. The producer “was pretty unknown in the U.S. at that time, [but it’s] now one of our easiest sells,” Bollew confirms—much to Musar director Marc Hochar’s satisfaction: “Broadbent Selections is the right fit for us, [allowing us to get] the attention we require,” he says.

Given that he started his business with the importation of German and Lebanese table wines and Ports, Bollew is clearly comfortable swimming upstream. In 2006, he launched Broadbent Vinho Verde, which is now both Broadbent Selections’ highest-volume wine and the bestselling Vinho Verde in the U.S. “People thought I was nuts, since [the category was] rightly seen as cheap bottom-shelf stock,” he admits. “But I knew that if stored and

shipped refrigerated, it’d do well . . . and I had luck with its distinctly attractive label.”

In 2008, Bollew relocated to Richmond, Virginia, where he wasted no time in bringing Barboursville Winery aboard while launching his own California brands, Architect and Auctioneer. Portfolio growth has since continued with what’s now a fine range of South African wines, including Swartland’s Curator (which he owns), but “it was only during COVID that we took on Italian wines,” says Bollew, who all-too-humbly believed he lacked the expertise to carry them. “If I’d been told earlier that these would be easy to sell, I would’ve done so sooner!” His own Broadbent Toscana red blend will

soon hit the streets. Meanwhile, his work with English sparkling-wine producer Gusbourne recently led to his becoming a shareholder in the company. And his newly expanded spirits lineup includes Musar’s excellent arack; Wales’ Dyfi gin, which features foraged botanicals; and Chazalettes Vermouth di Torino.

When onboarding producers, Bollew notes, “We follow six absolutes to which our suppliers must adhere.” They must be family-owned; have a good story; exemplify their region; offer excellent value; emphasize natural production methods; and above all be “ethical, honest, fun, and nice.” He himself possesses those qualities, according to John Gay, a Broadbent Selections advisory board member since 2005, who calls Bollew “a great citizen of the wine world whose long-term employees and peripatetic nature support his ongoing success.” ■

# A Scholar and a Gentleman

**DOUG FROST, MS, MW, SERVES THE WINE COMMUNITY BY STERLING EXAMPLE**

by David Furer

**SINCE 1993**, Doug Frost has been one of four individuals to simultaneously hold the titles of Master of Wine and Master Sommelier (he served as the Institute of Masters of Wine's North America president from 2013 to 2019 and as vice chair of the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas' board of directors from 2010 to 2015). The author of three books, he's contributed as a writer or editor to an additional seven publications; he also serves as a consultant, with a handful of active clients that includes, since 2004, United Airlines. But his entry into the industry was a humble one. "I was 14, washing dishes in a Hutchinson, Kansas, steakhouse, when my family took me on a winter visit to the San Francisco Bay Area, where my well-off, artistic uncle Gene asked me to help pick out wines for [our] dinners. He gave me my first wine lessons with California Cabernet Sauvignons and Pinot Noirs," Frost recalls, noting that despite his uninformed palate, he made an impressive first choice: a Louis Martini 1968 Special Select Pinot Noir.

Later, he worked at famed Kansas City restaurant Plaza III under wine director John Skupny (now co-founder/winemaker of Lang & Reed Napa Valley), who took the young protégé to his first vertical tastings of classified-growth Bordeaux and other classic wines. After a few more years working in front-of-house positions, Frost began a 14-year stint as a wholesale and import representative for five companies in the Kansas City area. This provided a fertile training ground for teaching the trade and consumers about wines and spirits, and in 1997, he and Steven Olson created the Spirits Division of the now-closed Sterling School of Service & Hospitality, which operated nationally and whose Wine Division was overseen by Evan Goldstein, MS.

Madeline Triffon, MS, has known Frost since 1991. "He's always been and contin-

ues to be the most exuberant, entertaining, and welcoming doorway into wine for professionals and consumers alike, with a tremendous depth of experience and knowledge—a rare combination of qualities," she says. "After [he passed] the MW exam in 1993, I sent him a handwritten, formal congratulatory note. He responded politely in kind, though added, 'If anyone invents another [expletive] wine exam, I'm going to kill them!'" Pointing out

in bar work at the Culinary Institute of America." As Frost's friend and colleague of nearly 40 years, Goldstein adds that, "with the credentials to be the biggest jerk and [with] nothing more to prove in the drinks world, Doug has instead chosen to do whatever he can to uplift fellow professionals who invariably appreciate, respect, and admire him."

