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THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

# THE SOMM JOURNAL

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# Stories to Tell

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



Meredith May

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to gather ideas  
and experiences by  
creating a platform  
that connects us all.*

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*“After nourishment, shelter, and companionship,  
stories are the thing we need most in the world.”*  
—Philip Pullman, British author

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In this new year, our mission of telling stories with the ultimate goal of edu-tainment continues. We travel the world gathering photos, interviews, and moments in time to share with our readers.

When you're not working the floor or making sales calls or running your retail shops, we're glad you're finding the time to sit back and open these pages. Providing content alone is not enough; we provide context for your world—the hospitality industry—and the opportunity to gather ideas and experiences by creating a platform that connects us all.

Our cover story (page 42) takes us to Lake County to walk the volcanic soils at Brassfield Estate Winery while offering an understanding of the nature of wines that need to be “rediscovered.”

Rediscovery also comes to mind when tasting the latest releases from Rodney Strong Vineyards (page 74). Thanks to Justin Seidenfeld, senior vice president of winemaking and winegrowing, the producer has adopted a new persona and philosophy. Its wines are made with intention; yields are smaller; case production has decreased, and quality has increased by leaps and bounds.

An entirely new discovery is The Hills, to use the nickname for Washington State's Rattlesnake Hills AVA, where a group of 14 growers and estate wineries are dedicated to elevating its profile (page 80). We tasted through some of their wines to get a sense of its bright, mineral-driven terroir.

And in Portugal's Douro Valley, we headed to Quinta do Vale Meão (page 5) to uncover its history and explore the region's geology as well as how it relates to the estate's stellar wines.

Some of our stories serve as introductions to the people in our business who make a difference; take Lyn Farmer's roundup of on-premise leaders in South Florida (page 82) and Brian Freedman's survey of beverage pros in Philadelphia (page 94). Meanwhile, for those of you who weren't able to attend some of our most recent seminars, dinners, and tastings, we've captured them in word and picture, from Boston (pages 28 and 52) to San Diego (pages 38, 64, and 85).

We are continually on the lookout for compelling stories and hope to tell yours one day. 





*The Quinta do Vale Meão estate and vineyards along the Douro River.*

# *passion, patience, and* PRESCIENCE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF QUINTA DO VALE MEÃO



*The de Olazabal family: Jaime, Maria Luisa, Francisco Javier, Luisa, and Francisco.*

## HOW QUINTA DO VALE MEÃO HAS BECOME A FORCE FOR QUALITY WINE IN PORTUGAL

*by Lars Leicht*

**T**he Douro River rises in the mountains of north-central Spain, where it is called the Duero, and then crosses 556 miles of the Iberian Peninsula; it encounters Portugal outside of the town of Salto de Castro and flirts with both countries for 70 miles as a national boundary and cultural divide. It only fully commits to Portugal outside of Barca d'Alva, where it cedes border duties to the Águeda River at their confluence. It then makes a somewhat dramatic bend north to meet up with the Sabor River; whereupon it turns around and continues the westward trek toward Oporto and the Atlantic Ocean.

This detour around Mount Meão is known locally as “the meander” and coincides with the geological fault of Vilariça, which separates granitic soils on the steep hillsides on the river’s left bank from a patch of schist extending to the riverbank; alluvial stones and sand interplay here as well. This is where, in 1877, the 66-year-old Doña Antónia Adelaide Ferreira, already owner of the largest wine-making estate in the Douro, purchased 740 acres from a local municipality and founded an estate named for the valley, Quinta do Vale Meão.





Was it whim or wisdom? Given that Vale Meão was a far-flung outpost in the late 19th century—and in many ways still is—one could be forgiven for wondering what Ferreira was thinking. Vale Meão is over 100 miles upstream from Oporto, the main trading hub for the region, where many producers shipped their wines in cask for warehousing and commerce. In 1877, there were no roadways to Oporto; the safest way to get there was a 12-day journey by small boats capable of navigating the river's many rapids.

One thing we know about Ferreira, however, is that she was nobody's fool. Having been widowed at the age of 33, she immediately took over her late husband's business and divested his varied investments in other industries to focus on the production and marketing of Port wine. She became one of the wealthiest citizens of Portugal, earning considerable influence. Therefore, it was likely not coincidental that within ten years of her purchase, the Douro railway line was extended from its old terminus at Penafiel about 80 miles away to Pocinho, less than 2 miles from the estate.

