

THE SOMM JOURNAL



The Marrises of Marisco Vineyards are considered a founding family of viticulture in Marlborough, New Zealand.

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The Kautz family of Ironstone Vineyards, which produces wine in California's Sierra Foothills and Lodi AVAs.

Family MATTERS

HOW
QUINTESSENTIAL
BUILT A SUCCESSFUL
BUSINESS ON THE
TIES THAT BIND



Luca Bosio Vineyards' eponymous third-generation winemaker (right) with his family in their vineyard in Piedmont, Italy.



Javier Murúa, co-owner of Bodegas Muriel in Rioja, Spain, with his cousin, winemaker Chema Ryan.



Goose Ridge Estate Winery was established by the Monson family in what is now the Goose Gap AVA in Washington State.

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Rutherford Hill winemaker Stephanie Jacobs in Heaven's Peak Vineyard, whose angelic angle is that it's planted exclusively to Cabernet Sauvignon—but Merlot remains the producer's foundation.

A Time for **REIMAGINATION**

STORY BY MERIDITH MAY
PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER RUBIN



The nearly-mile-long cave has plenty of space for 7,000-plus barrels as well as room to entertain guests.

WITH A LEGACY OF MERLOT, A NEW WINEMAKER, AND A SLEEK ARCHITECTURAL UPGRADE, **RUTHERFORD HILL WINERY** IS INVESTED IN HOSPITALITY “HEAVEN”

With a name like Heaven's Peak, Rutherford Hill Winery's most prestigious vineyard is sure to deliver on expectations of celestial greatness. The 6-acre plot presents an awe-inspiring vista high atop the already elevated property in Napa Valley's Rutherford AVA.

In fact, the view is so dramatic and picture postcard-perfect that it naturally inspired a master plan to build an outdoor tasting room. The Valley Vista Terrace offers not only this spectacular panorama but also cabana-style seating in covered open-air pavilions that seem to float over the valley floor, where guests taste from oversized glasses that capture the nuanced essence of each wine.

Carrying the torch for Merlot—which the winery considers its legacy despite the well-documented downturn in consumer affection for the grape—Rutherford Hill is determined to set the record straight: This variety shines here. The long-term vision of the Terlato family owners is paying off in this respect, as I discovered on a recent visit, where I tasted a series of Merlots (as well as new vintages of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon).

Bringing Stephanie Jacobs aboard as winemaker and general manager was synchronistic. Her restrained, measured presence is as warm as a softly lit room: How perfect that her goal is to tame the extroverted tannins that challenge the Rutherford AVA's Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignons.



The hospitality center resembles an upscale resort, and its views are likely unmatched anywhere in Napa Valley's Rutherford AVA.

"Our focus is on quality," she explained. "Merlot had a bad enough reputation that it was removed from shelves and wine lists. It's time to start over; and that's what we are doing here. The red grapes are so concentrated and rich here [thanks to] such intense sunshine, especially for our high-elevation vines above the fog line. So our Merlots do—and will continue to—rival Napa Cabs in power and depth."

Adding that they're also "fruit-forward and friendly," she noted that she concentrates on farming with a purpose, a determination to not overextract. "I respect the tannic Rutherford dust, but the advantage of having estate fruit to work with allows me to understand our soils and climate," she said. "These vineyards are my teammates—my job is not to mess them up by working with the land and soil and, ultimately, elevating the wines to an approachable, elegant style. The goal is to motivate our customers to desire that second glass."

With three estate vineyards totaling more than 50 acres (including the Cabernet Sauvignon—exclusive Heaven's Peak); an enhanced, mile-long cave; the updated, expanded terrace on which to welcome trade and consumers; and recently refreshed labels, Rutherford Hill also has the will and know-how to break the stigma of Merlot while perfecting the evolution of its house style. The winery's direction is taking form like an angel taking wing: It's soaring toward something greater, with a full sense of purpose. *§*





"I respect the tannic Rutherford dust, but the advantage of having estate fruit to work with allows me to understand our soils and climate," says Jacobs.



TASTING NOTES

Rutherford Hill 2025 Angels' Peak White Blend, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$30) This new, 100% estate-grown release consists of 57% Sauvignon Gris and 43% Sauvignon Blanc aged in 100% neutral French oak. Though Rutherford Hill produces mostly reds, its facility with expressive whites that are ideal for the on-premise is apparent here. Lifted notes of jasmine tea and lime blossom are so inviting, persisting in a cycle of florals and fruit such as lemon zest. The creamy mouthfeel comes courtesy of the Sauvignon Gris, while the Sauv Blanc contributes mineral tonality. **95**

Rutherford Hill 2025 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$32) Gossamer tones of gardenia and honeyed mango possess powdery subtlety. Ample acidity carries citrus-driven charm that alights on the finish. **92**

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$45) Ripe and ready, with notes of cranberry, cherry tart, and a touch of rosemary. Acidity is keen, extending freshness to the perky finish. **93**

Rutherford Hill 2023 AJT Collection Merlot, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$85) This vineyard is dedicated to Anthony J. Terlato, founder and patriarch of the family-owned business. Dark and red fruit intertwine, shining on the sleek and inviting palate with sturdy tannins, a muscular grip, and a savory shadow of coffee and dark chocolate. Dynamic! **94**

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$85) Violets strike a pose with plum and iron against a backdrop of drying tannins and an athletic backbone. Crunchy, with boundless energy and gleeful notes of boysenberry and vanilla. **96**

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley (\$85) Teeth-grabbing tannins wash the palate with plum skin and dried lavender while frisky acidity lends a fresh air to notes of bay leaf, hibiscus tea, and white pepper. Brown spices add a layer of sweet oak (the wine spent 20 months in French barrels, 25% new). Restrained and elegant. **95**

Rutherford Hill 2023 Heaven's Peak Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$150) Delicate violet tones add timbre, lifting the aromatics of this poised, finely tuned wine and turning its classic framework into something more dimensional and emotionally resonant. A stream of cherry, spearmint, white pepper, and white chocolate helps define its voice, adding texture to its song. Its color and cadence round out on the palate, where tannins and structure serve as a counterpoint to minerality. **98**

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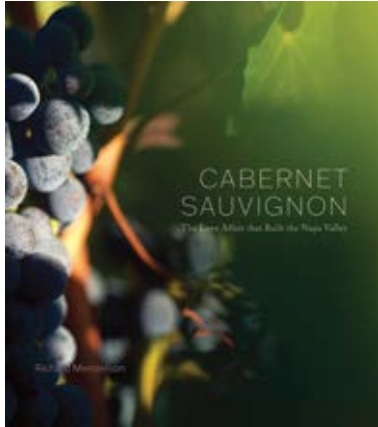
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New Book Celebrates Napa Valley Cabernet

AVAILABLE FROM AMAZON, Napa Bookmine, Barnes & Noble, and bookstores throughout the country as well as online at cabernetloveaffair.com, a new book by Richard Mendelson, *Cabernet Sauvignon: The Love Affair that Built the Napa Valley*, details the historic rise of the region and of American wine while drawing together Mendelson's 40 years of experience as a Napa Valley winemaker, wine lawyer, and personal advisor. Page after page, Mendelson shows how one prized grape variety led the revolution, amplifying the story with a wealth of historic and contemporary photographs; detailed maps; lithographs; and portraits of prominent Napa Valley pioneers such as Robert Mondavi, André Tchelistcheff, Maynard Amerine, Warren Winiarski, and Bill Harlan.

"Great achievements, whether in cinema, wine, or life, come from a belief that artistry can change the world. Napa Valley reflects that belief, and Cabernet Sauvignon has become its most recognized expression. Richard tells the story of how that came to be—of the people, the land, and the commitment that built this wine region. I recognize this story as my own, one that belongs to all of us who believe in the power of place, community, and one remarkable grape," says Francis Ford Coppola.

Napa Valley Vintners Develops Future Leaders

THIS SPRING MARKED the launch of the sixth cohort of Napa Valley Vintners' (NVV) Napa Valley Leadership Program. Since its inception, the program, which was designed to invest in the next generation of wine professionals, has graduated 62 individuals representing all sectors of the Napa Valley wine industry. Alumni have gone on to serve in leadership roles at their organizations and in the broader wine business.

The curriculum includes in-person sessions, guest speakers, facilitated discussions, reading assignments, and a cohort-driven group project for which the class identifies a need within the industry or community and develops a strategic response. The most recent cohort focused on engaging the next generation of wine drinkers by developing a digital media campaign centered on the question "Why Napa?", incorporating participants' personal stories of living and working in Napa Valley to spark curiosity, connection, and appreciation among younger audiences.

Members of the new cohort are: Brittany Anderson, owner of MTGA Wines; Lauren Carpenter, GM of Miner Family Winery; Marla Carroll, winemaker at Antinori Napa Valley; Morgan Couch, manager of community relations at Lewis Cellars; Samuel Dearden, director of hospitality and sales at Sleeping Giant; Lucas Farmer, owner and assistant winemaker at Euclid Wines; Torie Greenberg, owner and CMO of The Vice; Frances Stockton, VP of operations and sales at Gallica; Georgia Taylor, GM of Blackbird Vineyards; Raul Toscano, estate liaison and marketing coordinator at Continuum; Michael Tracy, VP of winemaking at Darioush; and Jonathan Tyer, senior associate winemaker at Inglenook.

Spec's Family Corp. Acquires Lee's Discount Liquor

SPEC'S FAMILY CORP., the parent company of Spec's Wines, Spirits & Finer Foods, has announced the acquisition of Lee's Discount Liquor, Nevada's largest independent liquor chain. This transaction marks Spec's first expansion outside of Texas.

Lee's Discount Liquor was founded in 1981 by the late Hae Un Lee in Las Vegas. Over the past four decades, the company has grown from a single store into one of Nevada's most recognized liquor retailers under the leadership of Lee and his family, particularly his son, Kenny, and daughter-in-law, Nami.

Lee's Discount Liquor will retain its name and continue operating independently in Nevada, preserving the local brand and customer experience that have made it a fixture in the Las Vegas community. "Our families have shared a commitment to great customer service and community values for generations," says John Rydman, president of Spec's. "We are excited to bring Lee's Discount Liquor into the Spec's family and to continue the legacy started by Mr. Lee. The shared vision of excellence, along with the combined retail experience of over 100 years from our two dynamic companies, will benefit our customers by giving them great values; superlative selections; and knowledgeable, friendly staff." 

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by Deborah Parker Wong



◀ The back label of all Future Wines touts the fact that they come from vineyards where sequestering CO₂ and increasing biodiversity are priorities and that they contain 80% fewer pesticides than conventionally grown wines.

A lineup of wines from ▶ Weingut Forster.



PHOTOS: DEBORAH PARKER WONG

The Future Has Arrived

IN GERMANY, SECOND-GENERATION HYBRIDS ARE PRODUCING APPEALING WINES

GERMANY'S RHEINHESSEN, NAHE,

and Rheingau regions are hotbeds of hybrid wine production. Having recently spent several days attending revelatory tastings in all three, I remain impressed by the wines that I tried made from second-generation hybrid varieties, including whites such as Sauvignac, Sauvignier Gris, Muscaris, Cabernet Blanc, and Solaris and reds like Regent and Satin Noir. While some first-generation disease-resistant hybrid grape cultivars (DRHGCs), often referred to as PIWIs (short for *Pilzwiderstandsfähige Rebsortens*), prioritized pathogen resistance over wine quality, that mistake has now been rectified.

Hybrid grapes may be crosses between *V. vinifera* cultivars and wild species of *Vitis*, between hybrid grapes and *V. vinifera* cultivars via a practice known as backcrossing, or between hybrid cultivars. First-generation hybrids grown in Germany include Müller-Thurgau, Scheurebe, and Dornfelder, all of which have been used to make fine wine for decades. In 2021, the EU began permitting the use of PIWIs in protected designation of origin (PDO) wines, and Germany has since reclassified the hybrid varieties Regent, Rondo, and Bronner as *V. vinifera*. Almost every producer I tasted with is growing and vinifying at least one second-generation variety.

Though their chemistry necessitates specific winemaking practices—compared to *V. vinifera*, they have higher acidity, pH,

and proteins in addition to lower anthocyanins—second-generation hybrid varieties possess sensory profiles that work in their favor. Sauvignier Gris wines from winemakers Laura Weber of Weingut Udo Weber in the Nahe, Eva Vollmer of Eva Vollmer Weine in the Rheinhessen, and Anja Seybold of Weingut Gemmrich in Baden-Württemberg all showed characteristic lemon, grapefruit, citrus pith, and white fruits along with saline mineral and/or lightly spicy white-pepper notes through the finish. “We are increasingly confident in this variety as it can make all of the styles. What remains to be seen is its ability to age,” said Vollmer; who, with Hanneke Schönhals, founded Zukunftsweine (Future Wines), a movement and brand built around DRHGC grapes with about 60 members.

Fifth-generation Rheinhessen winemaker Sebastian Erbeldinger is one of many producers working with Sauvignac, a cross of Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, and other resistant varieties, producing a standout wine that shows lime blossom, kiwi, and melon with good intensity. “The new-generation [hybrids] have two or three resistant genes, making them even more resistant,” he said, “and they are later ripening.” This allows more time for the fruit to build aromatic and phenolic maturity, which results in a fuller, more expressive wine style.

At Weingut Forster in Nahe, third-generation winemaker Johannes Forster

works with several hybrid varieties, including Sauvignac, Muscaris, Regent, and Solaris. Regent, a cross between Diana and Chambourcin, is a teinturier grape that produces ripe, assertive, dark-fruited wines with good structure. Solaris has a complex lineage that includes Riesling and Muscat Ottonel and is typically made in a sweet style; at 93 grams per liter of residual sugar, Forster's Auslese rendition was exceptional, with elderflower, lush yellow peach, passion fruit, and hazelnut notes.

Muscaris, which counts Solaris as a parent along with Gelber Muskateller, is intensely aromatic with notes of citrus, florals such as orange blossom, and often exotic fruit notes like lychee. The wines it yields are typically dense and extract-rich yet fresh, with notably high acidity. Fourth-generation winemaker Martin Koch at Rheinhessen producer Weingut Abthof, a member of Future Wines, makes a stunning example, its floral aromas of rose and lilac combining with bright citrus, yellow fruits, and nutmeg.

For all the exemplary sensory qualities of these second-generation hybrids, their success still relies on consumer acceptance. According to researchers, German consumers place a high priority on environmental credentials, which helps to override their unfamiliarity with the varieties; the wines' affordable prices and naturally lower alcohol levels could be an incentive for U.S. consumers as well. 

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Water With Steak

WHY I WORRY ABOUT RISING WINE PRICES

RECENTLY, I interviewed Eric Asimov, wine critic for *The New York Times*, who spoke about the need for more good wine in American restaurants. Not great wine. Just good wine—plain, honest, nonindustrial, good wine. The kind of wine that simply makes you happy. Wine that isn't cerebral and isn't on a pedestal. Wine that makes your dinner taste better. Wine that you can afford.

That last part is a touchy subject on-premise. Here in Napa Valley where I live and work, it's all too easy to dine in a restaurant where even the lower-priced bottles of wine cost four times as much as the food itself.

I, along with every wine writer I know including Asimov, have written about the danger of these high prices. In response, I've been told by sommeliers that I don't understand what restaurants are up against financially. In the wake of the pandemic, they say, the margins they work

with force them to charge high prices for wine. But this seems backwards to me. You know what charging high prices for wines by the glass gets you? It gets you a guest who orders a colorful cocktail at the bar and then a glass of water with their steak.

This should make every sommelier, every wine buyer, and even every chef cringe. Because all of us know what a glass of wine could do for that steak. It could make it sensational. Having water with steak instead feels like driving a stake through the heart of pleasure.

A few years ago, I asked 50 professionals in the food, wine, and hospitality industries one question: "Do chefs know more about wine than winemakers know about food, or do winemakers know more about food than chefs know about wine?"

Forty-nine responses came back that winemakers know more about food. But the one response that intrigued me the

most was from a chef who said, "Karen, that's a ridiculous question. Because if you care about flavor, what difference does it make if it's solid or liquid in your mouth?"

Indeed. And that brings us back to good wine and the need for such wines on on-premise wine lists. Restaurants are in the business of flavor. To make wine essentially unattainable by pricing it out of reach is to eliminate a whole field of flavor that a guest could experience, could fall in love with, could come back for again and again.

Restaurants say they want return business. It might not be possible to get there with water and a steak. 

Karen MacNeil is the author of The Wine Bible and the editor of the digital newsletter WineSpeed. She also writes the Substack column "Wine Bible(ing)." You can reach her on social media @karenmacneilco.

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Ditch the White Gloves

IT'S TIME TO DE-CORPORATIZE TASTING ROOMS

THERE HAS BEEN a lot of discourse about how tasting room visits have slowed and how even reducing fees has not brought back consumers. As the small producers that can't get their wines into the big grocery chains know all too well (the topic of blatant corruption in the distribution business is a whole other story), the bulk of their income comes from direct-to-consumer sales, and the vast majority of those sales happen in tasting rooms rather than online. Most consumers walk away from these visits with at least a couple bottles of wine if not a club membership—but as foot traffic slows, DTC sales decrease proportionally.

When I started going to the Santa Ynez Valley—it was just a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Los Angeles, and I was near destitute, so I couldn't afford Napa or Sonoma—wine tasting was free, though it bears mentioning that the staff often read from a script and knew very little about wine. When *Sideways* came out and I was no longer light in the wallet, my range expanded: Paso Robles, Napa, Sonoma, the Willamette Valley, Europe, New Zealand, Chile. And I wasn't alone. After the film's release, tasting room visits exploded: What was once for members of the trade like wine shop owners and restaurateurs was now for the hoi polloi, who came in droves, eager for the sort of wine-tour adventure romanticized in my book and movie. So, naturally, wineries started charging—\$5, then \$10. To justify the rising fees, they hired more experienced staff, but that hiked the cost even further. Enter the wine club membership pitches, the more aggressive tactics to get guests to walk away with bottles. I'm generalizing, but the salesmanship began to approach used car lot-like levels.

A little over three years ago, I moved to downtown Napa to be with my partner, who works at a famous wine company. As we explored—mostly in Sonoma because



PHOTO COURTESY OF REX PICKETT

The author (right) at Schug Winery's tasting room with its manager, Teresa Blankenship.

I'm a diehard Pinot and Chardonnay guy—we noticed with alarm that fees now started at \$50 for five tastes and went up from there. At the most prestigious wineries, the price burgeoned into the three figures. Meanwhile, the tasting rooms had turned more corporate. At Anaba in Carneros, for example, you're met by a maître d' who leads you to a table with a great view before another member of the staff comes over to serve you and dish out rehearsed tasting notes—sometimes informative but often mind-numbingly generic. Then the club memberships are pitched . . .

No! This is not what I want from a tasting room visit. Let me transport you to my absolute favorite tasting room in all of

Sonoma, also in Carneros: Schug Winery, which specializes in exquisite Pinots and Chardonnays. It is welcoming to anyone, and the fees are modest. It offers patio seating and barrel room caves for private parties, but I always choose the tasting room proper, which has six stools facing a picture window with stunning vineyard views. Its manager, Teresa Blankenship, runs it the way it should be run: no tasting notes unless you ask for them. (All I'm interested in is vintage, vineyard location, and time in barrel—period.) If you want to do a deep dive into the portfolio, she will provide one, but if you just want bubbles and rosés, no

problem; snobbery is nonexistent here. (And so for that matter are Coravins, which measure splashes.) Teresa is experienced and knowledgeable but also warm and funny—and when she's feeling especially generous, she may even take you back into the barrel room and pull magnums of aged vintages. I love Schug's wines, and we buy a lot of bottles there.

If tasting rooms want to survive, they need to de-corporatize: Stop the pretentious white-glove service designed to justify exorbitant tasting fees; pour more freely and offer half-glasses; put a halt to rehearsed speeches by mostly young people who know little about wine; and let the customer discover on their own what they like and don't like. Go to Schug and study how it's done there, then replicate the experience as closely as possible. 

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IN BOULDER, CO, SPANISH RESTAURANT **CASA JUANI** AIMS TO REDEFINE DESTINATION DINING

ORDER THE JAMÓN IBÉRICO at Casa Juani in Boulder, Colorado, and chef-partner Eduardo Valle Lobo himself is apt to roll a cart to your table and slice pieces off the leg of the highly prized ham before your eyes. It's quite a polished performance—but no less deeply personal for that.

"I want people to understand more about Spanish food, about the amazing ingredients that we have," says the Madrid native. "Actually, last week I started [offering] two different types of Ibérico ham, one from Jabugo and one from Salamanca 400 miles [away]," in order to demonstrate how terroir impacts the finished product. And that's just one example: Be it sea bass from Andalusia, olive oil from Córdoba, or what he calls "the secret ingredient"—love—"we're trying to bring Spain here."

"We" in this case is Valle Lobo and his wife-partner, Kelly Jeun, who moved to Boulder in 2017 to serve as co-executive chefs of famed Friulian restaurant Frasca Food and Wine. But upon striking out on their own, explains Jeun, "We wanted to do something authentic to Eduardo and his heritage," right down to naming their debut venture for his mother. While the result also clearly reflects their background in prestigious kitchens both stateside and abroad, she points out, "We don't have white tablecloths; servers are not in suits. People notice the details of technically correct service and appreciate it but still feel the soulfulness of the cooking." Valle Lobo puts it simply: "The vision is fun fine dining."

Bringing that vision is to bear on the beverage program is the responsibility of sommelier Alexander Greenberg, whose wine list has already begun to evolve since Casa Juani's grand opening in March. Though it also includes bottlings from across the Old World, particularly France,

as well as a handful of domestic alternatives, Greenberg has been pleased to discover that "our guests mostly want to drink Spanish wine, so I've tended to only buy [that] for the last couple months now."

Examples range from such historic estates as López de Heredia and Vega Sicilia to newer sensations like Comando G and Envinato—but whether the clientele knows Spain's top producers by name or not, they're certainly exploring

PHOTOS: CASEY WILSON



its key grapes. For example, says Greenberg, "I sell almost as much Mencía [as Tempranillo]. It's an extremely versatile wine [that's] really good for people who don't want something as big as a Ribera del Duero ... yet still want a red. And I think we sell more Albariño than anything else in this restaurant. It's a great food wine; that salinity pairs really well with seafood."

I'd say the same of the El Piraña 2023 Tarbissana that I enjoyed on my inaugural visit alongside mussels in escabeche and sea urchin custard with green grapes and almonds. Composed of 100% Palomino Fino from Jerez, it exemplified the potential for dry white table wine in the land of Sherry—which, *por supuesto*, also makes

a splash at Casa Juani, from the Fino that serves as a base for low-ABV cocktails like the Rebutito with Spanish lemon soda and mint to the PX that's used as a topping for ice cream.

Through those back doors, Greenberg hopes, the uninitiated will soon be led to drink Spain's fortified wines by the glass—not only Sherry but also vermouth, which the bar keeps on draft. But he's patiently taking the same long view as the restaurant's owners. Given that her husband's goal is purely "to do something for my homeland," in his words, Jeun adds, "We'd just love to become a community focal point, a go-to where everyone can drop in and be themselves." SJ



▲ A selection of shellfish-based bites from the *Marisqueria* section of Casa Juani's menu.

◀ Casa Juani chef-owners Eduardo Valle Lobo (center) and Kelly Jeun (right) with sous chef Sonny Viggiano.

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A Fine Wine Shrine

IN NEW YORK CITY, **SAINT URBAN** DOES JUSTICE TO ITS NAMESAKE

SAINT URBAN MAY be the new kid on a renowned block in Manhattan, but for chef, owner, and sommelier Jared Ian Stafford-Hill, the restaurant is something of a homecoming. In May 2025, he opened Saint Urban in the space formerly occupied by the gone-but-not-forgotten Veritas, just across the street from the legendary Gramercy Tavern. Stafford-Hill worked at both establishments in the 1990s: "I learned wine at Veritas. I learned seasonal cooking at Gramercy Tavern," he says.

However, at Saint Urban, Stafford-Hill has created a fine-dining experience representing his own unique vision. While some restaurants earn acclaim for signature dishes available day in and day out, Saint Urban is accumulating accolades for its ethereal and ever-changing seasonal menu: Each month, it offers five- and seven-course tastings inspired by a different wine region, with which guests can enjoy the suggested pairings or order from the impressive bottle list.

When I dined at Saint Urban in June, the menu showcased Spain, but it's primarily dedicated to French regions, among them Champagne (February), the Loire Valley (April), the Southern Rhône (September), and the Côte de Nuits (October). "November," notes Stafford-Hill, "is Piedmont, because that's the season for the white truffle." Miss a month, miss out.

Stafford-Hill fine-tuned the concept in his hometown of Syracuse in upstate New York, where he first opened Saint Urban in 2019 after 21 years of cooking in Manhattan. It won critical acclaim and a loyal following, but as the five-year lease was ending, some serendipitous news led him back to the Big Apple: "I saw that the Veritas space was available and it seemed like a neat opportunity to bring it full circle," he says—a way to create "a new generation of wine restaurant" within its hallowed walls.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAINT URBAN



Jared Ian Stafford-Hill is chef, owner, and sommelier at Saint Urban in New York, NY.

world, offered at remarkably fair prices. This is a list built with intention and restraint and one that shows tremendous promise—I expect it will continue to evolve, take risks, and grow into something truly significant." Meanwhile, *New York* magazine's dining vertical, Grub Street, hailed Saint Urban as "the city's best new restaurant for wine."

What motivates Stafford-Hill to offer fine wines at a fraction of the cost of other restaurants, prompting some customers to ask him if the prices are a mistake? "The lower the margins, the better stuff they're going to be

The lower cost of doing business upstate enabled Stafford-Hill to make a significant investment in the wine program. "All of the profit went into the wine cellar," he says. When Saint Urban concluded its run in Syracuse, it had amassed 2,000 selections. "Now, there's about 3,500 selections, but there's probably 12,000 bottles in inventory," Stafford-Hill adds.

However, it isn't just the size and variety of the wine list that has New Yorkers buzzing—it's the competitive pricing. In May, *Star Wine List* (for which I serve as New York ambassador) honored Saint Urban with the Best Newcomer List 2026 award. Says sommelier Yannick Benjamin, who served as a competition judge, "Particularly impressive is the depth of back-vintage selections from around the

drinking, the better time they're going to be having," he explains. This strategy also boosts sales volume: "For the right clientele, the people that really want to drink nice wines, special wines, they'll end up spending a whole lot more, because they come in and they say, 'Oh, they have good prices here—let's get all kinds of bottles.'"

Saint Urban was a third-century pope and the patron saint of winemakers and vineyards. How fitting that, in the 21st century, savvy sippers make a pilgrimage to a restaurant that bears his name and reveres wine accordingly. 

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

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The Great Grape Gamble

ON THE PROS AND CONS OF SIGNATURE VARIETIES

NAME ANY WINE REGION—does a grape variety or two come to mind? In France, Burgundy's renowned for its Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, while the Loire Valley is famed for Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc. Germany champions Riesling, whereas in Italy, Tuscany has Sangiovese and Piedmont is inseparable from Nebbiolo.

While these places have been associated with their key grapes for centuries, other examples are more recent. Napa Valley is to Cabernet Sauvignon as the Willamette Valley is to Pinot Noir. Mendoza is synonymous with Malbec, Marlborough with Sauvignon Blanc.

The idea of a signature variety has obvious marketing appeal: It's easy for consumers to grasp. No wonder, then, that producers in some lesser-known regions are making concerted efforts to create such identifications in our minds. The Cab Franc Forward campaign was launched last year by a collective of New York wineries to promote Cabernet Franc as the state's signature red, a unified approach that alleviates the pressure of competition between AVAs like the Finger Lakes and Long Island. Fans can enjoy discussing the differences between the bright, juicy Cab Franc from Hermann J. Wiemer on Seneca Lake and the refined, Bordeaux-styled version from Wölffer Estate Vineyard in the Hamptons, among many other delicious examples. The takeaway from the comparison will be that New York makes excellent Cabernet Franc.

In California's Livermore Valley, meanwhile, wineries are banking on Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc as their best bets for boosting the region's reputation as a wine country destination, in deliberate contrast to the luxury Cabernet Sauvignon that defines Napa Valley. "When I first started making wine 30 years ago, the goal was to make the most expensive wine, the biggest Cabernet Sauvignon we [could], because [we thought], 'We've got



PHOTO: DAVE MCINTYRE

Could the Livermore Valley be California's next big wine-country destination?

PHOTO: MAX FLATOW



Merchandise at the 2026 Cab Franc Forward Grand Tasting in New York City.

to compete with Napa,'" says Steven Kent Mirassou, sixth-generation scion of one of California's founding wine families and co-owner of Steven Kent Winery in Livermore. "Now the mission has changed dramatically. A \$30 bottle of Cab Franc from Livermore is affordable, it's delicious,

and it increases the amount of joy that's spread in the world."

Such campaigns may risk overshadowing the diversity these regions offer. Livermore has a history of Chardonnay production (think of the Wente clone), and on a recent visit there I enjoyed several wines made from Spanish and Italian varieties. The Finger Lakes still excels at Riesling, and New York as a whole has moved beyond the cheap fizz of Great Western and André to make some world-class sparkling wines.

But if these efforts to promote a signature variety succeed, consumers who discover the delights of Cab Franc from New York or Livermore will then have a wide range of other wines to explore from their new favorite regions. **SJ**

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FROM
SHOWRUNNER
TO *somm*

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.

The Power of “Yes”

BECOMING A SOMMELIER REQUIRED A LEAP OF FAITH

September 27, 2023, marked my first day at MICHELIN-starred restaurant Gwen, where I'd been hired for a job waiting tables that was harder to get than my first job writing for television. Auspiciously, as I arrived, the Writers Guild of America suddenly called off its six-month strike after reaching a tentative agreement with the major studios. I'd get my Universal deal back. I'd get my assistant, my development executive, my office, my *life* back!

But after my first service at Gwen ... I didn't want to go back. I loved the food, the pre-shift, my co-workers, making each guest's night special. I nervously approached Gwen's wine director, Andrew Merritt, and asked to be part of the sommelier team. He must have thought I was having a midlife crisis (as my wife did) and suggested I first get entry-level certification through the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS) the way a guidance counselor would gently suggest community college to a failing senior who's broadly announced his intention to go to Harvard.

Because I'd been drinking wine for 30 years and spent all my vacations in wine country, I passed the CMS Introductory Sommelier Course immediately. To prepare for the Level 2 Certified test, I continued studying and blind tasting every day at lunch. Some of the TV scripts I wrote post-lunch were definitely ... interesting.

A month later came a call from Andrew that changed my life. He and the other sommelier, John Paul, were both sick. Could I be the somm at Gwen that night? It was the moment I had been waiting for—and I said “no.”

Let me explain: I'd never been inside Gwen's wine cellar. How was I supposed to find anything? I'd never used a Coravin



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID SCHULNER

The author with Curtis Stone, chef at the MICHELIN-starred Gwen in Los Angeles.

or a Durand or tasted a Grand Cru Burgundy! But the main reason I declined was because I now knew how much I didn't know. I had too much respect for Gwen and the chef, Curtis Stone, to be anything less than perfect. But my wife, god bless her, told me to call back and say “yes,” which is a better answer than “no” to almost everything.

The night ended up being exhilarating. I felt totally at ease and confident, as though I were hosting a dinner party for my best friends. It went so well that Stone asked me to work as a somm at

his second restaurant, Maude, which is also MICHELIN-starred and offers an intimate multicourse tasting menu with wine pairings. If Gwen was a rollicking party, Maude was an intimate dance: hushed, serious, precise. Its GM, Jessica Taylor, corrected me every five minutes—I covered the wine label with my thumb; I poured “close-handed”; my pours were too big, too small, too late, too early—and I loved every second of it. I was a somm!

An idea for a TV show slowly began to form. 

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THE BIG SKINNY ON OREGON CHARDONNAY

UP UNTIL RECENTLY, I didn't think it was possible to grow a sleek, effortlessly crisp and fluid Chardonnay—that is, something similar to White Burgundy—in the U.S. But tasting, specifically blind tasting, is believing. This past spring, I sampled 26 current releases of Willamette Valley Chardonnay in which I found:

- A distinct sense of freshness and purity of fruit—primarily stone and orchard fruit (peach/pear) rather than a sweetly tropical character or sharp, underripe citrus
- A taut sense of balance and elegance, driven primarily by elevated acidity couched in distinctly moderate alcohol (all the wines hovered between 12.5% and 13.5% ABV)
- Suggestions of minerality, ranging from briny nuances to wet stoniness, that added to the sense of restraint on the nose and in the palate feel

The big issue with American brands has always been the compulsion to produce wines that adhere to a house style. Though most Oregon producers are no different, there is a positive movement afoot. For instance, I tasted five Chardonnays by Bergström Wines showing five distinctly different profiles: The 2023 Le Pré du Col Vineyard from the Ribbon Ridge AVA evinced more briny minerality than varietal fruitiness on the nose, while the 2023 Bergström Vineyard from the Dundee Hills had more riverine than saline minerality, along with the aforementioned Oregonian orchard fruit tinged with French accents of leanness and toast. My favorite Bergström, though, was the 2023 Silice Vineyard from the Chehalem Mountains AVA, whose flinty minerality merged with a faint oak toastiness to create an intriguing, floral, ginger cookie-like spiciness.

I asked owner/grower Josh Bergström what makes contemporary Oregon Chardonnay so distinctive and appealing. “The



PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

Bergström Wines is among the Willamette Valley, OR, wineries whose Chardonnay the author most prizes.

years spent trying to copy the stylistic expressions of White Burgundy or California were a fool's errand,” he responded. “We needed to pick our fruit when it best expresses our climate and our ripening zones and our soil types. Once we started focusing on our regional typicity, we started making world-class wines.” In short, these wines taste as though they come from Oregon, not anywhere else in the world.

Other outstanding expressions included the Lingua Franca 2023 Estate from the Eola-Amity Hills AVA, which showed an almost ethereal lightness and fluidity combined with floral fruit and pervasive minerality. The uncommon delicacy of the Bethel Heights 2024 Eola-Amity Hills Estate belied the strength of its pristinely fresh profile of lemon and

stone fruit. And the crisp, feather-light Walter Scott 2023 Freedom Hill Vineyard stood out for the crystal clarity of its floral-scented stone fruit.

There were toastier, Burgundy-inspired wines I liked too, including the 2023 EGW from 00 (pronounced “Double Zero”) Wines—which offered equal parts minerality, toasted barrel spice, and toothsome phenolic content—and its svelte 2023 Chehalem Mountain, whose terroir-derived profile of medium weight and elevated acidity was wrapped in toasty oak and yeasty lees.

At long last, there is such a thing as American Chardonnay made with restraint and a sense of place to counter the usual fruit and oak bombs that could hail from anywhere. And it's all coming out of Oregon. 

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Renaissance Woman

MASTER SOMMELIER MADELINE TRIFFON HAS MAINTAINED “A JOYFULLY CURIOUS SPIRIT” THROUGHOUT HER CAREER by David Furer

BORN IN CONNECTICUT and raised in Greece, Madeline Triffon, MS, returned to the United States to attend the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. “I made a deal with my father that I’d pay for my own tuition by working in restaurants as long as I could study whatever I wanted,” she recalls.

Upon discovering that Detroit’s 1,400-room Renaissance Center was about to open, the 21-year-old theater major applied for any open position; after impressing the F&B director with her French accent, she was placed as a sommelier in the French dining room. “At the time there were no corporate wine programs, so I’d nothing to build upon other than being told to read Hugh Johnson’s *[World Atlas of Wine]*. But the job teaches you, and soon I was given the responsibility of ordering the wines for the hotel’s entire needs,” Triffon says.

While at the “RenCen,” Triffon entered a few sommelier competitions to test her mettle, and in 1985 she shifted jobs to become the first sommelier at Detroit’s London Chop House. Two years later, she was one of 20 Americans invited to Monterey, California, to take the first Master Sommelier exam conducted in the U.S. “Five of us passed the Advanced exam and took the MS exam the next day, something that’s not been done since,” Triffon notes. She was the only one to pass all three sections the first time. “Our British colleagues have since been incredibly collaborative . . . in our endeavors [to build the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas (CMSA)]. I’ve made professional and life friends through this process [of serving as an examiner and mentor for CMSA]; the equity it has brought to my life has been of immeasurable value.”

Anthony “Chip” Delsener, president of key Michigan distributor AHD Vintners, came up in the wine business with Triffon and describes her as “unquestionably the most down-to-earth of Master Som-

PHOTO COURTESY OF MADELINE TRIFFON



meliers.” Over the course of 30 years, the colleagues traveled to France and Italy numerous times. “When a producer learned Madeline was an MS, they grew more selective in describing their work, and Madeline would say, ‘No, please tell me like I’m a third grader—start from the beginning [and] don’t leave anything out,’” Delsener says. “She always brings a joyfully curious spirit to the exercise of tasting.” Referring to Triffon as a “lodestar,” fellow Midwesterner Doug Frost, MS, MW, a previous subject of this column, adds that “Madeline showed me how important it was to thank someone for bringing a problem to our attention by first thanking them for speaking up and then showing that I heard them and will take action. It’s one small strategy, but I always use it when I’m managing people or teaching.”

The sixth overall and first female American MS—and just the second female MS worldwide—says she never

found her gender an issue in her hospitality career, as she worked solely with owners and managers who simply wanted her job done successfully. In 2012, she began serving as a moderator at the Women in Wine Leadership Symposium, an experience that, in her words, “struck me deeply and made it obvious that I have to show up and be supportive, encouraging, and aware of issues other women may be having.” Triffon currently mentors MS candidates through the CMSA Office Hours program, and when organizing and hosting events, she always brings along an active wine professional such as Advanced Sommelier Michelle

DeHayes of Little Guy Wine Company, who as a young restaurant manager sought out the best possible mentor in her area. “My smartest career decision was applying where Madeline was the wine director. She dubbed me her ‘deputy,’ as she was uncomfortable with the term ‘assistant,’” DeHayes says, noting that Triffon has been “a steady presence on the Michigan restaurant scene, quietly setting an example by making the time to support tasting groups, charity events, and loyal (sometimes now multigenerational) clients. I’ve seen her charm winemakers around the globe, collectors in their own cellars, and your favorite auntie out for a special occasion.”

In addition to her event work, Triffon vets wine selections for Plum Market, an independent Midwest retailer where “guest perception rules and quality is non-negotiable,” in her words. To this day, she’s happiest interacting with guests and staff—and tasting wine! 



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Why Experiences Are Wine's Most Powerful Marketing Tool

I'VE HEARD A LOT through the years about the “experience economy” and how consumers increasingly crave authenticity and memorable moments over scores, awards, and prestige: They want to know the stories behind the wine, to learn about the people who make it and the mission that drives them.