Frost gradually retreated from running two wine competitions he'd founded, the

Jefferson Cup Invitational (which he oversaw from 2000 to 2023) and the Mid-American Competition (2007–2019), to focus on his latest project as co-owner/president of Echolands Winery in Walla Walla, Washington—as if he doesn't have enough to do! He was inspired in part to help start the winery by attending invitation-only winemakers' retreats in Oregon before the state's wines "had been widely recognized," Frost explains, adding that he "learn[ed] enough to be dangerous." When Washington industry stalwart



PHOTO: BRANDON CUMMINS

Norm McKibben sold him and his soon-to-be winery partner, fellow Kansas Citian Brad Bregman, a parcel with a few rows of vines, Frost was convinced he could produce red wines with moderate alcohol, less oak, and greater elegance than the plethora of bruisers he had encountered from Walla Walla. Though the humble Midwesterner insists, "I'll always have imposter syndrome—[I'm] a winery owner and not a winemaker"—the early and high acclaim Echolands has received is yet more evidence of Frost's impact on the wine world. **sj**

that he's not one to rest on his laurels, she noted that, in 2021, Frost founded the Best USA Sommelier Association (BUSA)—which, ironically, holds its own exams that Frost was key in creating. "Before [he took on] the thankless task of founding and developing BUSA," says Goldstein, "I was the Goose to his Maverick, warning him that dealing with the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale[, of which BUSA is a member,] would be complicated. He gladly took it on despite being busy doing things like teaching and examining 80 people

Norm McKibben sold him and his soon-to-be winery partner, fellow Kansas Citian Brad Bregman, a parcel with a few rows of vines, Frost was convinced he could produce red wines with moderate alcohol, less oak, and greater elegance than the plethora of bruisers he had encountered from Walla Walla. Though the humble Midwesterner insists, "I'll always have imposter syndrome—[I'm] a winery owner and not a winemaker"—the early and high acclaim Echolands has received is yet more evidence of Frost's impact on the wine world. **sj**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WINES OF HUNGARY

▲ John Szabó, MS, led a seminar on Hungary's volcanic terroirs at the BOR Hungarian Wine Summit in Budapest last fall.

◀ Szent György-hegy (Mount Saint George) is a volcanic peak in Hungary's Badacsony region that's home to steeply sloped, well-draining vineyard sites.

# From Bubbles to Bull's Blood

EXPLORING EUROPE'S CROSSROADS AT THE **BOR HUNGARIAN WINE SUMMIT**

by Chris Howard

## DISCUSSIONS OF HUNGARIAN WINE

typically revolve around Tokaji Aszú. While the historical significance and pure deliciousness of the legendary sweet wine cannot be denied—after all, it was long the drink of royalty, from Louis XIV to Russian tsars and the Habsburgs—it's hardly Hungary's sole contribution to the world of wine, especially in a modern-day context.

The overlooked diversity of the country's wine reflects its geographic and cultural complexity. The history of this landlocked nation at the crossroads between East and West is a palimpsest of Ottoman, Habsburg, and Soviet influences. Yielding everything from *méthode traditionnelle* sparklers to volcanic whites (white wines in fact represent 70% of its output) to elegant reds from indigenous varieties, vineyards cover 64,000 hectares across 22 regions and 36 formal PDOs, producing nearly 4 million hectoliters annually.

Last autumn, I had the good fortune of attending the BOR Hungarian Wine Summit in Budapest, organized by Wines of Hungary. The week-long summit included

master classes, study excursions, thermal bathing jaunts, goulash parties, and a wine festival in the Buda Castle above the Danube. *Bor* is Hungarian for “wine”—but as I learned, Hungary is anything but boring.

## Volcanic Wines

Canadian experts John Szabó, MS, and Róbert Gilvesy led a masterful seminar exploring Hungary's volcanic terroirs. Szabó is Canada's first Master Sommelier, the author of *Volcanic Wines*, and the co-founder of Volcanic Wines International, which organizes an annual conference and the World Volcanic Wine Awards competition; he has also produced wine in Eger. Gilvesy, meanwhile, established his organic estate in 2012 on Szent György-hegy, a 4-million-year-old eroded volcano in the Badacsony appellation.

Typically low in organic matter, highly porous, and rich in minerals, volcanic soils account for just 1% of the world's surface, yet they produce wines of distinctive character. Their chemical composition differs dramatically from that of limestone or clay, with higher levels of iron, magnesium, and potassium as well as unique

drainage properties that stress vines in ways that concentrate flavors. The result? Wines with pronounced minerality, saline notes, tension, and, often, a distinctive stony or smoky quality.

Hungary is home to significant volcanic terroirs. In the Badacsony region along Lake Balaton's northern shore, dramatic volcanic peaks like Mount Badacsony, Csobánc, and Mount Saint George (the aforementioned Szent György-hegy) provide steep vineyard sites with exceptional drainage—all sitting atop ancient basalt and tuff. Further afield, the volcanic hill of Somló and the northern region of Eger also showcase Hungary's volcanic legacy, containing soils formed from eruptions millions of years ago. In Eger, the cellars of producers like St. Andrea and Tóth Ferenc are carved into the same tuff stone that anchors their vines. In Somló, one of Hungary's smallest but most dynamic appellations, volcanic basalt and tuff mixed with clay and marl produce almost exclusively white wines from varieties like Juhfark, Olaszrizling, Furmint, and Hárslevelű. Geology, in short, is central to what makes Hungary's wines distinctive.

## Etyek Effervescence

Hungary's tradition of sparkling wine production is a surprise to most. Predating many modern Champagne houses, Törley has been making *méthode traditionnelle* wines since 1882; at its peak in the 1980s, it was producing 30 million bottles annually. Today, the Etyek-Buda region just west of Budapest has emerged as the country's sparkling heartland, recently establishing the Etyeki Pezsgő PDO, where strict quality standards are modeled on Champagne's regulations.