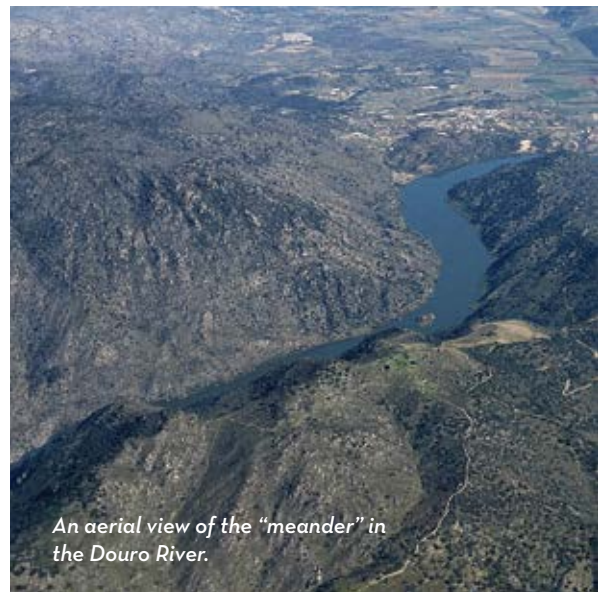
Ferreira guided the planting of roughly half of the mountain with vines and olive trees along with the construction of two wine cellars, a manor house, farm buildings, a small hospital, and two chapels. She died in 1896, a year after building was complete, and her properties were inherited by her only daughter and subsequent heirs.

Today, dams have quelled the rapids and highways follow the river's path, but Quinta do Vale Meão is still the easternmost wine estate in the Douro, where it's a two-hour drive from Oporto.

When I visited last September, my driver pointed out the old overland route that had been the source of so many fatalities over the decades that the authorities were finally constrained to create a high-way bypass about 17 years ago.

Over the course of the 20th century, the estate remained commercially viable but primarily served as a fruit source for other brands, some prestigious and others volume. Ferreira's vision and passion for the property were rekindled a century after its establishment by her great-great-grandson Francisco Javier de Olazabal. After decades spent purchasing shares from dozens of other heirs, he acquired full ownership of the property in 1994 and separated it from the larger Casa Ferreirinha Group, which was sold to the Sogrape Group in 1987. That left Quinta do Vale Meão as one of the few independent, family-owned wineries remaining in Portugal. While it is recognized for its outstanding Ports, de Olazabal's mission was to create two unfortified estate wines based on the Bordeaux model: a flagship named for the estate and a second wine called Meandro in honor of the geographic meander of the river around the property. The first vintage of these wines was 1999.

**Quinta do Vale Meão Tinto**, labeled under the Douro denomination of controlled origin, is made with grapes grown on five estate vineyards that are at least 35 years old. The indigenous Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca regularly make up about 90% of the blend, supported by Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, and Tinto Cão. Most of the vineyards were renewed in



*An aerial view of the "meander" in the Douro River.*

the 1970s when the river was dammed and certain areas flooded; each plot was studied and then planted to a specific variety rather than an old-school field blend. Today the varieties are vinified separately and crushed by foot in the same large granite basins, called *lagares*, traditionally used for Port. Some of the wines undergo malolactic fermentation, and they are all aged for 18 months in new and second-year barrels, namely 225-liter barriques of Allier oak. Blending is overseen by the winemaker, de Olazabal's son Francisco, to reflect house style based on variations in vintage conditions and terroir.

**Meandro do Vale Meão** is also a Douro DOC wine. Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, and Tinta Roriz regularly make up 85% of the blend, often complemented by Tinta Barroca, Alicante Bouschet, and Tinto Cão; these are also vinified separately, treaded by foot and fermented partially in the lagares for four hours before being transferred to temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks. The wine is aged in second- and third-year barrels for 14 months before blending and bottling.

During my visit as the harvest was coming in, I was treated to a vertical tasting of both wines with de Olazabal's daughter, Luisa, who, along with Francisco and their brother Jaime, oversees various aspects of the company, including marketing, hospitality, and sales. Luisa still considers the table wines a work in progress and a worthy challenge. "In a way, making Port is easier," she told me. She and Francisco specifically wanted me to taste older vintages to observe the longevity and consistency of their wines.