In May, I saw that play out in real time as V is for Vino hosted its first large-scale wine tour: a river cruise through Bordeaux with 60 members of our audience. Over the course of a week, we visited wineries, shared meals, explored vineyards, and spent countless hours talking about wine. What surprised me most wasn't what our guests learned about Bordeaux. It was what I learned about *them*. By the end of the trip, certain patterns became impossible to ignore. The moments people talked about most didn't necessarily involve the oldest wines, highest-rated bottles, or most prestigious châteaux; instead, they were the personal experiences. And for producers, retailers, and restaurateurs alike, there are some valuable lessons in that observation.

First, experiences create emotional connections. One of our favorite visits was Château Lagrange in Saint-Julien, where our group was hosted by managing director Matthieu Bordes himself. The contrast with more transactional tastings was striking: We didn't just sample the wines but got to know the producer that crafted them, transforming it from

a label on a bottle into a personal story. Not every tour can be led by an owner or winemaker, but the lesson remains the same: Whoever represents your brand becomes its public face, so make sure they're equipped to create the kind of connection that turns visitors into fans.

Second, experiences create advocates. Another memorable visit was Château Biac, a family-owned estate that had previously been featured on our show, which meant that many of our guests already felt connected to the family. As we enjoyed aperitifs and hors d'oeuvres before gathering for dinner in the barrel room, we saw personal touches everywhere, from family recipes and home-made dishes to stories shared throughout the evening. The wines were outstanding, but they weren't what people talked about afterward—it was the feeling of being welcomed into someone's world. That represents an opportunity for wineries and wine brands: Whether through social media, wine club events, winemaker dinners, or other hospitality initiatives, the goal is to make consumers feel like insiders rather than customers. When you do that successfully, you create loyal proponents who will share your story long after the event is over.

Finally, experiences build community. One of the most rewarding parts of the trip had nothing to do with wine at all. On the ship, we hosted training sessions, trivia nights, and gatherings to help guests learn

about the region and get to know one another. Over the course of the week, those relationships deepened, and people who arrived as strangers left discussing where they would meet next. This reinforced something I've long believed: The strongest brands don't simply create customers but create opportunities for customers to connect. Offerings such as wine club socials, educational events, harvest celebrations, and annual festivals drive engagement and long-term loyalty in ways that marketing campaigns rarely can.

So how can wine professionals apply some of these ideas? The good news is that creating meaningful experiences is often more achievable than people think. You might take your wine club members on a trip as I did, host a special tasting, or simply work to ensure that every member of your team understands how important it is to make each guest feel valued. It's easy to lose sight of that when facing the day-to-day realities of our industry, but the most successful wine businesses understand that they should be creating memories, telling stories, and bringing people together. The wine may be what first attracts consumers, but it's the experience that keeps them engaged long after the bottle is empty.

Until next wine,
Vince 

Episodes of V is for Vino can be watched for free on YouTube at @visforvino.

On a recent trip organized by V is for Vino, the group visited Château Biac in Bordeaux.



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The Pause Is the Point

HOW HISTORIC MONTALCINO ESTATE **FATTORIA DEI BARBI** EMBODIES THE MESSAGE OF COME OVER OCTOBER by Ruth Tobias

"TOAST TO TOGETHERNESS." That's the concise motto of *Come Over October*, which encapsulates the goal of the promotional campaign conceived by prominent wine writer Karen MacNeil and communications specialists Gino Colangelo and Kimberly Noelle Charles, DipWSET: to remind consumers that wine isn't just a beverage but an agent of cultural exchange and personal connection. It exists not simply to be drunk but to be shared, face to face and heart to heart.

As a major supporter of the campaign, respected importer Frederick Wildman & Sons obviously subscribes to that philosophy—and so, accordingly, do the producers in its portfolio. A remarkable case in point is Fattoria dei Barbi in the Montalcino zone of Tuscany, where proprietor Stefano Cinelli Colombini's family has been ensconced since the mid-14th century, establishing their winery in 1790.

For Colombini, wine is woven into the fabric of everyday social life. "My earliest memories are of the long tables of my childhood, where everyone gathered for meals that lasted for hours," he recalls. "We shared food, stories, laughter; lively discussions, and, of course, wine. It was ... a natural part of being together." Come harvest-time, those tables included not just relatives but friends and colleagues: "Once the work was finished, people came together to celebrate. Landowners and farm workers sat at the same table with their families; we ate, we drank, and we enjoyed each other's company. [It] was about sharing a meaningful moment together. [To me] as a child, it all seemed perfectly natural. Only later did I realize that this simple way of gathering reflected an entire culture."

After all, the Brunello di Montalcino for which the region is so renowned is "more



Stefano Cinelli Colombini is the proprietor of Fattoria dei Barbi in the Montalcino zone of Tuscany, Italy.

than a wine: It's a way of thinking, a way of being," Colombini muses. "The Sangiovese grape gives us the potential. The soil gives us the potential. But the strength of Montalcino is that we believe in a project which is shared between us. We have always worked together as a community, always, to produce Brunello ... because we share an idea." And as a community, they love to share that idea with visitors who could ultimately become friends (or relatives, for that matter).

"In Montalcino, a table is not truly a table unless there is bread and a bottle of wine at its center. ... They are the most genuine symbols of hospitality," Colombini explains. "They are the simplest way of saying, 'Come, sit with us. ... You are among friends.'" That's certainly true at the estate's Taverna dei Barbi, he adds, where they're accompanied by

tastes of housemade cheeses as well as other local products such as olive oil and truffles: "Each glass and every bite tells a story of people, place, and heritage, inviting guests to experience ... the culture, traditions, and way of life that the wine represents."

And it's true elsewhere in Montalcino too, as American wine writer Jessica Dupuy attests. Notes the co-author (with Andrea Lonardi, MW) of recent release *Italianity: The Culture of Italian Wine*, "One of my favorite places to visit is a restaurant and hotel called Il Giglio that has been in the area for generations. We all have our romantic visions of the *nonna* who's rolling out the pasta in the kitchen—and that really is happening at Il Giglio," where a simple dish of white beans impressed her so much she included the recipe in her book. In her view, it illustrated, "in a very quiet, humble, authentic way, [how] nothing is spared in terms of intention at the table. That's the inviting. That's the sharing."

Of course, such invitations are proffered not just here but across Italy, day in and day out, as they have been since time immemorial. Dupuy points to yet another salient Italian tradition: aperitivo. "It's much more than a pre-dinner drink—it's a ritual that marks the transition from work to life," she says. "As I wrote in *Italianity*, 'To be Italian is to practice a particular kind of pause.' [When] people gather for a drink and a few bites to reconnect with themselves and each other ... the drink isn't the point; the pause is. It's one of the clearest expressions of the Italian belief that how we spend time together matters just as much as what we eat or drink." To that, we raise a glass of Fattoria dei Barbi Brunello. *sj*

LA PETTEGOLA BANFI

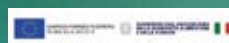


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The Sud-Ouest Has a Lot to Benefit Your Bottom Line

IF YOU READ the last six installments of this column (starting with the August/September 2025 issue), you have a theoretical basis for using the tactics of transactional psychology to improve both revenue and guest satisfaction at your restaurant. Now it's time to put them into practice. The next step is determining the wines that you'll feature in your program. For instance, I've long been a believer in showcasing up-and-coming wine regions as a means of introducing guests to something new. But don't forsake the established regions that are reinventing themselves.

Enter Cahors and the Côtes du Lot. Most sommeliers know that the former produces Malbec and little else; indeed, it is the mainstay grape of this incredible Sud-Ouest appellation. But what they might not know is that Cahors has been undergoing many changes: It is vastly different today than it was 20 or even ten years ago. Furthermore, the broader Côtes du Lot region opens the stylistic

gates. It has, pun intended, a lot to offer, from sparkling, white, and rosé wines to non-Malbec-based reds. The only thing that isn't a lot is their price. Even at their most expensive, they are wildly affordable as well as tantalizing. I can think of very few other regions in the world that offer such an incredible value proposition.

The Cahors of yesteryear had a reputation for being rustic and simple, but its most visionary modern producers are changing the game with polished, elegant versions. These include Fabien Jouvès' Mas del Périé, Domaine la Calmette, Clos Tro-teligotte, Domaine du Prince, Paul Hobbs' Crocus, Château du Cèdre, Château Lagrézette, Château La Reyne, Château Saint-Sernin, Domaine des Gravalous, and many more that can compete with the world's best. Given that Malbec remains one of the most popular categories by the glass, the advantage of Cahors has to do with your bottom line. With virtually no competitive set outside of more commercial Argentine brands, wines from this re-

gion overdeliver on quality and can easily be listed at a price premium, allowing for better margins as well as happier guests.

As for the Côtes du Lot, it is rife with Kimmeridgian limestone, the very soil that gives Chablis its vibrant acidity, savory salinity, and marine minerality. It should therefore come as no surprise that the region produces racy, fresh, and delicious Chardonnay as well as Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, and more. The main difference? They don't carry anywhere near the price tag of their competitive set, namely Chablis, Sancerre, and Vouvray. They can be acquired for less, sold by the glass (or bottle) for more, and still ensure the happiest of guests. Since we've been focused on psychology, it's worth pointing out that introducing guests to these lesser-known gems adds massive value to their experience (and to their virtual brag board on social media).

So don't sleep on the wines of Cahors and the Côtes du Lot. Your margins and your guests will thank you! 

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Spin the Wheel

AT **ZUZU** IN SCOTTSDALE, AZ'S HOTEL VALLEY HO, EXECUTIVE CHEF RUSSELL LACASCE INVITES DINERS TO BET ON SURPRISE

A CERAMIC GOOSE, its belly billowing with dry ice, lands on the table. Perched on top, a tray set on crushed ice holds deviled eggs crowned with salmon tartare and Osetra caviar; flanked by capers, shallots, chives, crème fraîche, and fresh-fried potato chips dusted with truffle and parmesan. Two custom mini Martinis arrive alongside. Welcome to Chef Roulette, where the executive chef of ZuZu, Russell LaCasce, deals first.

Listed on ZuZu's regular menu—the Scottsdale hotel restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner—it's a six-course option for those game enough to try it. "Roulette is for adventurous guests who are willing to let us surprise them," LaCasce explains, "and because I'm blessed to have a great team of creative chefs, I'm always looking to give them opportunities for their creativity."

On our visit, the Roulette featured everything from gnocchi sardi alfredo tossed tableside in a cheese wheel, topped with a whipped parmesan "cloud," and showered with black truffles and chives to a filet paired with a duck fat—and-bone marrow popover filled with demi-glace-glossed mushrooms. While the menu is fluid ("We can change it at any time," notes LaCasce), one dish remains a fixture: a sandwich featuring a buttermilk-fried chicken breast topped with hot honey and, brilliantly, buttered popcorn ice cream. "That dish really represents what we do here—it's approachable and not too fancy but creative and done really well," explains LaCasce, adding that his philosophy in the kitchen revolves around a "focus on technique, quality ingredients, and [creating] the best version of [a] dish while still having fun."

Behind the bar, general manager Webster Shelton brings the same spirit to the



ZuZu general manager Webster Shelton and executive chef Russell LaCasce.

beverage pairings that come with select Roulette dishes. LaCasce wanted the first course to feel "playful and interactive," he says, which led to the aforementioned build-your-own Martini. For the hot chicken, Shelton pours the Allen Key—named for beloved food-and-beverage director Amber Allen and designed to cut through the sandwich's heat and richness—with Tito's Handmade Vodka, ginger liqueur, ginger beer, and lemon.

The standard cocktail list, created in collaboration with the beverage team, is designed for "everyone," says Shelton, "from those looking for a more curated fine-dining experience like Roulette to



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

The whimsical first course of ZuZu's current Chef Roulette menu.

someone here for a quick lunch before heading back to the office." The Pear + Citrus Spritz, combining Giffard Pamplemousse Liqueur, St-Germain, Gran Ponche Mexicano pomegranate liqueur, and Prosecco, is "an easy sipper any time of day," he notes, while the Dark Side leans moodier, layering High West Bourbon with coffee liqueur, Carpano Antica Formula, espresso, vanilla-demerara syrup, and black walnut bitters over a king cube to deliver "the feeling of an Espresso Martini but in a more upscale vehicle," in Shelton's

words. Mocktails like the Prickly Business, a union of prickly pear, passion fruit, lime juice, and jalapeño, are equally thoughtful so that everyone "can have something delicious alongside whatever they're eating," he adds.

In short, both Shelton and LaCasce take hospitality seriously, ensuring that it's at once inclusive and engaging, without taking themselves too seriously. "I just want people to come in and experience something different," LaCasce says. "It's about creating memories and standing out so they leave saying, 'Wow, I had such an amazing experience last night'—and then go tell ten of their friends about it." **SJ**

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Wine and Me

WHY THIS INDUSTRY IS THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

HAVE I MENTIONED that I love wine or perhaps given that impression?

Like many of you reading this, I make my living from wine and love what I do. It's in my blood; my paternal ancestors are from Germany's Pfalz region, and my maternal ancestors grew grapes and made wine in the countryside south of Rome. When my maternal grandfather, Giuseppe, emigrated and purchased his first house in the Bronx in New York, he carved a cellar from the soft bedrock under the front porch to make his own wine. After he passed away, my father, despite being an in-law, brought the family tradition to our home in Queens. I still make wine as they did.

Our homemade wine is simple—rustic but good, or so wine folks tell me without, as far as I can tell, being overly polite about it. Like my grandfather and father, I purchase grapes from California's San Joaquin Valley through the Bronx and Brooklyn fruit markets. I won't make anything other than the Alicante-Moscato-Sultana blend Giuseppe did because I already have access to great varietal wines from around the world. This is about a tradition that I only improve on for three reasons: I have learned from my family's lessons, modern technology allows for temperature-controlled home cellars, and I work in the wine industry. Many informal consultants offer me valuable insight into making wine, even at home.

Working in and educating others about wine seems to be my true calling. I started 40 years ago as a wholesale sales rep in Westchester County, New York, then went into marketing before representing wines for five years in the Caribbean, Canada, and Asia. I lived in Tuscany for three years building a groundbreaking winery-hospitality program and managing European sales, then came back to the U.S. to handle press relations, followed by a stint with a luxury wine team. I've also



PHOTO COURTESY OF LARS LEICHT

The author in his element.

had the pleasure of leading GuildSomm enrichment trips to vineyards and wineries across Italy for ten years, traveling with over 100 somms to date—16 of whom went on to the Master Sommelier level.

Throughout this journey, I have met exceptional people who have shared, taught, learned, and listened, a wonderful and (generally speaking) common trait in the wine business. Today, helping lead wine-country camps as VP of education for *The SOMM Journal*, I learn as much from our

campers as from our winery hosts. And none of us should ever stop learning.

Suffice to say, all of this has just magnified my love for wine exponentially. As Ca' del Bosco's Maurizio Zanella told me when I was researching how he fuses art with wine (see page 130), "Wine is alive. It's an organic, evolving thing meant to be consumed, enjoyed, and felt through the senses."

My senses are far from done with wine, but what a great ride it has been—so far! **SL**

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Raucous bidding unfolds at the Willamette Valley Wine Auction.

PHOTOS: EASTON RICHMOND

A Perfect Ten

THE **WILLAMETTE VALLEY WINE AUCTION** CELEBRATES A MAJOR MILESTONE AND A BLOCKBUSTER VINTAGE by Pete Holland

BACK IN 2014, the Willamette Valley Wineries Association (WVWA) was chronically underfunded, with member dues failing to cover the cost of promoting the region to the world. Area pioneer David Adelsheim was determined to right the course. He imagined an Oregonian version of Premiere Napa Valley, an auction that would raise money while fostering camaraderie among local vintners. So he and Pat Dudley, co-owner/president of Bethel Heights Vineyard, formed a committee, with Josh Bergström of Bergström Wines accepting the role of auction chair. After all, how much work could it be?

"It took a decade off my life," says Bergström, with the levity of a man now unburdened by the responsibility. Safe to say his sacrifice was not in vain, as the Willamette Valley Wine Auction, open

exclusively to the trade, has raised over \$6 million for the WVWA since its 2016 inception. Chaired by Argyle Winery brand and marketing manager Elizabeth Clark, the tenth annual edition took place on May 13 and 14, with buyers from 27 states (plus Washington, D.C.) descending on the region to bid on 41 online and 36 live auction lots. Bergström described it as "full circle" in that some of the attendees were likely first lured to the Willamette Valley as junior industry associates with invitations to Pinot Camp. Win them young with a four-day bacchanal packed with seminars, soil pits, and salmon bakes, the logic goes, and they'll come back as senior buyers—bearing big checks.

The highlight of day one was a tasting in the Arena at Abbey Road Farm, a spacious, rustic-luxe setting where attendees

also enjoyed a sprawling buffet and live music from an Americana band. Those thirsting for a little extra education could duck into Abbey Road's Cellar Room for two packed seminars, each offering the perspectives of four Willamette Valley winemakers: "A Benchmark Year" and "A View Forward—Insights From the 2024 Vintage." Both focused on a growing season that's inspiring "best of the decade" talk; as Bethel Heights winemaker Ben Casteel noted, "I can't recall [another] harvest when we could get grapes exactly when we wanted to."

On the climactic second day, the crowd took over Domaine Serene's palatial Clubhouse for another tasting, followed by lunch and the raucous live auction.

Continued on page 44 ►

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Domaine Divio owner/winemaker Bruno Corneaux pours for auction attendees.

“There was so much energy” among the attendees, who were buoyed by optimism and “ready to get down to business,” according to Clark. By the end of the day, bidders had pumped \$600,000 into the WVWA’s coffers.

Among the one-of-a-kind 60-bottle lots on the auction block, Alexana Winery’s fetched the highest bid for the second straight year, bringing in \$25,000 for its Mosaic – In Sepia Pinot Noir; Argyle wrangled \$15,000 for its 2022 Point Zero Blanc de Noirs, sourced from Knudsen Vineyard’s own-rooted Block 2, planted in 1974. Lots from 00 Wines, Elk Cove, Bethel Heights, Penner-Ash, and Bergström all raised over \$10,000, as did collaborations by Bethel Heights and Cristom Vineyards; Domaine Divio and Soléna; and Hyland Estates, Lingua Franca, Nicolas Jay, and Soléna.

Cooperation has been a core tenet of the auction from the start, and a quarter of this year’s lots were collaborations between producers, which are given free rein to link up as they wish. The all-female squad of Ponzi Vineyards’ Luisa Ponzi, Matzinger Davies’ Anna Matzinger; Argyle’s Kate Payne Brown, and Ridgecrest’s Wynne Peterson-Nedry poked at the patriarchy with their outstanding You’d Look Prettier if You Smiled Chardonnay, while Laurent Montalieu of Soléna and Bruno Corneaux of Domaine Divio fêted their native land with their Francophilia Chardonnay.

A week before the auction, I hopped on an early-morning train from my home in Eugene to meet my colleague, *SOMM Journal* chief wine critic Jonathan Cristaldi, in Portland. Over a two-day marathon at



Elk Cove Vineyards owner/winemaker Adam Campbell with Josh Bergström of Bergström Wines.

the Kimpton Hotel Vintage downtown, we tasted as many of the auction wines as we could. (Many thanks to Emily Pettersson, who handles media relations for the WVWA, for putting the tasting together; as well as Elaine Kim, wine director at The Allison Inn in Newberg, who kept the wines flowing and the bottles organized.)

All in all, I left with notes for 48 Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, and sparkling wines. The best wine of the day for me was Bethel Heights and Cristom’s Acclivity Pinot Noir, made with fruit from the latter’s top-tier Jessie Vineyard and the former’s Steep Slope block. Teeming with deep red and black cherry, tangy yogurt, boysenberry, cinnamon, vanilla, and toast

as well as earthy notes of turned soil and mushrooms, it was silky on the palate despite its firm structure of grippy tannins and acidic backbone. It’s fit for 15 years in the cellar.

Three other Pinots stood out: The full and silky Evening Land Hunter’s Moon Pinot showed deep notes of candied ripe raspberry and blackberry accented by baking spice and cedar sawdust; Lingua Franca’s Antinomie displayed a gorgeously deep and concentrated black-cherry character; and The Four Graces’ Grace and Harmony was a Pommard-clone stunner with powerful aromatics and a structure derived from super-fine yet firm tannins.

This year’s auction also included many fine examples of Willamette Valley Chardonnay, among them the Trading Places collaboration between Domaine Serene and WillaKenzie Estate. Sourced 50/50 from the former’s Côte Sud Vineyard and the latter’s estate property, it had a rich yet racy nose and a palate of lush pineapple soaked in lemon juice that led the mouth on a thrill ride before tapering to a vibrant finish. Bethel Heights’ phenomenal Swan Song Chardonnay, meanwhile, was crafted from own-rooted Wente vines that were planted in 1977 and perished after the 2024 season. Robust on the palate, with a sexy mouthfeel and energetic finish, it will delight fans of fuller-bodied styles. And massive kudos to relative newcomer Ambar Estate for its outstanding Writer’s Block Chardonnay from the Willamette Valley’s only Regenerative Organic Certified vineyard; medium-bodied, it was a “wow” wine worthy of praise, showing a nose of baked golden apple and lemon curd with a slight reductive note and a peppery zing as well as a firm backbone of acidity that lasted through a lingering, lively finish.

As for the bubbly, wines from Trisaetum and King Estate—the latter a nationally known stalwart from the southern Willamette Valley—both impressed. The Trisaetum spent a whopping ten years on the lees, on par with top Champagnes from Billecart-Salmon and Bollinger, and had rich, oxidative notes to show for it. King Estate’s bottling was youthful and lemony, with a fantastic harmony between acidity, effervescence, and spice notes.

Stay tuned for further details on next year’s auction, which will take place May 12–14. *SJ*

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Liquid Assets

AT SOUPÇON IN CRESTED BUTTE, CO, GENERAL MANAGER AND SOMMELIER
JOEL GRILL SHARES STORIES AS GLADLY AS BOTTLES by Rebecca Treon

IN CRESTED BUTTE, nicknamed “the last great Colorado ski town” for its jaw-dropping scenery and cast of colorful locals, a modest 1880s miner’s cabin tucked away in an alley is home to the area’s only upscale French restaurant. Soupçon opened in 1975 and has been wowing diners with its seasonal, locally sourced, innovative fare ever since. With only nine tables that seat just 28, it offers an intimate, bespoke experience that general manager and sommelier Joel Grill plays an integral role in creating every evening.

Like much of the population here, Grill took a circuitous route to Crested Butte, crediting many moves throughout his life for his wanderlust: His unconventional upbringing took him to South Korea from Sweden when he was a child, then to Switzerland as a teen before he attended college in the United States. Grill arrived in Colorado 15 years ago with a master’s degree in international business, intending to take a break before entering the corporate world. He’d worked as a line cook all through college, but when he

applied at Soupçon, the only available position was as a dishwasher. Still, he saw an opportunity for growth at the restaurant and took the leap.

After about a year, Grill was cooking a couple of nights a week, followed by bartending the next year, giving him well-rounded experience in the front as well as the back of the house. He spent off-season months at the restaurant fortifying his spirits education, then moved into a server role. “As soon as I started that position, I knew I needed to focus on my wine knowledge,” he says, noting that Soupçon’s fully insulated, temperature-controlled wine cellar holds around 300 bottles. “We opened a new bottle of wine every night to taste it and talk about it. I did wine tastings with two of Soupçon’s sommeliers, learning as much as I could.”

Upon becoming general manager about three and a half years ago, Grill continued his wine education by getting certified by the Court of Master Sommeliers. “I work with as many distributors as possible to access a wide range of

wines and ensure I’m bringing in the best bottle at each price point. While quality is paramount, I’m especially drawn to wines with a compelling story. Guests respond to that, too,” he says. “Instead of simply describing tasting notes, I love sharing details like, ‘This family has been producing wine from this vineyard since 1610,’ or ‘This [was] one of the few vineyards not uprooted by the Romans when they invaded nearly 2,000 years ago.’ Every great wine carries a story, and I enjoy sharing that story as guests experience it.”

Grill rarely stocks more than six bottles of any single wine, resulting in a varied and fluid list that’s reprinted almost daily. It’s largely Old World with a French focus, but a few surprises include the Gravner 2014 Ribolla Gialla produced by Joško Gravner, a pioneer of biodynamic orange wines that are buried and aged in Georgian qvevri (clay vessels), and the Birichino 2022 Bechthold Vineyard Cinsault from 140-year-old vines in Lodi. “There’s always something fresh and exciting to discover,” says Grill. ■

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The Areni Awakening

ARMENIA'S FLAGSHIP RED GRAPE RISES FROM OBSCURITY TO ACCLAIM

story and photos by Deborah Parker Wong

ONE OF THE world's oldest-known cultivated grape varieties, Areni Noir is considered to be indigenous to Armenia. Originating from the Caucasus domestication line of *Vitis vinifera*, it emerged in the village of Arpa—now named Areni in its honor—in southwestern Vayots Dzor province, where it thrives today.

Areni has gone by as many as 39 other names over the millennia. Ancient synonyms include Sev Malahi (Black Malahi) and Orduzi Sev (Black of Orduz), the latter referring to the ancient settlement of Orduz in the Armenian Highlands region, where the grape was cultivated long before it was renamed after the Areni River by a Soviet decree in 1946.

In 2007, the discovery of the Areni-1 cave complex in Vayots Dzor provided further insight into Areni's origins. Located on the left bank of the Arpa River in the eastern part of the modern-day Areni village, the three-chambered karst cave dates back to the Copper Age and contains evidence of the world's oldest winery, estimated to have been in operation between 4,100 and 4,000 B.C.E.

Initial research was quick to establish that domesticated *Vitis vinifera* was used to make wine at Areni-1 but didn't confirm it to be the ancestor of Areni. In

2015, geneticists and ampelographers at the University of Lisboa in Portugal analyzed charred grape seeds from the cave dating from 780 to 1,000 C.E. to confirm that they came from a close relative to the vines being cultivated in the region today. This DNA match implies that local vignerons have been using massal selection to propagate the variety for 6,000 continuous years.

A Varietal Overview

For millennia, Armenia boasted a vibrant wine culture, one that historians say influenced those of Greece and Rome. But in the 20th century, production succumbed to Soviet rule. During the Soviet era (1920–1991), Armenia's wine industry centered on the mass production of brandy, resulting in the loss of hundreds of native grape varieties. While indigenous white grapes like Voskehat, Mskhali, and Garan Dmak were spared because they were preferred for brandy production, Areni survived primarily because local families continued to farm it in small, private household plots.

Once Armenia regained independence in 1991, a new generation of winemakers began reclaiming Areni. Often likened to Pinot Noir and Sangiovese for its finesse,



A map of Armenia's five winegrowing regions.

silky tannins, and vibrant red-fruit aromas, the grape is capable of yielding world-class wines that are now receiving international acclaim. (The 2026 Concours Mondial de Bruxelles wine competition, held June 25–27 in the capital city of Yerevan, offered some noteworthy examples: Judges bestowed awards on more than 30 Areni wines, including a Grand Gold for the Noa 2022 Red Reserve and gold medals for the Krya Sev 2021 Areni, Ijevan 2023 Reserve Areni, Dzor Em 2023 Areni Cuvée Attila, Mayrik 2025 Red Dry, Hin 2021 Areni Red, Voskeni 2021 130 Reserve

Continued on page 50 ►

Vineyards at the base of Mount Aragats in the Armenian region of Aragatsotn.

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Areni, Voskeni 2021 Sardarapat Reserve, and Manukyan 2024 Kouash Rosé.)

Although it is cultivated across Armenia, Areni has naturally adapted to the severe temperature swings that mark the harsh continental climate of Vayots Dzor; so production is concentrated there. The thick-skinned variety is characterized by primary aromas of red fruit like cherry, cranberry, and pomegranate but can also show darker fruit such as blackberry and plum in warmer regions. Flavors are nuanced with floral and mineral undertones, and medium-weight tannins are fine-grained. Aging reveals secondary notes of black pepper, dried herbs, and subtle earthiness, while oak aging specifically contributes notes of vanilla, spice, and black tea.

Five Regions, Five Terroirs

In the first century B.C.E., historic Armenia stretched 300,000 square kilometers from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the Caspian Sea in the east and as far south as Mesopotamia, making it the most powerful state east of the Roman Republic. As a strategic crossroads, it was subject to waves of Mongol, Ottoman, Persian, and Russian invasion that left it one-tenth of its size. Modern-day Armenia's borders are now confined to a mountainous area of about 30,000 square kilometers, with Mount Ararat looming above the horizon across the border with Turkey to the southwest and Lake Sevan at the base of the Lesser Caucasus mountains to the east.

Considered the cradle of Armenian culture, biblical Mount Ararat dominates the skyline of Yerevan and the surrounding vineyards of Ararat, one of the country's five wine regions. Ararat is the nation's historical winemaking center; home to the largest wineries and brandy distilleries. Its hot summers and rich volcanic soils yield excellent wines from the indigenous white varieties Kangun and Garan Dmak. Areni grown here shows darker fruit and more concentration: Aged in Armenian and Caucasian oak, the full-bodied Voskeni 130 Areni Reserve offers robust ripe cherry, vanilla, and clove; fine, mature tannins; and balanced acidity.

Vayots Dzor, the birthplace of white Voskehat as well as Areni, is the country's southernmost region. Its vineyards are set on slopes in ferrous volcanic and



The excavation of a 6,100-year-old winery in the Areni-1 cave complex in Vayots Dzor.

Lake Sevan, Tavush is a heavily forested region close to the Georgian border. There's a dramatic shift in the climate on the northeastern side of the Lesser Caucasus due to maritime influence from the Black Sea, ensuring ideal terroir for producing crisp white and sparkling wines as well as light, fresh, and delicate expressions of Areni. The Hovas 2023 Areni aged in stainless steel has pronounced aromas of rose, pomegranate, strawberry, and plum plus a spicy finish;

the 2019 vintage, which spent one year in French oak, demonstrates its ageworthiness with additional notes of blood orange, camphor, and amaro.

A Word on Armenian Culture

In many ways, Armenian culture feels like an antidote to modern life. Fresh and dried fruit, vegetables, and herbs accompanied by grilled or roasted meats and the flatbread called lavash are central to the country's cuisine, which is seemingly absent of processed foods. Live music and dancing are considered keys to happiness, accompanying meals at larger restaurants and prevalent at events of all sizes. It's common to see community dance circles in the streets of Yerevan, whose thriving café scene dates to the eighth century B.C.E.

Unbeknownst to many, Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion, establishing a church in 301 C.E. that exists independently of both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox faiths. Long before it became part of that church's sacrament, archaeobotanical finds at Areni-1 confirm that wine was used in burial rituals there. The presence of wine in everyday life in Armenia harkens back to the very earliest moments of its culture. 

limestone soils at extreme altitudes of 3,200–5,200 feet. A fine example of its terroir is the Old Bridge 2023 Areni Noir Reserve, which displays youthful aromas of tart red cherry and pomegranate and complex flavors of red cherry, sandalwood, and cedar within a medium body.

Located in the fertile Ararat Plain at elevations of 3,000–3,600 feet, Armavir is modern Armenia's largest viticultural and winemaking hub. With a hot, semi-desert climate, it's home to such producers as Karas Wines and ArmAs Estate. Recommended wines include the Karas 2023 Reserve Areni Sireni; showing aromas of tart, macerated raspberry as well as vanilla and smoke, it's refined and balanced on the palate, with mellow tannins.

Just north of Yerevan, Aragatsotn is nestled on the slopes of Mount Aragats, a four-peaked volcanic massif reaching 13,420 feet, where the soils are composed of basalt and limestone and the diurnal temperature shift is pronounced. Here, prominent estates like Van Ardi and Voskevaz Winery grow both indigenous and international varieties. The former's intensely fruity 2023 Reserve Areni boasts a ripe, concentrated nose of sweet cherry, cranberry, and dried herbs and a well-balanced finish.

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story by **MARCI SYMINGTON** / photos by **BRITTANY CONERLY**

Continued on page 54 ►



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"Few wines can match

Pinot Noir for its ability to transmit the distinctive features of a particular place," asserted Master Sommelier Evan Goldstein as he introduced a master class designed to give wine professionals a language for talking about Russian River Valley (RRV) Pinot Noir.

My eyes drifted over the tasting glasses laid out before me and the 40 or so other beverage professionals who'd gathered at CiboDivino Marketplace in downtown Dallas, Texas, to attend Pinot Forum Dallas, an extension of the annual educational gathering held by the Russian River Valley Winegrowers association (RRVW) in the Sonoma County, California, town of Healdsburg. Representing more than 70 wineries and 50 growers, the trade organization promotes the diversity and distinctiveness of the appellation's wines. At the core of its message is a concept introduced in 2019 by Roger Boulton, a professor of enology and chemical engineering at the University of California, Davis. With the help of local winemakers, Boulton demonstrated that Pinot Noirs grown in six specific pockets, or "neighborhoods," of the RRV exhibit their own unique, recognizable traits. The six neighborhoods he singled out are Sebastopol Hills, Green Valley, Laguna Ridge, Santa Rosa Plains, Middle Reach, and Eastern Hills.

Now the RRVW has taken to the road. Using membership surveys and sales data, it has identified influential wine markets where it could most successfully spread its message, from Washington, D.C., to Atlanta, Georgia. Dallas, with its strong restaurant culture and growing wine scene, was a natural choice. "Take this [neighbor-



Master Sommelier Evan Goldstein, third from left, leads a discussion alongside panelists Mari Jones, president at Emeritus Vineyards; Cristina Torres, general manager at Marimar Estate; and Diane DiRoma, vice president at River Road Family Vineyards and Winery.

hoods] framework into your restaurants and shops. . . . The goal is to share this perspective with your customers and help bring the region into clearer focus," said Geoffrey Thompson, general manager of Balverne Wines. Agreed RRVW executive director Jesslyn Jackson, "It's just [about] finding what fits the consumer profile better," allowing somms and store buyers to recommend the wines best aligned with their patrons' preferences. She added that these types of events help "create ambassadorships and promote the region as a whole."

The master class featured a panel of 20 RRV vintners, who represented a mix of multigenerational wineries such as Emeritus Vineyards, Pellegrini-Olivet Lane, and Gary Farrell Winery as well as newer producers like Harper's Rest Winery and Morét-Brealynn Wines. (It's worth

noting that, according to Jackson, "we are one of the only AVA associations in Sonoma County committed to outbound marketing through grant funding. [As a result,] there are very few organizations that have as many principals as we do traveling to do market visits [together].") They elaborated on the neighborhoods concept, furnishing the tools to help attendees articulate the style, structure, and sense of place provided by each expression of RRV Pinot Noir to clients.

Sebastopol Hills is the coolest, windiest neighborhood, producing naturally structured, tannic wines. James MacPhail, owner and winemaker of Tongue Dancer Wines, explained, "Because we have shatter, smaller berry size, and lower yields, we get a higher skin-to-juice ratio and more structure. I let that be."

For Morét Brealynn Chavez, owner



Continued on page 56 ►

Definitive Edna Valley

BAILEYANA

UNCHARTED CALIFORNIA





Presenters Matt Duffy, owner/winemaker, Vaughn Duffy Wines; Tom Pierson, winemaker, Bricoleur Vineyards; Geoffrey Bedrosian, proprietor, Domaine de la Rivière; Brent McKoy, winemaker, Gary Farrell Winery; Alan Ramey, co-president/co-owner, Ramey Wine Cellars; Geoffrey Thompson, general manager, Balverne Wines; and Melissa Moholt-Siebert, owner/winemaker, Ancient Oak Cellars, with Goldstein.

and winemaker of Morét-Brealynn Wines, Green Valley represents balance, thanks to its signature combination of morning fog and generous afternoon sun. Here, cooler temperatures and long hang times create a tension between freshness and ripeness that many winemakers consider ideal. "Green Valley is kind of the Goldilocks for Pinot Noir," she said.

Courtesy of its higher elevation, warmer temperatures, and sandy soils layered with clay, Laguna Ridge yields wines with notable structure and acidity as well as ripeness. Leslie Renaud, director of winemaking at Martin Ray Winery, described their profile as "a bright cherry core typical of RRV Pinot Noir, along with orange-toned notes like tangerine and citrus peel."

Set on fertile soils in a relatively warm climate, Santa Rosa Plains produces softer, richer, more approachable wines. Anthony Beckman, winemaker at Balletto Vineyards, called the BCD Vineyard Pinot Noir he was presenting his effortlessly enjoyable "vacation wine," explaining that, compared to the more demanding Sebastopol Hills sites he works with, the vineyards in this neighborhood tend to produce fruit that contributes a plush midpalate for immediate drinkability without sacrificing ageworthiness.



Anthony Beckman, winemaker at Balletto Vineyards, opens bottles ahead of the Paulée-style post-seminar lunch held at CiboDivino Marketplace.



Attendees tasted through 20 Pinot Noirs representing the six neighborhoods of the Russian River Valley.

The Middle Reach represents the more voluptuous side of the RRV, due in part to its signature alluvial plains and warmer growing season. The wines are darker, richer, and built for longevity. Brent McKoy, winemaker at Gary Farrell Winery, described his Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir as "the classic expression of the [neighborhood]—opulent yet elegant, with bright red fruit, depth, floral notes, and a sense of purity."

As the discussion turned to the Eastern Hills, complexity became part of the discussion. Melissa Moholt-Siebert, owner and winemaker of Ancient Oak Cellars, acknowledged the challenge of defining a neighborhood with a broad range of soils, elevations, and microclimates. Even so, she maintained that a common thread runs through the wines; while individual expressions vary, recurring patterns in structure, fruit profile, and texture create a recognizable character.

That shared sense of identity naturally resonated during the Paulée-style lunch we enjoyed after the tasting, inspired by the traditional French harvest celebration where winemakers gather to share treasured bottles from their cellars. As we passed special expressions from each estate around the long tables, it became clear that the afternoon was about more than wine: It was about breaking bread, sharing stories, and helping the trade feel connected to the people behind the SKUs they sell. Goldstein said it best: "We want everyone to feel as if they are getting their boots dirty in the vineyard." 

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Income Strategies Most Wine Professionals Have Never Heard Of

AT SOMMCON IN Washington, D.C., this spring, I had a conversation I've been having in some form for years—but rarely so openly. A seasoned sommelier pulled me aside and said something like, “I love this industry. I just don’t know if I can afford to stay in it.”

That kind of financial anxiety isn't a personal failing. It's a structural reality, and it's made worse by the fact that most wine professionals with 1099 income are sitting on tools they've never been shown how to use. Whether you're a somm picking up private tasting gigs, a distributor rep doing consulting on the side, a supplier manager moonlighting as a brand educator, or a retail owner juggling multiple income streams—if any of your income arrives as a 1099, these strategies were built for you.