Péter Tüü, one of Hungary's top sommeliers, led a master class that showcased everything from Etyek's Chardonnay-Pinot blends to Badacsony's volcanic expressions featuring indigenous varieties, including Éliás winery's Grande Cuvée, which blends three native grapes: Kéknyelű, Rozsakő, and Furmint. Our first study tour, meanwhile, included a stop at Sau-

Kadarka, Hungary's elegant answer to Pinot Noir; was the red on everyone's lips at BOR. Historically, this grape was the backbone of Egri Bikavér, aka Bull's Blood, a blend whose dramatic name comes from the 1552 Siege of Eger, when Hungarian defenders held off a massive Ottoman army: Legend has it that the Turks, seeing the Hungarians' wine-stained beards during their fierce resistance, believed they were drinking bull's blood for strength. Kadarka fell out of favor over the decades as heavier varieties took over, but today's producers are rediscovering its potential as a single-varietal wine. Eszterbauer's 2024 vintage from Szekszárd was a case in point; satin-textured and shining with bright red fruit, pepper, and baking spices, it revealed the variety's more delicate, aromatic side.

Many fine examples of Kékfrankos, especially from Sopron on the border of

and Menoire as well as rare whites like Bakator, Budai Zöld, and Kövidinka. Given that many wine drinkers today are looking beyond international varieties and styles, this return to native fruit is perfectly timed.

## Tradition and Evolution in Tokaj

A trip to Tokaj and a master class with Dr. Péter Molnár and László Mészáros reminded us why this region remains Hungary's calling card. The production of Aszú—requiring multiple passes through vineyards to hand-select individually botrytized berries, followed by years of barrel aging—represents a commitment to craft and tradition that explains why Tokaj was granted UNESCO World Heritage status.

Granted, a group tasting at Dereszla with growers like Oremus, Pelle, and Samuel Tinon revealed its diversification: This isn't a monolithic sweet-wine zone but a complex terroir where nervy, bone-dry Furmint is on the rise. But for all their contemporary appeal—and dessert wine's commercial struggles—Tokaj's sweet wines remain essential. Tasting the near-mythical Eszencia—pure botrytized juice so concentrated it can take decades to ferment—is an experience one doesn't forget. The Disznókő 2017 Tokaji Aszú 5 Puttonyos showed Aszú's modern expression: apricot, honey, and orange peel balanced by vibrant acidity. The Patricius 2015 Tokaji Eszencia, meanwhile, transcended wine entirely—a drop of liquid history verging on the divine.

## Rising to the Challenge

The BOR Hungarian Wine Summit revealed a nation reaping the fruits of a renaissance that's been underway for three decades. The challenge isn't quality or value: Hungary's bubbles give Champagne a run for its money, Kadarka offers Pinot-esque pleasure minus the price pain, and dry Furmint rivals Sancerre at half the cost. The challenge is finding space in a crowded global market where familiarity and ease of pronunciation can trump experimentation.

Yet perhaps Hungary's very uniqueness—its indigenous varieties, its geological diversity, its position at Europe's crossroads—is its greatest strength. In an era when wine lovers increasingly seek authenticity and distinct identity, Hungary has it all. S



*BOR attendees on a field trip to a winery in the Pannohalma region.*

ska's facility in historic Budafok—where kilometers of cellars carved into limestone hills on the banks of the Danube have housed sparkling production since the 19th century. Sauska's Brut Magnum NV is still bubbling away in my memory, as is the Hernyák Brut 2021.

## Native Grapes Come to Light

Though whites and sparklers dominate production, Hungary's reds offer serious intrigue. Andrea Gere and György Lőrincz Jr. of the aforementioned St. Andrea estate led a seminar exploring Kadarka, Kékfrankos (aka Blaufränkisch), and Néró, a rare indigenous variety being revived from near-oblivion.

Austria, demonstrated the variety's ability to express both power and finesse, as did the more contemporary styles of Egri Bikavér it's often blended into. (It should be noted that Cabernet Franc also figures into many of these blends; in fact, the grape has excelled so well in the southern Villány region that a formal category of Villányi Franc has been established.)

Hungary once cultivated one of Europe's most diverse collections of indigenous varieties—many tragically lost to phylloxera and the replanting decisions that followed, which were exacerbated by a focus on quantity over quality in the Communist era. Today, ambitious growers are reviving forgotten red grapes like Turán



PHOTO: JETT KOLANK

Jacob Brown, head sommelier at Napa Valley winery Realm Cellars; Jienna Basaldu, sommelier at The Modern in New York City; and Mark Guillaudeu, sommelier at Eleven Madison Park in New York City, took first place in Service, Tasting, and Theory, respectively, at the third annual Sommlympics in Atlanta, GA.