Here are my notes by vintage (for reviews of the current releases, see sidebar):

## 2007

The growing season started with an unusually wet spring marked by record rainfalls, but it was offset by dry and mild conditions in summer and autumn, which helped to preserve aromatics and form balanced tannins.

**Meandro do Vale Meão:** 40% Touriga Nacional, 30% Tinta Roriz, 20% Touriga Franca, 5% Tinta Cão, and 5% Sousão. The color is still very integral; on the nose, palate, and finish, the wine belies its age, with youthful flavor and fruit character.

**Quinta do Vale Meão:** This blend of 45% Touriga Franca, 38% Touriga Nacional, 12% Tinta Roriz, and 5% Tinta Barroca shows great structure and elegance with hints of bergamot. Luisa pointed out that the Touriga Franca is usually more subtle, while the Nacional is more expressive; given the vintage conditions, Francisco believed it best to reverse the proportions of the two grapes.

## 2008

After a dry, cold winter, spring rains helped replenish water levels in the soil; summer was mild and marked by moderate rainfall in June and July. Autumn remained dry, allowing for the luxury of a long harvest during which to select plots at their ideal ripeness.

**Meandro do Vale Meão:** This blend of 35% Touriga Franca; 25% Touriga Nacional; and unrecorded percentages of Tinta Amarela, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, Sousão,

and Tinta Cão shows juicy, round notes of fresh plum, plum jam, and blackberry plus a hint of tobacco leaf.

**Quinta do Vale Meão:** This blend of 55% Touriga Nacional, 30% Touriga Franca, 10% Tinta Roriz, and 5% Tinta Barroca is a juicier wine than the previous vintage; showing more sweet fruit notes, it's still dark and concentrated, with good acidity.

## 2011

After a long, cool, wet winter, spring arrived early, followed by a hot summer that moved the start of harvest up by a few weeks to late August. This vintage is widely acclaimed in the Douro: "Everything was easy," declared Luisa.

**Meandro do Vale Meão:** The nose is decidedly more complex on this blend of 35% Touriga Nacional, 30% Touriga Franca, 27% Tinta Roriz, 3% Sousão, 3% Tinta Barroca, and 2% Tinto Cão; richer and slightly more tannic, it shows bright, crunchy fruit with notes of forest floor.

**Quinta do Vale Meão:** This blend of 55% Touriga Nacional, 34% Touriga Franca, 6% Tinta Barroca, and 5% Tinta Roriz is complex, round, full, and elegant, with nice integration of fruit and oak leading to a long finish.

## 2012

Winter and spring were abnormally dry, resulting in late and irregular budding. Relief came in the form of moderate rainfall in late April and early May. Despite two heat waves in June and July, the summer and autumn remained mild, and mildew was not an issue.



**Meandro do Vale Meão:** Blending 38% Touriga Nacional, 30% Touriga Franca, and 20% Tinta Roriz with 12% other varieties, this wine shows soft, round fruit and confectionary flavors; it is still quite youthful.



**Quinta do Vale Meão:** A distinctly juicy wine (58% Touriga Nacional, 35% Touriga Franca, 5% Tinta Barroca, and 2% Tinta Roriz), with bright fruit and acidity balanced by grippy tannins and vibrant acidity.

Luisa proudly carries on the legacy of her father, Francisco, and ancestor Doña Antónia. During my visit, I witnessed her excitement at the arrival of several loads of grapes at the winery as if they were the first of the season and her weakness for the almonds freshly picked from estate trees and husked with a wooden-handled hammer atop a wood stool. At the estate lodge, she lovingly pointed out historical documents and family pictures that adorned the walls and tabletops. She told stories of visiting there as a child, conveying vivid recollections of sights, sounds, and smells. Her management role and experience as well as her family's holdings make her one of Portugal's most noteworthy business leaders, but she remains humble and approachable, reflecting her roots in a way that makes her an ideal symbol of her family's wines. In this age of international mobility and agility, it is refreshing to have a true sense of place in the person of Luisa de Olazabal and the wines of Quinta do Vale Meão. *sj*

## tasting notes

### Quinta do Vale Meão 2021, Douro DOC, Portugal (\$150)

A velour-textured flow of black licorice and dried lavender makes up this beautifully crafted blend of 53% Touriga Nacional and 40% Touriga Franca with some Tinta Barroca and Tinta Roriz. It's sinewy, chewy, and luxuriously appointed, with a heady, plum liqueur-like texture and hints of burnt tangerine zest, walnut, and cedar that linger on the teeth and tongue. **96** —*Meridith May*