■ **Open a Solo 401(k) and use both contribution buckets.** If you have any self-employment income, even alongside a W-2 job, you may be eligible for a Solo 401(k). Unlike a standard IRA, you contribute as both the employee and the employer, which dramatically raises your ceiling. In 2026, the employee deferral limit is \$24,500. On top of that, you can contribute up to 20% of your net self-employment income as an employer profit-sharing contribution (note: incorporated businesses may use 25% of W-2 compensation, but most sommeliers filing as sole proprietors or single-member LLCs use 20%). A sommelier with \$60,000 in net consulting income could contribute over \$35,000 in a single year between the employee deferral and the employer

contribution. The combined 2026 ceiling is \$72,000 for those under 50.

■ **Take advantage of the SECURE 2.0 “super catch-up” if you're 60–63.** Most people know about the standard catch-up contribution for those 50 and older—an extra \$8,000 in 2026, bringing the employee deferral limit to \$32,500. What far fewer people know is that SECURE 2.0 created an enhanced “super catch-up” for those aged 60–63 specifically. In 2026, that brings the employee deferral limit to \$35,750 and the overall combined ceiling to \$83,250. If you're in that window, this is one of the most powerful retirement accelerators available to you.

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■ **Establish your Solo 401(k) before December 31—not April 15.** This is the most common and costly mistake self-employed wine professionals make. Unlike an IRA, which can be opened and funded up to the tax filing deadline, a Solo 401(k) must be established by December 31 of the tax year you wish to contribute for. You can fund the contribution later, but the plan must exist by year-end. Missing this deadline means missing the entire contribution window for that year.

■ **Claim the Qualified Business Income (QBI) deduction.** I have found this to be the most underused deduction in the self-employed toolkit—and most somms have never heard of it. Under Section 199A, eligible self-employed individuals may deduct up to 20% of their qualified business income from their taxable income. If you earned \$50,000 in net 1099 income this year, you may be able to deduct \$10,000 before your taxes are even calculated. The deduction was made permanent in 2025 by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, so this is a strategy you can count on year after year. Income thresholds and phase-outs apply, so consult a tax professional to confirm your eligibility.

■ **Deduct expenses related to continuing education as well as your home office, memberships, and trade publications; also write off wine and spirits purchases used for work.** WSET Exam and CMS tasting fees, study materials, and any courses directly related to your professional work are deductible business expenses on your Schedule C, as are guild dues, registrations for professional events such as SommCon, and trade publication subscriptions; meanwhile, a dedicated workspace used regularly and exclusively for business may allow you to deduct a portion of rent, utilities, or mortgage interest. Bottles purchased for professional tastings, education sessions, or brand ambassador work, not personal consumption, are also a legitimate business expense. Keep receipts and document the professional purpose. A dedicated business credit card makes recordkeeping simple and audit-proof.

■ **Track your mileage.** The 2026 IRS standard mileage rate is 72.5 cents per mile for business use, the highest rate in

recent years. For wine professionals who are constantly on the road, driving to accounts, tastings, industry events, and other professional engagements adds up quickly. A simple mileage log app on your phone is all the documentation you need.

■ **Pay quarterly estimated taxes and avoid the penalty trap.** This isn't glamorous, but it's where many somms with 1099 income get hurt. When no employer is withholding taxes on your behalf, the IRS expects quarterly estimated payments four times a year. Miss those deadlines and you'll face underpayment penalties on top of your April bill. A simple rule of thumb: Set aside 25%–30% of every 1099 payment into a separate account and pay it quarterly. It's never a surprise if you planned for it.

The beverage industry rewards passion, resilience, and craft, and the professionals who thrive long-term tend to bring those same qualities to their financial lives. That doesn't mean earning more; it means being intentional with respect to what

Most wine professionals with 1099 income are sitting on tools they've never been shown how to use.



you already earn. If you're doing the side work—the education, the consulting, the private events—you're already most of the way there. The question is whether that income is working as hard as you are.

The headwinds in this industry are real. But so is the opportunity to build something lasting—one intentional decision at a time. *—SJ*

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF QUINTESSENTIAL

Steve Kreps Sr. (center) and his sons, Dennis and Steve Jr., own and operate Quintessential, a fine wine and spirits importer, marketer, and distributor.

Family MATTERS

HOW QUINTESSENTIAL
BUILT A SUCCESSFUL
BUSINESS ON THE TIES
THAT BIND

by Wanda Mann

The media has an insatiable appetite for sagas about dysfunctional families—people who can't get through a meal without drama, let alone sustain a successful business. However, the tales of kinfolk who work together in harmony also merit our attention. As the owners and operators of Quintessential, an importer, marketer, and distributor of fine wine and spirits, the Kreps family has a feel-good story to share. And doesn't the wine business need more of that?

Established in 2003, Quintessential is not only family-owned itself but also exclusively represents family-owned wineries and distilleries worldwide—a strategy that father-and-son co-founders Steve Kreps Sr. and Dennis Kreps were actually discouraged from pursuing at the onset. “We had a lot of industry experts tell us we were doing it wrong,” recalls Dennis.

Well, 23 years later, it's safe to say that the naysayers were mistaken: Today, Quintessential represents over 50 family-owned wineries in 12 countries, assisted by a team of more than 100 employees. Steve Jr. joined his father and brother at the company in 2005, after a high-flying career as a commercial pilot. "I kept hearing the stories behind these family wineries, tasting the wines, and pairing them with meals at home," he recalls. "That got me excited about joining the business." Along the way, the Krepeses have begun to play an important role in preserving the heritage of California wine, acquiring and revitalizing a number of historic brands such as Geyser Peak in Sonoma County; Atlas Peak, which makes wine in both its namesake AVA and the broader Napa Valley; and XYZin in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley.



The Lorentz family has been running Gustave Lorentz in Alsace, France, for seven generations.



The Malan family of Simonsig in Stellenbosch, South Africa, played a defining role in shaping the country's wine by producing its first Méthode Cap Classique sparkling wine, Kaapse Vonkel.

Why did they disregard advice to build their portfolio around, say, a particular region or style? "We were passionate about wineries that are building for future generations, and that's really the message we enjoyed communicating to the trade and to the consumer," says Dennis. Steve Sr. instilled that passion: "I thought there was a place for [our model], because a lot of the family wineries that made excellent products from all different parts of the world were not getting the attention in the United States that they should have," he notes. "If somebody could take some time and focus on them and bring them to the marketplace, they would be successful—and we have been. It's worked well for us."

Under the Krepeses' leadership, Quintessential has grown significantly while staying true to its founding relationships: Many of the estates that joined the portfolio in the early years remain partners today, including South Africa's Simonsig, Spain's Bodegas Muriel, and Argentina's Valentin Bianchi. "There's been a good dedication. I think we understand their problems more, being family," says Steve Sr. Luca Bosio, third-generation Piedmontese winemaker/owner of Luca Bosio Vineyards and the historic Bel Colle—one of only 13 wineries that are authorized to produce both Barolo and Barbaresco—shares this sentiment: "We've been working with Quintessential for more than 20 years, and our relationship goes far beyond business," he says. "It's built on trust, friendship, and shared val-



Three generations of the Monson family, which oversees Goose Ridge Estate Winery in the Goose Gap AVA of Washington State, are behind Revelation, a women-led line of fresh, bright whites and rosés.

ues. As family-owned companies, we have a similar approach to long-term partnerships, a strong commitment to quality, and a deep dedication to our work. We are truly families working together every day.”

That trust is essential as the U.S. wine market evolves amid myriad challenges, including tariffs, turbulent economic conditions, and changing consumer preferences. Joan Kautz represents the second generation of Ironstone Vineyards, which was founded in 1968 in California’s Sierra Foothills and was the first winery to plant Chardonnay in Lodi. As global sales and marketing director, Kautz views the Quintessential team as Ironstone’s “eyes and ears in the market,” in her words: “We rely on their knowledge, insight, and opinion on what is happening throughout the distribution process, with brands and with the end seller, either retail or on-premise. Operating in the U.S. is like working in 50 countries that all have their own unique personalities and needs. Via Quintessential, we are able to better understand the transitions and evolutions of the wine industry.”

Brent Marris, owner of New Zealand’s Marisco Vineyards, agrees. The son of John Marris—who’s considered the founding

father of modern winemaking in Marlborough, where he identified and sourced land suitable for grape growing as far back as 1972—Brent oversees a brand portfolio that includes The Ned (which has earned spots on multiple top-100 lists) as well as Leefield Station and Fernlands. As a second-generation winemaker whose daughters are now actively involved in the family business, he attests to Quintessential’s ability to deliver results on Marisco’s behalf. “The U.S. market is highly competitive for wines from Marlborough, so standing out requires both strong brand storytelling and a disciplined sales strategy,” he points out. “Quintessential brings a clear focus on building long-term brand equity, not just chasing short-term volume. Their established relationships, strategic distribution focus, and ability to communicate our family story and provenance have helped differentiate our wines in a crowded category. We are looking forward to building on the past two years and growing a sustainable business with Dennis and the team.”

That team doesn’t have a crystal ball. It’s simply by paying attention and being prepared that they’ve positioned themselves at the forefront of various

industry trends. For example, refreshing, acid-driven white wines like Sauvignon Blanc have gained traction with American consumers, and they are well represented in the Quintessential portfolio. “We’ve been seeing the lighter white wines coming on for a while—we just put increased emphasis on them,” says Dennis. “We get a little more aggressive with our marketing and social media. We bring in more inventory to make sure the salespeople can be successful. We’ve got an interesting stable of wines.” For instance, in addition to South African Chenin Blanc, Hungarian Grüner Veltliner, and Albariño from Rías Baixas, “we probably have more Sauvignon Blanc than anybody for the size of our portfolio,” he estimates—including bottlings from the aforementioned Geyser Peak, The Ned, and Ironstone as well as from Revelation by Goose Ridge (Washington State), Matetic (Chile), Dakota Shy (Napa Valley), and La Chapelle du Berry (Loire Valley), among others. “So we’re positioned really well.”

Given that trends evolve, however, it’s important to the Kreps family that Quintessential remains nimble to meet the moment. For example, the question of how to make a beverage with 8,000

years of history attractive to younger consumers is an urgent one these days. The Krepses believe that Quintessential's emphasis on family brands resonates with them because it's authentic. "Young people like to talk about their grandma and grandpa, their great-grandma and -grandpa. And we're telling them about the same family situations [in] different countries, whether it be Argentina, France, or Italy," says Steve Sr. "There's a growing appreciation for the legitimate family story," adds Steve Jr.

And as time goes by, there are always new chapters to add to that story. For example, Quinta do Vallado, founded in 1716 in the Douro Valley, is a benchmark Port producer that now also produces dry red and white wines. Since bottling its first vintage in 1990, Cortonesi in Tuscany has become a reference point for a modern style of single-vineyard Brunello di Montalcino. Seventh-generation winemaker Clara Lorentz will soon be taking the reins as head winemaker at Gustave Lorentz in Alsace. And in eastern Washington State, the Monson family is the proud proprietor of Goose Ridge Estate Winery, which has the distinction of being the only winery in the Goose Gap AVA. Their dynasty started with cattle in the 1900s, and today the fourth generation oversees a diverse agricultural business that includes wine and spirits. Three generations of Monson women have carved out a special niche within Goose Ridge's portfolio with the aforementioned Revelation, a line of wines that is woman-led at every step, from the vineyard to the cellar to package design. On the spirits side, meanwhile, Tia Linda's



Tommaso Cortonesi is the third-generation winemaker of Cortonesi in Montalcino, Italy.

Margarita has quickly become a standout premium brand for Quintessential, built around Aunt Linda's beloved margarita recipe and crafted with real tequila, real juice, and no artificial ingredients.

Of course, new branches are also being added to the Quintessential family tree. Case in point: Señá, the iconic Chilean winery founded by Eduardo Chadwick and American wine trailblazer Robert Mondavi, has recently partnered with the company. Talk about a full-circle moment: "When I was a really young wine rep and confused half the time trying to figure everything out, I got to know a guy named Robert Mondavi because we sold

be great people. They have to be fun," explains Steve Sr. "We work hard together and we play hard together."

One such person is Javier Murúa, co-owner of Bodegas Muriel in Rioja, whose partnership with Quintessential involves "a different kind of connection," as he puts it—one that "goes beyond business. In a world where so many companies are becoming larger through consolidation or focusing on specialization, Quintessential's dedication to family-owned wineries gives them a unique identity."

It also makes for a more personal philosophical outlook. "It's too much fun, this industry, and it always has been, even



The Matetic family has been farming land in Chile for more than a century, planting their first vineyards in 1999.

his wines in Chicago," Steve Sr. reminisces. One of the many lessons he learned from the legendary vintner was "have your basics down, and you will always succeed." Another was that wine should be food-friendly. "Wine is about dining; it's about enhancing the flavor of your food. It's important that we continue to highlight that, as it's what makes wine so magical," he remarks.

In life, there are blood ties, and then there are the friends and colleagues who become our chosen family. What is Quintessential's criteria for expanding its clan? "Each one of these wineries that we've taken on . . . really has passion for what they're doing—but it takes more than just passion. Not only do they have to make great wine from a great area, they have to

during the tough times. If you can't smile and laugh, then you shouldn't be doing it," says Steve Sr. That attitude, combined with his expertise and that of his sons, makes Quintessential a valuable and reliable partner for the estates it represents.

The wine world can be confusing, but the Kreps family's mission is crystal-clear: "We are what we say we are: We're a family representing families and their stories. And the wines are what they're supposed to be. That's Quintessential," declares Steve Jr., nodding to the genesis of the company's name. Adds Dennis, "The thing I'm most proud of is that we have a wonderful portfolio of fantastic people. They're the kind of people you love telling stories about, you love working for—and you want to be successful for them." SJ

Tasting Notes

"Here's to family-owned ground; to every vintage sewn to ours / May we drink with gentler hearts, to find a world that still remembers to pass it on." —Anonymous

The following Quintessential wines have all received scores of 94 points or higher from our publications.



Gustave Lorentz L'ami de Crustacés Pinot Blanc, AOC Alsace, France (\$25)

Between its name—"The Friend of Crustaceans"—and the shellfish illustrated on its label, this lithe and electric white undoubtedly marries well with creatures from the deep sea. Briny, crushed-stone minerality instantly charms, joined by scintillating lemon sorbet and tangerine blossom. **94** —Meridith May



Bodegas Muriel 2016 Viñas Viejas Gran Reserva, Rioja, Spain (\$32)

Almost fully mature as it approaches a decade since the fruit was harvested, this marvelously detailed wine shows expressive aromas and flavors, intermingling spicy, savory notes with both red and black fruit. **95** —M.M.



Ironstone Vineyards 2023 Reserve Meritage, Sierra Foothills (\$42)

A milk-chocolate texture and chewy tannins frame expressive notes of blackberry and tobacco leaf. The fruit is elegant—juicy, extracted, and fresh rather than jammy. A teeth-coating dusting of sandalwood adds length and complexity to the finish. **94** —M.M.



Pascual Toso 2021 Alta Malbec, Barrancas Vineyard, Mendoza, Argentina (\$50)

Teeth-grabbing, dusty tannins align with a creamy density, bathing the palate in black coffee, lavender, graphite, and Black Forest cake. Plush crushed boysenberry and sweet soil emphasize the suede-lined mouthfeel. **97** —M.M.



Quinta do Vallado was founded in 1716 in Portugal's Douro Valley.



Eponymous 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$60)

Elegance is on display as the liquid flows gently across the palate, offering the freshness and clarity of juicy blackberry. Black tea enters midway, adding length to notes of plum skin and a pinch of black pepper. **94** —M.M.



Château Clarke 2020 Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Bordeaux, France (\$70)

The elegance of this blend of 70% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Sauvignon is instantly evident. We were impressed with its well-crafted style, revealed in savory layers of fresh soil, new leather, roasted coffee, and black currant. **95** —M.M.



Matetic 2018 Syrah Rosario Vineyard, DO San Antonio Valley, Chile (\$95)

Elegant yet luscious, with creamy notes of plum and violet that lather the palate. Fennel, white pepper, melted dark chocolate, and roasted coffee form complex layers of flavor and texture, and the finish of crushed olive and dusty blueberry is revelatory. **98** —M.M.



Dakota Shy 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$125)

This well-mannered Cab shows blackberry and dark cherry with plenty of flavor impact as well as oak-derived touches of spice and toast. Tannins provide a welcome firming on the finish without notable astringency. **94** —M.M.



Champagne Palmer 2018 Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, France (\$130)

If this 100% Chardonnay from the Montagne de Reims is any indication, the heralded 2018 vintage in Champagne will be the gift that keeps on giving. It's already generous in most every respect, from the aromas of fresh bread, baked apple, dried fig, macadamia nut, and above all dazzling citrus—including Buddha's hand citron—to a palate that, while not without weight, is focused by salinity and flintiness as well as a smattering of nutmeg, gingerroot, and anise. **94** —Ruth Tobias



Cortonesi 2021 Poggiarelli Brunello di Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy (\$140)

Showing depth and restraint, this silky Brunello possesses a quiet confidence. Cedar and tobacco surround savory cherry, lifted by notes of violet, forest floor, and flinty minerality that come into focus on the elegant finish. **98** —M.M.

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{ winery spotlight }

LOCK, STOCK, *and* BARREL OAK

BARREL OAK WINERY
IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF
VIRGINIA'S VINOUS VANGUARD

STORY BY *Christina Barrueta*
PHOTOS BY *Krysta Norman*

Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery sits amid the rolling hills of Virginia's Middleburg AVA in Delaplane.



Director of production/head winemaker Jeremy Ligon joined Barrel Oak in 2021, the year before Kavelle and Ken Bajaj took ownership of the winery. ▶



◀ In addition to his winemaking duties, Ligon also designs all of Barrel Oak's labels.



BARREL OAK WINERY & BREWERY

has always drawn a crowd. Perched in the Piedmont hills of Delaplane, Virginia, in the Middleburg AVA, the 78-acre estate was founded in 2006 and quickly became a community gathering spot. Sweeping views of the vineyard and the Blue Ridge Mountains—not to mention an on-site brewery whose beers round out its portfolio—have kept its picnic tables full of weekenders. But since director of production and head winemaker Jeremy Ligon came aboard in 2021, followed by new owners Kavelle and Ken Bajaj in 2022, the winery has entered an exciting new chapter. In April, I spent several days on the property with Ligon and general manager Adriana Lucca, staying in the Winemaker's Cottage, tasting through the portfolio, and touring the vineyard. And I left, frankly, smitten.

Ligon is a Virginia native and second-generation winemaker who studied enology at California State University, Fresno, before returning to his home state in 2012. Named the #1 Up-and-Coming Winemaker in Virginia to Watch by Scoutology in 2014 and a finalist for the 2025 SommCon Imprint Emerging

Leader Award, he's been on the radar of Virginia wine insiders for years.

I learned more on the first night at The Ashby Inn & Restaurant, chosen as much for its wine list as its farm-to-table kitchen. Ligon, a fan of fellow Virginia producer Linden Vineyards, poured owner Jim Law's Hardscrabble Chardonnay, grown on granite slopes high in the Blue Ridge Mountains, while Lucca pointed out that the restaurant "has a deep commitment to Virginia wines, as reflected in the list—which is great because, for a long time, Virginia had a reputation for fun, not serious, wines. Jeremy has done a tremendous job of rebranding us from a more casual place to a serious, high-quality winery."

With 30 acres under vine, the estate itself gives Ligon plenty to work with; an additional 11 acres are planted at Horsefield Farms, an equestrian and agricultural property in nearby Upperville. (Elevations at both properties range from 500 to 800 feet.) "I've always admired the quality of the wines coming from this area, so the opportunity to lead the winemaking program at Barrel Oak and work with grapes grown in this region was incredibly appealing," he said. Among them is Norton, a native North American variety first cultivated in Richmond in the 1800s by Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton and one of Virginia's signatures—though

Ligon acknowledged that, for his money, Cab Franc is truly "Virginia's grape." His favorite estate white, meanwhile, is Seyval Blanc. (He also likes Sauvignon Blanc "because of the distinctive expression it develops here," he explained, citing its tropical aromas and prevalent minerality and structure, but he sources that from a grower in Paeonian Springs.)

"When I started at Barrel Oak, there were 32 different wines," he continued. "We had more off-dry and sweeter wines, so I cut it down to 15 to focus more on premium-style dry wines." The changes didn't stop there. Public spaces got a facelift; new barrels and winemaking equipment came in; and chef Allen Young, Youngjin "Jin" Oh, and Seth Marshall joined the team as culinary director, brewmaster, and assistant winemaker, respectively. "With the new owners, we now have a great team," Ligon said, gesturing to include Lucca, who came with serious credentials of her own, having worked with both Wolfgang Puck and José Andrés.

We met the next morning on the patio overlooking the vineyard, where Ligon pointed out rows of Chardonnay trained on vertical-shoot-position trellising. As we looked toward a building on the adjacent property, the conversation circled back to the Norton grape. "That's the John Marshall House," he said, also known as



Barrel Oak Winery assistant winemaker Seth Marshall, Ligon, and author Christina Barrueta taste an experimental rosé aged in bourbon barrels.

Oak Hill, built in 1773 by Colonel Thomas Marshall, whose family Dr. Norton joined when he wed Lucy Marshall Fisher: “We lease that land to grow Norton there,” he explained. “It ties the history together.”

He pointed to another stretch below us. “That’s our coolest spot, where we grow Vidal Blanc, which is more cold-hardy,” he said, noting the frost that hit the region days before. “It was really bad,” he added somberly. “Budbreak was early, and then it was one of the worst hard freezes we’ve ever had.” Still, he and the local winemakers he meets with regularly are keeping their spirits up. “As one of them said, ‘I don’t care if I’m getting 1 ton of grapes, it’s gonna be the best damn wine I made this year,’” he added with a laugh as we climbed into our UTV. “We’re staying positive.”

With that, Ligon started our tour of the estate, gesturing toward a crew working on young Cascade hops destined for the brewery before we traveled through rows of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Predicting a stronger yield from the former, he explained that since “Cabernet Franc is early budbreaking, [it] was pretty much out [following the frost]. It’s unfortunate, but when you’re a farmer, you’re always at the mercy of Mother Nature.” Further down the vineyard, tertiary buds were pushing through on the Vidal Blanc after the primary and secondary buds were damaged, and in the Traminette block, Ligon noted that the grape, a relative of Gewürztraminer, is one of the winery’s most aromatic. “I say it smells like

grandma’s perfume,” he said with a grin. Most goes into blends, though he’s currently working on a new Traminette Blanc de Blancs and is “pretty excited with the way that’s coming along.” As we trundled through rows of Chambourcin, a French-American hybrid low in tannins and phenolics, he explained that its role is also “mostly for blending, including in our rosé and our Port-style Chocolate Lab.” We finished the tour with a look at the Norton, as distinctive in character as it is in history. “It’s really intense, and people either love it or hate it,” Ligon admitted. “Norton always fights back—it has a lot of seeds and pulp and clogs the press and filters. Making wine with it is a real labor of love.”

Back at the tasting room, we took a break over some charcuterie and chef Young’s wood-fired pizzas. The pepperoni drizzled with caramelized hot honey paired nicely with Barrel Oak’s bright, red-fruited Cabernet Franc, while a burrata, prosciutto, and apricot pie found easy harmony with Vidal Blanc’s orchard-fruit richness, Seyval Blanc’s aspects of grass and citrus rind, and Sauvignon Blanc’s citrus-driven crispness.

Properly fueled, we headed to the pub, where Oh, a cicerone who holds a master’s degree in brewing science from Auburn University, guided us through his drafts. The lineup included Best Cellar Lager, whose name hints at its popularity, and Oak Blossom, a rosy fruited ale inspired by cherry blossoms. With each one, Oh talked about the ingredients he uses, the fermentation process he em-

ploys, and the character he chases, bringing the same deliberation to the taproom that Ligon brings to the cellar.

Lunch had been fantastic, but dinner in the cottage that night spectacularly revealed Young’s talent. Ligon and Lucca arrived with a pre-dinner pour of the 2024 Rosé, a pale-hued blend of Chambourcin and Seyval Blanc whose refreshing mineral snap was graced with melon and stone fruit. From the kitchen came an amuse-bouche of chilled apple tea and orange kombu syrup, crowned with chamomile and saffron cream. The 2024 Seyval Blanc followed, its lemon-bright citrus ushering in Hokkaido scallops dressed with charred lemongrass—bitter orange vinaigrette and decorated with fennel, watermelon radish, and spicy pickled celery.

Next was spaetzle enriched with carrot jus and garnished with charred ramps, grapevine-smoked carrot purée, and crispy chicken skin, which accompanied the soon-to-be-released 2023 Barrel Chardonnay. Of achieving its velvety texture and leesy weight, Ligon explained, “It follows a new protocol of soaking whole berries for 48 hours to build body, heavy bâtonnage, and aging in mostly neutral French oak for about nine months.”

Dry-aged duck arrived over mole blanco, which took on an orange hue thanks to fermented persimmon, and blueberry-turmeric demi-glace alongside soy-cured Horsefield Farms asparagus. To pair with it, Ligon poured a 2022 and 2023 Cabernet Franc as a study in contrasting vintage



Young leaves in Barrel Oak’s vineyard are welcome survivors of a spring frost.

conditions. “We got 26 inches of rain in ’22 and 2 inches in ’23,” he said, comparing the delicate balance and soft tannins of the former to the concentration and power of the latter.

For dessert, lemon-blackberry semifreddo with almond cake crumble and smoked maple syrup was complemented by the 2023 Paradox, a sparkling Norton. “We broke all the sparkling rules,” he said. “We didn’t harvest it early, we didn’t back-sweeten, and we stopped fermentation early.” It’s an unconventional but skillful approach that earned the wine a double gold at the 2025 San Francisco International Wine Competition.

The next morning opened a window to the production process. Our tour started in the main cellar, where I joined Ligon, Lucca, and Marshall among stainless-steel tanks ranging from 200 to 3,500 gallons. “The small ones are for experimentation,” Ligon explained, “and the big guys are for blending.” In one corner, he paused at a massive 60-hectoliter oak vat from Tonnellerie Bossuet, a French cooperage based in Saint-Simon-de-Bordes. “Jean-Louis [Bossuet] is one

by the Traminette Blanc de Blancs, not yet bubbly but redolent of tropical fruit, orange blossom, and jasmine and already hinting at the stunner it will become.

We moved into the barrel room, where French oak now dominates the cellar—roughly 80% to American oak’s 20%. Ligon ran a hand across two barrels set side by side, mentioning French cooperages like Tonnellerie Cadus, Nadalié, and Sansaud as he went. “Look at the tightness of the grain,” he said. “Touch this one—see how smooth it is? Now touch the American one. Huge difference.”

We then tasted a wine club exclusive: a bourbon barrel-aged rosé, which Ligon noted was an experiment born from abundance. “I typically would never do stuff like this,” he said with a laugh, “but we had way too much rosé this year, so we decided to have some fun with it” by putting it in the bourbon barrels he initially brought in from A. Smith Bowman Distillery in Fredericksburg for the aforementioned Chocolate Lab dessert wine. “We wanted some nuttiness while still retaining acidity, and I think we’re doing a good job so far,” he added.

“really lets the fruit shine.” And a 2025 Merlot and Petit Verdot blend showed how tightly grained tannins begin to soften under new French oak.

Norton reappeared with its inky core of blackberry and plum before we ended on the 2023 Chocolate Lab also aged in the bourbon barrels. “We stop the fermentation at about 5% residual sugar because we don’t like to do any back-



Ligon pours his award-winning 2022 Cabernet Franc in the vineyard.

sweetening,” says Ligon. “You’ll notice it going from chocolate-covered cherry to dark chocolate with a little bit of tobacco, and that’s what we want.”

On my last full day, we moved from the cellar back to the vineyard with a tour of Horsefields Farms, where a warmer microclimate helped Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, Vidal Blanc, and Chardonnay fare better in the frost. Afterward, we met up with Lucca and Ligon at Field & Main in Marshall—a 2026 James Beard Award finalist for Outstanding Wine and Other Beverages Program—to sample wines from Domaine Finot, Matthieu Finot’s garagiste project from Turk Mountain Vineyards, and nearby estate Slater Run Vineyards. And the following afternoon before my departure, we returned to the tasting room for a closing lineup paired with Young’s curated bites, including stand-out goat cheese crostini with dill, thyme, and oregano that lifted the herbaceous edge of the 2022 Petit Verdot.

As Lucca had suggested, Northern Virginia winemakers are proving that serious quality is not confined to more established regions, and Ligon is part of that trajectory. “Barrel Oak has always been laid-back,” he remarked that first night. “When they brought me on, we wanted to make killer wines while keeping that non-pretentious feel.” Thanks to his talent, Barrel Oak has found its footing in that qualitative shift. 



The Winemaker’s Cottage overlooks Barrel Oak’s estate vineyards.

of my favorite coopers,” said Ligon. “He comes [to Barrel Oak] every year, and we were one of the first wineries on the East Coast to have this vat.”

We started with the 2025 Sauvignon Blanc, which was “not quite ready, but it’s getting close,” according to Ligon, who is pushing the acidity. “We want it really bright because once it’s bottled, it will become more subdued.” It was followed

Ligon continued to plunge his wine thief into various barrels as we moved through the room. A 2024 Cabernet Franc in new oak was set against its neutral-barrel counterpart to show the contrast between their tannic framing. A 2025 Merlot was pulled from a Tonnellerie du Sud-Ouest barrel, its early profile leaning into cherry and dark berries; Ligon noted that the cooperage’s style



A luncheon at Summit in the Sun in Miami, FL, was accompanied by ROCO's 2021 RMS Brut, 2022 Gravel Road Chardonnay, 2022 Gravel Road Pinot Noir, and 2022 The Stalker Pinot Noir as well as the 2022 Marsh Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir (not pictured).

A Label Worthy of the Table

AT SUMMIT IN THE SUN IN MIAMI, FL, **ROCO** PROVED ITS STATUS AS A STANDOUT OREGON PRODUCER story by Lyn Farmer / photos by Alfred Gugig

ATTENDING AN IN-DEPTH master class led by an international cast of experts is always a rewarding experience. Whether exploring pH levels, delving into the arcana of aging protocols, or discussing marketing techniques, sharing a geeky moment with fellow wine professionals can be inspiring. But it must be admitted that, for all their learning opportunities, seminars often lack the real-world context in which our consumer audiences usually taste wine: lingering in a convivial setting at a table with food.

Fortunately, Summit in the Sun, which *The SOMM Journal* held in Miami, Florida, in March, had guests covered in that regard. On day one of the event, chef Víctor Santos of Tin Tin and the team at Tuyo—a restaurant located on the top floor of host venue the Miami Culinary Institute—prepared a three-course lunch to accompany a quintet of wines from ROCO, an acclaimed pioneer of still and sparkling Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in Oregon's Willamette Valley founded by winemaker Rollin Soles in 2003. Presenting them was Aga Hilferty, DipWSET, a Master of Wine candidate who serves as in-house wine educator for HERITA USA; ROCO, purchased in 2021, is one of the newest additions to the importer's wide-ranging portfolio.



HERITA USA wine educator Aga Hilferty and SOMM Journal VP of education Lars Leicht discuss the RMS Brut.



Hilferty made the case for the ROCO portfolio's versatility with food.

The lunch kicked off with the classic 2021 RMS Brut, a blend of 66% Chardonnay and 34% Pinot Noir that was loaded with mineral-laced acidity and bright floral and citrus flavors. Hilferty used this wine to set the stage for the meal that followed, noting three elements that contribute to wine's gastronomic potential. "A wine needs freshness," she said, determined by "not just the level of acidity but the shape of the acidity on your palate. Then, a wine needs flavor elements in the midpalate that complement food—hints of herbal and spice elements plus that hard-to-define quality of mineral and saline notes." And finally, she added, "the wine needs to have a savory finish—a quality that urges you to have another sip, to continue the experience."

The first course soon arrived at our tables overlooking Miami's sunny skyline and Biscayne Bay. Served with sweet potato relish and *canchas* (corn nuts), the fish crudo in coconut leche de tigre found an equally brisk, refreshing partner in the ROCO 2022 Gravel Road Chardonnay. Seeming to sense the guests' pleasure in the pairing, Hilferty pointed out, "This wine went through full malolactic conversion, though you wouldn't know it from the level of acidity in the glass. And, framing the acidity, you have abundant fruit that is well defined by savory notes." She added

that one of the beauties of great Oregon Chardonnay is its capacity to hold acidity even as it gains flavor ripeness throughout the cool but long growing season.

In the eyes of most consumers, the shining star of Oregon viticulture is Pinot Noir; and Hilferty brought three ROCO Pinots to share. "Oregon Pinot Noir in general, and ROCO in particular, is notable for three classic elements," she said, namely "purity of fruit expression, herbal notes that give the wine definition and structure, and an earthy foundation." There were indeed herbal and earthy notes in ROCO's 2022 Gravel Road Pinot Noir; but they took a backseat to the fruit alongside Santos' malanga gnocci cacio e pepe with crispy Swiss chard and shaved Grana Padano. The saltiness of the sauce tamed the moderate tannin in the wine, whose fruit and acid balanced the dish's rich flavors. "This," Hilferty said with a smile, "is a true gastronomic wine. It's multidimensional, so it's versatile."

That was no less true of ROCO's 2022 Marsh Estate Vineyard Pinot from Yamhill-Carlton and the Willamette Valley—appellated 2022 The Stalker Pinot, the latter of which undergoes a unique production process. "In Oregon the grapes get ripe, but the stems are generally vegetal, so not pleasant for Pinot," Hilferty explained. "Rollin destems the bunches and gives the

grapes a ten-day cold soak. The stems are treated separately, with seven days under a blanket of inert gas. This actually ripens the stems, which are then recombined with the grapes for fermentation." The result possessed a velvety mouthfeel along with black tea and spice notes. "The stems also give freshness," Hilferty says, "and allow the wine to have a roundness that pairs beautifully with food."

In fact, both expressions proved their food-friendliness alongside an entree of roasted Faro Island salmon with pea puree in a morel-and-leek ragout, which set off their earthy notes. The dish also prompted Hilferty to make a final point about ROCO's ecological values: "The winery is Salmon-Safe, a certification that was started in Oregon, as was an additional certification program championed by Soles, LIVE [Low Input Viticulture and Enology]," she said.