## MEDALS FOR *Mettle*

WHY THE INDUSTRY'S BEST AND BRIGHTEST ARE PARTICIPATING IN THE **SOMMLYMPICS**

BY RUTH TOBIAS

**O**n January 6—one month before the 2026 Winter Olympics opening ceremony took place in Italy—wine professionals from across the country gathered at the Forth Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, to showcase their skills not in skiing, skating, and hockey but the industry equivalent: tasting, theory, and service. Aptly called Sommlympics, the competition is the brainchild of co-creators and organizers Kelly Cornett of A Cork in the Road and Chelsea Young of The Oenophile Institute, who came up with the basic framework for the event back in 2023, shortly after Young had obtained her WSET Diploma. “I was like, ‘Man, there’s gotta be a way to make [studying] more fun,’” she recalls. “So Kelly and I started brainstorming, and it kind of snowballed from there.”

That's an understatement. In its third year, Sommlympics hosted 12 teams composed of three members each, among them not only restaurant somms and beverage directors but also retailers, importers, distributors, consultants, and educators hailing from 12 different states—all vying for the highest score as individuals in their chosen event (as determined by their respective strengths) and therefore the most cumulative points as a group. "Think about Olympic gymnastics," explains Cornett. "You have the barre winner; you have the floor routine winner; but then you also have the team gold medalist." And they weren't just in it to win it for the glory, either, she adds: "At the base level, these people are motivated by their skills and their careers, obviously, but we want to give them some sort of reward for putting themselves out there." In short, major prizes were at stake.

Though the five-hour competition held no shortage of suspense for either the contestants or the audience who came to cheer them on, we won't prolong it here: The New York City-based Terroir Titans took first place, receiving a five-day, all-expenses-paid trip to Portugal. In addition to Sam Neely, a sommelier at three-MICHELIN-starred Eleven Madison Park, the team consisted of Mark Guillaudeu, likewise a somm at Eleven Madison Park, and his fiancée, Jienna Basaldu, a sommelier at two-MICHELIN-starred The Modern; Guillaudeu also placed first in Theory, while Basaldu took the top slot in Tasting, which gave them the opportunity to go toe to toe against the Service champ—namely Jacob Brown, head sommelier at Napa Valley winery Realm Cellars—in a final battle of wits and palates that ultimately earned Guillaudeu yet another five-day, all-inclusive trip, this one to Argentina. Meanwhile, Avery Andrews, the Charleston, South Carolina-based senior beverage manager for Indigo Road Hospitality, was granted the title of Star du Spectacle (or, as he calls it, "the Vibes Guy Award") and a four-day, all-inclusive trip to Champagne for embodying the spirit of hospitality. And finally, The Liebfraumilkshakes, as the second-place team, garnered themselves a jaunt to Tampa, Florida, involving a \$1,000 gift certificate to dine at the legendary Bern's Steakhouse, a one-night stay at the Epicurean hotel, and \$900 total in airfare for team-

mates Adam Pucillo, VP, East region, at Hourglass Wines; Simon Kaufmann, sommelier at The Blue Point in Duck, North Carolina; and Paul Lee, wine director at Grill 23 & Bar in Boston, Massachusetts. All the victors also got one-year memberships to the Wine Scholar Guild.

And yet the throughline in the conversations I had with some of them shortly after the competition was not excitement about their winnings but pride in their performances, accompanied by respect for the intellectual rigor with which Cornett and Young had devised each event. Take Theory, which is conducted like the game show *Jeopardy!* The year prior, Guillaudeu explained, "I lost points on not answering in the form of a question," so for this year, he not only "crunched as many different flash cards

2016. What contiguous parcel would be worth that? What were major acquisitions that year? The only thing that fit the bill was Gallo buying Stagecoach, so 'What is Stagecoach Vineyard?' Another was, 'This residue on pottery shards at a dig from 8,000 B.C.E. is considered the oldest confirmed evidence of winemaking in the world.' One of my co-competitors said, 'What is beeswax?' But I said, 'What is tartaric acid?' Tartaric acid crystals are the only thing that proves it was made from grapes and it was fermented."

Basaldu, for her part, was raring to go for her Tasting session. She had to identify five wines in 15 minutes, "which is much quicker than [for most competitions]," she noted. "So I had to train for that. [But] before I had even started, I just knew I was going to crush. I got all the grapes but



PHOTO: JETT KOLARIK

**Avery Andrews (second from left), senior beverage manager for South Carolina-based group Indigo Road Hospitality, received the Star du Spectacle award from Sommlympics co-founder Kelly Cornett; George Staikos, head of education for the US Bureau of the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne; and Sommlympics co-founder Chelsea Young.**

as I could" but also "studied how *Jeopardy!* has been played and won . . . for the past 15 or 20 years." Yet even he couldn't be prepared for the number of curveballs the presenters threw. "I don't know what Chelsea's sources are, but whatever her research method is, it's incredible," he enthused. For instance, one prompt, as he paraphrased it, was: "'Sold in 2016 for \$600 million, this is the most expensive monopole ever sold in America.' I was like, 'OK, let me go back in my head to

one.'" Smelling one glass, the native Californian recalled, "I was like, 'This reminds me of home. This is a thin-skinned grape variety. I'm in Northern California. I'm in a cool climate. I'm in the Sonoma Coast. This wine is so familiar to me that I can't deny it: I can't take you to Burgundy. I can't take you to New Zealand. I can't take you to Oregon.' It ended up being Peay Pomarium, which is a wine that I have worked with for a very long time; in fact, I used to work in a restaurant in San Fran-