### Meandro do Vale Meão 2020, Douro DOC, Portugal (\$27)

Aromas of jasmine and white cherry beckon on the nose of this blend of 53% Touriga Nacional and 40% Touriga Franca with some Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, and Alicante Bouschet, leading to flavors of blackberry, spiced earth, Italian herbs, and black olive within a mineral frame. Silky and sensuous tannins purr, edging into a chalky finish. **93** —*M.M.*

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## THE SOMM JOURNAL



# Wine Finds a Way

THE INDUSTRY MAKES INROADS INTO BHUTAN AND THE BRONX

**THE SOARING HIMALAYAN** peaks of Bhutan may seem to have little in common with the concrete streets of the Bronx, but both locales are staking their claim in the wine world at long last.

Neither the Silk Road nor the Romans ever made it to Bhutan, but American entrepreneurs Ann Cross and Mike Juergens, founders of the Bhutan Wine Company, did. The country's rich history of subsistence farming spans thousands of years, but the Bhutan Wine Company planted the Kingdom's first vines in 2019.

Cross became enamored with the idea of visiting Bhutan as a teenager: "I basically had it on my bucket list as the number-one place I wanted to visit," she says. After years of hearing Cross speak longingly about it, in 2017, Juergens signed up to run a marathon in the Himalayas and surprised his partner with her dream getaway. "We certainly didn't go there with the intent of starting a wine industry," he says. But he observed that "the place looks and feels like a wine region, with terraces, slopes, and beautiful crops everywhere you look; all the fruit that you eat tastes amazing." Juergens, a Certified Sommelier and MW candidate, kept asking everyone, "Where are the vineyards? Where are the wineries?"

He convinced key government officials that Bhutan's status as the planet's first carbon-negative country as well as its pure water, lack of smog, and biodiversity positioned it for viticultural success. Today, the Bhutan Wine Company oversees vineyards throughout the Kingdom at elevations of 500–9,150 feet, planting a wide range of varieties such as Syrah, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Petit Manseng, and Riesling. The Bhutan Wine Company's impressive advisory board includes world-renowned wine writer Jancis Robinson, MW. In 2024, the producer had its first commercial harvest; the forthcoming wines will be bottled under the brand

PHOTO: FRANCIS "SLINGSHOT MENACE" MONTVOA



**Ramón Delmonte, Rita Bernard, Devon Delmonte, and Catherine Delmonte in Bronx Wine Co.**

erine, have joined them in this new venture.

Ramón started his wine career in the 1980s as a stock boy and worked his way up the ranks before starting his own importing company about 20 years ago. His wife, Rita, on the brink of retiring from a long career in New York's public school system, broached the idea of opening a wine shop. That vision has come to fruition on The Grand Concourse, which Ramón describes as "the single most important avenue in the Bronx."

The Bronx Wine Co. disrupts the narrative that there's no place for

name Ser Kem, a term that represents an offering of alcohol to the gods.

Traveling to the Boogie Down Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop and home of the New York Yankees, is logistically less daunting than a trip to Bhutan; even so, some people can't make the mental leap to envision the borough as anything more than a symbol of urban blight. Yet a recent wave of upscale residential construction has attracted newcomers to the Bronx—and they want access to quality wine. Rita Bernard and Ramón Delmonte are answering the call for them as well as for longtime residents. In autumn 2024, the couple opened the doors to the Bronx Wine Co. in the Mott Haven neighborhood. Their children, Devon and Cath-

a quality wine shop in a historically underserved community. "We've had people come in and say to us, 'What a beautiful store. This looks so out of place. This should be downtown.' And we say, 'Listen, we're from the Bronx, and we're bringing downtown to the Bronx,'" Ramón adds. The inventory focuses on organic, vegan, biodynamic, and sustainable wines from family-owned producers, women, and people of color.

Be it in Bhutan or the Bronx, wine finds a way. 