ROCO's dedication to sustainable initiatives in both vineyard and winery was clearly reflected in the striking purity of its wines overall. From the vibrant balance the whites struck between acidity and minerality to the violet aromas, red fruit flavors, and earthy notes of the Pinots, they all demonstrated how an elegant winemaking approach can make for effusive expression in the glass—especially within the context of a great meal. *SH*

An aerial photograph of Miami, Florida, showing the city skyline with several tall skyscrapers, a large beach, and a pier extending into the ocean. The water is a vibrant blue, and the sky is a clear, bright blue.

two lenses, ONE VISION

OUR “**TECHNIQUE OR
TERROIR**” SEMINAR
AT SUMMIT IN THE SUN
CONSIDERED THE MYRIAD
INFLUENCES ON WINE
CHARACTER

~~~~~  
STORY BY *Lyn Farmer*  
PHOTOS BY *Alfred Gugig*

What—or who—makes a great wine? At Summit in the Sun, the trade event we hosted in Miami, Florida, last March, *The SOMM Journal* brought a group of thoughtful producers together to explore that important question during a seminar titled “Technique or Terroir: A Study in Human Hands vs. Nature.” Is wine a beverage shaped primarily by people, or do we at best shepherd it through a process that is dictated by the elements? The easy answer is “both,” but our panelists and guests considered just *how* that might be the case following an introduction by *SOMM Journal* publisher/editor-in-chief Meredith May. As moderator, she set the tone for the discussion by noting that “nature and nurture” are not mutually exclusive so much as they are “two lenses through which to view the process of crafting great wine.”





Our “Technique or Terroir” panelists at Summit in the Sun included Saurabh Kathuria, North America business manager for Bodegas Muriel; Max Arriagada, national sales director at Viña Santa Rita; Foley Family Wines & Spirits vice president of luxury brands Alan Crawford; HERITA USA wine educator Aga Hilferty; and Pedro Garcia, managing director of USA and Canada at Félix Solís Avantis.



Saurabh Kathuria, an Indian-born wine scholar whose career has taken him to Bordeaux and Spain and who now serves as North America business manager for Rioja producer Bodegas Muriel, opened the discussion. He noted that the soils in Bodegas Muriel’s mountainous home subregion, Rioja Alavesa, contain a great deal of clay. “Our job is to work with that, to help realize what nature offers in clay and minerals; together we make a wine that is easy drinking” without lacking for complexity, he asserted. “We could not make a different wine from what nature offers.” The **Muriel 2020 Rioja Reserva** he presented was long on the palate, showing considerable finesse and elegance.



As national sales director for Chilean winery Viña Santa Rita, Max Arriagada explained, “Our home is Maipo, one of the oldest wine regions in Chile. It was planted in the 1600s, and we have been there for 150 years. We make the wine the land gives us.” Yet there are still choices to be made. The wine Arriagada used to illustrate his point was the impressive **Santa Rita 2020 Triple C**, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc tempered with 8% Carmenère. “Here is where the human input is important—in choices made in blending,” he said. “The Carmenère is important to include because, while the terroir is cool, we still get Cabernet that is powerful, so [it] provides some welcome freshness.”



Returning to Spain, Pedro Garcia—managing director of USA and Canada for Félix Solís Avantis, which operates Bodega Pagos del Rey in Ribeira del Duero—noted that the region experiences “extreme swings between day and night temperatures of around 20 degrees Celsius [36 degrees Fahrenheit]. That gives us small berries with thick skins, while the well-drained soil gives us an active root system; we can dry farm the vineyards. But it is challenging: We struggle, we adapt, and we survive, both people and vine. . . . More than half our vines are more than 50 years old, and we humans must respect what nature makes possible.”

Garcia likened Ribeira del Duero’s output to that of Napa Valley: “We [both]

have bold, powerful wines with a lot of intensity,” he pointed out. Presenting the **Pagos del Rey 2016 Condado de Oriza Gran Reserva**, he added that human input intertwines with nature in the context of barrel aging: “We use a combination of French and American oak,” whose inherent flavors are expressed in the final product according to the winemaker’s skill.

Speaking of flavor, Kathuria noted, “I trained as a chef, and I think we [must] look at wine as a chef [does a recipe] and ask, ‘What is the balance?’” Winemaking is largely the art of blending different elements, be it grape varieties, vineyards, or barrel types; those elements, in Kathuria’s view, are akin to the seasonings used by a chef. But seasonings can’t help a dish if the main ingredients aren’t of top quality, which is why Bodegas Muriel’s winemaker, Chema Ryan, believes a wine reflects “99% terroir, and only 1% is the human factor,” according to Kathuria. Still, that 1% involves a great deal of careful decision-making. For instance, he pointed out, “It took us seven years to figure out where we could find the Tempranillo that would give us what we wanted.”



That was a key point for HERITA USA wine educator Aga Hilferty as well. Nature ripens fruit, she said as she presented the exceptional **Masi 2016 Campolongo di Torbe Amarone della Valpolicella Classico**, “but we must choose when we are at the right level of ripeness” for the indigenous grapes that play a key role in the Veneto: “Rondinella, Corvina, and Molinara are local to this terroir, and they carry the terroir forward.” The latter, she explained, “is pale, almost pink in color; so when heavier wines were in favor, people stopped using it”—but what it lacks in color, it makes up for in acidity. “With the richness of Amarone, the high acidity balances the wine beautifully.” The result exemplified Amarone at its best—heady but not heavy, with scintillating notes of black fruit and chocolate.



**Sommeliers, wine directors, and retail buyers from Florida and beyond attended Summit in the Sun.**



Presenting the **Silverado Vineyards 2022 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon**, Foley Family Wines & Spirits vice president of luxury brands Alan Crawford agreed that “acidity is more important than ever. The [Mt. George] Vineyard was planted in Coombsville in the 1860s and has always produced succulent fruit.” Located in southeastern Napa Valley, the Coombsville AVA is relatively cool, but “all of us are dealing with a change in the climate,” Crawford pointed out. “In the 1960s and ’70s, alcohol [in Cabernet Sauvignon] was 12%, and now it is 14% or 15%. Acidity is crucial to keep these wines balanced.” For Crawford, the key question is, “How do you balance what nature gives you with [the] market demand for lower alcohol? At Silverado, we do this naturally by having vineyard sites closer to the cooling influence of the San Francisco Bay and its breezes and fog [as well as] by careful farming, [both] to protect our fruit more from the sun through canopy management and to [develop] true phenological ripeness in line with sugar ripeness, allowing us to pick fully mature fruit earlier.”

Arriagada concurred that while “the first role of [a] winery is to express the land, the second part is interpreting what

the consumer wants. In Triple C, it is a wine in which we look to stay current. Today’s consumer wants something a little more delicate and expressive, so we can increase the Cab Franc a little to express [both] the terroir and what our consumers want. The fresh, acidic red fruit is especially impressive these days.”

Garcia likewise emphasized that “respecting the terroir” comes first. “In Ribeira [del Duero], we believe in minimal intervention. . . . We are traditional but also very advanced with our equipment. We want to make the best wine led by technology but with limited human intervention.” On that note, Hilferty added, “With Amarone, we are talking about a process that is so human dependent, but it *must* work with the terroir.” That process is *appassimento*, the centuries-old method of drying grapes to concentrate sugar and flavor. Historically, inclement weather often disrupted it, but today, well-ventilated indoor spaces provide consistency. “Within the drying lofts, we have brought in new technology, but it just enhances the traditional process,” Hilferty asserted. “Botrytis attacks Corvina [as it dries], giving its own character, and we don’t want technology to ‘clean up’ this quality.” In short, in addition to geographical terroir, we might also speak about “cultural terroir”: Traditional techniques and even technological developments are part of the terroir too.

And so, we return full circle to May’s original point, namely that terroir and technique are not mutually exclusive but inextricably linked. It is the expertise and decision-making of humans responding to nature in all its nuances that shape a wine. SJ



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# High

ELEVATION,  
HIGH  
EXPECTATIONS

**ROWEN WINE COMPANY**

REFLECTS ITS ORIGINS IN A  
HIDDEN GEM AT THE EDGE  
OF SONOMA COUNTY



*The Sky High block of Cooley Ranch Vineyard sits at over 2,000 feet in elevation on the border between Sonoma and Mendocino counties.*



**BY RANDY CAPAROSO**

When a successful American wine entrepreneur like Rodney Strong Wine Estates (RSWE) proprietor Tom Klein puts everything he can into a passion project, trade buyers are bound to have high expectations. ROWEN Wine Company delivers, producing wines that are extraordinary not only because they are vivid and intense but also because they speak to their unique origins—namely Cooley Ranch Vineyard. Sitting at the northern edge of Sonoma County (parts of the property spill into neighboring Mendocino County), it consists of undulating mountaintops and slopes ranging in elevations from 800 to over 2,000 feet.

To get to the ranch, I drove north through Dry Creek Valley, then all the way past the craggy peaks of the AVA known as Rockpile. Owned by the Cooley family since 1910, the property remains off the beaten path, where it's largely undisturbed: Just 200 of its 20,000 acres were selected to be planted, while the rest of the property has been left to 1,200–1,600 heads of cattle that share the steep, rugged slopes with mountain lions, coyotes, black bears, deer, grouse, woodpeckers, porcupines, and river turtles under skies patrolled by soaring eagles, hawks, and kites.

Upon my arrival, RSWE chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld took me on a tour, driving along winding paved and unpaved roads



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RODNEY STRONG WINE ESTATES

**Rodney Strong Wine Estates chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld.**





▲ Cooley Ranch is designated as an Agricultural Preservation Open Space District.

These 600-liter barrels were custom-designed by Seidenfeld. ►



PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

through the vineyard blocks. It took us a while to get to the ranch's highest-elevation planting—at 2,040 feet, it's appropriately called Sky High—so Seidenfeld had plenty of time to tell the story of ROWEN.

"[It's] technically not part of Rodney Strong," he explained for starters. "We handle it as a separate and unique entity. For me, it's been a study of a completely different terroir. There's nothing quite like it anywhere in Sonoma County—or California for that matter.

"The name ROWEN refers to a second harvest of hay within a season—an expression for 'unexpected windfall.' Cooley Ranch demanded a lot of patience—[it took] over ten years [to get] our first cluster of grapes. But the quality... surpass[ed] everything we all hoped to get out of this wild, remote site. Tom originally signed a lease with the Cooley family in 2000, although the oldest vines are now just 17 years old, planted in virgin ground—there were no vineyards here before. The blocks are spread throughout the property because, with the help of some of the best viticulturists in the business, such as Daniel Roberts, we ended up pinpointing just a few spots with the ideal soils for what we had in mind."

Focusing on Cabernet Sauvignon, which represents 80% of the plantings supplemented by seven other varieties, the team was pleased to find pockets of what's known as the Greenstone Series,

which Seidenfeld described as "a pale- to bright-red-colored metamorphic soil derived from volcanic uplift. . . . It is a high-pH soil, rich in iron. [That has] a direct impact on what we get in the grapes and wines—more than ample natural acidity and phenolic content, creating a 'melted tannin' feel that is not quite like anything else we have at Rodney Strong."

Once we reached the Sky High block, though, the dramatic views served to illustrate Seidenfeld's assertion that "elevation is the other factor [most] advantageous to ROWEN," as Cooley Ranch is "impacted by cooler days and warmer nights created by a temperature inversion caused by nearby Lake Sonoma." The property occupies a full 23% of the lake's watershed, in the immediate vicinity of a large reservoir whose depth impacts the marine fog that stops at roughly 800 feet above the surface: Colder air remains trapped below even as the surrounding areas are fully exposed to sun.

The net result is increased acid retention and enhanced phenolic content. Added Seidenfeld, "We get fully ripened fruit at 24–25 [Brix], meaning we don't have to adjust anything in the winery. The vineyard gives us grapes with all the components and pristine quality our wines need."

To demonstrate as much, he poured two wines, starting with the **2022 Red Blend** (\$70), containing 57% Cabernet Sauvignon from a 1,400-foot block, 30%

Malbec, 11% co-fermented Syrah and Viognier, and 2% Petit Verdot. My first thought was: "smells of woodland." Redolent of spicy pine needles along with exotic notes of jasmine and grapefruit skin, the nose presaged the vibrant acidity that accompanied the dense yet compact layers of flavor on the palate, including wild mint.

Explained Seidenfeld, "We produced 1,000 cases of the Red Blend, which is half of ROWEN's production. . . . The Malbec, grown a few feet from where we are standing, adds to the floral fruit and fleshiness that you also get from the Syrah/Viognier co-ferment grown on the hilltop just below us. This classic Rhône Valley technique gives you that 'mystery' spice, a touch of bay leaf, and some nutmeg and mocha, while [the] Petit Verdot adds to wine's deep, compact feel."

Next, we sampled the **2021 2040 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$125), sourced entirely from Sky High and named, of course, for its aforementioned altitude. Dark ruby in color; it displayed concentrated notes of brambly wild berries tinged with spice suggesting mountain scrub; zesty acidity added a dramatic lift to the firmly structured, medium-weight palate, which came across as big without being rough or obtrusive. It was a near-perfect style for the on-premise trade in terms of how it combined intensity with appealing accessibility.

"While Sky High gives us elevated acidity and tannin, the fruit profile veers





PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

toward a wild raspberry/blueberry character, different from the blackberry/cassis and lower acids you get in Cabernets grown at lower elevations," Seidenfeld remarked. "It is the combination of high UV, narrow diurnal temperatures, the red soil, and [the] steep slopes forcing deep root penetration that add up to a robust feel, yet it still [has] a beautifully soft tannin structure."

Regarding the first factor, he added, "Think of increased UV exposure as like getting a deep sun tan without burning. Grapes grown at over 2,000 feet see at least 16% more sunlight than grapes grown closer to sea level. As a natural response, they develop thicker skins to protect their seeds; hence the enhanced phenolic structure"—and as for the second, "the diurnal shifts on this site vary by only about 10 degrees; cooler days [are] in the low 90s and warmer nights in the mid-80s, even in peak summer. This allows grapes to achieve phenolic ripeness at a lower Brix. Our best wines from Sky High finish naturally at just 14.2%–14.4% ABV."

If that sounds like a brand that's tailor-made for on-premise accounts, demonstrating the perceptible acidity and moderate weight optimal for varied contemporary cuisines, that's because it is: ROWEN has all the makings of a quintessential restaurant go-to. Appropriately enough, then, we followed our mountaintop foray with lunch at Castelli's—a remarkable Italian-American restaurant in Geyserville operated by the same family since 1936—accompanied by the rest of the current ROWEN portfolio. Read on for my notes. *SJ*

## Tasting Notes



**ROWEN 2023 Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$70)** Sourced from a site set at 1,800 feet in elevation, where an Old Wente selection from Hyde Vineyard was grafted onto the existing vines in 2020. The block's proximity to the Pacific coast just 13 miles away gives this citrus-toned wine a briny minerality in conjunction with vibrant natural acidity and a sleek, crisp medium body. Says Rodney Strong Wine Estates chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld, "The goal was to craft a wine that is seamless, luscious, [and] densely structured but . . . accessible enough to drink every day." It was fermented with native yeast and aged in (75% new) French oak.

**ROWEN 2021 CR21 Cooley Ranch Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$125)** Seidenfeld described this monovarietal bottling as a "master class" in high-elevation Cabernet Sauvignon. Combining fruit from the Sky High and Dawsons blocks—located at 2,400 and 1,600 feet, respectively—it melds black, blue, and red berry aromas with a dense, muscular structure bolstered by zesty acidity and what he calls the "melting tannin" typical of Cooley Ranch.

**ROWEN 2021 600R Red Blend, Sonoma County (\$175)** This Right Bank-inspired blend of 58% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc, and 12% Cabernet Sauvignon starts off with lush aromas of black cherry that quickly give way to a dense, high-phenolic structure. Says Seidenfeld, "High-elevation Cabernet Franc is more textural and less herbal than typical Cabernet Franc—[it's] able to fill in the midpalate, with the Cabernet Sauvignon adding a low basal structure and raspberry-like richness."

**ROWEN 2021 600L Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$175)** Culled from the property's finest cuvées, this Cabernet Sauvignon with 5% Petit Verdot is "microvinified" by Seidenfeld and his team to the nth degree. The result displays an exhilarating intensity of wild raspberry and blueberry with scrubby/herbal nuances on a palate that's dense, meaty, round, and seamless. Natural fermentation is carried out in 600-liter barrels designed by Seidenfeld himself, who does no pumpovers—the wine is moved only by gravity in order to retain the absolute purity of all the attributes intrinsic to Cooley Ranch Vineyard.

# Reframing a Relic

**MIGUEL TORRES CHILE IS AMONG THE PRODUCERS BEHIND THE REEMERGENCE OF PAÍS** by Kate Newton

**SPREAD ACROSS CHILE** by Spanish missionaries beginning in the 16th century, roundly dismissed as a relic suited solely to bulk wine in the 20th, and thrust back into the winemaking zeitgeist in the 21st due in part to its resilience in the face of climate change: Such is the story of País, aka Listán Prieto and Mission, which dominated the vineyards of small-scale farmers long before the arrival of Bordeaux grapes.

Pockets of vineyards planted to the grape, well suited to dry farming and poor granitic soils, survived primarily in Southern Chile as it broadly fell out of favor. Now wineries such as Miguel Torres Chile are helping to turn the tide as they champion a new chapter for País centered around the freshness and vibrancy so coveted by consumers the world over.

Miguel Torres Chile currently crafts three expressions of País: Estelado Rosé (\$19), a sparkling wine with notes of red and citrus fruit that's made in partnership with 19 small winegrowers from the Maule Valley; La Causa (\$24), an herbal and red-berried rendition sourced from old, dry-farmed bush vines in the Itata Valley; and Millapoa (\$35), which hails from a 100-plus-year-old vineyard in the Bío Bío Valley. We recently spoke with head winemaker Eduardo Jordán to learn more about the producer's role in the reassessment of País and how it serves as a living link to Chile's viticultural history.

**Q: What do you view as the turning point for País finding new life in the 21st century?**

I believe [it] came when the industry began to view País not as a relic of the past but as an authentic expression of Chile's winemaking heritage. The rediscovery of the century-old vineyards in the arid interior, coupled with a growing interest in wines with identity, origin, and history, led to the discovery of a potential that



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VINEYARD BRANDS

*Miguel Torres Chile head winemaker Eduardo Jordán.*

had been underestimated for decades. Thanks to the work of winemakers and wineries that made a firm commitment to reviving and showcasing this variety, the quality of historic vineyards has been brought to light, proving that País can produce high-quality wines with a strong sense of place.

**Q: What was your impression of País early in your career and has that perspective evolved?**

I began my career as a winemaker in 2001, at a time when the Chilean wine industry was heavily focused on international grape varieties, especially those of Bordeaux origin such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and, later, Carmenère. . . . In that context, País had a very different profile from what we see today. It was generally used as a component in generic blends intended for the bulk market and was rarely considered a variety capable of producing high-quality wines with their

own distinct identity.

Over time, my perception changed significantly. As some producers and wineries began to champion the revival of País, it became evident that this variety held immense historical, cultural, and viticultural richness. It was not merely a matter of reviving an ancient grape variety but also of honoring the communities and families that had preserved these vineyards for generations in regions such as Maule and Itata.

Advances in our understanding of the different terroirs were also crucial. Differentiating between zones, selecting old vineyards, and identifying plantings on less fertile soils led to the discovery of País wines with greater concentration, complexity, and character. This helped change the historical perception of the variety and demonstrated that, under the right conditions and with careful management, it could produce wines with a unique identity.



**Q: What makes País particularly well suited to meet the challenges of climate change?**

I believe that one of the País grape's main strengths ... is precisely its ability to adapt. Over time, it has demonstrated a remarkable ability to thrive in rain-fed conditions, especially in the areas between Maule and BíoBío, where it has survived and been produced for centuries with minimal intervention and without irrigation systems.

Many of the historic vineyards that exist today have endured long periods of drought and significant climatic variations while maintaining their productive capacity and identity. Furthermore, many of these vineyards are in harmony with their environment, cultivated using traditional methods and drawing on deep local knowledge accumulated over generations. This combination of natural adaptation, resilience, and management expertise is particularly valuable in a context where water availability and extreme weather events are increasingly frequent challenges.

**Q: What role has Miguel Torres Chile played in elevating País in recent years, and how does that align with the winery's respect for heritage varieties and its partnerships with small growers?**

I believe that Miguel Torres Chile's contribution has been, above all, a genuine belief in the potential of the País grape to produce quality wines at a time when very few were betting on this variety. That conviction translated into concrete projects that helped showcase the different expressions of País and its strong connection to the regions where it has historically been grown.

Examples of this include Millapoa, made with País grapes from BíoBío; La Causa, focused on reviving Itata's wine-making heritage; and, of course, Estelado, launched in 2010, which became one of the benchmarks for Chilean sparkling wines made from nontraditional varieties and contributed significantly to changing perceptions of País.

**Q: What differences in terroir and vineyard practices between Maule, BíoBío, and Itata help distinguish their respective wines?**

One of the most significant differences between Maule, Itata, and BíoBío is the

climate. As we move south, conditions become cooler and rainier, which directly influences the varietal's aromatic expression and freshness. I believe that herbal notes are always present in País' DNA, but ... in Maule, the fruity character predominates, with aromas of red fruits such as strawberries and fresh berries. In Itata, there is a greater balance between fresh red fruit and the typical wild herbs that characterize the variety. In BíoBío, where the climate is cooler, wild herbs and black fruits tend to stand out more.



*Miguel Torres Chile crafts three expressions of País representing three regions: Maule, BíoBío, and Itata.*

**Q: What techniques do you apply in the winery to best preserve the varietal character of País?**

I believe the key has been working with these vineyards for many years and learning how País behaves in different types of growing seasons. That has allowed us to better understand its ripening times and respect the way it has historically been managed in the field.

At the winery, we strive to follow that same philosophy, intervening as little as possible and, in some cases, reviving ancestral practices to bring out its most authentic character. For example, [for] Millapoa, we use manual crushing with a *zaranda*, a traditional tool made of small bamboo sticks tied together. We also work without selected yeasts, allowing the fermentations to better express the

origin and personality of each vineyard. Rather than following a set formula, our goal is to work in harmony with the variety and let País reveal what makes it unique in each region.

**Q: What has been the reception to the wines among Chileans, and how do you view the future of the grape both domestically and abroad?**

The response has been very positive, especially in the case of Estelado. When it was launched in 2010, it was quite a groundbreaking concept, as very few people imagined that a grape variety historically associated with simple wines could produce a high-quality sparkling wine. Over time, it has carved out a significant niche for itself and is now recognized as one of the leading Chilean sparkling wines made from nontraditional grape varieties.

Today, there are numerous examples of excellent wines made from País, which proves that its quality is no longer in question. I believe the future of this variety is very promising, both in Chile and in international markets. However, its growth will depend largely on the efforts we make as an industry to raise awareness of it ... and find the right channels to reach consumers, since for now it remains a niche category.

**Q: How can sommeliers and retail professionals describe the character and style of the grape and the wines it yields to U.S. consumers who might be unfamiliar with it and its background?**

I think the first thing to do is tell its story—[it's] one of Chile's oldest heritage grape varieties, brought by the Spanish in the 16th century and cultivated for centuries in the south of the country. [It] produces light- to medium-bodied wines that are very fresh, with a distinctly rustic yet authentic character, featuring red fruits, herbs, and a very direct sense of origin.

On the palate, País does not aim to be powerful or structured but rather juicy [and] easy to drink. In some expressions, it may resemble Gamay or Cinsault, making it very appealing to consumers seeking lighter wines with personality. ... It is not just an ancient variety but a grape that survived for centuries in the hands of small producers. ... That human and cultural connection is essential to understanding its charm. 



*Alpacas are among the many species contributing to the biodiversity of the vineyards of Viñedos Organicos Emiliana.*

# Organic All Along

SUSTAINABILITY HAS BEEN DEEPLY INGRAINED IN CHILEAN WINERY **VIÑEDOS ORGANICOS EMILIANA'S** PRACTICES FROM THE OUTSET

by Ellen Clifford

## **VIÑEDOS ORGANICOS EMILIANA**

was founded in 1998 by brothers Rafael and José Guilisasti, who shared the belief that having a positive impact on the environment while facilitating a healthy workplace for their employees was of the utmost importance. Using fruit from organic and biodynamic vineyards, they now produce a full portfolio of wines that carry virtually every environmental and

socially responsible certification they're eligible for.

"When we started, sustainability was optional; now it is mandatory," says Sebastián Tramón, the winery's sustainability manager. Indeed, over the past couple of decades, Emiliana has grown not just in size (it's among Chile's top ten wine exporters and the leading organic wine exporter to the United States) but also

in its pursuit of implementing additional sustainable practices. Such dedication has clearly paid off, as it's now the largest organic-wine producer in the world.

Back in 2001, Emiliana became the first Chilean winery to obtain the international ISO 14001 certification for environmental management, and with the launch of Coyam, Chile's first super-premium organic wine, it was off to the races. By 2006, its





Gê label had become the first Chilean wine to be certified by Demeter, and more accreditations and awards soon followed: Emiliana was Fair Trade Certified in 2011 and named Green Winery of the Year by The Drinks Business the following year (a title it reclaimed in both 2024 and 2025). And though its wines were vegan even before an official certification was in place, the Vegan Society bestowed it one in 2019.

So what vineyard and cellar practices have earned Emiliana such recognition? One example is vermicomposting, whereby earthworms and other microorganisms break down organic waste, creating a nutrient-rich humus used to make a tea that can be injected through the irrigation systems as a soil amendment. Another tactic is cover cropping, which captures carbon and prevents CO<sub>2</sub> from entering the atmosphere. Thirty percent of the total estate is set aside for biodiversity conservation, encompassing up to 221 plant and 61 animal species at last count, not to mention bacteria, fungi, and native yeasts.

Regarding Emiliana's aforementioned treatment of its workers, part of the impetus to go organic was to eliminate exposure to toxic pesticides. Among the additional initiatives that have merited the winery B Corporation status, Emiliana maintains organic gardens to grow produce for its employees and a library for their children, as well as assistance funds



in areas such as education and catastrophic events—all while paying them a wage 30% higher than Chile's minimum and providing health insurance.

Now the winery has turned its focus to regenerative agriculture. Regenerative Organic Certified is a stringent program that requires wineries to be certified as organic first: Noting that "it's a new paradigm," Tramón cautions that progress must be "carefully addressed to avoid greenwashing." Emiliana is also preparing to renew its B Corp status to align with the updated standards of the organiza-

tion, which is shifting away from a points system and now requires qualifying parties to meet a minimum threshold across seven key categories: purpose and stakeholder governance, fair work, JEDI (justice equity, diversity, inclusion), human rights, climate action, environmental stewardship and circularity, and government affairs and collective action.

As for Emiliana's portfolio itself, among the diverse premium offerings crafted by winemaker Noelia Orts are the Maycas del Limarí wines, made with Burgundian varieties influenced by proximity to the sea, dense fog known as the *camanchaca*, and mineral soils. The 57 Rocas line includes a Maipo Valley Cabernet Sauvignon as well as a Carmenère and a Malbec from the Colchagua Valley, which is also the source of the aforementioned Gê and Coyam: The latter is an old-vine red blend, while Gê is a premium bottling of Syrah and Carmenère. These wines have garnered quite a bit of success, earning scores as high as 98 points, among other honors.

Tramón notes that his and his colleagues' hope for the future is that the wine industry both in Chile and globally will start "banning some toxic pesticides [while] unifying criteria to have a global sustainability standard." It's an inclusive view that serves as a testament to Emiliana's devotion to leaving a positive mark on the world (and in the glass). SJ



High Valley Volcano Camp attendees, front row: Kathryn Morgan, MS, director of wine education, Southern Glazer's Beverage Co.; Airin-Nattha Apiwattanakit, restaurant general manager, JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort, Marco Island, FL; Carmilla Tindal, manager, Marquee Club, Fox Theater, Atlanta, GA; sommelier and writer Tonya Pitts; Eric Shapiro, general manager, The Beach House, Bristol, RI; Matthew Selva, wine educator/corporate sommelier, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, Columbus, OH; Ethan Gladner, director of beverage, Congressional Country Club, Bethesda, MD; and Lance Tolaio, wine and spirits director, Sam's Grill and Seafood Restaurant, San Francisco, CA. Back row: Rob Smith, sommelier, JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort; wine writer Michael Franz; Matt Mattox, wine buyer, Bottles Beverage Superstore, Columbia, SC; and Jody Craul, beverage operations manager, Boca West Country Club, Boca Raton, FL.

# *A Mouthful of* MINERality

GETTING A TASTE OF LAKE COUNTY  
TERROIR AT **BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY'S**  
HIGH VALLEY VOLCANO CAMP

*story by* STACY BRISCOE / *photos by* ALEXANDER RUBIN



*"If we're going to successfully promote*

*this region, this AVA, then someone has to take a lead,"* said Chris Baker, president of Brassfield Estate Winery, to the group of wine professionals attending the 2026 High Valley Volcano Camp in mid-April. Indeed, Brassfield Estate was the perfect place to explore what it means to grow winegrapes in volcanic soil. The 5,000-acre property is owned by Jerry Brassfield, who purchased his first 1,500 acres in 1973 and officially founded his eponymous winery in 2000. It's the only brick-and-mortar winery in operation in the High Valley AVA, which is defined by its extreme elevation—ranging from 1,600 to 3,000 feet—as well as that soil.

It must be said that High Valley isn't the only AVA in Lake County to contain soils laden with volcanic parent material. The Red Hills, Clear Lake, and Kelsey Bench-Lake County AVAs, to name a few, also bear traces of the area's volcanic past: Mount Konocti, located near the western shores of Clear Lake, formed around 400,000 years ago from a series of eruptions. In the shadow of that mountain stands Brassfield's 85-acre Volcano Ridge Vineyard, a field trip to which was the highlight of our camp. Located at 2,200 feet in altitude, it's planted predominantly to Rhône varieties as well as Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, and Malbec. It was here that Dr. Seth Burgess, geochronologist for the United States Geological Survey's California Volcano Observatory, described how the soil evolved from explosive material to winegrape-worthy ground.

As he explained, Volcano Ridge sits on the pyroclastic apron of an adjacent cinder cone called Round Mountain. At roughly 150,000 years old, this cone is part of the Clear Lake Volcanic Field, which has been active for about 3 million years. "In addition to the explosive



*Dr. Seth Burgess, geochronologist for the United States Geological Survey's California Volcano Observatory, led a discussion of the estate's terroir.*



*Proprietor Jerry Brassfield participated in many camp activities.*





eruption that produced the pyroclastic apron, five lava flows emitted from the base of the cinder cone,” said Burgess. “The pyroclastic rocks and flows only cover a couple-mile circumference around the cone, so the soil on which these grapes are growing is specific to this local area.”

Campers were able to witness the vineyard’s stunning rouge-colored terrain not just above ground but by looking into the depths of the sample soil pits. This red soil—similar to the *terra rossa* soils found in Australia’s Coonawarra GI—is the result of the oxidation that occurred in the iron-rich parent material during the weathering process that followed eruption. Rocks found throughout the site are full of small holes called vesicles, which formed when gases escaped the lava: “You can think of a volcano as an unopened bottle of Champagne—it’s full of gases under pressure,” explained Burgess. “Pressure decreases as magma ascends the crust during an eruption, having the same effect as uncorking a bottle of Champagne. [This] allows gases to escape as bubbles, which . . . are preserved as small holes as the lava cools from liquid to solid.”

This porosity means the soils have low water-holding capacity, “so we need to push canopy development early in the season to help get the green material established,” said Brassfield’s vice president of winery and vineyard operations, Jonathan Walters. “We use evapotranspiration sensors throughout to inform our irrigation schedule and then pull



▲ **Brassfield Estate Winery is located in the High Valley AVA of Lake County, CA.**

▼ **Campers gather around a soil pit in Brassfield Estate Winery’s Volcano Ridge Vineyard.**



back later in the season when vines are focused on grape formation.” Water management also involves planting vines to specific rootstocks, predominantly 420A, which “develops very quickly and then stops,” Walters noted. “It’s also a potassium miner; it can take in potassium without messing up the pH.” This is particularly important as volcanic soils are innately potassium-heavy, which can result in grape juice with higher pH and lower acid, ultimately causing imbalances once that juice turns into wine. But with the help of the proper rootstock as well as staggered harvesting, Walters’ team is able to avoid that problem. “We use our earlier picks as natural acid additions,” he said, “as opposed to having to synthetically acidify later in the winemaking process.”

The High Valley is also ideal for growing red winegrapes for other reasons: The intensity of the UV light it receives encourages the growth of thick, hearty skins and phenolic development; wind gusts aid in grape stress; and lower temperatures due to the altitude promote a





long ripening season, providing full color, aroma, and flavor.

To help them understand what all this means in the glass, campers were treated to a tasting of several wines, including Brassfield's 2017 Petite Sirah, 2021 Malbec, and 2024 Mourvèdre as well as a vertical of its Eruption red blend, consisting of Petite Sirah, Syrah, Malbec, Mourvèdre, and Grenache, from the 2021–2023 vintages. "Our house style," said Brassfield consulting winemaker David DeSante, "is fresh, floral, fruit-driven wines with tannins that are supple but have a coating duration on the palate." These are wines with the potential to evolve—whether over the course of the meal or during an aging period in the cellar.

How do the vineyards ensure that? DeSante described some trials the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI) conducted to compare two Coonawarra vineyards—one with those aforementioned terra rossa soils and one without. "When the same selections of Cabernet Sauvignon were harvested at the



**Brassfield's vice president of winery and vineyard operations, Jonathan Walters, and consulting winemaker, David DeSante, lead campers through a flight of Volcano Ridge Vineyard wines.**

same level of potential alcohol and then fermented at the same winery using the same procedures, the wines from iron-rich soils produced more tannins," he said. "When corrected for tannin concentration, these wines were then treated with oxygen, and the rate of tannin oxidation was observed to be much slower in the wines from red soils." In short, the iron-rich soils produced more ageworthy wines with higher amounts of tannin and slower oxidative reactions.

We can expect the same of Brassfield's bottlings. The Petite Sirah offered aromas and flavors of Black Forest cake along with tannins that imparted a textural sensation akin to corduroy; the Malbec provided classic black and blue fruits in addition to a distinctive wild rose-like quality; the Mourvèdre came through with all the brambliness and forest-floor funk the variety is known for; and the Eruption blend tied each of these varieties together in a clean, cohesive package. Specifically, the thread that linked them all was a fresh, seawater-like salinity that DeSante again credited to the nature of the soil. "We have attributed this sensation to the relatively high concentrations of potassium in the Brassfield wines," he said, "which is naturally taken up by the vines from the volcanic soils. Potassium levels ... in the wine average between 1,800 and 2,400 milligrams per liter. This, coupled with the ample acidity from the



**Pitts takes notes during a tasting.**

cool evenings, creates the sensation of saltiness on the palate."

If there had been any skepticism among the attendees about the concept of minerality, it was certainly laid to rest here. While one might not be able to taste the iron, the potassium, the porosity of the rocks, or the redness of the soil, these elements of the vineyard without a doubt affect how the grapes are grown and thus the profile of the resulting wines. These wines have a footprint embedded in volcanic grounds; they have preserved hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, and the evidence is in the glass. 



# A Complete Destination

AT CHILE'S **VIÑA SANTA RITA**, WINE WEAVES THROUGH NATURE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE by Chris Howard

## THERE IS A COMMON ASSUMPTION

that the *ne plus ultra* of wine tourism is great wine in a beautiful setting. Viña Santa Rita, located in Chile's Maipo Valley, not only fulfills but goes beyond that simple, if attractive, formula. Named the world's best winery by *Forbes* in 2025, it offers something more ambitious in keeping with the world-class Cabernet it produces, serving as a heritage destination where wine, history, nature, culture, and gastronomy are tightly woven into a uniquely Chilean tapestry.