PHOTO: JETT KOLARIK



PHOTO: TONI WILLIAMS

*Morgan Gray, Jess Helfand, and Joe Herrig served as judges for the tasting portion of the competition.*

*Theory was judged by Jane Lopes, Jade Palmer, and Sarah Bray.*

cisco that [Peay Vineyards owner] Andy Peay was an investor in. So there's that component of having the wines speak to you." Regarding the sole wine she failed to ascertain, she added, "I imagine no one got it. I called it Sauternes, [but] it was Klein Constantia from South Africa. If I knew that wine, I still wouldn't have called it; I'd have to be pouring that by the glass and have it on my palate every day to make a call like that. That is a ballsy choice."

Still, Basaldu completed the tasting in record time. "I had almost three minutes left . . . so I went through each wine and gave them a bunch of extra things they didn't ask for, such as glassware, service temperature, decantation, food pairing, [and] ageability," she recounted. "I walked out, and I felt so good. I had the time of my life. I was like, 'OK, Jienna, this is why we do this.'"

As for Jacob Brown, he asserted that, thanks to his prior role as beverage director at San Francisco's Lazy Bear, "I've essentially been preparing for this competition for the past seven years. But otherwise, I read great wine lists from across the country; practiced my cocktail shake and stir; and made sure that I was cool and collected" for the Service challenge, which in his view "did a really good job of mimicking actual things that might happen on a restaurant floor. . . . For example, there was a station where a cork was broken in the bottle, and you had to demonstrate to the service team how to take it out properly. There was a Champagne station where the judge wasn't ever quite happy with how cold the bottle was. There was a wine list with a ton of corrections that needed to be made."

Given 30 minutes to complete his tasks, he reflected, "That was really fast; the one thing I wish I could have gone back and really focused on is time management. And I suppose that's a really good note for anybody working as a sommelier—sometimes you don't have enough time for everything, so it's about prioritization . . . and being calm under pressure."

Avery Andrews also gleaned insight from his Sommlympics experience, admitting, "I definitely was not the best performer. But I would say I won the Star du Spectacle just by being myself. My mom always says I could talk to anybody from a 4-year-old to a 94-year-old. So I was shaking hands and kissing babies all day, asking [people] where they're from, what

they do, what they like to do—just getting to know them; rubbing shoulders with people who are titans in the industry is always a good time." While that outgoing personality obviously served him well this go-round, he added, "I think I'll try and be a little bit more prepared next time. I'll be back every year until they tell me to stop, that's for sure."

That sentiment was echoed by Guillaume, who mused, "What I love about wine is it keeps you humble. No matter how much you think you know—no matter how many, in my case, tens of thousands of flash cards you have—there's still something else to learn. And for me, that's inspirational but also just cool." ❧

## The 2026 Sommlympics Judging Panel

### TASTING

**Morgan Gray**, Advanced Sommelier and director of operations, Reeve Wines and BloodRoot Wines, Sonoma County

**Jess Helfand**, DipWSET, instructor, Napa Valley Wine Academy

**Joe Herrig**, DipWSET, Certified Sommelier and director of education, Georgia Crown, Alabama Crown, and Tennessee Crown distributing companies

### THEORY

**Sarah Bray**, DipWSET, sales director, transportation channel and private clients, Vineyard Brands

**Jane Lopes**, co-founder, LEGEND Australian Wine Imports

**Jade Palmer**, general manager/sommelier, Madeira Park, Atlanta, GA

### SERVICE

**Henna Bakshi**, regional editor, South, Eater

**Eric Palmer**, Advanced Sommelier and fine wine specialist, Republic National Distributing Company

**Jonathan Ross**, MS, co-founder, LEGEND Australian Wine Imports; wine director, The Twelve Thirty Club, Nashville, TN; wine director, The Global Ambassador Hotel, Phoenix, AZ