*Wanda Mann is a Certified Specialist of Wine and the founder of [winewithwanda.com](http://winewithwanda.com). Follow her on Instagram @winedinewanda.*



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# The Mighty Minority

CULTIVATING THE TASTES OF ALL DEMOGRAPHICS IS THE KEY TO SURVIVING 2025

**THANK GOODNESS** we're done with 2024, speaking from the perspective of someone who lives in the middle of the largest wine region in America (namely California). Panic was lit early last year by Silicon Valley Bank's January report on the state of the U.S. wine industry, which stated that "full-category wine sales by volume will be down for a third consecutive year."

It's hard to be oblivious. We're observing acres and acres of vineyard blocks left unpicked, fruit rotting on the vine, because producers are declining to make wine out of fear of oversupply. You may have noticed restaurant after restaurant shutting down in your own neighborhood, and sommeliers—typically the first to go when times get tough—are seeing pink slips.

But now that it's 2025, we must ask ourselves, "What are we going to do to hang on and right the ship?" The restaurant industry has always been the same: Everything hinges on one guest, one dish, and one bottle—one minute, hour, night, week, and month at a time. Attention to detail, a sense of urgency, and a devotion to doing things the right way all contribute to what makes a restaurant competitive.

Lately you may have heard that Gen Z is responsible for the overall stagnation of wine sales. Born between 1997 and 2012, this market segment, along with millennials under 35, has been blamed by researchers for buying wine (and alcoholic beverages in general) at a lower rate than did consumers of the same age just 20 years ago.

Boomers, as old as they are now (the youngest are in their early 60s), are still considered the industry's "good guys" because, according to Silicon Valley Bank's 2024 analysis, 58% of them still prefer wine above all alcoholic beverages. That preference drops nearly 30 points for each of the other demographics (Gen X followed by millennials and Gen Z).



In the restaurant industry, we've always known that the majority of guests who have enough disposable income to eat out often and buy \$100 bottles without blinking an eye are at least 40 years old. But that does not mean restaurants do not profit from younger generations. In my experience as a multi-unit operator, it's a matter of percentages: Even if 80% of your sales are from one demographic or from one type of dish or one beverage category, it is a mistake to ignore the other 20%. Most restaurants operate on profit margins of barely 1%–2%. If you lose out on most of that 20% due to lack of effort, it's game over: You're out of business.

That means you need to sell to *all* demographics. It is true that Gen Z is different—just ask them. They obviously drink a wider variety of adult beverages because those are the value products that are marketed specifically to them, and they fall for marketing as easily as any of the previous generations.

Gen Z consumers, however, are also telegraphing different values—loudly. They're watching the world fall apart, so sustainable and "natural" products

mean more to them than to previous generations. *I'm* a boomer, so I know firsthand that most of my generation never gave a damn if a product was sustainable or organic. Social values differ among demographics, directly impacting consumer choices.

Here's the bottom line: To survive or better yet prosper in 2025, you need to take a serious look at your own choices. Each sommelier, in their own little world, has the power to shape a guest's experience and cultivate their preferences. As the margin of success or failure continues to narrow, ignore the minority at your own peril. 

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*Gen Z consumers . . . are also telegraphing different values—loudly. They're watching the world fall apart, so sustainable and "natural" products mean more to them than to previous generations.*





**LOUIS ROEDERER**  
HAND IN HAND WITH NATURE

# A Worthy Exception

HOW HEALDSBURG'S **LO & BEHOLD BAR AND KITCHEN** BENT ITS OWN RULES TO WEATHER THE ESPRESSO MARTINI TREND

## LO & BEHOLD BAR AND KITCHEN

in Healdsburg, California, is a favorite among locals and out-of-towners alike, who love its knack for what co-founders Tara Heffernon and Laura Sanfilippo call “cultivated” cocktails as well as global comfort food. But over the past year or so, Heffernon and Sanfilippo have noticed the persistent popularity of the Espresso Martini—so much so that they departed from their philosophy of painstaking craft to bring in the premade Espresso Cocktail from Charbay Distillery in nearby Ukiah to keep up with demand.