The estate is a mere 45 minutes from Santiago's international airport—a detail more significant than it might seem. Chile is as long as the United States is wide, but the Maipo Valley is the only wine region in the world located right on the edge of a capital city, making it easy for tourists to visit Santa Rita without sacrificing a day's travel.

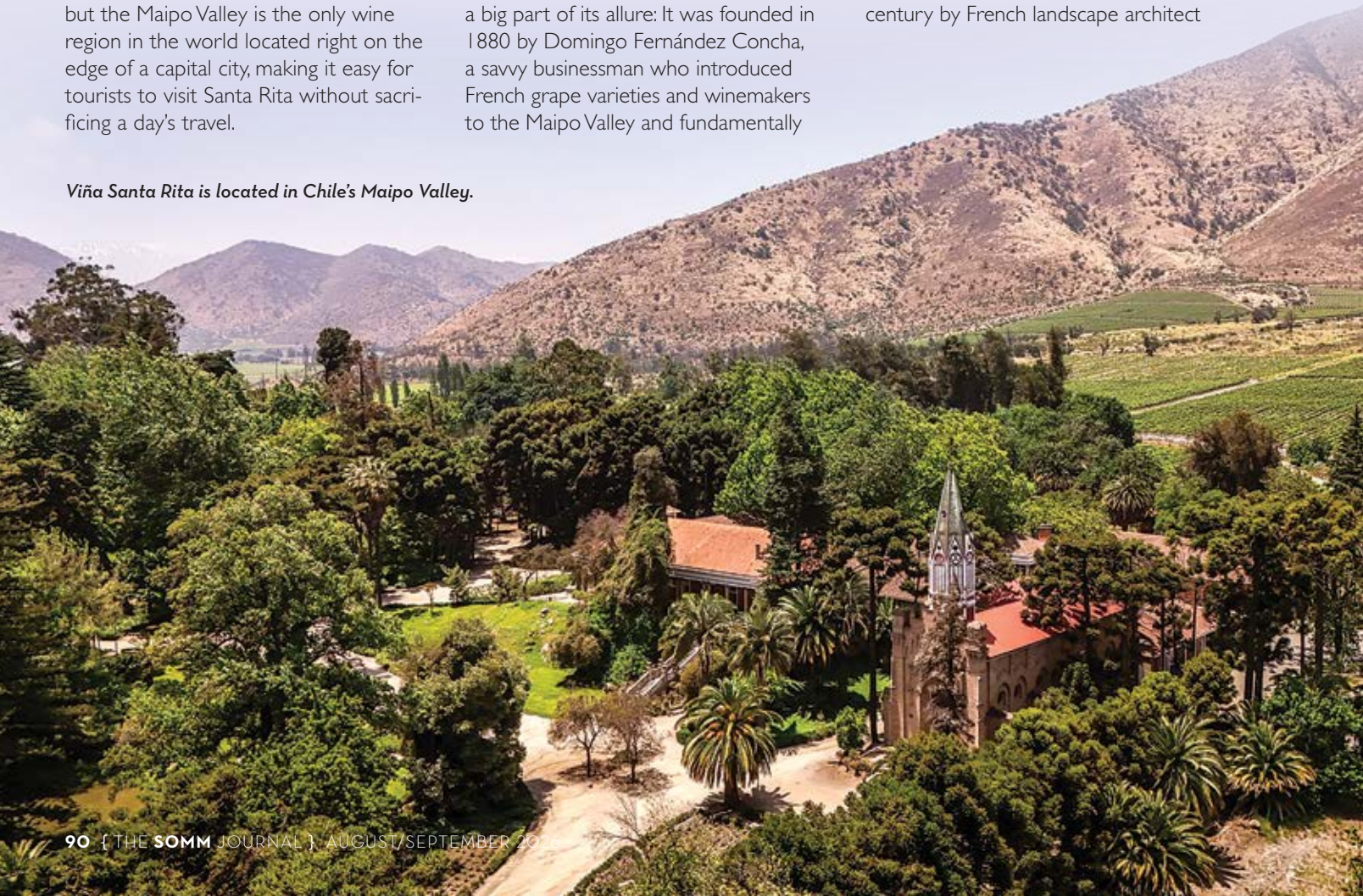
Chile, that “long petal of sea and wine and snow,” in the words of poet Pablo Neruda, is very much worth building an itinerary around. International arrivals grew 40% in 2024 alone to reach over 5 million—the highest in Latin America—driven by the allure of the Atacama's surreal desertscapes in the north, Patagonia's glaciers in the south, and outstanding wine everywhere in between, including right on Santiago's doorstep.

Since opening its doors to wine tourism in 2011, Santa Rita has seen an increase in visitors from 3,500 per year to more than 120,000; revenue has followed suit, growing 19% in 2025. Its rich history, rivaled by few New World wineries, is a big part of its allure: It was founded in 1880 by Domingo Fernández Concha, a savvy businessman who introduced French grape varieties and winemakers to the Maipo Valley and fundamentally

changed the direction of Chilean viticulture. But even before that, in 1818—the year Chile officially declared independence from Spain—120 patriot soldiers fleeing defeat at the Battle of Cancha Rayada took refuge on the property in the house of Doña Paula Jaraquemada, an event that inspired the winery's iconic 120 line of wines. The neo-Gothic chapel on the grounds hosted the wedding of the founder's daughter; from which union the renowned poet Vicente Huidobro was born in 1893. In 1972, the estate's manor houses, chapel, and cellars as well as its 40-hectare park were declared a National Monument.

The park, designed in the late 19th century by French landscape architect

*Viña Santa Rita is located in Chile's Maipo Valley.*







*Casa Real is an award-winning boutique hotel on the property.*



*Santa Rita's 40-hectare park is home to various water features: lagoons, Roman baths, and a swimming pool.*

Guillermo Renner in not only the French but also Italian and English styles, forms the heart of the estate at the foot of the Andes, whose snowmelt from peaks visible above the treeline feeds the Maipo River and the vines; its grounds contain lagoons, Roman baths, and a swimming pool of striking architectural elegance set among centenarian trees. They're also home to Museo Andino, which offers free admission and holds more than 3,000 pre-Columbian and

colonial artifacts representing cultures from across the Andean region—Diaguita, Atacameño, and Mapuche, among others—as well as Casa Real, a 16-room boutique hotel installed in the Pompeian-style summer residence that Concha commissioned for himself; a restoration completed in the 1990s preserved the building's original salons, billiard room, and interior galleries. *Condé Nast Traveler* has ranked it among the best hotels in South America in three consecutive years of

Readers' Choice Awards; *Travel + Leisure* ranked it the second best on the continent in 2024.

Among the most multifaceted in the world, the tourism program Santa Rita has established at the estate is as layered and complete as its premium Cabernets. There are eight tours in all, ranging from tastings in the cellar to more unconventional options such as a blending session in which visitors compose their own wine; a pedal-powered bar cart known as the Pedal Bar that circuits the park; an augmented reality experience in which visitors can use devices to see the estate as it looked in 1880; and a horse-drawn carriage ride through the vineyards to a monolith marking the spot where Carménère was rediscovered in Chile in 1994. (Visitors can then take the opportunity to taste acclaimed Carménères such as Pewën de Apalta, recognized five times as Chile's top Carménère by Descorchados.) The newest and most exclusive offering, the Colección de Origen, includes access to the estate's heritage spaces—including the aforementioned salons of Hotel Casa Real and the chapel—alongside a private tasting of five wines from the Colección de Origen range, among them Pewën de Apalta, Bougainville, Triple C, and Floresta, and a three-course paired lunch.

Other attractions include The Doña Paula, consistently recognized among the best winery restaurants in Chile; it occupies the building where those 120 soldiers once sheltered, offering menus that are developed through close collaboration between chefs and winemakers to showcase classic Chilean cuisine.

Santa Rita's flagship wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Alto Jahuel estate that's also named Casa Real and is sold at La Place de Bordeaux alongside Bordeaux's First Growths, is the main draw for many visitors; first released in 1989 and sourced from historic vineyards in Alto Jahuel, it remains Chile's only icon wine made exclusively from Cabernet Sauvignon since its inception and has played an important role in establishing Chile's reputation for world-class renditions of the grape. Yet it is proving to be just one chapter in a much larger story as Santa Rita widens the conventional view of wine tourism and receives the international attention this long petal of sea, wine, and snow has long deserved. *SJ*



# A Perpetual Passion Project

AT **LOVEBLOCK**, ERICA CRAWFORD CONTINUES TO ELEVATE NEW ZEALAND SAUVIGNON BLANC *by Wanda Mann*

**ERICA CRAWFORD** laughs heartily at the suggestion that, after decades in the wine business, she might consider taking it easy. "I'm absolutely loving what I'm doing," says the co-founder and CEO of New Zealand brand Loveblock. "People say 'Oh, surely you should start slowing down,' but I love it."

Love has in fact fueled Crawford since that fateful day in 2004 when she and her winemaker husband, Kim, climbed a hill overlooking the Awatere and Wairau valleys and saw "the most beautiful view in Marlborough. You look over the Cook Strait, and you see the North Island . . . and you just feel like your troubles lift," she says. Any trepidation that the couple may have felt about moving forward after selling their previous brand—the one named for Kim that they spent nine years growing into a global sensation—was as-



suaged by the discovery of this little piece of paradise, which they appropriately named Loveblock. Thus began their next chapter as vintners.

Though their surname may already have been familiar to avid Sauvignon Blanc drinkers, Loveblock itself was an intriguing mystery when it debuted with the 2012 vintage. That may have had something to do with the fact that the deeply personal project defies the preconceived notions that many consumers and even professionals possess about New Zealand's stylistic take on the variety. "It's a noble grape, and there's so much more to it than just classic Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc," says Erica.

Loveblock reflects not only the couple's commitment to crafting estate-grown wines that showcase terroir but also their curiosity about diverse styles and tech-

*Loveblock's vineyards in the Awatere Valley of Marlborough, New Zealand.*







*Erica Crawford is the co-founder and CEO of Loveblock.*

niques. “We’ve sort of become accidental Sauvignon Blanc specialists,” says Erica with a laugh. For instance, by experimenting with different fermentation vessels, they deftly coax a broad array of flavors and textures from the grape without risk of overmanipulation. Aging in concrete eggs adds an “ethereal layer” to the wine, she notes: “We put a portion of the Sauvignon in that, clay amphora, foudre, old oak, and then stainless steel. It just gives it nice texture and complexity.” These nuanced techniques also increase the aging capacity of her wine, she believes.

Of course, the Crawfords’ expertise in the cellar is grounded in their profound understanding of the vineyards they planted more than two decades ago. “What really is so impressive is when you taste the same wine from the same block—because it’s your block and you get to know it so intimately—you see how age changes the balance,” Erica observes. “Vine age definitely brings a beautifulness into it.”

To safeguard that beauty, she employs organic production methods informed both by her academic studies as a medical scientist and by her personal decision to eliminate artificial additives from her diet. “People are looking for less shit in their wine,” she says bluntly. And though Loveblock has always contained low sulfite levels, for those who prefer absolutely none, its TEE Sauvignon Blanc offers a solution that is both innovative and natural: The wine is preserved with tannin extracted from green tea rather than the more commonly used SO<sub>2</sub>.

Debuting with the 2019 vintage, it is the first wine in the world to use green tea tannin as an antioxidant.

Erica was inspired in this endeavor by winemakers in her native South Africa, where some vintners have successfully replaced sulfur with rooibos and honeybush tea extracts; TEE, in fact, is Afrikaans for “tea.” She can now claim similar success: “The wines are still intact from 2019,” she declares.

Such efforts are all in service of doing justice to the grape the Crawfords built their name on. “I’m really just trying to pay homage to Sauvignon Blanc,” says Erica; to that end, Loveblock is now also crafting a traditional-method sparkling expression, which she half-jokingly calls “the accountant’s worst nightmare” due to its labor-intensive production process and extended lees aging. (That said, Sauvignon Blanc isn’t all it offers: The portfolio also includes a Marlborough Pinot Gris and a stellar Pinot Noir hailing from its Someone’s Darling Vineyard in Central Otago.)

If you need still further proof that Erica has no intention of slowing down, consider that last year the Crawfords finally fulfilled their dream of purchasing their own winemaking facility. “We’ve been looking for a long time; I’ve always made [wine] at someone else’s place,” she says. “We now control the entire process, and, oh my goodness, it’s so amazing.” Ever the visionary, she finally has the freedom to conduct even more experiments: In addition to doing “a lot of yeast trials,” she’s

enthusiastically engaged in studying what she calls “aroma architecture” to ensure that Loveblock’s wines “layer the side of the palate, the front of the palate, the top, the back.”

In the 22 years since the Crawfords first set sights on the land that would become Loveblock, their passion project has blossomed into a benchmark for innovation and stewardship in New Zealand. However, their work is far from done: “There are so many other edges there to explore,” says Erica. And she has every intention of doing so.

## ~ Tasting Notes ~

### **Loveblock 2025 Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$30)**

Waves of dill and thyme perfume the glass, accompanied by grapefruit and star fruit. In keeping with the crisp entry, a zesty brightness cools the mouthwatering palate, edged with lime blossom, before settling into a lightly taut, refreshing saline finish. One of the label’s best vintages. **94** —*Meridith May*



### **Loveblock 2022 Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$33)**

Sunshine and intrigue unite in this traditional-method sparkling. Even as it exudes an uncommon medley of bread dough, orange, jasmine, and papaya fringed with snap pea and jalapeño, it’s almost weightless in the mouth, revealing vintner Erica Crawford’s deftness of touch. **92** —*Ruth Tobias*



### **Loveblock 2024 TEE Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$34)**

The aromatics of this wine, which is made without added sulfur, are quite vivid, with gooseberry, cut grass, and lime zest leading the charge. Though briskly sculpted and mineral-leaning, the palate feel is also open and juicy, showing less of the back-of-the-tongue edge associated with New Zealand Sauv Blanc thanks to the gentle touch of honeyed peach and a floral lift. **93** —*M.M.*

TERLATO



*The unique terroir of Balcarce in the Buenos Aires Province of Argentina.*

# Atlantic Impact

**PUERTA DEL ABRA IS PIONEERING WINEMAKING IN ARGENTINA'S NEWEST APPELLATION** by Meridith May

**LOCATED IN THE** southern part of Buenos Aires Province, Bodega Puerta del Abra is the first winery that developed interest in the emerging Argentine winegrowing region of Balcarce. Situated on mineral-rich soils within the Sierra de Tandilia mountain range, parts of which are estimated to be over 2 billion years old, Balcarce experiences a microclimate influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, with strong, cooling breezes and heavy rainfall.

Though Balcarce was not formally recognized and approved as a Geo-

graphical Indication (GI) until 2022 in an area known for its Pampas grasslands rather than its vineyards, Puerta del Abra launched the year prior in 2021. Its international expansion has not gone unnoticed by *The SOMM Journal*: We were fortunate enough to sample some of its wines, whose character is distinct from that of expressions hailing from Mendoza, Patagonia, or Salta. Granite and limestone soils, harsh winds, and the aforementioned marine influence as well as vast diurnal temperature changes impact

these focused bottlings, made with fruit from the El Vallecito Vineyard.

Sebastian Perez Companc is president of the winery, overseeing production and global sales from his home base in Southern California. "This was always meant to be a family business, started by my father," Companc says. "His business is agriculture, and he has always possessed an ambition to start a winery."

As a pioneer of grape-growing in Balcarce, Puerta del Abra has the advantage of being able to present some-





thing unique to wine buyers. "When we launched in the U.S. in 2024, we were able to partner with prestigious accounts, particularly on the West Coast," he adds, "and that decision began in Buenos Aires, where we have aligned with most of the MICHELIN-star restaurants. The advantage that we have is bridging the gap between producers and distributors, retailers and consumers, since we have an active presence in the market."

Now, Balcarce is home to about five new wineries, according to Compagnon, but being first, opening up his own import company, and building a customer base in the States is giving Puerta del Abra the edge it deserves. After all, its team spearheaded the development of the GI back in 2002 as a result of their belief in a region that nobody had ever thought of for developing fine wines.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PUERTA DEL ABRA

## Tasting Notes



### **Puerta del Abra 2021 Riesling, Balcarce, Buenos Aires, Argentina (\$50)**

Within a steely embrace of salinity and wet stone, delicate and linear notes of lemon, chamomile, peach, and vanilla wafer lead to a precise finish. **94**



### **Puerta del Abra NV ITZAE Red Blend, Balcarce, Buenos Aires, Argentina (\$65)**

This dramatic red blend—named for the Mayan word for "gift of god"—flaunts deep, dark layers of blackberry, graphite, dried violets, and cured meats. Emboldened by sturdy tannins, spiced cedar reinforces its power as it endures on the palate. **95**

### **Puerta del Abra NV Bonarda, Balcarce, Buenos Aires, Argentina (\$65)**

Herbaceous notes meld with flavors of wild cherry and plum, high acidity, and silky tannins. **93**

### **Puerta del Abra 2021 Pinot Noir, Balcarce, Buenos Aires, Argentina (\$80)**

Aged ten months in new and used oak vessels of varying sizes, this savory and woody red offers notes of tobacco, tree bark, orange peel, and soy sauce. Chalky tannins deliver textural clarity, drying the palate and revealing flavors of espresso and earth. Only toward the finish does the wine start to open, developing tones of black plum and pomegranate that are integrated with warm oak. **93**



*Banfi's 35-acre vineyard in the Bolgheri DOC of Tuscany, Italy.*



# Bolgheri alla Banfi

THE PRODUCER'S  
**ASKA AND DÈINOS**  
WINES OFFER  
A PATH FOR  
EXPLORATION IN  
THIS CORNER OF  
TUSCANY

by Lars Leicht

**IN ANY DISCUSSION** of the wines of Tuscany, two main themes tend to dominate: history and Sangiovese. For hundreds of years, Sangiovese-based wines such as Chianti, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, and Brunello di Montalcino have held sway in the region's rolling hills and hilltop towns. Yet Bolgheri, another of Tuscany's prestigious red-wine denominations, was established only in the late 20th century and has little if anything to do with Sangiovese.

This coastal area, today renowned for its red Bordeaux blends, received its DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) status in 1983, a good 15 years after the Italian government classified most of the historic wine types. The appellation initially acknowledged only the area's white and rosé wines, mainly Vermentino.

Historically, Sangiovese did not perform well here, yielding rustic wine whose demand rarely went farther than the dinner tables of the farmers who made it. A handful of midcentury pioneers discovered that red varieties of French origin were more likely to thrive in Bolgheri's sandy soils and marine climate. They made pricey wines sought after by collectors, but before the denomination system was overhauled in the 1990s,



they were listed at the lowest level, *Vino da Tavola*, regardless of quality and popularity. It wasn't until 1994 that Bolgheri Rosso DOC and Bolgheri Superiore DOC were officially sanctioned.

To qualify for recognition, the wines were required to be blends of the area's principal varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. In 2011, the law was changed to permit any of those as a monovarietal wine. Blends can now also include up to 50% Sangiovese, though few producers opt for it and are more likely to add the permitted Syrah (also up to 50%) or complementary varieties such as Petit Verdot (up to 30%).

In 2012, a year after the current rules were established, famed Brunello producer Banfi diversified into Bolgheri with its own project and released ASKA, a Bolgheri Rosso DOC blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Another 15 years on, Banfi has increased its commitment to Bolgheri with the recent release of Dèinos Bolgheri Superiore DOC, a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Both wines hail from Banfi's 35-acre vineyard near Castagneto Carducci on the Etruscan Coast, about 30 miles southeast of the port city of Livorno and a roughly 1.5-hour drive west from the winery's estate in Montalcino.

Professor Attilio Scienza, an esteemed former lecturer on viticulture at the University of Milan and a key consultant in Banfi's clonal research on the Sangiovese vine for Brunello, encouraged the producer's proprietors, the Mariani family, to invest in Bolgheri. Scienza was impressed by what he had found when studying the ancient alluvial soils of Castagneto Carducci: The vines dig deep into sandy clay loam with a high percentage of fine gravel to reach for nourishment, ultimately yielding elegant wines. Meanwhile, the marine climate—the vineyard is less than 5 miles from the sea as the crow flies—keeps the area cool and endows freshness. Consistent breezes reduce humidity and limit the threat of fungal disease, while the higher solar radiation index and the reflection of sunlight off the sea help stimulate photosynthesis.

"For us, Bolgheri represents both leadership and evolution," says Cristina Mariani, family proprietor and CEO of Castello Banfi. "While Brunello di Montalcino will always be the heart and soul of Banfi, our presence in Bolgheri allows us to express a different dimension of Tuscan excellence—one that reflects the global energy and prestige of the region today."

The area was densely inhabited from the ninth to the first century B.C.E. by the ancient Etruscans, who cultivated grapevines and established winemaking practices that were adopted by the Romans. They also established a metalworking industry in the southern part of Bolgheri, extracting iron and other minerals from the soil. The names of Banfi's Bolgheri wines pay homage to this civilization: A *dèinos* was a ceramic vessel used at banquets to hold wine, and an *aska* was used to store wine, oil, perfumes, and nectars while also representing a treasure chest that protected human emotions infused by Cautha and Semla, the Etruscans' sun and moon gods.

Mariani describes Banfi's Bolgheri venture as "a more focused, boutique project—but one that underscores our commitment to innovation and reinforces our role as a leading voice in fine wine-making." Indeed, Aska and Dèinos reflect the winery's signature clean, linear style as well as the unique terroir from which they come and the varietal character of the grapes grown there.



## Tasting Notes

### **Banfi 2023 ASKA Bolgheri Rosso DOC, Italy (\$40)**

Fermented in stainless-steel tanks and aged in 225- and 350-liter barriques of French oak for about ten months, this wine is a deep ruby-red color with violet reflections on the rim. Aromas of tobacco leaf, cedar, ripe plum, and cassis lead to a rich and smooth palate with notes of spice and preserved cherry. Velvety, jammy, and juicy, with well-balanced tannins and acidity culminating in a long finish.

### **Banfi 2022 Dèinos Bolgheri Superiore DOC, Italy (\$100)**

This brilliant garnet wine fermented in stainless steel and aged in 225-liter barriques of French oak for about 18 months. The bouquet is redolent of dried herbs, rosemary, and Mediterranean brush with hints of cherry cola, licorice, and crushed currant. The lean palate boasts solid tannins; good grip; and rich flavors of cherry, mint, currant, and dried raspberry. Savory notes of dried red fruit appear on the earthy, gravelly finish.

# Getting Some R&R in Santa Ynez Valley With Roblar Winery & Vineyards and Refugio Ranch Vineyards

by Meredith May

**IN 2004**, Kevin and Niki Gleason purchased a 415-acre cattle ranch in Santa Ynez just 35 minutes from the Pacific along California's Central Coast. Two years later, the couple planted a vineyard to Rhône varieties as well as Sauvignon Blanc and Petite Sirah to launch their label, Refugio Ranch Vineyards, whose lovely wines were elevated further when Max Marshak joined as winemaker. Marshak's previous experience involved helping to raise the profile of the Jonata label, working under winemaker Matt Dees.

Today, Kevin and Niki work with their children, Max Gleason and Callie Gleason Bieszard, and son-in-law Matthew Bieszard, under the umbrella of Gleason Family Vineyards, which oversees Refugio Ranch Vineyards and sister property Roblar Winery & Vineyards. The Gleasons purchased the latter in 2017, and Marshak has used his magic powers to enhance its reputation for stellar Bordeaux and Burgundian varieties. Roblar is more than a winery: Its farmstand and culinary program are unique to the Santa Ynez Valley, as is its Indah Gallery, which is dedicated to local artists and curated by Max.

**Roblar 2024 Chardonnay Reserve, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$60)** This wine performs a balancing act, matching scintillating notes of peach and pineapple with racy acidity. Vibrant mineral tones ramp up the perfume and flavor of jasmine and lemon blossom. **96**

**Refugio Ranch 2022 Escondrijo, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$60)** A perfume of dried lavender and blueberry leads to nuances of black cherry liqueur and tobacco in this blend of 92% Grenache, 7% Petite Sirah, and 1% Syrah, which has a slightly smoky edge thanks to notes of dried tea leaves and cedar spice. Dark plum, leather, and pepper indicate its depth, while pomegranate and crushed stone enhance its texture. **93**



Kevin and Niki Gleason.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBLAR WINERY



*Max Marshak is one of Santa Barbara County's rising stars. He began his career at Jonata Winery and since 2020 has overseen winemaking for Gleason Family Vineyards' sister properties, Roblar Winery and Refugio Ranch Vineyards.*

**Roblar 2023 Sangre de Dioses, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$70)** This blend of 63% Sangiovese, 34% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 3% Merlot displays the juicy side of boldness, with black fruit, sultry earth, and cedar going head to head to achieve balance. Bittersweet notes of dusty dark chocolate, fennel, and tobacco are streamlined by accessible and sturdy tannins. **96**

**Refugio Ranch 2022 Barbareño, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$70)** A meaty blend of 90% Syrah, 5% Grenache, and 5% Petite Sirah with fleshy tannins and spiced sandalwood. Round, concentrated, and dramatic, plum jam and graphite are texturally pleasing. Creamy blueberry is a highlight on the midpalate, flowing to a generous finish. **96**

**Refugio Ranch 2022 Petite Sirah, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$70)** This intense, teeth-grabbing wine is precise and surgical, showing bravura through high-octane notes of dark fruit, dried lavender, and spiced cedar plus a fine tannic structure that illuminates a wave of ripe berries. **94**



**Roblar 2021 Grace & Grit Gold Collection, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$98)** This blend of 74% Cabernet Sauvignon, 21% Cabernet Franc, and 5% Merlot aged for 20 months in new and used French oak. Chewy tannins and a slathering of licorice and graphite define its beastly nature from the first sip. Dried violets and dark chocolate impart a seamless, luscious, and inviting mouthfeel. Spiced sandalwood adds zip to the midpalate before a finish of savory soy sauce polished by blackberry liqueur. **96**



*Roblar is more than a winery: Its farmstand and culinary program are unique to the Santa Ynez Valley, as is its Indah Gallery, which is dedicated to local artists and curated by Max Gleason.*





# Pedigreed by Practice

MEET THREE WINEMAKERS FROM THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY WITH ELITE BACKGROUNDS *by Meridith May*

PHOTO COURTESY OF X NOVO



**CRAIG WILLIAMS** is the former winemaker at Joseph Phelps, where he created Insignia. He now owns X NOVO ([xnovo.com](http://xnovo.com)), comprising X NOVO Wines and the X NOVO and X Omni Vineyards, all in Oregon's Eola-Amity Hills AVA. In addition to making X NOVO Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Williams has sold fruit for over 15 years to many of the Willamette Valley's top producers, including Soter, Walter Scott, Morgen Long, Abbott Claim, and North Valley.

**X NOVO 2023 Pinot Noir, X Omni Vineyard, Eola-Amity Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$100)** Equal parts dynamic, juicy, concentrated, and luxurious, this is one of the most exciting full-bodied Pinot Noirs I've tasted. Rich, mocha-kissed notes of crushed cherries meld with cinnamon tea and peony. **97**

**JAMES CAHILL** just completed his 30th harvest in the Willamette Valley and is the founder and winemaker of North Valley Vineyards ([northvalleyvineyards.com](http://northvalleyvineyards.com)), which has two estate properties: North Valley Vineyard in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA and Aegrina Vineyard in the McMinnville AVA. Cahill works with vineyard partners across the northern Willamette to produce an iconic portfolio of single-vineyard wines from properties such as the X OMNI Vineyard and Thoma Vineyard.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORTH VALLEY VINEYARDS



**North Valley Vineyards 2023 Reserve Chardonnay, Gran Moraine Vineyard, Yamhill-Carlton, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$50)** Framed by crushed stone, this wine shows a shiny and energetic style through tropical tones of mango, banana, and coconut. Lemon curd shines as chamomile adds floral weight. **95**

**North Valley Vineyards 2023**

**Reserve Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$50)** A blanket of ripe red plum and milk chocolate soothes as it seamlessly unfolds across the mouth. Billowy notes of sage-kissed cherry and a dash of white pepper form a bond with cedar and cola. **94**

**North Valley Vineyards 2023 Pinot Noir, Aegrina Vineyard, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65)** Earthy forest floor and cherrywood define this juicy and elegant wine's persona. Cinnamon, cranberry, rose petal, and spearmint light up the palate. **94**

**FRANÇOIS MILLET** is the winemaker at La Biblioteca in the Willamette Valley ([labibliotecawine.com](http://labibliotecawine.com)). All "La Bib" wines come from the aforementioned Aegrina Vineyard, planted to an array of Pinot Noir clones. Millet is a legend in Burgundy, where he was chief winemaker at Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé in Chambolle-Musigny, known for Grand Cru Le Musigny and Bonnes-Mares.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LA BIBLIOTECA

**La Biblioteca 2023 Chardonnay, Aegrina Vineyard, McMinnville, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$50)** A wash of lemon sorbet and vanilla-kissed fennel floods the mouth, yet the linearity of this wine's structure reins in their richness to an almost ethereal degree. **95**

**La Biblioteca 2023 Rare Imprint Pinot Noir, Aegrina Vineyard, McMinnville, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65)** Beautifully balanced notes of salty minerality, spiced cherry, tomato leaf, cinnamon, and rose petal tingle on the palate of this focused and perky Pinot Noir. Well-developed flavors of spiced cedar and finely grained tannins define the wine from the midpoint to the finish. **94**



**La Biblioteca 2023 End Papers Pinot Noir, Yamhill-Carlton, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65)** Clove and allspice season sandalwood, creating an exotic experience. Dark, resonant notes of black plum, red licorice, and candied apple are intense, while tilled soil brings out minerality and tobacco on the complex and lengthy finish. **95**



# Marking a Monterey Milestone

CALIFORNIA'S TWO MOST FAMOUS GARYS CELEBRATE THEIR 30TH ANNIVERSARY IN THE SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS AVA *by Randy Caparoso*

ON MAY 1, two families representing the best of California's viticultural spirit came together to celebrate three decades of partnership as growers in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA of Monterey County. Billed simply as the "Garys' Vineyard 30th Anniversary Dinner," the event took place at Bernardus Lodge & Spa in Carmel Valley, where the Francionis and Pisonis toasted to their personal and professional relationships with relatives and friends over a five-course feast accompanied by 12 wines.

Bernardus wine director Roland Micu, MS, opened jeroboams of Garys' Vineyard Pinot Noir dating back to 2017, bottled under three labels: Bernardus, Lucia by Pisoni, and ROAR (the Francioni family's brand). Of course, the wines were incredible—each evincing the soaring, multifaceted perfumes; lively, acid-driven flavors; and fine, silky textures for which the Santa Lucia Highlands and Garys' Vineyard in particular are famed.

It is often said that terroir pertains to not only climate and topography but also human input. In 1996, Gary Francioni and Gary Pisoni chipped in on the property that now bears their shared name. Its foundation was a Pinot Noir selection that has since become known as the "Pisoni clone"—and although it's officially of uncertain origin, that hasn't stopped Pisoni from telling his version of the story countless times over the years. He did so on this night to thunderous, heartfelt applause.

"When I got out of college in the 1970s," he recalled, "my family was farming 1,000 acres in Salinas Valley. But I couldn't see my future as being just a vegetable farmer, so I convinced my dad [to go] into grape growing—particularly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, the great grapes of Burgundy. [First] I went to France to work at a famous winery in Burgundy for two months. My plan, though, was to walk away with grapevine cuttings. Before



flying home, I tucked 500 buds wrapped in gauze into my pants [and] snuck it through the airport. Out of those 500 buds we got 50,000 plants, which I planted with Gary Francioni. . . . All I can say is he's been the best partner and grape grower anyone can ever have." Francioni chimed in: "Our families have known each other for 90 years. From the start, our goal was to grow the best Pinot Noir in America. Many people say we've succeeded."

Adam Lee, the founder of Siduri Wines who went on to establish Clarice Wine Company, has been working with the Pisonis and Francionis since the early days of their partnership. For him, "it's not just about the quality of the grapes or the quality of the farming, which have always been second to none—it's about the quality of the people. *That's* the secret of Garys' Vineyard," he said.

Pisoni described that quality in his own inimitable way by referencing his personal cellar, which is stocked with over 1,000

bottles of the world's finest wines (mostly Burgundy, of course): "The entire [Santa Lucia Highlands AVA] consists of farmers who help each other at the drop of a hat. If we have a problem to solve, we go into the cellar and drink a bottle. If we still have a problem, we open a second bottle. It never gets to the point where we need three bottles."

Nevertheless, it was three bottles of Garys' Vineyard Pinot Noir that were served with the deliriously lavish entree of Brandt prime beef with truffle and sweetbread crisps in oxtail jus. The 2021 ROAR was characteristically high toned and driven by electric acid; the deeper-colored 2022 Lucia by Pisoni demonstrated luxurious texture; and the 2023 Bernardus was sumptuous yet possessed delicate briny/minerally nuances.

Yes, you had to be there—but even if you weren't, you can still mark the milestone with bottlings of Pinot Noir from this landmark vineyard. *sj*



▲ Prime beef in oxtail jus with truffles and sweetbread crisps accompanied Garys' Vineyard Pinot Noir at a dinner celebrating the site's 30th anniversary.

◀ Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni are the owners of Garys' Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA of Monterey County.

PHOTOS: ALLISON WATKINS



by Lisa Francioni

# Dry Farming 101

WHY THIS TRADITIONAL PRACTICE IS GETTING NEW ATTENTION

## AS CONVERSATIONS AROUND

climate resilience and sustainable growing methods, including reduced water use, continue to shape the future of California wine, one longtime practice is attracting renewed attention: dry farming.

For the trade, dry farming is worth understanding not only as a water conservation strategy but for its ability to influence how vines grow, how vineyards respond to drought, and how wines express a sense of place. While the technique is as old as grapevines themselves, many growers see it as increasingly relevant in a changing climate.

Dry farmers do not irrigate established vineyards but instead rely on the moisture stored in the soil from winter and spring rainfall. In California's Mediterranean climate, where summers are typically hot and dry, success depends on encouraging vines to develop extensive root systems that can reach water deep in the soil. These root systems also enable the vines to access a broad range of soil characteristics, from mineral composition to texture, that many growers believe ultimately contributes to a wine's ability to express terroir.

Dry farming also helps vines withstand drought conditions. While this may seem counterintuitive, because the root systems go significantly deeper in dry farmed vineyards, they can access water deep in the soil profile that irrigated vines cannot reach. Some growers also report reduced summer weed pressure and find it easier to manage vineyards organically, as irrigation is not stimulating additional vegetation growth.

Yet dry farming is not simply a matter of turning off the irrigation system. As dry farmer Lauren Pesch explains, "Dry farming is a verb, not a noun. It requires active management and is more than refraining from irrigation." Successful efforts depend on a carefully integrated



PHOTO COURTESY OF WINE INSTITUTE

*The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance partners with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers to host workshops on dry farming, like this one held in Napa in 2024.*

set of decisions involving site selection, vine spacing, grape variety and rootstock choices, soil management practices, extensive cover cropping, the addition of organic matter, and other cultivation practices. Each component influences the others and must be considered as part of a comprehensive farming system.

It's important to note that not every vineyard can be dry farmed. Soil depth, water-holding capacity, climate (especially annual rainfall rates), topography, and vineyard design all play critical roles in determining success. The California Winegrape Dry Farming Potential Map ([map.landiq.com/dryfarming](http://map.landiq.com/dryfarming)) was developed to help growers evaluate the potential for their properties, providing valuable insight into existing dry-farmed vineyards across the state and the conditions and practices that support them.

Over the past three years, the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance and the

Community Alliance with Family Farmers have worked with partners on a dry-farming project funded by the California Department of Water Resources. An updated guide to best practices, research study results, educational videos, and case studies are available at [sustainablewinegrowing.org/dryfarming](http://sustainablewinegrowing.org/dryfarming). The work highlights how this centuries-old practice can help modern vineyards build resilience while producing high-quality wines that reflect their place of origin. 

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





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*David Finlayson of David Finlayson Wines in his Edgebaston Vineyard in Stellenbosch, South Africa.*

# The Cape Makes the Case

IN STELLENBOSCH, CABERNET AND CHARDONNAY OFFER THE ULTIMATE VALUE PROPOSITION by Chris Howard

**THERE IS A** problem plaguing America's restaurant wine programs: The two varieties that anchor most lists, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, have become increasingly difficult to source at prices that make sense for sommeliers and guests alike. California, long the default solution to the predicament posed by costly French wines, is pricing itself out of the conversation as Napa Cabernet routinely ventures north of \$200 and Sonoma Chardonnay nudges \$70–\$100. The quality may justify a wine's placement, but the math often doesn't—so where do you go for serious Cabernet and Chardonnay that doesn't require taking out a loan?

The answer may lie on the southern tip of Africa, where David Finlayson has been building the case for decades on his family estate in Stellenbosch, the heart of South African wine country. The proprietor of Edgebaston Vineyard (which trades as David Finlayson Wines), he is among a growing cohort of producers on the Cape of Good Hope who have staked their reputations not just on the varieties

that typically grab headlines in the realm of South African wine—Chenin Blanc and Pinotage—but also on the two grapes that have, in his view, always been the region's greatest strength.

"Cabernet and Chard just weren't sexy at the time," he says of the marketing choices that began shaping South Africa's international image a few decades ago. "Chenin Blanc and Pinotage offered a point of difference, a story to tell. Cabernet has been around [Stellenbosch] since the 1960s, and it's kind of the solid workhorse in the background." Meanwhile, Chardonnay spent its early years in the Cape defined by the cultivation of young vines—often the wrong clones—and a reputation for the overuse of oak that international critics were quick to condemn. Neither variety made for a compelling narrative, so South Africa led with something else.

Yet both, in Finlayson's view, have been quietly excelling—and critics are finally beginning to take notice. "If you look at the International Wine Challenge, the

International Wine & Spirit Competition ... South Africa is coming out on top in a lot of those ratings for Cabernet and Chardonnay. There is proof that the wines are world-class," he says. The question is whether their story is "cool enough to sell."

## Getting the Foundation Right

Finlayson's argument for South African Cabernet is rooted, above all, in roughly six decades of history—a fact I experienced myself a few years ago when I tasted a bottle of Zonnebloem 1970 Cabernet Sauvignon that Eben Sadie, one of South Africa's most respected winemakers, pulled from his cellar. Over 50 years on, the wine was in impeccable condition: clear, alive, with a perfectly clean finish. Meanwhile, if you're lucky enough to taste vintage Cabs with Finlayson himself, he may spoil you with a bottle of the 1968 GS Cabernet Sauvignon, undoubtedly the most famous red wine in South Africa's history. It was made by the legendary George Spies, the first vintner to produce a 100% Cab in Stellenbosch at a time





when a mere 35% would have sufficed for varietal labeling.

Today, Finlayson makes a tribute to this icon wine from grapes that are grown on a north-facing slope (as did Spies' vines), ensuring a reduction in leafy pyrazines and an amplified spectrum of black fruit instead of the red fruit character typical of Stellenbosch. At an SRP of \$50, his GS Cabernet Sauvignon does what few domestic Cabs can for a third of the price, serving as proof that this is not a region still finding its feet—it's one staking its claim.

But as that example shows, the challenge of achieving truly great Cabernet here has been less about winemaking than farming. Virus-affected vine material diluted the potential of even the most carefully tended vineyards for years. "That was South Africa's problem for a long time," Finlayson says. "It's taken a couple of decades to sort out [finding] virus-free vine material, clonal selection, the right sites."

What has emerged from that pivotal work—including meticulous attention to canopy management for ideal sunlight penetration and strict crop thinning as well as ensuring the safety of rootstock—is Cabernet that has shed the green, herbaceous character that once held the grape back in South Africa. The estate-grown wines being made today by producers like Kanonkop, Thelema, Stark-Condé, Le Riche, and Beeslaar reflect a common conviction that the work that matters most happens before any fruit reaches the cellar.

### Chardonnay Finds Its Footing

South African Chardonnay has traveled a rougher road to become the quality-driven category it is today. The variety arrived in the Cape only in the early