# Site Seeing

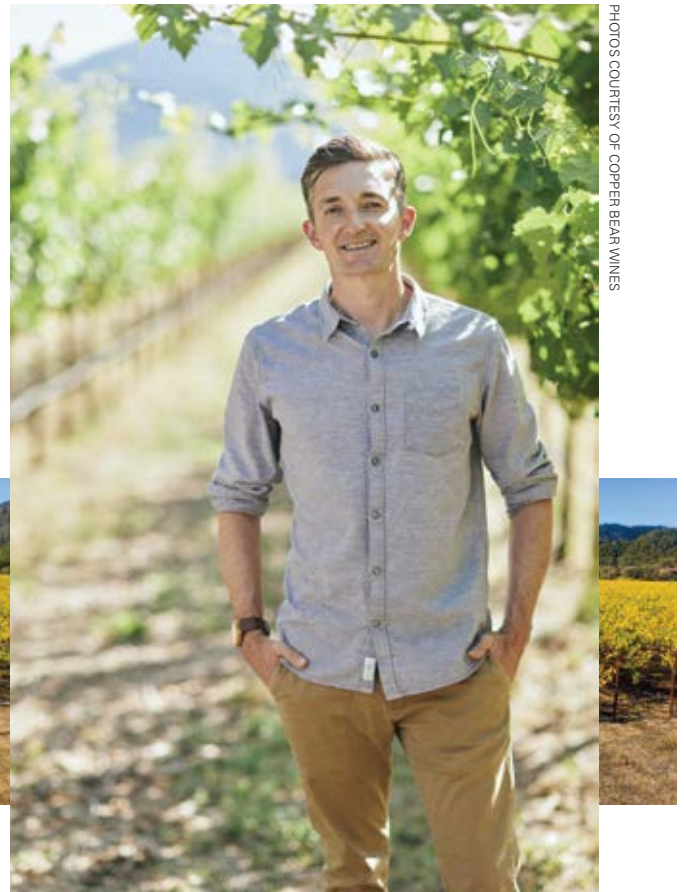
INTRODUCING **COPPER BEAR WINES** by Meredith May

**JESSE GIACOMELLI FOUNDED** Copper Bear Wines as a small-production Cabernet Sauvignon label dedicated to expressing Napa Valley's most historic vineyard sites through precise, hands-on winemaking. In addition to leading Copper Bear, he serves as director of winemaking at Beckstoffer Vineyards, where he works closely with growers and winery partners across the Valley.

Producing fewer than 500 cases annually, Copper Bear remains an intentionally small project focused on such benchmark sites as Beckstoffer Georges III, Missouri Hopper, and Stagecoach. Giacomelli's approach centers on balance, structure, clarity, and restraint, and he aims to make blending decisions that showcase the vineyard in question rather than overshadow it. *§*



*Copper Bear founder and winemaker Jesse Giacomelli is also director of winemaking at Beckstoffer Vineyards.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COPPER BEAR WINES

**Copper Bear 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stagecoach Vineyard, Atlas Peak, Napa Valley (\$110)** Mountain herbs gloss the palate, while plum-skin tannins grip. Oak and acidity circle one another in a dance of tension and lush power. Roasted coffee, blackberry, and truffle form a distinctively sturdy backbone. **97**

**Copper Bear 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer Georges III Vineyard, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$175)** Exquisitely crafted from a famed vineyard, this statuesque and poised wine takes the palate on a magic carpet ride of boysenberry cream, rich soil, and dusted dark chocolate. Its tension is derived from architecturally sound tannins. **98**



**Copper Bear 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Missouri Hopper Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$200)** Aged 20 months in (75% new) French oak, this is a seriously, deliriously seductive red offering a focused yet untamed sense of pleasure. Plum and black currant are slathered on graham cracker crust and topped with marshmallow and milk chocolate. **98**

**Copper Bear 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer Vineyards, Napa Valley (\$95)** Sourced from three of Beckstoffer's heritage vineyards in Rutherford, Oakville, and St. Helena, this wine spent 20 months in (75% new) French oak. One notices immediately its combination of opulence and precision: Soil, coffee bean, tar, and black currant are lifted by well-developed, sturdy tannins. Black pepper and leather further enhance the deep, rich, dark fruit. It will age beautifully. **96**



# Gulf Coast Gumption

THREE TOP BEVERAGE DIRECTORS IN FLORIDA SHARE HOW THEY'RE BUILDING PROGRAMS ACROSS MULTIPLE VENUES by Stefanie Schwalb

**TAMPA BAY'S CULINARY SCENE** is on the rise. Since the MICHELIN Guide arrived in Florida in 2022, the city of Tampa has become home to multiple starred restaurants, while neighboring St. Petersburg continues to attract national attention for its expanding roster of standout dining destinations. As the region's reputation grows, the beverage programs at many of these establishments are evolving just as quickly. We talked to three area hospitality professionals who are helping to shape the Gulf Coast's wine and cocktail culture.

PHOTO: MELISSA SANTELL



## Dustin French

*Wine director, Rocca and Bar Terroir, Tampa*

As wine director for the Tastes Pretty Good hospitality group, Dustin French oversees the beverage programs for two concepts: MICHELIN-starred Italian restaurant Rocca and the wine-focused Bar Terroir. In both cases, French says, his goal is to maintain a balance between well-known expressions and opportunities for discovery. For instance, at Rocca, "we try to focus on the Italian classics," he explains. "But we also like guests to experience some great value and lesser-known varietals." Rocca's seafood-driven menu also plays an important role in shaping the list, while French selections like Champagne and Burgundy complement classic dishes such as escargot and steak tartare at Bar Terroir.

When evaluating wines for his lists, French follows clear guidelines: "First I ask myself, do I actually like the wine? Then I look at it varietally: Does it taste like, [say] classic Nebbiolo from Barolo?" Price, he notes, is another factor. This framework helps him make decisions for both programs while maintaining a consistent philosophy. "I think it's a really fine balance. . . . [I'm] just trying to keep it approachable [in] all aspects," he notes.