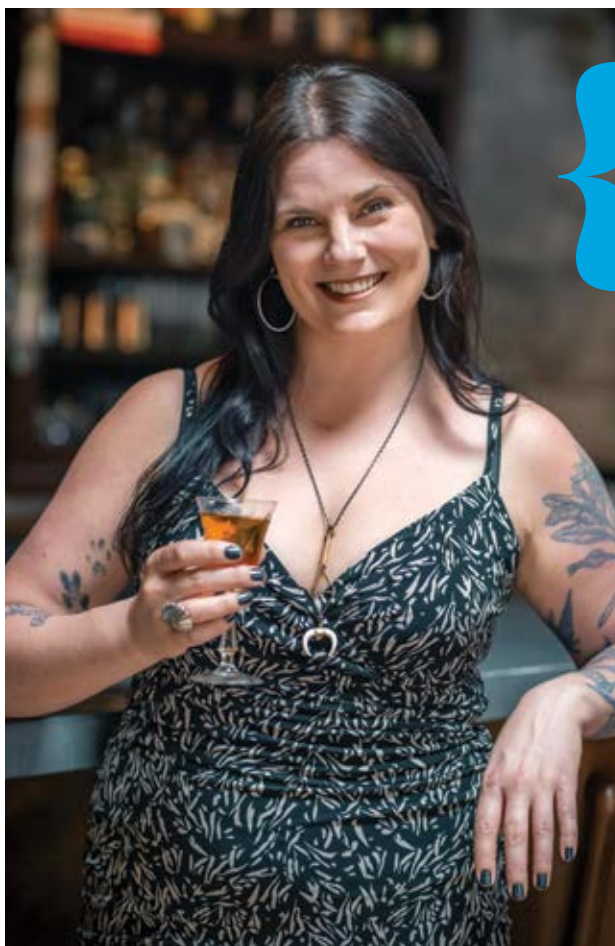
“It’s the only product we don’t hand-make ourselves,” Heffernon says. “[RTDs are] not really our thing, but Charbay did such a beautiful job, and we love supporting them. It shows just how amazing they are, because we are particular when it comes to making everything ourselves.”

Five years ago, she added, Lo & Behold’s Vodka Soda was all anybody was drinking, and it remains a bestseller. But the power of the Espresso Martini cannot be overstated. “The Espresso Martini two years ago became huge,” Heffernon notes, “and it’s lasted longer than these trends usually do.”

For a time, her team was making all the ingredients for the cocktail themselves, brewing locally roasted Flying Goat Coffee espresso beans at high temperatures to make a concentrate, then adding their own tinctures and other secret ingredients to spice it up, creating a rich and delicious drink. But that small-batch method was both expensive and labor-intensive, especially on nights when the bartenders might get 30 Espresso Martini orders in an hour.

Cue Charbay Espresso Cocktail, a 40-proof bottled product containing espresso, vanilla, and neutral cane spirit that, when shaken with ice and strained, produces a crema float all on its own.

PHOTO: CYNTHIA GLASSELL



“CHARBAY DID SUCH A BEAUTIFUL JOB, AND WE LOVE SUPPORTING THEM. IT SHOWS JUST HOW AMAZING THEY ARE, BECAUSE WE ARE PARTICULAR WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING EVERYTHING OURSELVES.”

—TARA HEFFERNON

*Lo & Behold Bar and Kitchen co-founder Tara Heffernon.*

Charbay master distiller Marko Karakasevic “brought me something so rich and complex, and the mouth-feel is incredible,” Heffernon says. “It has really great texture and can be cost-effective. [It] allows my bartenders to not go crazy making all these Espresso Martinis. There are times we make exceptions for a local, super-pristine, and amazing product.”

Granted, espresso cocktails aren’t the only trend in evidence at Lo & Behold. In addition to the



aforementioned Vodka Soda, tequila drinks are also “up, up, up,” according to Heffernon, as is the bar’s seasonally garnished Spanish-style Gintonica. “People are being more adventurous; they’re listening to their bartenders more; that’s a trend,” she adds—a positive one given the bar’s emphasis on artisanal spirits over big brands. “People want something super custom—they want to be able to say to the bartender, ‘What can you do?’” **\$**



*Amy Racine is beverage director and partner at JF Restaurants.*

# What's Shaking?

## HOW TO BOOST YOUR COCKTAIL PROGRAM IN 2025

### DEVELOPING COCKTAILS REQUIRES

a lot of thought: about the product, the flavors, the glassware, the garnish, guest preferences. All of these factors ideally come together to deliver a beautifully crafted drink that is in turn an essential part of a unique beverage program with something for everyone. Culinary Institute of America (CIA) alum Amy Racine—beverage director and partner at JF Restaurants—recently shared some of her tips for building a memorable cocktail program.