1980s—via cuttings that were "sourced creatively," according to Finlayson, alluding to the illicit importation of plant material that even led some growers to unknowingly vinify Auxerrois rather than Chardonnay for years. But due to the aforementioned combination of young vines, unsuitable clones, and brand-new barrels, even actual Chardonnay yielded wines that drew pointed criticism from Masters of Wine and top sommeliers. These were the same New World growing pains that afflicted the grape in California and Australia at the time, but they lingered longer in South Africa, partly because the industry had been so isolated during apartheid.

Thankfully, that era is long gone. A generation of Cape winemakers went on to cut their teeth in Burgundy and beyond, returning home with an international frame of reference that transformed their approaches to the noble variety. Some of the techniques now common in the region's best cellars, among them the use of concrete eggs and amphorae in lieu of new oak as well as natural yeast ferments and restrained malolactic, are producing Chardonnays that are bright, precise, and genuinely ageworthy. At estates like Hamilton Russell, Capensis, Storm, Paul Clüver, and Creation, the variety has claimed a well-deserved seat at the table.

Finlayson, for his part, may be best known for his success with the grape as head winemaker at Glen Carlou, a winery he later sold to none other than Donald Hess; stylistically, South African Chardonnay tends to hover between Chablis and Meursault (perhaps a result of the heavy cost of new French oak), and his own renditions are often referred to as Meursault-like. He's not complaining—and neither

are his U.S. customers, who pay under \$15 wholesale for a bottle, making it an easy by-the-glass choice for even the most discriminating restaurant wine programs, such as that of Mastro's Steakhouse.

### The Number That Matters

Consider that the release prices of premium California wines have roughly tripled in three decades, whereas those of South African Chardonnay and Cabernet have barely moved. The world-class wines of Finlayson and his comrades retail between \$20 and \$50, while the wines they compete with in terms of quality cost three or four times as much. For a sommelier building a list that has to make economic sense, that differential is not a mere detail. Outstanding value from the southern tip of Africa—that's the story. It's as simple as that.

And it's not lost on the buyers putting these wines in front of guests. Alicia Schmidt, wine director at the MICHELIN-starred Emmer & Rye Group in Texas, discovered Finlayson's Cabernet Sauvignon at a tasting stacked with bottlings from Sonoma and Napa. "[It] stood out for quality and freshness, and we were surprised when we saw the price—it was the best value in the lineup," she says. Michael Webber, wine director for Roy's Restaurant Group in Hawaii, agrees with that assessment: "The quality-to-price ratio is off the charts—it's delicious," he notes. What's more, at a time when consumers are putting a premium on authentic heritage, the story of a "third-generation owner/winemaker provides a discovery opportunity for our guests who haven't tried wine from South Africa."

Anyone who has spent time in the Cape—tasted the wines, driven through vineyards that fold into mountain ranges of sublime beauty, shared a table with the fine people who make them—tends to come away asking the same question: Why doesn't the world know more about this place? That leads to another inquiry: Why are we not buying and drinking more South African Cabernet and Chardonnay? Part of the answer is historical; part of it involves a tendency on the part of wine buyers and writers to favor the exotic over the simply excellent. But these days, is there anything sexier than a strong value proposition for America's favorite grapes? 





The “New and Old World Gems: On a Global Mission to Excavate Terroir” seminar panel from left to right: Aga Hilferty, wine educator, Herita USA; Emily Haines, winemaker, Quattro Theory; Theo Rutherford, director of wine and spirits education, Deutsch Family Wines & Spirits; Alison Rodriguez, winemaker, Silverado Vineyards; Jessie Birschbach, senior wine and beer editor, The SOMM Journal; Laura Hochrein, regional account manager, The Wine Group; Bernie Sun, luxury accounts manager, Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits; Han Han, winemaker, Ironstone Vineyards; and Gillian Ballance, MS, national education manager, Treasury Wine Estates.

# INTERNATIONAL Geographic

IN WASHINGTON, D.C., WE EXPLORED HOW WINES  
TELL THEIR OWN ORIGIN STORIES

story by **Dave McIntyre** / photos by **Violetta Markelou**

**WE SPEAK REVERENTLY OF TERROIR**, committed to the idea that the place a wine is grown influences its flavor. But can we actually taste terroir? That was the question attendees of SommCon DC, held in the nation's capital in April, considered at our seminar “New and Old World Gems: On a Global Mission to Excavate Terroir.”

Serving as moderator, *SOMM Journal* senior wine and beer editor Jessie Birschbach asked the roomful of beverage professionals to taste and take notes on the eight featured wines, assessing their acidity, body, alcohol, and both fruit and non-fruit characteristics. Then she urged us to ask the harder



question: "Does this wine reflect where it comes from, the time it was made, and the style of the person who made it?"

Over the course of the seminar, a consistent theme emerged: Terroir isn't a romantic abstraction. It's a set of tangible elements—climate, soil, exposure, elevation, even rootstock—that, filtered through the hands of the winemaker, impact a wine's expression. Here's how our panelists taught the audience to taste place in the glass.



*Rodriguez presents the winery's 2019 GEO, highlighting the terroir of the Coombsville AVA of Napa Valley.*



*Hilferty talks big acid and big tannin while presenting the Giovanni Rosso Barolo.*



*Han shares a sandy jar of Lodi soil in which old-vine Zinfandel thrives.*

## Volcanic Territory

### Quattro Theory 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Calistoga, Napa Valley

For Emily Haines, terroir begins with the volcanic soils underfoot as she walks Mary's Vineyard, an estate property of Quattro Theory Wines, where she is winemaker. The site is adjacent to Calistoga's Old Faithful Geyser, so geothermal activity—hot air and steam shooting into the air every 15 minutes—shapes how the grapes grow.

Walk the vineyard, Haines explained, and your feet crunch through black, mineral-rich pumice. The ground is stony, well-drained, heat-retentive, and aromatic—in fact "almost a little stinky," in her words, from natural sulfur compounds. That's the raw material that pushes Sauvignon Blanc toward ripeness and concentration.

But there's also a broader Napa Valley influence. Napa producers tend to take a more Bordelaise approach to Sauvignon Blanc than do those in other California regions by adding Sémillon to the blend and/or aging in wood. So look for that chewier, more substantial oak component as a way to identify Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc like the one she was presenting, Haines said, reminding us that a winemaker's style is also an aspect of terroir.

Ultimately, she added, the category is defined by three characteristics: warm-climate fruit as well as the volcanic soil that provides mineral backbone and the appellation's barrel-aged signature. Put simply, if stone fruit jumps from the glass, you're in the New World; if the palate feels silky and structured, you're specifically in Napa Valley.



## Coastal Tension

### Frank Family Vineyards 2023 Chardonnay Reserve, Carneros, Napa Valley

This wine, grown on clay-loam soils well suited to Chardonnay, benefits from the cool air and fog off San Pablo Bay. Gillian Ballance, MS, national education manager for Treasury Wine Estates, said that gives it a restraint that Chardonnay grown farther upvalley, where tropical fruit flavors dominate, doesn't possess: "I love that upside-down pineapple cake flavor too, but this is more Golden Delicious apples and citrus." Aging for about 11 months in new French oak added structure and creaminess without imparting a buttery character.

Terroir here is the tension between place and fashion. The climate naturally yields more linear, acid-driven Chardonnay; the market for Napa wine often demands richness. Frank Family's answer is to showcase the former in the form of acidity and varietal character while using oak and lees to support rather than dominate the fruit.

After all, that fruit is the result of painstaking viticulture. Established in 1992 and today certified California Sustainable Vineyard & Winery, Fish Friendly Farming, and Napa Green Winery, the producer has gone to great lengths in recent years to introduce regenerative practices such as planting a spectrum of cover crops, using low-till methods, implementing deficit irrigation, and reconfiguring its vineyards to allow for increased biodiversity. Healthier soils make for better grapes, which inevitably shows in the glass.



## A Line of Limestone

**Cave de Lugny 2022 Cœur de Charmes  
Chardonnay, Burgundy, France**



Theo Rutherford, director of wine and spirits education at Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits, presented Burgundian cooperative Cave de Lugny's Cœur de Charmes 2022 Chardonnay, selected from an 80-acre plot in the large Les Charmes vineyard near the town of Lugny. Much like the vineyards of Chablis, it's set on Kimmeridgian marl and limestone, but as Mâcon is farther south and warmer than Chablis, the wines are a bit riper, Rutherford said.

Still, they're nowhere near as ripe as their California counterparts. Burgundy doesn't reliably see the searing summer temperatures that parts of California do; if the mercury soars to 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Burgundy, Rutherford joked, "We're screaming and running for the hills." That moderate climate keeps Chardonnay's natural acidity front and center, while the limestone helps channel it into a precise, mineral-lined frame.

Rutherford suggested that Napa fans might consider Mâconnais Chardonnay "familiar but underripe," with many of the same notes—citrus, apple, stone fruit—coming from fruit that might have been picked a week too soon by New World standards. These wines typically see no oak; the Cœur de Charmes, however, does rest 18 months on its lees and another year in bottle before release, building texture and complexity through contact with yeast rather than wood. That restrained approach ensures that terroir is expressed rather than masked, pushing the taster to focus on acidity, minerality, and subtly ripe fruit, Rutherford said.

If Frank Family's Carneros Chardonnay gave us a taste of coastal California, Cave de Lugny's Mâconnais version spoke of limestone in an even leaner, unoaked accent. Together, they provided a lesson in how the same grape can tell a different story depending on where and how it's grown.

## Old World Roots, New World Soul

**Résonance 2022 Pinot Noir, Résonance Vineyard,  
Willamette Valley, Oregon**



Bernie Sun, luxury accounts manager for Kobrand Fine Wine and Spirits, noted that any discussion of terroir with respect to Résonance Vineyard—planted in 1981 in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA—must begin with the fact that it's one of the few sites in Oregon to remain on original, ungrafted rootstock.

Surrounded by forest and long farmed without affiliation to a winery, Résonance remained relatively isolated until its purchase in 2013

by Burgundy's Maison Louis Jadot. That isolation helped preserve its integrity and its plant material. The soils are predominantly Willakenzie, an ancient marine sedimentary series that is essentially uplifted seabed; Sun encouraged the audience to look for dark fruit in Résonance's 2022 Pinot Noir—blueberry, black currant—as a marker of this soil type, in contrast to the higher-pitched red fruit often shown by Pinots grown on volcanic Jory soils elsewhere in the Willamette Valley.

Clonal diversity lends complexity to the wine—Pommard for muscle, Dijon for aromatics, Wädenswil for structure—which has become even more elegant as the climate has warmed. The fruit is fermented with native yeast, often in vertical open-top tanks, and aged in a mix of new and used French oak. Sun described the 2022 vintage as "a little bit winemaker, a little bit terroir, literally New and Old World rolled into one": the former reflected in its depth and concentration of fruit, the latter in its moderate oak, savory undertones, and structural ambitions.

To taste it is to sense the ancient sea floor in its darker fruit and earthy base notes, the original rootstock in the seamless energy on the palate, and Burgundian tradition in its texture and balance. Pour it next to a red-fruited Dundee Hills Pinot—such as Résonance's own Découverte Vineyard expression—and the Yamhill-Carlton story writes itself.



## Sand, Swing, and Sagebrush

**As One Cru 2022 Paicines Project Cabernet Sauvignon, Paicines, San Benito County**

In the relatively new Paicines AVA, located about 30 miles southeast of Monterey Bay in San Benito County, terroir is defined by two main elements: sand and temperature swings.

The Palisades Trail Vineyard sits against the Gabilan Range on sandy soils that warm quickly and drain fast. By day, the sun beats down, imparting deep color and full phenolic ripeness to Cabernet Sauvignon grapes; come evening, ocean breezes and fog roll in from the bay, plunging temperatures and giving the fruit a vital "daily reset," in the words of Laura Hochrein, regional account manager for The Wine Group. The essence of the site lies in that climatic contrast, she added: The warmth contributes ripe, dark fruit such as blackberry, black cherry, and cassis, while the coolness preserves acidity, freshness, and "lifted aromatics."

Presenting As One Cru's 2022 Paicines Project Cabernet Sauvignon, she guided tasters to look for that classic Cabernet fruit up front, followed by distinct notes of graphite and stone courtesy of the diurnal temperature swings and mineral soils as well as an edge of wild sagebrush on the finish. Aging for

20 months in new French barrels added hints of spice, vanilla, and mocha without oak sweetness: The result is a Cabernet that reads as ripe and modern but stops short of jammy excess, its freshness and savory elements displaying the vineyard's marine influence.





## Structure Doesn't Lie

### Giovanni Rosso 2021 Barolo Serra, Piedmont, Italy

Aga Hilferty, wine educator at importer HERITA USA, viewed terroir through the lens of an indigenous grape that refuses to travel well. Nebbiolo, she argued, is as much a part of the Barolo landscape as the slopes and soils.

The region sits in a mountain-ringed “bubble” in Piedmont, protected from Mediterranean influence on one side and Alpine chill on the other. Over centuries, Nebbiolo’s DNA has evolved in this cloistered setting, most famously in communes like Serralunga d’Alba, where ancient, limestone-rich soils contribute to the variety’s formidable structure and ageworthiness.

With its pale color and red fruit aromatics accented by flowers and herbs, Nebbiolo can masquerade as Pinot Noir. But Hilferty insisted that that terroir-derived structure is its tell. Whereas Pinot’s charm lies in sweet, supple fruit wrapped around gentle tannins, Barolo is built on two uncompromising pillars: super-high acidity and super-high tannin. Fruit becomes secondary, suspended between these

structural extremes—and that tension is what students should latch onto when blind tasting.

Indeed, the old limestone soils in Giovanni Rosso’s Serra Vineyard drive both the minerality and rigid backbone found in its 2021 vintage. Long fermentations in large vessels and softer extraction have made modern Barolo more approachable in its youth, but the underlying architecture remains unchanged: No amount of fruit-forward winemaking can erase its signatures of high acid, long-grain tannin, and limestone touch. As Hilferty put it, in Nebbiolo, “Structure doesn’t lie.”

## Caldera Cabernet

### Silverado Vineyards 2019 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon, Coombsville, Napa Valley



For Silverado winemaker Alison Rodriguez, terroir in the Napa Valley sub-AVA of Coombsville begins with a crater. The Mt. George Vineyard sits inside what was once a massive caldera, the remains of a volcano that erupted 3 million years ago and then filled with water, becoming a lake for another 1.5 million years. Today, the site’s well-drained, low-vigor soils reflect that history, made

up as they are of volcanic granite overlaid by sedimentary lake deposits that force vines to go deep in search of water, while the southwest- and west-facing slopes they’re set on capture precious afternoon sun after foggy mornings.

Silverado’s 2019 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon reflects its origins in turn, with its spectrum of dark fruit, namely plum, plum skin, blackberry, and cassis; bold tannins appearing on the midpalate; and what Rodriguez called a “hint of cast iron”: a savory, ferrous edge that evokes the caldera’s volcanic ruggedness. It’s a Napa Cabernet to be sure, but not a stereotypically plush, sweetly polished Oakville rendition; Coombsville’s cooler southeastern position and complex geology make for a more compact, mineral-driven expression with clear structural tension.

Crafted from 25- to 35-year-old vines, the GEO aged 22 months in (48% new) French oak before bottling, Rodriguez explained. As more recent vintages see close to 100%, she added that “winemaking is an art that science hasn’t really caught up with yet”—implication being that you cannot neatly separate terroir and human intervention.

## A Hallmark of History

### Ironstone Vineyards 2022 Rous Vineyard Reserve Ancient Vines Zinfandel, Lodi



Ironstone Vineyards winemaker Han Han closed the seminar with a wine that wore its terroir like a tattoo: a 2022 Zinfandel sourced from a vineyard planted in 1909 in the Victor Triangle of the Mokelumne River sub-AVA in Lodi.

Here, the soils contain about 80% sand, which is coarse and gritty, like beach sand; they drain almost instantly. The site is typically picked a month earlier than Ironstone’s other Zinfandel sites, and the fruit has

impressive balance for a warm region.

In the cellar, the wine spends 24 months in neutral oak (French and American), so “what you’re tasting is just the terroir; just the fruit,” Han emphasized. On the palate, that means jammy red fruits (raspberry, cranberry) rather than black as well as a floral lift to the aroma and notes of both white and black pepper—a Zinfandel hallmark when terroir, not new oak, does the talking. What it has to say is almost tactile: You can feel the old-vine concentration, the lift from the balanced acidity, and the spice that comes from the soils and the fruit rather than barrel seasoning. In Han’s telling, the vineyard itself does the heavy lifting; the winemaker’s job is to avoid getting in the way.

Throughout this fast-paced flight, we heard of volcanic rocks and geysers, fog and limestone, ancient seabeds and marine breezes, sand and sagebrush, calderas and century-old plantings—all interpreted through the grapes they yield and the decisions made by winemakers in handling that fruit. Approach the glass carefully enough, and you can indeed taste terroir. **SJ**

# The Right Side of Burgundy

AT A RECENT LUNCHEON IN WASHINGTON, D.C., THE WINES OF **CAVE DE LUGNY** PROVED TO BE REFRESHINGLY ACCESSIBLE

story by Jessie Birschbach / photos by Violetta Markelou

**WHEN WE CONCEIVED** of the “Charm of Burgundy” luncheon for SommCon DC back in the fall, we couldn’t have known how thoroughly it would deliver on its promise of being an upgrade from the buffet lunch that came with the conference’s price of admission. Just on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the Westin Georgetown’s warm, bright, airy dining room, a line of fellow SommCon attendees navigated the outdoor courtyard, juggling their umbrellas with the plates they were attempting to fill. Fortunately, the rain was more of a drizzle—but we were the lucky ones. Inside, thanks to Cave de Lugny, we had Burgundy.

Holding court in the restaurant—a characterization I use quite deliberately, as he really does have an air of nobility about him—was Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits’ director of wine and spirits education, Theo Rutherford. Granted, he grew up in the small but densely populated fed-

eral district, so it’s possible this gracious regality can simply be attributed to him feeling comfortably at home.

Likewise small but still one of the best-known communes within the Mâconnais is the village of Lugny, which lends its name to Cave de Lugny, established there in 1926 as the second cooperative in the Mâconnais. Today, it consists of roughly 200 families tending about 3,100 acres of vineyards in the southern Burgundian appellation. “And those growing families generally stay the same” over the years, said Rutherford, noting that the cooperative model ensures they can pool their fruit in order to make enough wine to sell commercially. “But [Cave de Lugny] doesn’t just help with that side of it; it helps with everything from winemaking [to] picking and sustainability. . . . As you can imagine, those families are important to not only the history of Burgundy but also to [the] business, so we want to make sure that they’re well taken care of.”



As if to toast to this longstanding relationship, guests were greeted with glasses of Cave de Lugny’s nonvintage **Blanc de Blanc Crémant de Bourgogne** (whose distribution is more limited than that of its other SKUs but includes Whole Foods Market). Made in the traditional method, Crémant can generally be relied upon as an affordable alternative to Champagne, and this silky, bright sparkler was a case in point. “None of what we will pour you today is over \$25 on the shelf,” noted Rutherford. “Despite the tariffs, we chose not to take a price hike this year, which was a little tough to do.”

Accompanying the first course of butternut squash soup was the **Cave de Lugny 2023 La Côte Blanche**, a Mâcon-Villages-level Burgundy sourced from three villages—Bissy-la-Mâconnais and Saint-Gengoux-de-Scissé as well as Lugny—whose label bears the phrase “Unoaked Chardonnay.” Although neutral oak barrels were once employed in production, all of the cooperative’s wines are now vinified exclusively in stainless steel, according to Rutherford, who added that “every single one . . . does [also] see lees



The “Charm of Burgundy” luncheon was held during SommCon DC at The Westin Georgetown.



*Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits  
director of wine and spirits  
education Theo Rutherford.*



contact,” six months’ worth in the case of La Côte Blanche. (It’s worth noting that only white wines may be labeled as Mâcon-Villages, which is fitting given that the Mâconnais is one of Burgundy’s largest producers of white wine.)

The Mâcon-Lugny-appellated **Cave de Lugny 2024 Les Charmes** was paired with a choice of entree, mushroom ravioli or herbed chicken breast. Most of the ravioli was left on my plate, but the rich, bright wine was sustenance enough. Sourced from the 220-acre Le Charmes Vineyard in Lugny—situated on south- and southeast-facing slopes atop classic chalk and limestone soil, where the vines average 50 years of age—it underwent 100% malolactic fermentation before aging an additional six months on the lees. Rutherford recalled tasting a 20-year-old Les Charmes not long ago that had maintained its freshness, an impressive feat given its SRP, now \$19.

Speaking of worthy investments, Rutherford emphasized Cave de Lugny’s commitment to sustainability. The cooperative joined the Vignerons en Développement Durable (Winegrowers in Sustainable De-



velopment) in 2014 and has considerably reduced its fuel, gas, and water consumption since. “We don’t just mean sustainability from a farming perspective,” he said. “We recycle literally everything we can: All our vines are used for compost or [as fuel for] steam [powered-machines] if needed. But one of the things that makes us unique is our yearly ‘summer camp,’ educating the next generation to make sure that sustainability just becomes normal for them. We gamify it a bit and make sure it’s fun, but we’re really proud of what we’ve been able to build upon over the past 100 years.”

As part of these efforts, Cave de Lugny also seeks to innovate. “We are constantly pushing technology and [are] open to exploration to see if we can do things better,” said Rutherford. The cooperative packages its wines under screwcap, which is indeed more sustainable than cork while aiding in the prevention of TCA. In 2019, he added, it created a fining agent made from a derivative of green peas, and since then, all of its wines have been vegan.

For dessert, Cave de Lugny’s **2022 Cœur de Charmes** was a perfect pairing for a pear tart with Amaretto anglaise, as its creamy midpalate mirrored the nutty, luxurious sauce. The wine’s name translates as “heart of Charmes,” a reference to the 80-acre plot from which the wine is sourced, located on a limestone plateau in the middle of Les Charmes Vineyard. Having spent 18 months on lees followed by one year in bottle, the 2022 vintage is the current release; Rutherford noted

that the cooperative is selective to when it comes to determining the vintages in which it will release Cœur de Charmes.

As the luncheon concluded, our guests expressed a mix of merriment regarding the quality of the wines they’d tasted and disbelief at the prices. WSET Level 3-awarded wine writer Liza-Bart Carroll, who has a large following on Instagram (@beachedvine), works full time as a lobbyist, and although she represents another industry, she shared a savvy en-



*Wine writer Liza-Bart Carroll was one of the local beverage professionals in attendance.*

dorsement of not only the afternoon but what it revealed about the broader wine business. “Cave de Lugny reminded me how exciting the Mâconnais can be—pure, expressive [unoaked] Chardonnay with freshness, texture, and remarkable value for Burgundy. About 40% of my Instagram audience falls in the 25-to-34 age range, and this is exactly the kind of wine I love highlighting: The bright acidity and freshness [could] convert even Chardonnay-skeptical, budget-conscious millennials to the right side of Burgundy.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DELOACH VINEYARDS

*Eco-friendly solar paneling graces the winemaking facility at DeLoach Vineyards in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma County.*

# The Real Thing

AS IT LAUNCHES NOT ONE BUT TWO CERTIFIED-SUSTAINABLE LABELS, **DELOACH VINEYARDS** PROVES IT'S STILL "THE RUSSIAN RIVER ORIGINAL" by Jonathan Cristaldi

## HAVING CELEBRATED ITS 50TH

anniversary last year, DeLoach Vineyards, the iconic Russian River Valley producer owned by Jean-Charles Boisset, is now looking to its future—sharpening its focus on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay while undertaking a sustainability initiative that extends from viticultural practices to packaging.

Boisset acquired the winery in 2003, inspired by the parallels he saw between the vineyards he grew up among in Burgundy and DeLoach's 20-acre Santa Rosa Plains estate, planted on gentle rolling hills of Huichica loam soils just east of Green Valley. He subsequently pushed for the same organic and biodynamic approach to farming that his family had embraced

in France. "That philosophy continues to guide everything we do today," says Boisset Collection director of marketing Julia Jinks.

The most prominent example is the launch of DeLoach's Certified Sustainable California Collection; priced at \$15, it aims to broaden access to responsibly made wines, starting with the 2024 vintage. With younger consumers focused on such products, the new tier positions DeLoach as a serious producer when it comes to sustainability as well as quality.

According to vice president of winemaking Brian Maloney, that identity begins in the vineyard—not only DeLoach's own but also its outside sources. "For us, sustainable farming starts with long-term

relationships," he says. "We work closely with grower-partners who share our commitment to certified-sustainable practices and who view themselves as stewards of the land." The third-party designation serves as validation of their efforts, he adds: "When consumers see the Certified Sustainable California Collection, they can be confident that the wine comes from vineyards and winery operations that have been independently verified to meet rigorous sustainability standards."

Maloney describes the winery's strategy as a combination of practical farming decisions—cover cropping, integrated pest management, habitat conservation, soil-building practices, and precision water management—all aimed at improv-



ing vineyard health. “Sustainability isn’t one practice,” he says. “It’s a collection of thoughtful decisions that help ensure we can continue producing exceptional wines for generations to come.” Emphasis on “exceptional”: “Responsible farming produces better fruit, and better fruit makes better wine,” he points out. “Healthy vineyards are more resilient, more expressive of their terroir, and better positioned to produce exceptional grapes year after year.”

As for the matter of packaging, it became a major focus during the development of the Certified Sustainable California Collection, leading DeLoach to partner with Verallia—the third-largest producer of food-and-beverage glass packaging in the world—on the manu-



facture of a lighter bottle. Its weight has been reduced by roughly 25%, from 545 grams to 410 grams. “That may sound like a small change, but the impact is meaningful,” says Jinks. “Lighter bottles require less raw material to produce, reduce trans-



portation emissions, and lower the overall carbon footprint of the wine.” Capsules were also eliminated (probably much to the delight of restaurant floor workers everywhere); Forest Stewardship Council–certified label materials were introduced; and recyclable packaging components were prioritized throughout the redesign.

In July, meanwhile, DeLoach debuted yet another sustainably made line: O.F.S., which stands for “Our Finest Selection.” Bearing a “Made With Organic Grapes” seal, it consists of two Russian River Valley–appellated wines, a Pinot Noir (\$50) and a Chardonnay (\$40).

“These wines reinforce our commitment to sustainability and to our beloved AVA, the Russian River Valley,” says Maloney. “After all, we refer to ourselves as ‘the Russian River Original’ because we were the first to plant Pinot Noir on the Olivet Bench, the first winery to use the AVA on a wine label, and the winery that petitioned to have it become an AVA. [O.F.S.] is going to help us broadcast the excellence of our Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and our lasting relationship to those varieties [in] the Russian River Valley.”

DeLoach’s longevity is indeed part of what gives it authenticity in a crowded California landscape. And that applies to its team as well: Maloney is entering his 24th harvest at the winery, while winemaker Katie Carter and estate manager Rob Cooper are each celebrating their 21st anniversaries. “That is rare,” notes Maloney, “and it speaks to the culture of care and consistency that defines DeLoach. [It’s] important to remember that DeLoach Vineyards is a real place, in the heart of the Russian River Valley, with real people who have dedicated their careers to it. We just celebrated our 50th anniversary, and that sense of continuity matters deeply to us.” 



**Boisset Collection founder Jean-Charles Boisset with DeLoach winemaker Katie Carter and VP of winemaking Brian Maloney.**



# A Microcosm of MAVERICKS

**SERIAL WINES'** RECENT "ROOTED IN FRIENDSHIP, GROWN IN PASO ROBLES" DINNER WAS A TESTAMENT TO THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COLLABORATION AND CRAFT ON THE CENTRAL COAST

*story by* **RUTH TOBIAS** / *photos by* **JEREMY BALL**

*Darren Delmore, national sales manager at Tablas Creek Vineyard and founder/winemaker of Delmore; Steve Peck, VP of winemaking at J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines; Curt Schalchlin, founder/winemaker of Sans Liege and The Fableist Wine Company; Jeremy Leffert, director of winemaking/general manager at Fortress Custom Crush; Stewart Cameron, winemaker at Ancient Peaks; and Jeff Kandarian, winemaker at Serial Wines.*







Even before I traveled to Paso Robles in May to attend a dinner that would span four hours, five courses paired with no fewer than 24 bottles, and two decades' worth of anecdotes about the close ties between the six winemakers present, I could see how the hardly novel yet certainly noble concept of unity in diversity applied to the Central Coast growing region. Officially established in 1983 and expanded twice since, it's California's largest appellation today, encompassing 11 sub-AVAs across more than 600,000 acres (40,000-plus of them planted to vine); that fact alone illustrates the wide range of terroirs to be found here, supporting an equally broad array of grape varieties. Against this sprawling backdrop, meanwhile, the people who farm and vinify that fruit remain tight-knit: Over the years, we at *The SOMM Journal* have assiduously chronicled the extent to which Paso's growth in not only size but reputation can be attributed to the can-do spirit of cooperation defining its wine community. (See, for just the most recent instance, "When Paso Wins, We All Win" in the June/July 2026 issue.)





Yet to experience the human connection that is, after all, also a key aspect of terroir in such an intimate way was to appreciate how the region operates—with passion and compassion alike—on a whole other level. Providing that understanding was obviously what Jeff Kandarian of Serial Wines had front of mind when he organized the dinner, inviting five people he felt could help him tell the story best: Jeremy Leffert, director of winemaking/general manager at Fortress Custom Crush; Steve Peck, longtime VP of winemaking at J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines; Darren Delmore, national sales manager at Tablas Creek Vineyard and founder of Delmore; Ancient Peaks winemaker Stewart Cameron; and Curt Schalchlin of Sans Liege and The Fableist Wine Company.

Watching my dining companions reminisce, talk shop, commiserate, and joke around, however, I deduced what Kandarian had in the back of his mind all the while: He just wanted a chance to hang out with some of his most esteemed colleagues and dearest friends over some killer vintages. Fair enough—welcome to Paso.

### *A Culture of Camaraderie*

On the ride to the host venue—Serial's Deseo Estate Vineyard in the Estrella District—I learned that these winemakers have all known each other for at least nine or ten years, and in many cases for more than 20. Along the way, they've become mutual sources of moral as well as material and technical support. Cameron echoed many in the group when he noted that

Peck, as the most veteran among them, "has always been the mentor that I never got to work for; the guy I call with random weird questions: 'What's this super-obscure compound called again?' And he always [answers]. I look up to him."

Which isn't to say that Peck is all business. Leffert met him in 2017 on a trip through Burgundy, where "we were the only people from Paso, so it was like, 'Well, we'll stick together, I guess,'" he recalled. "Of course, it's Steve Peck of J. Lohr, so I'm paying respect where respect's due. One day we're in a car together, driving into Puligny-Montrachet to go taste in the vineyard of Olivier Leflaive, and all of a sudden, we see Olivier himself standing outside, smoking a cigarette. Steve rolls down the window and says to him, 'Flavor Flav! I'm like, 'Dude, you know who that is?' He's like, 'Yeah.' And then we just proceed. It was classic."

Speaking of respect, Kandarian expressed his gratitude to Leffert, Cameron, and Schalchlin for their frequent assistance in the production of Serial's portfolio, noting that "they'll ask me what my SOP is, and I'm like, 'Well, how do you guys do things? If you guys float instead of settle, I'm floating instead of settling. What do you do for punchdowns and cap management? Well, that's what we're gonna do.' They'll talk me into and out of things and suggest stuff, and I think that collaboration is in essence mentorship too, right? [Whether it's] Curt calling me up and telling me my VA's creeping or Jeremy making me excited, like, 'You gotta taste this Grenache!' ... my wines are bet-

ter because of these guys, and I'm better for working with these guys."

In turn, Delmore credited Kandarian—whom he met while working in the tasting room at Eberle in 2003—with playing a key role in his development as a winemaker. Having accepted a position at a winery in Oregon in the mid-aughts following his stint at Eberle, Kandarian hired Delmore as an intern for a harvest, "but because I wasn't that skilled as an intern, I pumped a tank of Merlot into a fermenting tank of Cab," the latter recounted. "I was up top and he was down below, we were having this great conversation, and then he looked at the tank tag and was like, 'Oh my God, stop.' But he handled it so well. Cut to today, I make a little bit of tiny-batch wine, and Jeff's helped me with some of those intense questions: 'Oh man, what do I do with this? This isn't what I think it is, I need some help.' Do you want to fix something? This is the guy." Responded Kandarian with a laugh, "I've messed up enough wine, I know how to get you out of trouble." (According to Delmore, Kandarian's also the guy to bring on a surfing trip: On one of their many wave-catching adventures, he remembered, "Jeff brought these foil-wrapped frozen burritos. We parked the car, and he's like, 'Hey, pop the hood.' He put the frozen burritos on the engine, we surfed for two hours and came back, and those things were warm. Still one of the most genius things ever.")

As they continued to swap war stories, Leffert pointed out that the group represented a microcosm of their home region





as a whole: "What's special about Paso Robles is [that] ... it's always an open-door policy; it's super collaborative." Take, for example, the 2022 vintage, when "the heat spell that came in on September 4 lasted around ten days. Everybody's cell phones were ringing because there were things coming in off the vineyard that most people hadn't seen ... at that advanced stage of maturity. So we were having to brainstorm in real time: 'What are you seeing? How are we handling this? What's working, what's not?' ... We had to get creative with non-*Saccharomyces* yeast [and] really manage acidity to keep the wines fresh. As you taste through them, it's easy to identify which winemakers were successful—and knowing this crew, we all were."

## Diversity in Unity

That's not to say that "this crew" is a monolith. While sharing so much with respect to their professional and personal histories as well as their dreams for the region's future, these winemakers all have their own unique philosophies, approaches, and styles. Over the course of our evening together, they proved that if Paso exemplifies unity in diversity, it also demonstrates diversity in unity, with a far more multifaceted range of wines to offer than American consumers yet realize. (Emphasis on "yet.")

The first flight alone made that crystal clear. Following a welcome cocktail featuring **Croma Vera Vermouth del Sol**—which Leffert crafted for the brand with Grenache rosé, three types of orange peel, rosehips, and ginger—we gathered poolside for a round of passed hors d'oeuvres paired with five wines: **Ancient Peaks 2024 Pearl Sauvignon Blanc**; **J. Lohr 2024 F&G Vineyard Pinot Blanc**; **Tablas Creek 2024 Dianthus Rosé**; and not one but two **Clairette Blanche** expressions, a 2022 traditional-method sparkler from **Sans Liege** and an El Pomar–appellated 2024 version from **Serial**. Together, they instantly dispelled what Cameron called the average drinker's "opinion of Paso as being [all about] plush, i.e. sweet, and boozy red wine."

That comment disconcerted Peck, given that J. Lohr's "brand name appears on more bottles of wine that say 'Paso Robles' than anybody else," as he put it. "I take that with a certain amount of responsibility—we're the greeting card, that first handshake to the wine-drinking community around the country. But we've always done our wines in a drier style. So [if] the higher-residual-sugar styles become the definition of Paso Robles, it's easy to get put in a box."

Schalchlin, for his part, was less concerned. As a maverick by nature—he called the bubbly he brought "one of my learn-by-doing adventures"—he admitted that "the stereotype that all of the wines from Paso Robles are big and rich is not necessarily a misconception. ... We can do big and rich wines really well. But tonight, I'm hopeful we're going to show a lot more diversity in the wines that can be made [here]. We're so spoiled to be able to work with all these different sub-climates and soils." Agreed Leffert, "Some



*Kandarian (left) said of Peck, "I've been tasting his wines and have looked up to him for years, and now, he's kind of a brother to me."*

of the wines coming out of Paso Robles right now are the most exciting stuff in California: personality, energy, vibrancy.”

The rest of our al fresco meal, prepared by chef Logan Foos, would bear that out in spades. To accompany a dish of Thai-inspired coconut curry with crispy rice and cucumber-mango salad, the next flight primarily showcased the Rhône varieties around which the region initially rallied, indicating their continued significance. Of the **Serial 2023 Willow Creek District Viognier**, Kandarian said, “I appreciate the aromatics Viognier can have, but I think they get off-putting if it gets too ripe. So in order to stay away from grandma’s bathroom potpourri, I pick it early and press it gently. I know I’m still going to get the honeysuckle. Then it goes into neutral French oak, but we incorporate new acacia barrels . . . to add some complexity and some extra weight. I’m trying to make Condrieu come to Paso, you know?” A dollop of Viognier (9%) also graced the J. Lohr 2023 South Ridge Syrah. “We’re really focusing more on the aromatic side of a red wine,” explained Peck. “We’ll pick the Syrah the day we pick the Viognier and really try to do those things together.”

Schalchlin noted that the two varieties “are two of my favorites to work with, and it’s because of the non-winemaker factor of them. They really show a sense of place. When you get that cool-climate Syrah, it’s all about green olive tapenade and pepper; and in warmer climates, it’s the fruit zone; cooler-climate Viognier is more floral, and warmer-climate is tropical. We as a group are very talented, but we get instantly removed from the equation, and [all we really] need is knowledge of what to expect: ‘If I’m getting fruit from here, it should taste like this; if I’m getting it from there, it should taste like that,’ which gives us a head start on where we source.”