## Michelle Richards

*General manager/wine director/sommelier, Allelo, Juno & the Peacock, and Pluma Lounge, St. Petersburg*

Michelle Richards runs the beverage programs at Mediterranean restaurant Allelo, coastal New American restaurant Juno & the Peacock, and Pluma Lounge, a South and Central American-themed cocktail bar. Allelo's wine list leans Old World, with a strong emphasis on French and Italian producers. At Juno & the Peacock, the focus is on New World regions, including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, South Africa, and New Zealand, while Pluma's wine and spirits selection is dedicated entirely to producers in the countries from which it draws inspiration.

Despite the differences between the venues, Richards says their underlying philosophy remains consistent. "We want people to come that are lovers of wine, collectors of wine, and very curious about it," she comments. "I also pride myself on having wines that are affordable but really high quality." For her, that means small-production bottlings from family-owned and -operated wineries—among them Bodegas Muga Tempranillo and Château Gravielle-Lacoste Bordeaux Blanc—with an emphasis on organic or biodynamic practices rather than globally recognized brands. "We really want to be supporting families," she explains, a philosophy that reflects St. Petersburg's propensity for uplifting independent businesses and the local community.



PHOTO: KAREN CULP

## Tyler Wolff

*Beverage director/sommelier, Ponte Modern American and On Swann, Tampa, and Olivia, St. Petersburg and Tampa*



PHOTO: STEPHEN BARNA

Managing the beverage programs for several of Chef Chris Ponte's restaurants, Tyler Wolff tackles the challenge of building ambitious lists that are nonetheless accessible to guests. At Ponte Modern American, whose cellar holds more than 300 labels, he focuses on helping guests to navigate the extensive selection. Digital menus allow diners to filter wines by region, price point, and/or rating. "The iPad lets guests categorize the list themselves," Wolff explains. This way, guests can decide what they want without feeling overwhelmed.

When structuring the list at more upscale restaurants like Ponte and On Swann, he thinks about what their well-heeled clientele is looking for, such as collectible bottles and benchmark producers, while other venues such as Olivia focus more heavily on specific regional styles. At the same time, Wolff points out, beverage programs are and should be constantly evolving: "The list is living and breathing. You can't just pick a wine and that's the wine forever; you have to be ready to adapt when necessary." That philosophy also extends to the cocktail program, which earned Ponte the MICHELIN Guide Florida's Exceptional Cocktails Award in 2025. "We keep [drinks] people are familiar with and just tweak them a little, not pushing them too far out of their comfort zone but letting them try something new," he says; at Ponte, that might mean an Old Fashioned reimaged with kokuto sugar, walnut bitters, and Montenegro Amaro in place of simple syrup.

As Tampa's and St. Petersburg's restaurants continue to attract national attention from the culinary media, their beverage programs are becoming an increasingly important part of the conversation. For professionals like French, Richards, and Wolff, the Gulf Coast offers an opportunity for them to parlay their credentials—all three are Certified Sommeliers—into an approachable style of service befitting the region's laid-back vibe. The result is a beverage culture worthy of an ascendent dining scene. **sj**

# Mind Over Matter

**CHRISTIAN SHAUM, LEAD SOMMELIER AT ASADOR BASTIAN IN CHICAGO, SEES “ALL-ENCOMPASSING” KNOWLEDGE AS THE HOSPITALITY IDEAL**

story by Kate Newton / photo by Rebecca Peplinski

**CONSIDERING TWO OF** the earliest mentors in his career were Master Sommeliers Madeline Triffon and Claudia Tyagi, it's no surprise that Christian Shaum—who worked with the former at Coach Insignia in Detroit, Michigan, and the latter at The Forest Grill in nearby Birmingham—has a certain zeal for not only continuous self-improvement but sharing the knowledge he's gained over nearly 20 years in the industry with his peers.

And that knowledge is considerable: The 34-year-old now serves as lead sommelier at Asador Bastian in Chicago, which in December was named the Best Steak Restaurant in North America by 50 Best, after past positions with the José Andrés Group and the Chicago-based B. Hospitality Co. and stints as a stagiaire at the original Noma and the now-three-MICHELIN-starred Steirereck in Vienna. “For me, being given a lot of grace by my early mentors when I didn't know anything, and being given an inordinate amount of their time, I respect it, and I do my best at this point to pay it forward” during service as well as formal staff tastings and classes, he says, adding, “It's great when you turn someone into a sommelier, [but] I'm trying to get people to care the most they can. I don't think you can ever quantify what small thing is going to turn the switch on for someone to make them think differently about how they approach [hospitality].”