In contrast, Leffert introduced the **Deep Sea 2025 Grenache Blanc** by referring to the variety as “a winemaker’s grape, because it’s not in the aromatic whites category necessarily. So it’s really about what you do to it in the cellar. And honestly, the white wines that excite me most are the ones that are the leesi-est. I used a Champagne yeast for this. . . . It was all barrel fermented, [and] I started stirring every week for about



*Delmore both contributed and provided insights into the two oldest wines in the lineup, Tablas Creek’s 2003 Esprit de Beaucastel Rouge—a blend of Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah, and Counoise—and the 1999 Viking Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from Adelaida, whose cellar master at the time happened to be his stepbrother: “I remember the intensity of this wine upon release,” he said.*

five months . . . to really get that autolytic character.” It was nicely complemented by a red Grenache sourced from a vineyard planted in 1996, Sans Liege’s 2023 Pickpocket, on the grounds that “I think it’s really fun to see what Grenache can do as it gets older,” Schalchlin explained. Early on, “it wanted to deliver really fruity, dense [wine], but as . . . we’ve gotten less and less crop off it, it’s become more and more lean and elegant.”

But Paso’s evolution from a Rhône-focused region to one of near-endless possibility, contingent only upon the collective will to experiment, was underscored by the curveballs Cameron and Delmore tossed into the flight. The former, who brought **Ancient Peaks’ 2023 Nebbiolo**, noted matter-of-factly that although the Italian variety is “finicky [and] hard to make, we as winemakers want to throw our hat in the ring and see what can happen. It’s made very simply [in the] traditional style: I destem and try to use as many neutral, large-format barrels as I can. This is [our] third vintage, and I just love how it’s evolving; there’s starting to be a hint of mushroom characteristic.” Meanwhile, the latter’s decision to bring his namesake label’s **2023 Deer Ridge Trail Pinot Noir**—sourced not from Paso but from another Central Coast appellation, the Santa Cruz Mountains—served as a further reminder that there’s a decisive human element to terroir. After all, Kandarian pointed out, “Darren lives in Paso, he made the wine in [local production hub] Tin City, and it’s awesome to see his passion. He’ll drive anywhere for good fruit, and [there’s a] ‘no boundaries’ mentality here.”

That passion was evident as Delmore described the travails of producing the wine since discovering the 5-acre designated site in 2020: Between fires, heat waves, and *brettanomyces* issues, “this is the first year where I was [able to] get the Mount Eden clone from the best little section of the vineyard and make three barrels—half whole-cluster, unfin-ished, unfiltered—that turned out pretty amazing.” The result certainly impressed Peck. “As a structure guy, I like the tension; I assume that’s where the whole cluster comes in,” he mused. “It’s just a lovely wine, with New World fruit but the brushiness/earthiness of the Old World.”





*Chef Logan Foos prepares paella with scallops.*

The next course of paella with scallops and duck prosciutto was also accompanied by primarily Rhône-inspired wines: Cameron showcased **Ancient Peaks' 2021 Whole Cluster Syrah**, Leffert the **Vigo Cellars 2024 Picpoul Blanc**, Schalchlin the **Groundwork 2023 Picpoul Carboneque**, Kandarian the **Serial 2024 G2 Vineyards GSM**, and Delmore the **Tablas Creek 2003 Esprit de Beaucastel Rouge**, the outlier being Peck's Bordeaux-style red blend, the **J. Lohr 2023 Pure Paso**. For the main course of smoked tri-tip with pinto-bean cassoulet and arugula salad in Champagne vinaigrette, meanwhile, my new friends—manifesting a well-documented shift in the region as a whole—turned their attention mainly toward Bordeaux varieties, with the exception of **Serial's 2023 Willow Creek District Syrah**. In addition to **Ancient Peaks' 2021 Pearl Merlot**, **J. Lohr's 2023 Cuvée St. E Red Blend**, **The Fableist's 2023 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**, and the **Old Creek Ranch 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon** made by Leffert, Delmore outdid himself by bringing yet another library wine into the mix: a **1999 Viking Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** from area pioneer **Adelaida**. With that taste of Paso's history came a discussion of its future.

### *A Legacy of Learning*

Pointing out that “there are a lot of '23s in [this lineup],” Kandarian asserted, “2023 was the best vintage in Paso in the last 25 years. The acidity and vibrance were off the hook.” Climate change notwithstanding, that's a hopeful sign that the ever-growing collective knowledge of the region's winemakers—and their generosity in terms of sharing it with one another—will be paying off for decades to come.

“I think back to the collaboration that happens,” Kandarian mused. “Curt's helped me I don't know how many times, Stewart and Jeremy help me all the dog-gone time. And it's a really crazy dynamic to be mentored by some of these guys—I mean, at Serial, I'm competing with Fableist, you know? And we're all chasing J. Lohr. It's co-opetition. If someone's filter is broken, you're putting yours in the back of the truck and you're driving it over there. There's no cost, you know? You're just helping out. ‘Oh, you need that valve on your tank or your press? I have that. I'm done pressing.’ You just work together, so we always called it ‘co-opetition.’”

Today, these steadfast compadres are ensuring that such healthy co-opetition is a hallmark of the region by mentoring Paso's

up-and-coming talents. Leffert, for one, praised his assistant winemaker, Emma Garcia, as “an animal, with a voracious appetite to learn, and it just brings me a ton of joy to watch people grow and also provide that great culture at work.” Schalchlin gave similar props to his assistant turned partner at The Fableist, David Culliton, who “came to work with me when he was 23; he's now 32. At one point, he was in his mid-20s, and his whole crew was all 20-year-olds, and they were making 40,000 cases of wine with me just checking in on them. I have had all the faith in him, and he's delivered. At this point, not only do I enjoy mentorship, but I see a legacy starting. I'm going to walk away, and the things that we've learned together are going to go on. It's such a beautiful thing.”

What will undoubtedly also live on are the wines themselves. As we nibbled an after-dinner assortment of cheeses and charcuterie and sipped the last of the Adelaida Cabernet, Peck observed, “There are a dozen wines we tasted tonight that'll end up where that '99 Viking ended up. That's the business we're in, trying to make wines of that quality that will hold up for years.” Agreed Kandarian, “We were joking earlier about whether [consumers] even know where Paso is. We're not there yet, but people are going to know where El Pomar is. They're going to really know where Willow Creek is. And it started with these guys.” SJ





PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOLEY FAMILY WINES & SPIRITS

Alison Rodriguez is Silverado Vineyards' third-ever winemaker.

# Good Things Come in Threes

**SILVERADO VINEYARDS WINEMAKER ALISON RODRIGUEZ** IS ESTABLISHING HER OWN LEGACY WHILE SHAPING THE HISTORIC ESTATE'S FUTURE by Ruth Tobias

**OVER THE COURSE** of its 45-year history in California's Napa Valley, Silverado Vineyards has employed only three winemakers—a rather remarkable state of affairs that speaks to the value of continuity as it relates to brand identity. Though change is inevitable in the industry as in life, the sort of institutional knowledge that develops among personnel with long-range perspective is vital to ensuring that a winery's evolution is in perfect harmony with its mission, as informed by its history.

Currently entrusted with that responsibility is Alison Rodriguez, who joined Silverado as winemaker in 2022. It's one she takes seriously given the winery's long-held reputation for 100% estate-grown and -produced wines that express their renowned terroir—including its three most important Cabernet Sauvignons from a trade standpoint, namely the Silverado Estate, GEO, and SOLO. Happily enough, in 2023, she had a





great deal of help from Mother Nature in fulfilling her objective: The first vintage in which she supervised the entire production process from budbreak to bottling is widely regarded as extraordinary.

Here, Rodriguez shares her thoughts on the resulting wines and on her role in shaping them—now and in the future.

**Q: What were your deepest hopes and concerns upon taking the reins at Silverado four years ago?**

There was a lot to be very excited about and nervous about at the same time—I feel like those two emotions are just intrinsically intertwined. The potential to take a role at a winery that is 100% estate is like a holy grail for a winemaker. We can't control everything, right? We don't control nature; we don't control the vintage. But as a 100% estate-based winery [with] 325 acres of vineyards, we plan what we are planting and how are we planting it—clone, rootstock, row orientation, on what soil, et cetera—all the way through to [how] we farm those blocks . . . and age our wines. We really are just involved from root to glass. So on the one hand, it's very exciting; on the other hand, it's like, OK, now you control everything you can possibly control—better make it happen!

**Q: How would you describe the 2023 vintage?**

It was a very late vintage. We had a good winter, full of rain, [so there was] a good supply of water in the soil, but it wasn't until mid-April that we were seeing budbreak. I remember having conversations out in the vineyard, saying, "OK, we're really late—how are we going to open up our canopies early, get as much light into the grapes as early as possible [to] help stimulate the synthesis of some of those wonderful aromas and flavors?" . . . The next decision was, "Hey, why don't we do an early green drop?" We're not going to wait until veraison; we're going to take the green drop right after seed hardening to make sure that everything we have left is racing ahead at the same velocity toward full, rich, lovely tannin ripeness, phenolic ripeness, and aroma ripeness. You balance all of your decision-making throughout the year to try to get to that place where you're able to allow the fruit to express itself fully.

Summer was moderate; what that means in terms of high-quality Cabernet grape growing, at least here in Napa Valley, is that all of the color and all of the aromas that we try to grow into our grapes and grape skins tend to hang around when you don't have heat spikes. So

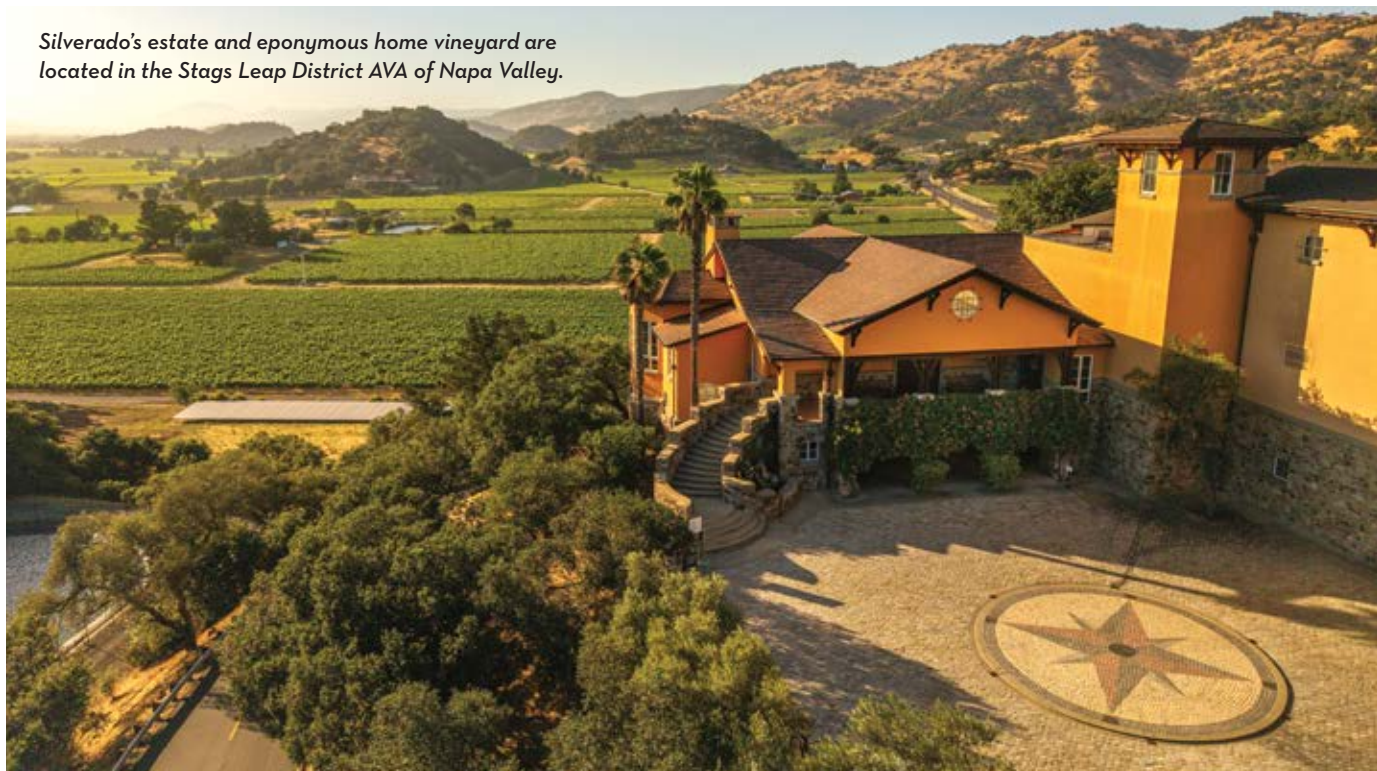
you have more color and, typically, more aroma and flavor to start the harvest with.

We were waiting for quite a while to pick, and in Napa, you may not know when harvest starts, but you know when it's going to end, because the winter rains will catch up with you—usually by early November if not sooner. So as you wait and wait for those aromas and tannins to soften, the flavors to reach their peak, you are also very cognizant that you might be running out of runway in order to bring the whole harvest in. So you have to take a deep breath, watch the weather very carefully, and take some calculated risks. For winemakers like myself who have been in Napa for a while, we've seen fall go either way; there was no promise that we were going to get an incredible spate of weather in October. But we did in 2023, and it absolutely made the vintage. It was just fantastic.

**Q: What's your approach to crafting Silverado Cabernet?**

For GEO and SOLO, I'm always keeping tabs on which blocks seem to have the richest depth of flavor and color; [so] before [harvest], we already have a few that we feel like, yep, these are the ones that are probably going to make the grade. . . . They get picked in small bins, optically

*Silverado's estate and eponymous home vineyard are located in the Stags Leap District AVA of Napa Valley.*





sorted, and brought in to the best tanks. I like to do a really long cold soak to extract everything out of the skins that I can—five to seven days on Cabernet.

The [winemaking] process is similar for GEO and SOLO, but the fruit itself extracts very differently. Our Mt. George Vineyard in Coombsville tends to have a bigger phenolic profile [and] more tannin, which means that the wines can have incredible structure and amazing potential for aging. But you can overextract that tannin very quickly if you're not careful; 2023 was such a big, big vintage from [that] perspective, and it was really amazing to see the color and tannin that came out of those skins as soon as we started fermenting. So we went into more of a gentle extraction mode on GEO that year, adjusting the times of our pumpovers and the temperatures that we used.

SOLO comes from Silverado Vineyard itself in the Stags Leap District, which [is often] described as the iron fist in the velvet glove. It's dense but rich, so the tannins aren't quite as challenging. [Even so,] we watch those fermenters like hawks; we taste them every day to make sure that we're at the right place before we press—I always make press cuts, though I hardly ever use my press wine.

So each of those [vineyards] has a very special character. Silverado [contributes] black and red cherry, a marzipan sort of note, and a sweet braised-fennel herbal quality. Mt. George is definitely darker—blackberry, plum skin, maybe bay laurel. So what I've been very slowly optimizing is barrel profile to match vineyard profile: How can I choose the right barrels to bring out the incredible depth

of fruit of those vineyards and really help them shine?

There's always going to be a very special selection made for GEO and SOLO, but thankfully, we have incredible vineyards, and we have an amazing team that works to farm them. So just because this particular barrel didn't make the cut for [those wines] doesn't mean it's bad—it's pretty damn good. And those barrels are making it into our Estate Cab. Roughly 50% each year comes from Silverado and 50% comes from Mt. George. And I feel like if I've done my work well, then you should be able to find both of those personalities in the Estate Cab—you should find that black and red cherry and marzipan, and you should find that plum skin and blackberry and sweet bay laurel undertone.

The [main difference is] the oak profile may not be quite as big. GEO and SOLO are typically very close to 100% new French oak, and our Estate Cab is around 40% new French oak. More older oak just helps to elevate the fruit and bring out its freshness.

**Q: Now that you have a few vintages under your belt, what's your perspective on your role at Silverado?**

I am following two pretty legendary winemakers. Jack Stuart was Silverado's first winemaker; he was here for at least 20 years in some form or fashion . . . and he really set the trajectory and helped the [founding] Miller family see quite a bit of success. His successor, Jon Emmerich, was here for 32 years in some capacity; he was here when SOLO was first created as a wine, and now we're about to celebrate its 25th anniversary. So I feel

like I have a great legacy to uphold.

But I also feel like I can make my own mark. With the beautiful estate vineyards that we have, it is really just a matter of fine-tuning each year—polishing up this gemstone, working incredibly diligently, with a lot of passion and a lot of dedication, to elevate the stature of Silverado even beyond what these two legendary winemakers were able to do.

The thing that's so great about Silverado is that we're right here. Again, I shy away from the word "control," but we can see the full picture—we're steeped in it every day. We are steeped in our own vineyards, in our own winery, in our own operations, and we are rarely taken by surprise. We make good decisions together, and we prepare for the best and for the worst. Then we're ready for whatever happens every vintage.

As a person who loves history, I find it interesting to be at this place at this time. Napa has a leading role in the wine world for a reason. And even though that world is going through some challenges at the moment, I feel grateful that I'm at a place that has this 45-year history of crafting incredible estate wines, [and] I firmly believe that we are only at the outset of establishing our place in [California] wine history. I know that's a lot to smash into a sentence, but I fully intend to ensure that Silverado has a lasting presence. **SJ**

## Tasting Notes

### **Silverado Vineyards 2023 Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$60)**

Opaque black/crimson in hue, this wine leads with notes of violet, iron, black plum, and soy sauce that flash across the palate. Its broad and dense backbone supports its balance between acidity, fruit, and oak, creating a vivid arc of power and elegance as it softens on the finish. **98** —*Meridith May*

### **Silverado Vineyards 2023 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon, Coombsville, Napa Valley (\$90)**

A polished combination of beauty and structure, with floral aromatics and meaty flavors of blackberry, plum skin, graphite, and soy sauce rounded out by silky tannins. Its firm, grippy texture speaks to its ageworthiness, while earthy accents of coffee and tobacco strengthen the poised finish. **98** —*M.M.*

FOLEY FAMILY WINES & SPIRITS



# Small Talk

CELEBRATING THE CENTRAL COAST REGION'S CRAFT PRODUCERS—AND THEIR WELL-CRAFTED WINES *by Jessie Birschbach*

**ALTHOUGH THE ALCOHOL** and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau does not have an official definition for “boutique winery,” the wine industry generally uses the term to refer to an independently owned producer that makes fewer than 10,000 cases. And while Paso Robles is itself vast—in fact, it's California's largest AVA, spanning over 600,000 acres—it happens to be home to many such producers: Two-thirds of its wineries make fewer than 5,000 cases a year. I recently took a whirlwind trip to the region to seek out the small but mighty; here are my favorites.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GLUNZ FAMILY WINERY & CELLARS



**Matt and Stephan Glunz.**

## **Glunz Family Winery & Cellars**

Visiting the charming Glunz Family Winery & Cellars tasting room feels more like touring a mini history museum, as the family has been in the wine business since their ancestor, German immigrant Louis Glunz, opened The House of Glunz in 1888 in Chicago. Eventually the shop evolved into

a thriving wholesale business and set Glunz's great-grandsons, Matt and Stephan, on the path to establish their 40-acre estate (10 under vine) in Paso Robles' Geneseo District in 2013.

The brothers' portfolio of mostly single-vineyard wines from the Central Coast and Bordeaux varieties sustainably grown on the estate offers unparalleled value, including the 2022 Wells & Division blend of equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Petite Sirah, whose dark, sweet blue and black fruits, edged with a tangy floral note of hibiscus tea, stay with you almost as long as the family's inspiring success story. For the price, these wines are truly among the best I've tasted in all of Paso.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HIGH CAMP WINES



**Spencer Rawles and Megan Mouren.**

## **High Camp Wines**

At the start of the pandemic, sixth-generation farmer Megan Mouren and her husband, Spencer Rawles, gave up their busy careers in Los Angeles to begin a crash course in winemaking. The couple is now marking their fourth year of producing wine from their 75-acre property, whose roller coaster-like vineyards range in elevation from 1,000 to 1,500 feet in Paso's warmest and driest subregion, San Miguel. Many of High Camp's bottlings are purposefully lighter in style (with a few exceptions, including its 2022 Estate Reserve, a Bordeaux-inspired blend). If you're lucky enough to visit

the rustic yet hip estate, you'll leave with a refreshed impression of San Miguel thanks to this crushable selection and the graciousness of cellar and estate lead Erin-Barrett Sparrow. Look for the savory, crisp 2025 Skin Contact Sauvignon Blanc, but try not to get too much sun in your eyes.

## **Copia Vineyards & Winery**

Founded in 2017 by Anita and Varinder Sahi, “Copia is the meeting of the two of us,” in Anita's words. A 14th-generation farmer from Punjab, India, Varinder witnessed the degradation of land there firsthand due to the transition to commercial farming practices that occurred during the Green Revolution. As a result, the couple was inspired to organically farm Copia's 50 acres (20 under vine) in the Willow Creek District and 26 acres in the Adelaida District, yielding wines of incredible vibrancy such as the 2023 The Source, a benchmark cool-climate Syrah with notes of brambly blackberry and mint. But it's not only the wines that are special: Thanks in part to Anita's background working with MICHELIN-starred restaurants in Chicago and New York, a stay in Copia's guesthouse near the family's house on their windy, wild Willow Creek estate is a deeply intimate bucket-list experience.

PHOTO: PETER SCHROEDER



**Varinder and Anita Sahi.**



**Douglas Ayres and Don Burns.**

### Allegretto Wines

At the top of Allegretto's 8-acre vineyard in the Estrella District, which surrounds its luxury resort, is a Sacred Hoop, a symbol used by Native Americans to represent life cycles and the interconnectedness of all things. It's a fitting reminder of the producer's farm-forward approach: Both this site and fellow estate property Michelle's Vineyard in the Willow Creek District are farmed biodynamically and certified organic, not to mention

currently in the process of regenerative certification.

This meticulous approach to viticulture so beloved by visionary proprietor Douglas Ayres has long played a starring role in Allegretto's story—and as of the 2023 vintage, winemaker Don Burns (of Saxum and Turtle Rock acclaim) has been working with Ayres to craft an invigorated portfolio with a depth of winemaking skill that finally matches that of its farming. Allegretto's savory, herbal, and blackberry-tinged 2023 Tannat, for example, is a refined version of a famously scrappy variety.

### Radial Estate

In 2020, Bill and Julie Lapp jumped at the chance to purchase the historic Rotta Winery, established in 1908 as one of the first three wineries in Paso Robles. Planted on their own rootstock, many of the head-trained old vines needed to be replaced, but some of the oldest Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon in California remain there today.



**Brett Curran and Bill Lapp.**

Viticulturalist turned wine-maker Brett Curran and his team took on the task of redesigning and replanting the organically farmed 40-acre estate now known as Radial, whose rolling hills sit on Willow Creek's signature calcareous shale soils that support 20 acres of vines. The success of the Lapps' more approachable brand, mid•point, has enabled them to follow a long, costly aging regimen in barrel and bottle, similar to the traditions of Bordeaux and Rioja, in addition to letting them be selective about the estate-grown fruit used for the label. Meanwhile, Bill has leveraged his tech background to develop several innovations related to packaging and hospitality, from topping Radial's bottles with cast metal cartouches that double as cork holders and decanter stoppers to using water-soluble rear labels that allow for bottle reuse. The UMBRA Cab Franc, typically aged for two years in barrel and three-plus years in bottle to sing with red fruit and Indian spices, and the rich, suede-like Portuguese blend PAVONA reflect a new Paso legacy that's built to last.



**Damian Grindley.**

### Brecon Estate

When I visited Brecon Estate, the warmth of its modern tasting room served as an antidote to the moody, rainy weather. The 40-acre Adelaida District property, purchased and renovated by Damian and Amanda Grindley in 2012, harbors precious old-vine Cabernet Sauvignon; at 51 years old, it was recently inducted into the Historical Vineyard Society, and one of Brecon's Cab Franc vineyards is soon to follow. These sites,

along with others containing mainly Bordeaux and a few Rhône varieties, total around 27 sustainably farmed acres.

As serious and well regarded as Brecon's wines are, often made with some degree of the old-vine Cab and/or Cab Franc, Damian is lighthearted when it comes to naming expressions such as the Haggis Basher and Last Sandwich blends (and his tasting notes are equally playful). During my visit, he shared the dense, floral 2023 Malbec, of which he had held back a pallet from the total production of just 168 cases to give the wine more time to age. After tasting this revelatory bottling and other current releases, I was met with the disappointing news that Brecon mainly sells direct to consumer—but this minor inconvenience is immediately forgiven by the fact that it encourages a pilgrimage to the estate itself, where one can properly honor its old vines.



**Paloma Bilson and her dog, Bullet.**

### Dilécta Wines

Normally, Dilécta Wines proprietor Paloma Bilson and her blue-eyed dog, Bullet, can walk among their roughly 8 acres of vines in the Willow Creek District without getting soaked, but during my visit, their typically leisurely stroll from Bilson's pink home to the art-filled tasting room was rushed by rain. The Cabernet, Zinfandel, and Petite Sirah that grow in what Bilson lovingly calls her "glorified garden" go into the roughly 3,000 cases made by her son

Andre Minassian, supplemented by fruit sourced from other Paso Robles sites.

"Every year our wine is a little different. We're a small producer, and we don't make it in a lab," said Bilson as Bullet stood on his hind legs at the tasting counter. The world's cutest tasting room manager barked as Bilson explained that many of the wines in Dilécta's Rhône-driven portfolio undergo whole-cluster fermentation—including the bright, briary 2020 Tiller; a 100% Grenache that, despite its ABV of roughly 15%, remained as lifted as Bullet's spirits when he discovered that the rain had stopped.



## Vinyl Vineyards

Visitors currently staying in one of Vinyl Vineyards' music-themed vintage trailers or in a camping spot on its 120-acre estate in the Geneseo District can taste through its small portfolio in the charming guesthouse of proprietors Jeff and Dina Hevert while enjoying their signature "Sip and Spin" vinyl pairing. (Ultimately, they'll be able to walk to a new tasting room—which will also serve as a vinyl listening bar inspired by similar venues in Tokyo—adjoining the soon-to-be-built micro-winery.) Along the way, they can visit the "divas," the Heverts' term of endearment for the alpacas (Beyoncé, Taylor, and Rihanna) that provide the wool for the lush alpaca blankets that they also sell.

For now, Jeff uses the winemaking facilities at Alta

Colina, where he is employed as a harvest intern and has studied under former winemaker Molly Lonborg, current winemaker Dallas Parnigoni, and owner Bob Tillman. In addition to sourcing fruit



**Jeff and Dina Hevert.**

from local growers, the couple has begun converting their roughly 26 acres of estate vines to sun-loving Iberian Peninsula varieties like Touriga Nacional and Tempranillo that are well suited to the Geneseo District's warm climate. Among their cleverly designed squat bottles are a refreshing, lemony Vermentino whose interior label artwork was inspired by David Bowie and the dusty and leathery yet bright 2024 Jota Iberian Blend, which showed the greatest promise. Although Vinyl is currently California's coolest glamping experience, I'm willing to bet it's also the future of Paso's lesser-known east side.

## LXV Wines

Established in 2010 by Neeta and Kunal Mittal, LXV Wines has long been beloved for the unparalleled spice-driven pairing experience it offers at its downtown tasting room. (Seriously, it's not to be missed.) But the Mittals' dedication to flavor goes

beyond pairing, as they are currently working with their local chapter of the American Cancer Society to help cancer survivors regain a sense of taste with their housemade spice blends.

LXV's organically farmed 14-acre Armaa.N estate in the Willow Creek District is home



**Kunal Mittal and Jeff Strekas.**

to just 8 acres of vines, so the couple and winemaker Jeff Strekas, who has a background in biochemical engineering, have forged long-term relationships with growers (some of whom established custom plantings of Merlot just for them) to source fruit for their three brands: the core line of food-friendly LXV Wines, inspired by the Mittals' worldly travels; the terroir-driven single-vineyard MESO; and the ageworthy Maison Mittal, a global blend of fruit from a Grand Cru Classé Saint-Émilion site, Paso's G2 Vineyard, and the Armaa.N Vineyard.

On my visit to Armaa.N, I joined Strekas and Kunal to taste through their latest releases following a tour of the vineyard, where Strekas had noted while fiddling with an ice shield sprinkler that "to me, limestone soils aside, the driving factor for this property is the climate. Temperatures would substantiate that this is one of the top three coolest properties in all of Willow Creek." This helped to explain the elegant, cool-climate style of, for instance, the MESO Syrah and Sangiovese, but I detected the same subtle sense of refinement across the portfolio regardless of site, reflecting LXV's profoundly solicitous approach when it comes to both making and tasting wine.

## Ancient Peaks and Ancient Farming

Although Ancient Peaks is by no means a boutique winery, it's just as special. Nearly a monopoly in Paso's namesake southernmost subregion, Santa Margarita Ranch—its family-owned and -operated 14,000-acre estate (830 under vine)—has something in common with most of the aforementioned boutique producers: It too is participating in the Paso Robles CAB Collective's One Block Challenge program, in which participating wineries dedicate one block of vines to regenerative farming practices and then share soil and biodiversity test results with fellow participants to measure how these methods positively impact the land.

At the newly opened Cambria Hotel in Templeton, Ancient Peaks co-owner Doug Filippini shared his 2021 Pearl Collection Cabernet Sauvignon. A top-tier expression of the grape made with the free-run juice of hand-selected lots that are vinified and aged separately in 100% new French oak, it proved that Santa Margarita Ranch Cabernet can rival the best in Paso.

*Ancient Peaks' Santa Margarita Ranch estate vineyard.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GUS MATTHEW

*Pictured from left to right are Jason and Shelley Vargas, Stacy and Steve Holder, and winemaker Don Burns.*

# Opening Pandora's Box

A MUTUAL ADMIRATION OF WINE LED TO THE CREATION OF LABEL **GUS MATTHEW**

by Meridith May

**FRIENDS STEVEN GUS HOLDER** and Jason Matthew Vargas met when Vargas was pitching for the Anaheim Angels. They quickly bonded over their love of wine, leading them to pursue their passion to create what they aimed to be a world-class wine of their own. Holder, a retired mortgage banker, and Vargas, now retired from professional baseball, decided to join forces with their wives, Stacy and Shelley, to start a boutique wine label using their middle names: Gus Matthew. "When we first met, we were hanging out in front of our houses watching our kids play and getting to know each other," commented Vargas. "Steve asked me if I liked wine, and he pulled something epic from his cellar. That's when we opened Pandora's box and our fate was sealed."

The next step was falling for Paso Robles. Through a friend they were fortunate to meet Don Burns: The former Saxum winemaker is the owner of Turtle Rock Vineyards, where he has gained top acclaim from critics. Burns will continue to craft Gus Matthew's wines with fruit sourced from neighboring property G2 Vineyard in the Willow Creek District until their estate vineyard comes to fruition.

Now in their second vintage, these small-production selections are ready for their close-ups.



*Gus Matthew Vineyard's exceptional terroir includes exposed limestone with oak growth.*

**Gus Matthew 2023 GSM, Willow Creek District, Paso Robles (\$125)** This blend of 55% Syrah, 20% Mataro, 18% Graciano, and 7% Grenache boasts fresh berry aromatics and a satin-lined mouthfeel that offers up a zip of white pepper. Umami notes of soy sauce saturate the palate atop a foundation of graphite, while a hint of jalapeño spices cedar on the lingering finish. **97**



**Gus Matthew 2023 Red Wine, Willow Creek District, Paso Robles (\$150)** A wake-up call for the senses, with peppery notes joining a surge of generous boysenberry, black currant, and crushed stone. A blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cab Franc, and 10% Syrah with some Mourvèdre, Petit Verdot, and Petite Sirah, it's a sleekly textural beauty, spreading across the palate like a silk scarf. **98**

**Gus Matthew 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Willow Creek District, Paso Robles (\$175)** This expression is tense and precise, with up-front notes of clove and black pepper allowing its youth to proudly show alongside polished, structured tannins. While black currant and flint add to its reined-in richness, it morphs into a more elegant red as it continues to open up, smoothing out with poise. **98**



# A Slow Exhale in the Creston District

**CHATEAU MARGENE** WAS THE FIRST TO MAKE A NAME FOR THIS PASO SUB-AVA

by Meridith May

**SITTING AT AN** elevation of 1,250 feet in the Creston District, the southeastern-most sub-appellation in Paso Robles, is Chateau Margene. The small winery was founded by Michael Mooney and his wife, Margene, with their son Jon taking over winemaking and viticulture. Now Chateau Margene is entering a new chapter, with Jon continuing on as winemaker under new owners Steve and Misty Law.

"The west side has always been the praised part of Paso," notes Michael, recalling that a vineyard consultant urged him to plant in Creston over three decades ago while other winery operators were staking a claim in the Adelaida District, Willow Creek, and Templeton Gap areas. "He advised that this was the best place to grow Bordeaux varieties," he adds. "We listened."

Jon grew up around the winery and has been working alongside his dad for 28 years. The 42-year-old began overseeing the vineyards five years ago, employing sustainable and regenerative farming techniques. But he enjoys all sides of the business. "Engaging with customers is a beautiful thing," he explains, "and I am grateful for being able to take the reins for winemaking and blending responsibilities too."

Jon points out that Creston is known for having a slightly cooler climate than the majority of the region while still experiencing the warmth that Paso is known for. "The diurnal swings can change 47 degrees from day to night. We get the cold air from the Templeton Gap to the west, Morro Bay, and the La Panza mountain to the east," he says.

Chateau Margene's elegant and focused expressions possess a graceful structure and a silky harmony: Flavors don't boldly announce themselves so much as they thread together, allowing the wines room to breathe with a slow exhale. **99**



*Mike and Margene Mooney are the founders of Chateau Margene.*

## **Chateau Margene 2022 CASK 4, Creston District, Paso Robles (\$210)**

This majestic and concentrated blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon and 50% Cab Franc spent 32 months in new, tight-grained French oak, which imparted a spiced, creamy character augmented by a note of juicy black-cherry ganache. Though steps away from hedonistic, the result exudes elegance. Balanced flavors of blue and red fruit, mocha, and dried herbs cast a spell. **99**

## **Chateau Margene 2023 Cielo Rosso, Creston District, Paso Robles (\$80)**

A blend of 92% Sangiovese and 8% Cabernet Franc aged in (35% new) Taransaud French oak, this delicious wine built for pairing with pasta offers up tart red cherry, dried herbs, and astringent tannins that morph into a gentler, riper soul. An essence of dried roses and a whisper of leather meld with cinnamon stick and tangy acidity before the long and flattering finish. **97**

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHATEAU MARGENE



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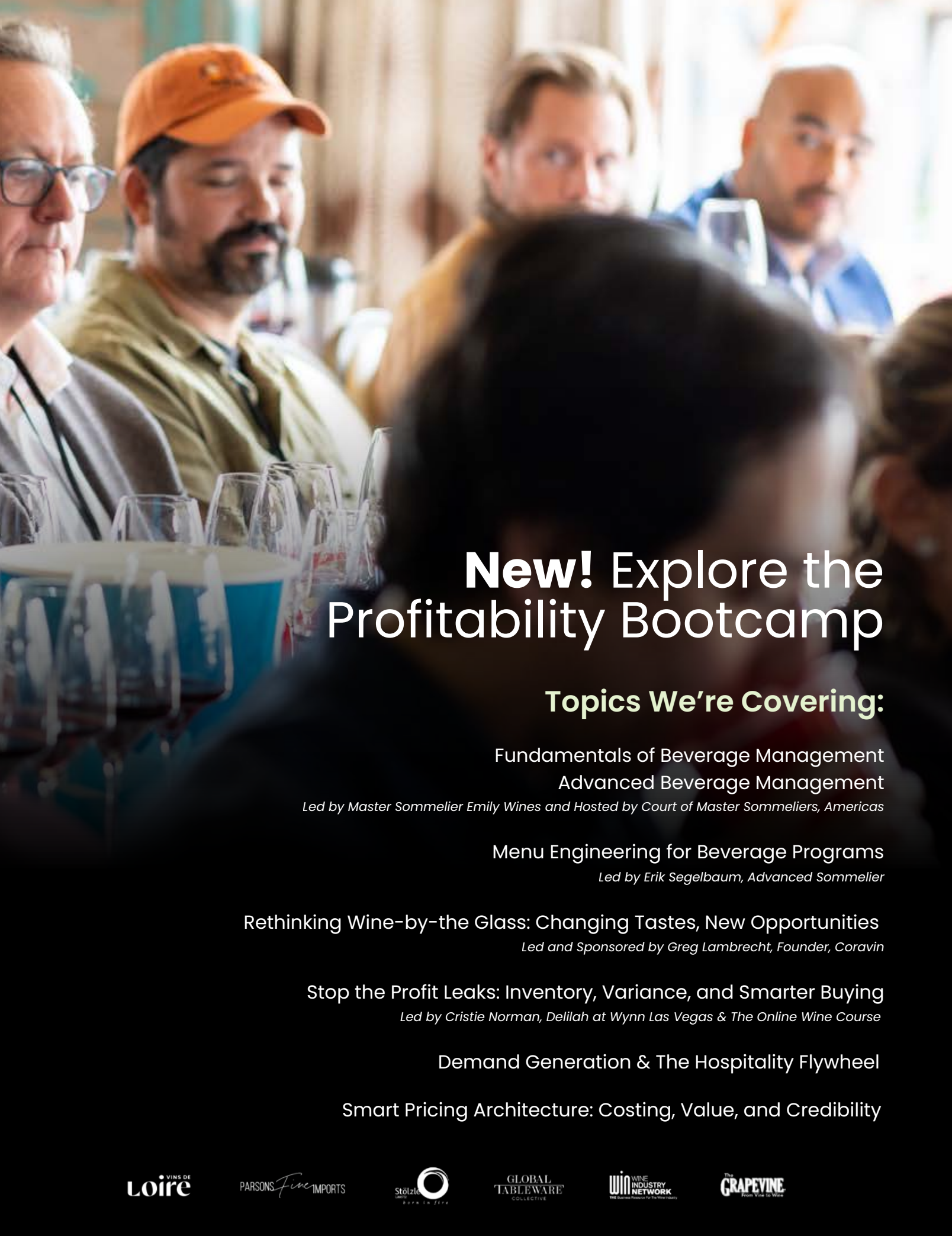
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Artist Tsuyoshi Tane's "Sound of Marble" is  
showcased on the grounds of the Ca' del  
Bosco estate in Erbusco, Italy.

# An Homage to Harmony

**CA' DEL BOSCO'S SCULPTURE AWARD CONTINUES  
A LONG TRADITION OF SUPPORTING THE ARTS**

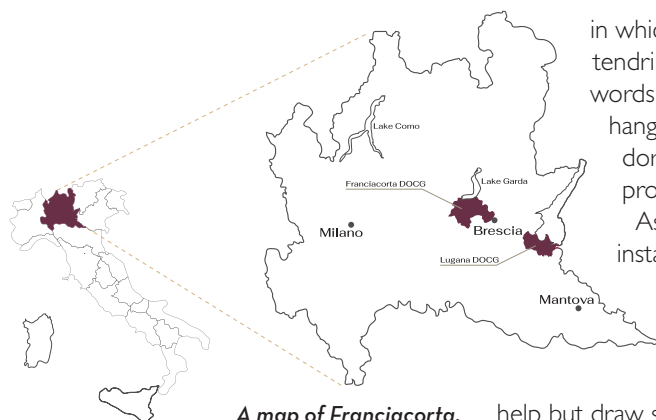
**by Lars Leicht**







*"Eroi di Luce" was sculpted from marble by Igor Mitoraj.*



*A map of Franciacorta.*

The award formalizes the sense of patronage that Zanella sees as necessary to energize a new generation of artists. The competition is held every two years by invitation only for sculptors under 40 who were born or reside in Italy; it is run by a jury of professionals in the creative arts and presided over by Toto Bergamo Rossi, director of the nonprofit Venetian Heritage, which supports the legacy of Venetian art in Italy. In keeping with Ca' del Bosco's overall philosophy, the judges consider environmental sustainability a key parameter for evaluating the submissions, and the winning work is installed permanently on the Ca' del Bosco estate in areas such as its sculpture park.

The winner of the first Ca' del Bosco Sculpture Award was Irene Coppola, born in Palermo in 1991. Her neon creation—

in which spirals resembling the tendrils of a grapevine form the words "hand and land"—now hangs on the wall of the corridor that leads to the winery's production area.

As for the other pieces installed throughout the property, Zanella says that none of them were inspired by specific wines, but one can't help but draw some comparisons. The first masterpiece can be encountered at the entrance of the estate: The "Cancello Solare," or "Sun Gate," was created by Arnaldo Pomodoro, an architect, designer, decorator, and sculptor, and installed in 1993. It is circular and bronze-colored, with arrow-like rays emanating outward, symbolic of the sun that nourishes the grapes, as Zanella describes it: "I wanted something that felt like a sacred gateway to the vineyards."



In much the same way, Ca' del Bosco's Cuvée Prestige wine serves as a portal to the portfolio and the winery's expression of the Franciacorta DOCG. Its elegant bottle with a yellow label and antique gold capsule is often wrapped in orange cellophane or placed in an elegant green

box. Well balanced and refreshing, the wine is a multivintage blend made each year in both white and rosé versions, with varying proportions of older vintages adding complexity to the freshness of more recent harvests.

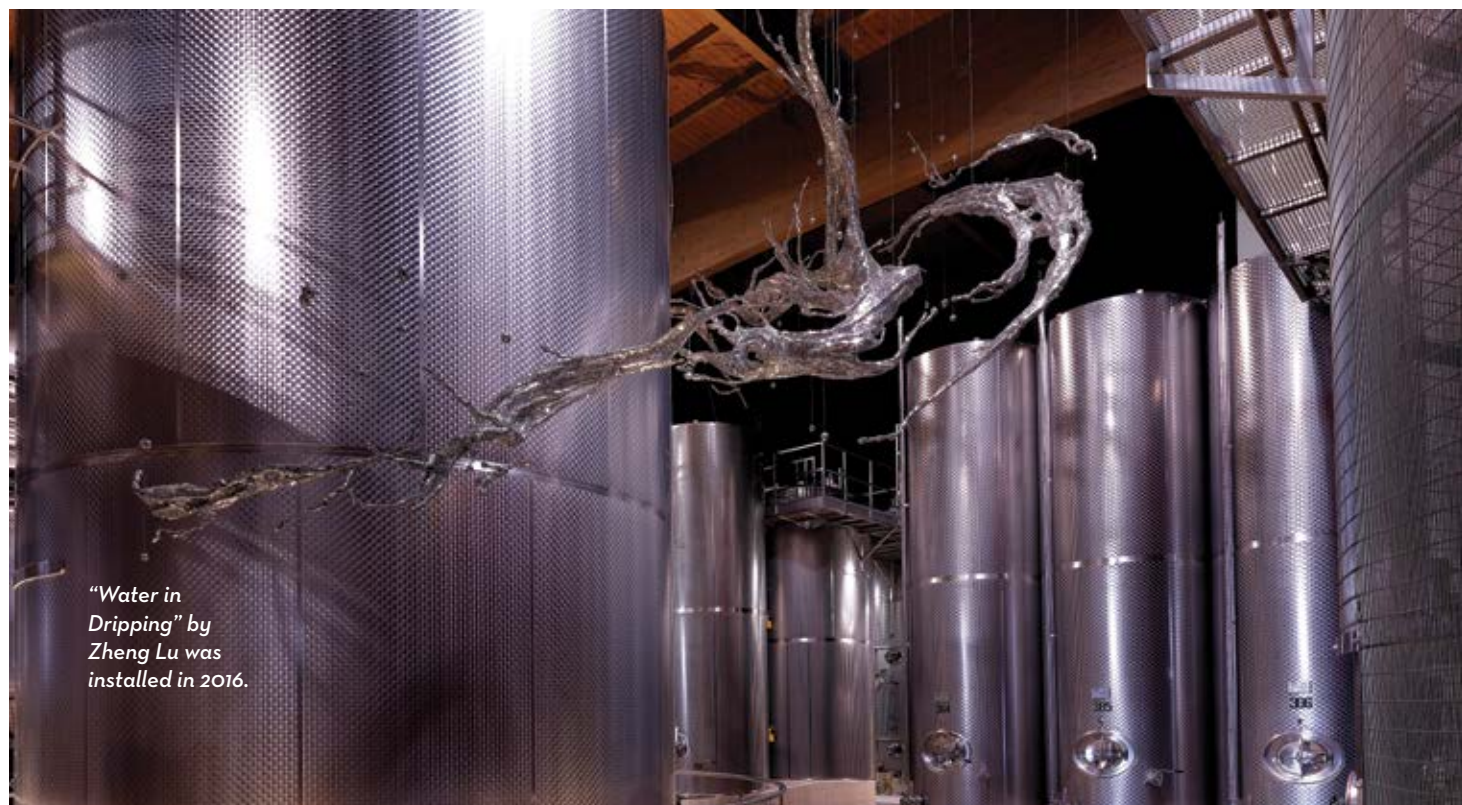
The path that leads from the gate to the winery works its way past the dramatically sky-framed "Eroi di Luce," or "Hero of the Light," a marble sculpture created by Igor Mitoraj in 1991; recalling the familiar facial features of Michelangelo's iconic David, from the columella of the nose to the clavicle, it features an open vault in the neck that contains a smaller head swathed like a mummy. Mitoraj has said he expresses himself through fragments "because the unseen part is much more important."



The Ca' del Bosco Vintage Collection Dosage Zéro is similarly defined by an absence—in this case, the absence of the liqueur d'expédition. This brut nature style of wine is a pure and sincere embodiment of Franciacorta, with delicate aromas of stone fruit, lemon custard, and toasted almond. Its dark bottle and minimalist label convey its elegance.

Once visitors to the winery pass the "berry spa," which employs an innovative method of cleaning impurities from the





*"Water in Dripping" by Zheng Lu was installed in 2016.*



*Stefano Bombardieri's "Il Peso del Tempo Sospeso" hangs above Ca' del Bosco's fermentation tanks.*

grapes before production, visitors reflexively look up to the ceiling where "Il Peso del Tempo Sospeso" hangs, presenting "a total shock to the system," according to Zanella. He refers to the life-size rhinoceros sculpture as "a witty, hyperrealist joke, symbolizing vitality and energy that here is harnessed and suspended." Created by Stefano Bombardieri in 2003, it makes a dramatic impression meant to inspire contemplation on harnessing a powerful force—but, said Zanella, it also "makes you stop and think about the weight of time and what 'still life' really means."

Analogously, the Ca' del Bosco Vintage

Collection Satèn channels all the intensity of Franciacorta in a refined and delicate way. Made exclusively from white grapes with less sugar than is typically added during the tirage and 5 bars of pressure instead of the usual 6, it has a creamy profile that's soft and round on the palate thanks in part to lengthy bottle aging.

In the heart of the winery, suspended between stainless-steel tanks for temperature-controlled fermentation, hangs "Water in Dripping" by Zheng Lu; installed in 2016, the silver sculpture resembles a splash of water—or, better yet, Franciacorta—composed of fused letters from a verse of ninth-century Chinese poetry that explores the natural movement of water: "It recalls the dynamism of nature and of wine spilling from the barrels," explains Zanella.

In the two icon Franciacortas he has dedicated to his mother, Annamaria Clementi, Zanella shows a similarly dynamic commitment to excellence. Made only in optimal vintages with the best fruit, the wines—a white cuvée of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Blanc and a rosé of Pinot Noir—spend eight years on the yeasts and show extraordinary balance, rich texture, and elegance. It was Clementi who purchased the hillside cottage in Erbusco, surrounded by heavy oak and chestnut woods, that is today the Ca' del Bosco estate. "That little house was the

spark for my entire life," declares Zanella. "While the specific passion for collecting and commissioning sculptures was my own journey, her bravery and her eye for a beautiful place laid the groundwork for everything. Dedicating our most prestigious Franciacorta Riserva to her memory was the most natural thing in the world."

The aesthetic sensibility that Zanella inherited from his mother has profoundly inspired his endeavor to turn a country retreat into a center for both wine production and art curation, combining the esoteric with the accessible. That much is clear to anyone who has the opportunity to converse with him and witness his keen observation of detail, appreciation for nuance, and sensitivity to flair. "Art at Ca' del Bosco isn't a separate decorative layer or a corporate marketing strategy," he explains. "It's woven into our everyday labor. It reminds us every single day that we are modern artisans, working by hand to capture the absolute best of nature in a bottle."

One gets the impression that his mind is constantly channeling every experience he has into improving upon his wines or further enriching the winery's artistic and cultural experience. And that is why Ca' del Bosco is never static but rather in perpetual evolution—always meriting another look, another visit, another sip.

# Other Notable Installations at Ca' del Bosco



*Created by the Cracking Art collective, “Blue Guardians” overlooks the property from the winery rooftop.*

## **“Egg Concept,” Spirito Costa (2014):**

Made with more than 6,000 eggshells, the central element of this work is a perfect egg on an articulated base. It adheres to Ca' del Bosco's sustainable ethos as well as the tradition of *Arte Povera*, an art movement focused on recycling everyday, low-cost materials.

## **“Gravity Untiled Column,” Rado Kirov (2013):**

This work was crafted using a unique technique of manipulating a sheet of stainless steel by hand, creating a striking three-dimensional surface that dynamically mirrors its surroundings and draws the observer into its reflection.

## **“Codice Genetico,” Rabarama (1999):**

Covered in multicolored puzzle pieces, this sculpture depicts a woman slowly reawakening from a state of drowsiness, grasping herself as she stretches in a fetal position.

## **“Il Dioniso,” Bruno Chersicla (1985):**

In this work, the ancient Greek god of the grape harvest, winemaking, orchards, festivity, and theater is transformed into a clown emerging from a flute glass. The multicolored design is seemingly inspired by a Gothic window in an ironic and spare style, in juxtaposition with the

joviality and prankishness associated with the god.

## **“Blue Guardians,” Cracking Art (2010):**

Commissioned by Ca' del Bosco founder Maurizio Zanella, who asked the Cracking Art collective to create an animal sculpture that would blend into the setting of the vineyards and woodlands on the estate, this consists of a vigilant pack of wolves that watches over the property from the winery rooftop and other strategic positions, standing out in a shade of blue that deliberately breaks with Ca' del Bosco's more neutral colors. In keeping with Zanella's own sustainability efforts, it is made completely from recycled plastic.

## **“Elogio dell'Ombra,” Bruno Romeda (1994):**

Located on a small lake with a covered bridge on the Ca' del Bosco estate, this sculpture plays off of the reflections from the water and interlaces with the leaves of surrounding trees, conveying a sense of lightness in contrast with its solid structure.

## **“Zolla Natura,” Bertozzi & Casoni (2017):**

This work reimagines a clump of soil as a microcosm magnifying what the earth can contain, including little flowers,

fragments of human activity, grass, and rocks; at the center is a bottle of Ca' del Bosco wine, which enshrines these rich sensations.

## **“Testimone,” Mimmo Paladino (2017):**

This imposing limestone sculpture is meant to serve as a symbolic guard watching over the precious treasure contained in the bottles that rest in the shadows of the cellar.

## **“Sound of Marble,” Tsuyoshi Tane (2021):**

Based on the interaction between marble, sound, and light, this work investigates the inherent qualities of stone through thin walls that are curved and self-supporting; they're made with Estremoz marble, whose veins change color in the rain. Inside, sounds of nature such as the wind and birds are amplified.

## **“Ludoscopio,” Paolo Scirpa (2020):**

Showcased in the winery's Senses Dome, this installation “does not highlight emptiness as ‘absence’ but as [an] insubstantial presence not yet defined and yet visible in the intimate dimension of space,” per the Ca' del Bosco website. Neon light and mirrors transform the primary geometric form of the work. 





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# A REGAL Reputation

**DAOU VINEYARDS’  
2023 SOUL OF A LION  
ENCAPSULATES A  
STELLAR VINTAGE IN  
PASO ROBLES**

by Kate Newton



## DAOU VINEYARDS’ FLAGSHIP WINE,

Soul of a Lion, was hardly the first Bordeaux blend to hail from Paso Robles, but it certainly carved out an indelible niche in the category for the region, achieving a sense of regality that’s true to its name while furthering the winery’s—and Paso’s—reputation on the world wine stage.

Among the few who have seen firsthand how brothers and DAOU founders Daniel and Georges Daou elevated the winery from an ambitious project to a household name is José Alberto Moreira dos Santos, who studied biochemistry as well as viticulture and enology in his native Portugal and officially came on board as general manager and senior winemaker in 2022. But his familiarity and involvement with DAOU dates back over a decade earlier to 2010—the same year as Soul of a Lion’s inaugural vintage—when he was serving as global business director at Enartis, a supplier of enological products and technical support for wineries worldwide.

When he met Daniel atop DAOU Mountain—roughly 2,200 feet above sea level and 14 miles from the Pacific Ocean in Paso’s Adelaida District—“they were pouring foundations for the tasting room

and the winery,” dos Santos recalls, and “we hit it off immediately,” bonding over their mutually “geeky” obsession with wine phenolics and how these compounds correspond to quality. Dos Santos worked closely with the DAOU team in establishing fermentation protocols and other technical parameters as they expanded production, and in 2013, he helped isolate the proprietary yeast, known as D20, that DAOU uses to ferment the majority of its portfolio. “So that strengthened even more [my] connection with Daniel. . . . My goal at the time [of leaving Enartis] was actually to take a little bit of a sabbatical and not really do much for a period of time, but I made a mistake of calling Daniel to tell him, and one week later he said, ‘Hey, you want to join the team?’” dos Santos says with a laugh. “The only reason why I even considered going to production was because it was DAOU and because it was Daniel. . . . I really believed [in] the project [and] the philosophy.”

And while they occasionally have differed in their approaches in the cellar, their respective backgrounds have allowed for an easy return to common ground: “When I taste the wine and I perceive something that I don’t like or something

that I like, I try to basically make [sense of] the chemistry of it in my mind. . . . Being an engineer, [Daniel] also likes to understand the process,” dos Santos explains, adding, “I think we aligned a lot [from the beginning] in terms of not leaving anything to chance; we wanted to . . . try to produce the best fruit possible and then extract the maximum potential [while] only doing things that we need to do. We barely use any additives; we use basically fermentation aids and sulfur and that’s it . . . but we control the process all along.”

The 2023 Soul of a Lion, released widely earlier this year, might be dos Santos’ first official vintage of the wine, but he’s witnessed it build upon its legacy as a paradigm shift in Paso Robles, which was long known primarily for Rhône varieties. But “the Bordeaux were definitely the reference for Daniel”—who spent part of his childhood in France—“so that’s what he wanted to make,” notes dos Santos, adding that the decision was solidified by the ideal conditions of DAOU Mountain’s terroir, including its calcareous and limestone soils. “And [that bet] has definitely proven to be right, because now most of Paso is planted with Cab, so . . . he knew what he was doing, let’s put it this way!”





*The view from DAOU Vineyards' estate in the Adelaida District of Paso Robles.*



**José Alberto Moreira dos Santos is general manager and senior winemaker at DAOU Vineyards.**

Cabernet Sauvignon comprises 76% of the 2023 blend, but the wine also features, at 18%, the highest proportion of Cabernet Franc (represented by clones 17 and 327) in Soul of a Lion to date—a development due to the abnormally cool vintage (Petit Verdot makes up the remaining 6% of the blend). These conditions allowed for a “slow and long” accumulation of both sugar and phenolics in addition to the preservation of natural acidity, yielding wines of deep color with prevalent freshness. “I think that [the] ’23

is the year of Cab Franc, because you have the ripe Cap Franc aromas that are not green but what I describe usually as herbal. . . . I [also] really like the green tea notes that I think are pretty distinctive and pretty identifiable for the vintage. It’s really the biggest indicator from an aromatic point of view,” says dos Santos. “Definitely ’23 is a fresher year, and you find much more blue, dark fruit, but fresh fruit versus raisins or compote or something that you [would] find probably in a ’22 or a ’21.”

Like its predecessors, the wine aged 22 months in 100% new French oak—namely a rare type known as *bois rosé*, of which some staves are brought in from France and aged on the property to add yet another layer of terroir to Soul of a Lion and other select wines. “The reason why this wood is so special is that the pink color comes from compounds that are derived from beta-carotene . . . [and] act as fruity character enhancers,” explains dos Santos. “So you [may] have the same amount of fruity aromas [as a wine aged in traditional French oak], but because you have a little bit of [these compounds], the perception of the fruity aromas is exacerbated. And this is what we find with the pink oak, is that the wines tend to be even fruitier and fresher than they would with regular oak.”

Like any seasoned scientist, dos Santos is open to deviating from Soul of a Lion’s tried-and-true methods, but he was certainly content with the reception the 2023 vintage received at a recent event in Los Angeles, one of several held to celebrate its release. “The feedback was absolutely astonishing, [including from] DAOU club members who have been our members since almost the beginning, and they know the wines and the history of the wines and the evolution,” notes dos Santos. “We also did a mini vertical tasting, and of course I’m biased because the vintage ’23 is my first vintage with DAOU, so I’m very happy that among the vintages that we tasted, the majority of the people in the room preferred [it]. . . . Independently of whatever contribution I made, ’23 is a stellar vintage.”

#### **DAOU Vineyards 2023 Soul of a Lion, Adelaida District, Paso Robles (\$150)**

Velvet-lioned tannins powerfully grip the teeth and palate in this majestic blend of 76% Cabernet, 18% Cabernet Franc, and 6% Petit Verdot. It comes in with a roar that’s gentled by its poise and presence, exhibiting notes of graphite, violets, blackberry, tobacco, and coffee bean and leveling off to a refined, harnessed purr on an ideal finish. **99** —Meridith May

TREASURY WINE ESTATES





# Always BECOMING

**ALEXANDER VALLEY CAB ACADEMY**  
REINFORCED THE SONOMA COUNTY REGION'S DISTINCTIVENESS

*story by* **JESSIE BIRSCHBACH** / *photos by* **TIM VALLERY**



*Rodney Strong's Rockaway Vineyard overlooks the surrounding Alexander Valley AVA.*





*ACTA co-founder/director of winemaking Dustin Moilanen; Jessie Birschbach, senior wine and beer editor at The SOMM Journal; and Trione Vineyards & Winery winemaker John Duckett on the “Geology & Soils” panel.*

**T**his year marks the 13th edition of the Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy, and I was lucky enough to be a sophomore attendee of the two-day immersive program hosted by Alexander Valley Winegrowers. Since my first visit to the Sonoma County subregion in 2024, what has lingered on my palate most is the savoriness of its Cabernets—and this year, a hand-selected group of roughly a dozen intrepid sommeliers from across the country confirmed that the 20-mile-long, 8-mile-wide region and its roughly 15,000 acres of grapevines continue to produce some of California’s freshest versions of the variety.

“I’ve found that the natural acidity in Alexander Valley Cab is generally much higher than in other regions,” said Stonestreet Estate Vineyards winemaker Kristina Shideler during one seminar, “and that natural acid influences how the tannin is going to feel.” The refresher course on the freshness of the Cabs aside, this year’s biggest takeaway centered around the fact that the Alexander Valley is home to one of the largest geothermal fields on the planet.

For thousands of years, Native Americans would visit the steam baths and thermal pools found in the region and the surrounding area for ceremonial rebirth and healing rituals. Misnamed “the Geysers” by an early explorer in the mid-1800s, this collection of fumaroles and hot springs spanning 30 square miles became a tourist destination and is now home to the largest geothermal complex in the world, serving as a sustainable source of electricity since 1960. This complex, along with the columns of steam seen from some of the vineyards and frequent earthquakes, are a regular reminder of the volatility below the surface of the Valley that continues to impact the diversity of soil series found in the region, among them nutrient-poor, well-draining volcanic soils such as the prehistoric white ash “chalk” of Chalk Hill and a red, rocky type. Cabernet happens to thrive in both.

## On the Offense for Agriculture

The general sense of inviting warmth one experiences in the Alexander Valley seems to go up an extra notch at the ACTA estate. Maybe it’s because meeting co-founder/director of winemaking Dustin Moilanen feels akin to catching up with an old friend. Maybe it’s the organic flow of the hospitality center itself, whose indoor/outdoor tasting area melds seamlessly with its surroundings. Or maybe it’s simply the comforting, luxurious plushness of ACTA’s DEEDS blend, but I digress (we’ll revisit that wine later).

In ACTA’s small but mighty winery, which at the time was lined with long tables filled with glasses rather than its usual winemaking equipment, the group munched on breakfast sandwiches while Karissa Kruse, CEO of Sonoma County Winegrowers (SCW), joined by a handful of Sonoma-based winemakers, kicked things off. A seminar about viticulture from a grower’s perspective provided helpful context on the Sonoma Valley before diving more deeply into the Alexander Valley, which is, after all, one of 19 Sonoma County AVAs.

Kruse shared an extensive list of statistics on and initiatives in Sonoma County, acknowledging the Spanish missionaries, fur traders, and Italian immigrants who played roles in the region's history dating back to the early 1800s, when vineyards were first planted in what is now the Fort Ross–Seaview AVA. Sonoma County is home to roughly 500 wineries (70% of which produce less than 6,000 cases), and 97% of its vineyards are family-owned. “That’s a really important part of our DNA up here,” noted Kruse, as is sustainability: 99% of Sonoma County wineries are certified sustainable.

The SCW’s Century Club serves as a testament to these strengths, celebrating families who have continuously farmed here for 100 years or more, while its Fundación de la Voz de los Viñedos has distributed over \$2 million to vineyard workers who have suffered financial hardship; as part of another initiative, Offense for Agriculture, the SCW has formed partnerships with companies on efforts related to environmental conservation. But there was no better proof on display of Sonoma’s sustainable, family-driven winegrowing prowess than the growers themselves: Joy Sterling presented her **Iron Horse Vineyards 2019 Spirit of ’76 Brut** from Green Valley; Nick Briggs brought his **Dutcher Crossing Winery 2024 Sauvignon Blanc** from the Russian River Valley; Anne Moller-Racke showed her **Blue Farm Wines 2022 Anne Katherina Vineyard Chardonnay** from Carneros; James MacPhail offered his **Sangiagomero Family Wines 2023 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir**; Taylor Serres discussed her **Serres Ranch Wine 2022 Katherine Malbec** from the Agua Caliente area of Sonoma Valley; and Julie Pedroncelli St. John came with her **Pedroncelli Winery 2023 Bushnell Vineyard Zinfandel** from Dry Creek.

## A Function of Subduction

Admittedly, after the “Geology & Soils” seminar hosted by Moilanen and Trione Vineyards & Winery winemaker John Duckett, I had to Google the word “subduction”—and it turns out that if you want to understand the Alexander Valley, it certainly helps to familiarize yourself

with the geological process in which one tectonic plate slides beneath another and sinks into the Earth’s mantle. Moilanen distributed a packet of soil maps to the group, noting one page in particular that referenced the immense diversity of profiles. “We tend to think of soil in layers horizontally,” he said, but thanks to the recurring process of subduction, “covering old seabed from the west and volcanically built mountains to our east that then erode down, it looks more like a stack of books in a bookcase. That’s an important thing to understand. You’ve got your topsoils, obviously, but underneath that, the actual rock geology is a lot more vertically aligned.” It’s these different pockets that, according to Moilanen, enable the Alexander Valley to not only grow different varieties but make varying styles, especially of Cabernet Sauvignon. Duckett added that “you have a lot of alluvial plains; deposits of clay, silt, and sand; and the eons of erosion from both mountain ranges in east and west, and that all comes together in the Valley. As a winemaker, I like to think of [these soils and the grapes they yield] as tools in a toolbox.”

A mid-seminar field trip to a fallow, recently disced ACTA vineyard had turned up a topsoil revealing large, rounded river rocks, offering proof of the riverbed activity occurring on the valley floor of the region. The two winemakers lamented past floods while also celebrating the intertwined soil striations that developed as a result.

Among the wines we tasted was Trione’s well-structured **2021 Cloverdale Ranch Block 21 Cabernet Sauvignon**, which hails from the northernmost site in the Valley; Block 21 is a mix of volcanic and gravel (the Cortina and Yolo series). The winemakers also noted the much warmer temperatures in the north compared to the southern Alexander Valley, where the **ACTA 2022 Alexander Valley Chalk Hill Cabernet** was grown in chalky volcanic ash and alluvial soils. Most of the group agreed with one assessment that the Trione and the **Alexander Valley Vineyards 2020 Alexander School Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** offered a bit more tannic structure than the softer, rounder ACTA Cabernet and the **J. Rickards Winery 2023 AV Select Cabernet**.

## Algorithmic Farming

Most wine professionals are familiar with the celebrated history of Rodney Strong, established in 1959 by its eponymous ballet dancer turned winemaker as the 13th bonded winery in California. Purchased by the Klein family in 1989, the producer now sustainably farms 19 grape varieties on 1,158 acres across Sonoma County. But what many may still stand to learn is that, thanks to the help of chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld (and some AI-based technology), Rodney Strong has invested over \$15 million in replanting and redesigning its vineyards. “[This] not only has pushed quality forward but also enhances our sustainability, [enabling us to use] less of everything—less tractor inputs, less water inputs, and more. Everything is designed to keep us out of the vineyard as much







*Lunch in Rodney Strong's Rockaway Vineyard at 750 feet in elevation.*

as possible and let Mother Nature do what it can in the most balanced way possible," said Seidenfeld as he stood at the end of a row at the top of Rockaway Vineyard. The group sipped on the crisp **2024 Alexander Valley Sauvignon Blanc** while he fastidiously pointed out all the technological Easter eggs in the vineyard.

Aided by renowned soil scientists Dr. Daniel Roberts and Dr. Paul Anamosa, three soil pits per acre, and an electroconductivity sled that helped them determine what was underground, Rodney Strong has designed a three-dimensional map enabling it to redraw larger blocks into "mini-polygons." Vineyard blocks managed by producers of its scale are commonly 20–40 acres, but at Rockaway, for example, they're between 1 and 3 acres. "That's because we've pointed out how soils change through the slopes and aspects," Seidenfeld explained, which in turn has led them to plant more tightly, increasing from 800 vines per acre (the standard for conventional farming according to Seidenfeld) to 1,550.

Each row has primary and backup drip hoses, with the emitter on the former dropping 1 gallon of water per hour. Depending on the vine's growth phase, weak spots may be identified through multi-spectral mapping photographs taken from satellite imagery, at which point a second emitter is added so only vines in need of extra water or fertigation receive it. This has reduced Rodney Strong's water usage and inputs such as fertilizer, pesticides, and labor by 35%. "Most of the time we're just irrigating with the primary line, and then every so often the backup line will come into play," clarified Seidenfeld. Meanwhile, sensors installed 24 inches below ground monitor soil moisture near the rooting zone,

which is purposefully being kept shallow to reduce vine vigor and concentrate energy on grape growing. Additional sensors gauge how much water the vines are losing as they absorb carbon dioxide. These sensors, along with metal rods throughout the property that measure wind speed and other metrics, also receive weather station data that's fed into an AI-based algorithm to calculate water needs even more precisely.

So far, roughly 650 of Rodney Strong's 1,158 vineyard acres have undergone the upgrade, resulting in a 50% savings in water, power, and vineyard management costs compared to conventional farming practices, according to Seidenfeld. All this technology leads directly back to the pioneering spirit of the winery's founder: After a walk down the switchback trail from the top of Rockaway to an oak-shaded picnic area with equally stunning views, we shared a family-style meal served with the winery's **2023 Chalk Hill Chardonnay** and **2023 Davis Bynum Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir** plus two vintages of its flagship **Rockaway Cabernet Sauvignon**, **2012** and **2021**. Over lunch, Seidenfeld told the story of Rodney Strong's first visit to the area, when he sat on the tailgate of his truck in what's now the Chalk Hill region and was reminded of the smell of Burgundy after a freshly fallen rain. With only his nose and without the help of AI, Strong instinctively understood the incredible potential of the Alexander Valley,



*Rodney Strong chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld addresses the group.*





*Alexander Valley Vineyards proprietor and head of operations Harry Wetzel IV leads a walk through his estate vineyards.*

## Savoring the Time Rift

I felt a sudden stillness as I crossed the worn wooden threshold of the old adobe building on the Alexander Valley Vineyards (AVV) estate. Square, hand-forged nails have been holding the 3-foot-thick door frame together since the structure was erected in 1845 by Cyrus Alexander, the fur trapper turned farmer credited as the first person to grow grapes in the area and the subregion's namesake. In addition to being one of the oldest buildings in Sonoma County, it served as AVV's initial winemaking facility.

On our first night in the Valley, I sat in the building's naturally cool interior, aerating my peppery **AVV 2021 Syrah** during dinner with a few other somms and wondered how the good-natured guy to my right, proprietor/head of operations Harry Wetzel IV, felt when he entered Alexander's home—as it is, after all, part of his family's legacy too. The next day, standing near the winery with the whole group, he pointed out the large tombstone to the left of an oak tree on a nearby hill. "That's Cyrus," said Wetzel. "Most of the graves are descendants of Alexander, but on the right of the tree are my grandparents." Harry and Maggie Wetzel purchased the prune-producing homestead from Alexander's great-great-grandchildren in 1962 and planted vines

in 1963, selling grapes to customers like Krug and Mondavi before establishing AVV in 1975, when their oldest son, Hank, produced AVV's first wine. Hank and his wife, Linda, Harry's parents, built the winery into the beloved brand it is today while also playing an instrumental role in formalizing the Alexander Valley's AVA status in 1984.

Today, Hank and Linda live in "the White House," a Victorian home lovingly restored by Maggie that's located on the other side of the small courtyard from the old adobe. A walk across a small bridge over a stream flowing into the Russian River takes you to yet another historic building: a schoolhouse built in 1868 that was also restored by Maggie and relocated onto the AVV property in the '70s. Today, surrounded by estate vineyards, it serves as a guesthouse and the namesake of the Alexander School Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

The estate is as rich with life as it is with history. Gardens filled with neat little rows of rotating seasonal crops, citrus trees, and bursts of flowers are guarded by a pair of 102-year-old redwood trees, while the courtyard typically hosts cats and dogs drinking from its fountain as well as the hummingbirds that sip from feeders on the front porch of the White House. AVV owns and farms 700 acres, of which



*The Alexander Valley Vineyards guesthouse, once a schoolhouse, was built in 1868.*

roughly 230 are planted to vine on both sides of the Russian River; they provide a range of soil profiles, microclimates, and exposures on the valley floor, benchland, and Mayacamas foothills, enabling the producer to grow about a dozen different grape varieties. Its varietal wines and blends are aged in AVV's cave, which, at just shy of 50,000 square feet, is the largest barrel-aging cave in the country, capable of holding about 14,000 barrels. Kevin Hall, winemaker since 1997, took the reins from Hank Wetzel and works closely with Harry today. Priced at just \$28, AVV's Alexander Valley Estate Cab remains a staple in by-the-glass and retail programs across the country—and it held its own at the "Weather & Microclimates" seminar among Cabs at least twice the price.

On the last day of the Academy, Harry shared the **AVV 2009 CYRUS**, a flagship Cab blend made from the estate's best lots, which are vinified and aged separately for 12 months before being blended and aged another year in barrel and then in bottle. Vintage variation is a familiar reality in our industry, but CYRUS stays even truer to its respective harvest year through this varying selection. Perhaps this is in part why enjoying the inky, gripping wine feels much like crossing the time-stopping threshold of the old adobe.



## Barrel-metric Pressure

While we tried to keep up with Harry and AVV's vineyard manager, Isaul "Junior" Macias, through the maze of the winery's caves, Harry told tales of the epic hide-and-seek games he and his friends played there as kids. Like Harry, Macias has spent his entire life on AVV's estate, as his own father has helped the Wetzels run the vineyards since 1972. Listening to the duo host the "Weather & Microclimates" seminar felt more like listening in at a family dinner table.

The most important thing to know about the Alexander Valley's generally Mediterranean climate is its wide range in average temperature from the south, cooled by the intake of ocean air through the Petaluma Gap and the Russian River Valley, to the warmer north end; precipitation, meanwhile, ranges from 30 to 50 inches across the region. But Harry believed the most compelling weather-related tidbit involved the region's diurnal swings. "During the summer especially, you can get up to a 40-degree temperature swing from day to night . . . which I like to say gives the vines a chance to breathe. Without it they'll remain shut down and stop photosynthesizing. The swing is what gives you a lot of the good acidity that you experience in the Alexander Valley," he explained.

That much was reflected in the seminar's wines, from the herbaceous

**Bedarra Vineyards 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon** and the food-friendly **AVV 2023 Estate Cabernet** to the black plum-driven **Lampson Family Wines 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon** and the rich, blackberry-tinged **Stonestreet 2019 Estate Cabernet** (a great standalone example of varying microclimates, as Stonestreet's elevation ranges from 400 to 2,200 feet). As for the **Rodney Strong 2021 Alexander's Crown Cabernet Sauvignon**, its floral, spicy, sweet aromatics served as a testament to the increased airflow experienced in its vineyard, where the northern half of Alexander Valley narrows from 4 miles to 2.

## "Ripeness Through Light"

At the tippy-top of Stonestreet's Rockfall Vineyard, which was as blustery as it was sunny at 2,200 feet in elevation, somms nervously shielded their paper spittoons from the wind as proprietor Christopher Jackson and winemaker Kristina Shideler politely corrected my oversimplification during our "Topography & Elevation" seminar. I had claimed that it cools 1 degree for every 330 feet, but "that's only during a warm climactic cycle," said Jackson. "During a cold climactic cycle, where there's a frost event or something with a high degree of precipitation and fog," there's less diurnal variation. This counterintuitive thermal profile separates

Rockfall and the rest of Jackson Family Wines' proposed Pocket Peak AVA from the Alexander Valley: The steep area is cooler than the Valley during the day but warmer at night, and Rockfall's position above the fog line also means more sunlight. "So here on the Mayacamas mountain range, 23 miles away from the Pacific Ocean at Rockfall, you get a tremendous amount of ripeness through light before you get accumulation of sugar, so you get these savory, botanical-infused wines, which have this vibrancy to them," said Jackson.

The wines for the seminar—the **AVV 2022 Organically Grown Cabernet**, **Jordan 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon**, **North Coast Wine Co. 2022 Cabernet**, **Archimedes 2023 Alexander Valley Cabernet**, and **Stonestreet 2021 Rockfall Cabernet**—served in order of ascending elevation also seemed to increase in tannic structure.

## Bottle Hoarding

While enjoying the grilled fare produced from a *parilla* (open-fire grill) at Francis Ford Coppola Winery, the three large tables of somms were tasked with how to fairly share a handful of library selections—a few thankfully larger-format—served at a lunch designed to highlight ageability, among them the **2009 CYRUS**, **2008 Trione**, **2009** and **2015 Alexander's Crown**, and **Rodney Strong 2015 Symmetry**. Between lighthearted accusations of bottle hogging and discussions around the aging of large-formats, winery representatives told stories of vintages past.

One memorable anecdote came from Trione Vineyards & Winery proprietor Denise Trione, whose family established their small-production winery in 2005 using the top 2%–3% of their roughly 600 acres of grapes. "My dad hoarded a bunch of 750s of our Block 21 of the 2005, our first vintage. Every Christmas he breaks one out and a few of us sneak into the garage to drink it so we don't have to share it with everyone else. It happens every year, and every year it's so good," she told us. And by the end of our lunch, it was abundantly clear that you don't have to be a Trione to understand how well the acid-driven Cabs of Alexander Valley age.



*Proprietor Christopher Jackson and winemaker Kristina Shideler lead the "Topography & Elevation" seminar in Stonestreet Estate Vineyards' Rockfall Vineyard.*



Pictured from left to right is the group in front of Trione Vineyards & Winery's Old Stone Building: Christopher O'Gorman, director of communications, Rodney Strong Wine Estates; April Denny, front-of-house manager, St. Elmo Steak House; Collin Hoofnagle, general manager, SoDel Concepts; Jessie Birschbach, senior wine and beer editor, The SOMM Journal; Michael Sage, national sales manager, Trione Vineyards & Winery; Sarah Adams, winemaker, Francis Ford Coppola Winery; Jennifer Watterson, director of beverage, Huse Culinary; Jessica Milton, owner, Cardinal Distributing; Farouk Chaabi, manager/sommelier, Wildest Restaurant & Bar; Hilary Adams, manager, Trevor's Liquor; Kelly Cornett, founder, A Cork in the Road, LLC; Denise Trione, managing director, Trione Vineyards & Winery; Alex Lopez-Wilson, resort beverage director, Tryon International Equestrian Center; Matthew Selva, wine educator/corporate sommelier, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants; Siegfried Mueller, assistant general manager, California Golf Club; Barry Herbst, wine director, Bottle Barn; Louis Martin, manager, IHG Hotels & Resorts and Tanzerra Resorts; Nestor Torres, sommelier, Sistina; Trevor Wood, general manager, Supperland; Fausto Galicia, wine director, Mina Group; and Harry Wetzel IV, proprietor and head of operations, Alexander Valley Vineyards.

## The Gestalt of the Valley

Down the hall from the vampire costumes featured in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (the movie that's said to have funded Francis Ford Coppola's endeavor into winemaking in the early 2000s); up the stairs from a rotating 1948 Tucker sedan; and past Vito Corleone's grandiose desk, a gleaming case of Oscar statues, and a whirlwind of more movie memorabilia, the group finally began to see evidence of a production facility that became hard to ignore. On the skywalk

from the hospitality center to the bottling line to our left was the wall of the winery, capable of producing 2 million cases, and on the right was a Tivoli Gardens–inspired pool. After descending through the bottling line area back to ground level, we arrived in the banquet room where the Alexander Valley Cab Academy held its final seminar, “Blending the Best,” hosted by the savvy Olivia Wright, winemaker at Rodney Strong Vineyards, and Sarah Adams, the soft-spoken yet knowledgeable winemaker at Francis Ford

Coppola Winery. Adams told the group that the lots of Cabernet, Petite Sirah, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc sourced from varying topographies across the Alexander Valley are all vinified separately, “because we like to taste the wines as they evolve, both blindly and collectively,” to decide which of Coppola’s wines are appropriate for each lot—including the expression she shared, the blue-fruited, brown-spiced **2023 Director's Cut**.

Wright similarly noted that tasting around 300 separate lots during the





*Olivia Wright, winemaker at Rodney Strong Vineyards, with Birschbach and Sarah Adams, winemaker at Francis Ford Coppola Winery.*

small-lot vinification process for the bright, brambly **Rodney Strong 2021 Symmetry** was a two-day affair. “How do you assess a wine for quality? You’re looking at balance, length, intensity, complexity, concentration, aromatics, lots

of things. And you’re very rarely going to get ten out of ten on every single one of those components in one block,” she said. “From a winemaker’s perspective, a lot of us think more in terms of color, acid, midpalate, soft tannins, et cetera, et

cetera, as we’re trying to put the puzzle together to make a complete wine. This is why I would say [Symmetry] is our most ageworthy wine, because it is the most complete and structured throughout. It’s also the most labor-intensive wine that we make.” Also appropriately featured, discussed, and thoroughly enjoyed were the **AVV 2021 CYRUS** and the red-berried, plush **ACTA 2022 DEEDS**.

Later that evening, on our last night in the Valley, we enjoyed a wood-fired pizza dinner at Trione Vineyards & Winery next to its historic Old Stone Building. Built in 1908, the former Nervo Winery was restored and repurposed as an events space by the Triones, who also made sure to retain the original bond number (350) to tie the site to its legacy. Its renewal reminded me of that of the Alexander Valley itself: a place where Native Americans once sought the same sense of transformation, where mineralogically complex soils remain restless, and where a fresher style of Cabernet continues to evolve. *§*

## Somm Thoughts on the Valley

■ “One of the most eye-opening lessons of Cabernet Academy was the opportunity to taste wines from different parts of the Alexander Valley side by side across a variety of higher elevations and soil types. Witnessing the Russian River fog pattern firsthand during our visit demonstrated how the region sits at a fascinating intersection of warm-climate fruit intensity and cool-climate freshness, producing Cabernets that often defy ‘California Cab’ stereotypes. I noticed elegance and structure over power and ripeness, and I was delighted by how many of the wines we tasted were graceful, approachable, and unmistakably connected to place. I also appreciated an overarching farming-first mentality from all of the producers—even from those with larger production volumes—that felt deeply woven into the area’s identity.” —*Kelly Cornett*

■ “High atop the Stonestreet vineyards as well as [at] Rodney Strong, one is enlightened as to how massive Alexander Valley actually is. Often overshadowed by the fame of Napa Valley and even other regions of Sonoma, Alexander Valley certainly has its place in the world-class regions of California wine country. The variety of soil types and the historical significance of what makes Alexander Valley unique all play into it. Learning of Cyrus Alexander and enjoying his namesake wine were also focal points of the experience.” —*Siegfried Mueller*

■ “The [Alexander Valley] Cabernets have everything I love: beautiful fruit, structure, freshness, and an approachability that makes them incredibly food-friendly. In a lot of ways, they remind me of Cabernet from the Tuscan Coast, which was a cool connection I wasn’t expecting. . . . More than the wines, though, what stood out was the people. There is a genuine sense of family and community among the growers and producers that feels increasingly rare in the wine world. Everyone shows how they’re invested in the success of the region as a whole. I left with a much deeper appreciation for Alexander Valley and the people and wines that make it special.” —*Matthew Selva*

■ “Standing in Rockaway Vineyard and discussing oak treatments with Justin Seidenfeld was a personal awakening on par with first visiting the Côte-d’Or; [proving to me that] California Cabernet Sauvignon is a pure expression of terroir.” —*Alex Lopez-Wilson*

■ “I never thought of myself as a Cabernet person; most Napa Cabs always felt too big, too bold, and honestly too expensive for what they delivered. . . . But tasting Cabernet from Alexander Valley completely changed my mind. The wines are brighter, more approachable, and genuinely food-friendly. They have lift, freshness, and balance instead of weight and heaviness.” —*Farouk Chaabi*



# What the Fire Couldn't Take

REBUILDING **AUGUSTINE WINE BAR** TAUGHT DAVID GIBBS SURPRISING LESSONS ABOUT THE DURABILITY OF WINE—AND THE ECONOMICS OF SELLING IT

by Alissa Bica Raines

**"IT'S VERY HARD** for me to let things [lie]," says David Gibbs. "I need to know how and why."

Unfortunately for him, he may never know exactly what caused the fire that destroyed Augustine Wine Bar—which he co-owns in the Sherman Oaks neighborhood of Los Angeles with Dustin Lancaster and Nick Caballero—in May 2023. It started around 1:30 a.m., likely in the ceiling or roof. By the time the alarm activated, flames had already spread above the kitchen and bar. Gibbs arrived before dawn and was eventually allowed inside. "It was soaking wet, smoky, hard to breathe, and very sad," he recalls.

Later that day, he was given just two hours to salvage what he could from Augustine's 3,000-bottle cellar. The luckiest bottles remained cool inside large refrigerators; others—including older magnums and Champagne—had popped or been exposed to the heat. Gibbs managed to save roughly 500 bottles before the building was locked down for nearly seven months.

That evening, he met the staff at Augustine's sister bar, Mirabelle, in nearby Valley Village. Among the bottles he'd grabbed were three he'd been saving for a special occasion: a 1945 Château Léoville Barton, a 1959 Château Pichon Longueville Baron, and a Mount Eden 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon. He'd assumed they were ruined; instead, they were beautiful. "I thought, 'Wait a minute—we should've gotten more out,'" he says. "We left hundreds and hundreds of bottles."

When Gibbs finally reentered Augustine in December, the damage was devastating: mold, blackened walls, oily fire retardant, and the lingering smell of burnt vinegar. He and his team salvaged what they could—light fixtures, barstools,



*The Augustine Wine Bar team: Freddy Delgado, David Gibbs, Nick Caballero, Silvia Gallo, Claire Coppi, and Miguel Gonzales.*

the bar top, and even the booths, sanded and repainted their signature "French beret" blue. Everything else was gutted and rebuilt. Meanwhile, as Gibbs opened bottles that had sat through an entire San Fernando Valley summer without temperature control, his understanding of wine's durability was further reshaped: Even a magnum of Hanzell 2011 Chardonnay with the cork partially protruding showed beautifully. "I literally couldn't believe it," he says. "Sometimes wine is sturdier than we give it credit for."

When Augustine resumed service in December 2024, Gibbs skipped the fanfare by forgoing a formal announcement or reopening event. "By the end, I didn't want to wait for some big moment," he says. "I just wanted to be open." It quickly returned to what made it beloved: rare vintage wines by the glass, from 1985 Pavillon Rouge du Château Margaux to Inglenook 1981 Charbono, all offered at accessible prices. But the fire also caused Gibbs to make changes to his business

plan. Replacing inventory through auction houses like Christie's and Zachys proved far more expensive than it had when Augustine originally opened in 2015. "Things I used to buy for \$60 a case because nobody wanted them 25 years ago now cost \$500 a bottle," he says.

As a result, Augustine began selling vintage wines by the bottle for the first time. Gibbs points to a 1959 Château Gruaud Larose as an example: At \$50 a glass, a bottle may yield only four sellable pours after ullage, sediment, and staff tasting. If those glasses don't sell in one night, margins disappear quickly; at around \$400 a bottle, though, they're still far below retail pricing while making for a more sustainable model, not to mention giving guests a new way to experience mature wines they might otherwise never have access to.

But Gibbs' ultimate mission remains unchanged. "Nothing thrills me more than when somebody has that first sip of something that speaks to them," he says. **SJ**

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