While Shaum has long specialized in Italy and France, it was during his time with the José Andrés Group that he became well versed in Spanish wine. Considering that the first wine he identified correctly in a blind tasting while working with Tyagi was a Rioja, he sees his current role as bringing him “full circle,” in his words, as he's overhauled the restaurant's wine list and doubled its inventory in his quest to compose “a love letter to what I've learned



about Spanish wine [while] trying to make a name for [Spanish] varieties in the same way that we've made a name for French varieties.” (Granted, there's room for those too on the list, including a sizable selection of Champagnes.) In a restaurant located in a historic townhouse that seats just 55 in its dining room and 32 in its bar area, “storage is a nightmare,” Shaum says with a laugh, “but what I thankfully have is a very captive audience who are willing to give themselves over to [the] concept immediately” as they explore Asador Bastian's rendition of Basque cuisine, which “they maybe haven't experienced outside of casual tavern-style foods.” Shaum credits that immersion to chef Doug Psaltis, whom he calls “probably the most wine-knowledgeable chef I've ever worked with,” and his culinary team: “[That] is the real secret sauce ... to be in an environment where the chef is making food that craves wine—and guests can feel it when they sit down.”

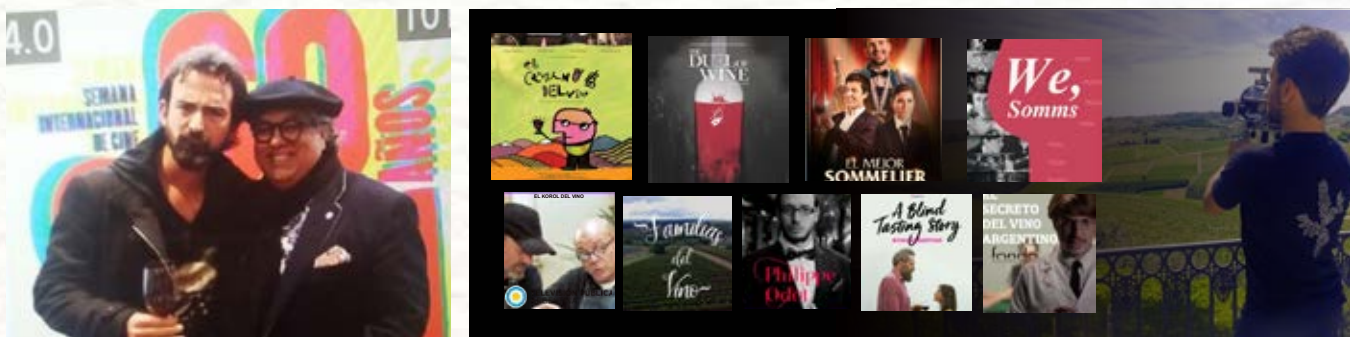
And while many of course flock to Asador Bastian specifically for its acclaimed selection of steaks that changes daily, in Shaum's opinion, what the majority of the

seafood-heavy menu craves most is white wine. “If you decide to spend the amount of money that you value in red wine on white wine, you'd be very surprised by how much you enjoy the [latter category]. I'm trying to push more of the native white grapes of Spain [and Portugal] and just get people to understand white wine's sensibility and practicality in pairing with food,” he says, highlighting by-the-glass pours like Clos Mogador Nelin and Buçaco Branco Reservado. But Shaum also wants those guests to feel welcome to order of their own volition, whether they're opting for benchmark reds like Vega Sicilia Unico, the aforementioned Champagnes, or a rare 1905 Armagnac from Asador Bastian's extensive list of vintage spirits, accrued through auctions, estate sales, and the staff's travels. “I like to use the [term] ‘beverage professional’ ... because it is all-encompassing and implies that you have knowledge about everything. And my goal is to give you knowledge about everything,” he says. It's a high bar to clear, but Shaum has proven again and again that he's able to meet the moment. **STJ**



# WHEN CINEMA FALLS IN LOVE WITH WINE

Charlie Arturaola and Cactus Cine Return with The Master of Wine



## A NEW FILM, A DECADE OF EXPERTISE

Buenos Aires-based Cactus Cine—creators of the award-winning *El Camino del Vino* (International Critics' Prize, Mar del Plata) and *El Duelo del Vino* (Berlin, San Sebastián selections)—returns to complete their celebrated trilogy with the bold finale, *The Master of Wine*.

Charlie Arturaola, wine ambassador with 25+ years in the industry and former world champion taster, leads this journey through climate-resilient viticulture. The film weaves real winemakers and sommeliers into compelling narrative cinema—education wrapped in storytelling.



"A decade learning that wine's true message isn't in the glass—it's in the emotional connection between maker and drinker. Cinema can bridge that."

— Charlie Arturaola

"The key was not trying to film wine, but falling in love with the people who make it. Their passion guides every frame."

— Nicolás Carreras, Producer

## CLIMATE, TERROIR, AND REAL STORIES

Brenda, a New York wine journalist, recruits Charlie Arturaola—a reclusive sommelier with a profound understanding of terroir—for an ambitious project: **mapping** resilient wine regions in a climate-changing world.



Scouting locations already featured in the companion micro-series include Patagonia (Argentina), Mid-Atlantic wine country (USA), and Mexico (Guanajuato, Querétaro, Chihuahua, Veracruz)—short-form content exploring the wineries and their integration into the film. European scouting is underway.

The project continues to identify exceptional regions, grape varieties, and winemaking voices worldwide for this cinematic selection.

Production 2026 | Premiere 2027

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