Racine starts by asking herself these key questions: Who is the audience? Does the establishment observe specific cultural traditions? And how should the program align with the overall brand? For instance, she says, “We have a Mediterranean concept in Manhattan called IRIS. Its cocktail program features a lot of Turkish and Greek produce, but we know the guests also want something familiar, so we use these ingredients to put spins on classic cocktails [such as] a Turkish Tea Manhattan and a Negroni using Greek spirits. We can still give the guests what they want while keeping true to our brand”; needless to say, “These are not ideas we would pick

up and use in our chophouse concept The Vermilion Club in Boston.” Thoughtful touches that illustrate a sense of place tend to stand out in guests’ minds.

Low-alcohol and nonalcoholic cocktails are also becoming increasingly popular for a variety of reasons. Health-conscious guests and non-drinkers shouldn’t have to feel left out in a hospitality setting, and catering to their needs presents a valuable opportunity to boost revenue. For this reason, Racine puts as much effort into low- and zero-proof drinks as she does the rest of her menu, and she’s seen immense growth in their demand and sales year over year.

Culinary knowledge is also important in the implementation of Racine’s bar programs. Bartenders need to be familiar with all types of produce, knife cuts for interesting garnishes, culinary agents like agar agar, and different methods of preservation. As few formal training programs teach this kind of thing, they typically turn to resources like books, podcasts, networking, and social media—though the CIA’s innovative online master’s degree in wine and beverage management is

an exception as educational options for beverage professionals go.

Notes Racine, “My culinary background comes into play frequently, and not just on the creative side. The other day, we were trying to figure out the best way to clarify tamarind juice. We went through different filtration processes and methods [I] learned in school.” What’s more, she adds, “My culinary education taught me how to not only understand flavors but also manage the financial side of the business, like costing. I didn’t realize at the time [that I would be] using my culinary education regularly on the bar and wine side.”

Ready to shake up your cocktail program? Remember to stay true to your brand, deliver a high-quality product, listen to your clientele, and keep things interesting. In the end, you’ll have happy guests coming back for more while boosting your bottom line. *sj*

*Amy Racine will be speaking at the CIA Wine & Beverage Summit, taking place May 5–6 in Napa, CA. For more information or to register, visit [ciabevpro.com](http://ciabevpro.com).*



# Mouthwash and Metronomes

## A BLIND TASTING GUIDE FOR ASPIRING SOMMELIERS

**YOU MAY BE** wondering why, in a column about the business of wine, I would be offering advice on how to pass a blind tasting exam. I assure you these two things are very much related. I've been fortunate to work some high-profile jobs over my career, and there's not a shadow of a doubt that my ability to secure interviews for those positions was based on my being an Advanced Sommelier. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that those with Advanced or Master Sommelier certifications are categorically more knowledgeable, capable, or better than those who don't. In fact, I've observed plenty of highly credentialed sommeliers who have no clue how to run a program and others with no official certifications who are absolute savants. However, much like a master's degree, higher-level certifications often help you get noticed in a sea of other candidates. From there, it's up to you to land the job. But make no mistake about it, the process is made much easier by those post-nominals.

Now's the time to tell you I failed the Court of Master Sommeliers Advanced exam twice before I passed—both times due to blind tasting. I then resolved to crush that section, and after completely refining my process, I am confident that the only time I've gone six for six in a blind tasting was when I passed the exam. I'd like to offer you a few of the tips and techniques that aided my success.

**The grid is a song.** Yet many people don't take the time to learn the music or the lyrics. Generally, most people are capable with assessing the wines from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint. They lose points by missing boxes or running over the time limit. This is because they haven't memorized the "song" of the grid. If a candi-



date is wasting time and mental bandwidth thinking about which box comes next, they can't effectively pay attention to their assessment in the moment and will therefore struggle with their conclusions. But there's an easy fix. Download a metronome app, set it to 4:4 time, and read, line by line, the boxes on the grid, in order. Do this five times from start to finish four to five days per week for one month. Each box on the grid should coincide with a tick on the metronome. More complex and detailed boxes can take two or three (or more) ticks to read. The point is, after a few weeks of this you'll have a perfect memory of the grid and what comes next. It will be the background music that accompanies your tasting notes and helps you stay in rhythm all the way to the end.

### Calibrate, calibrate, calibrate!

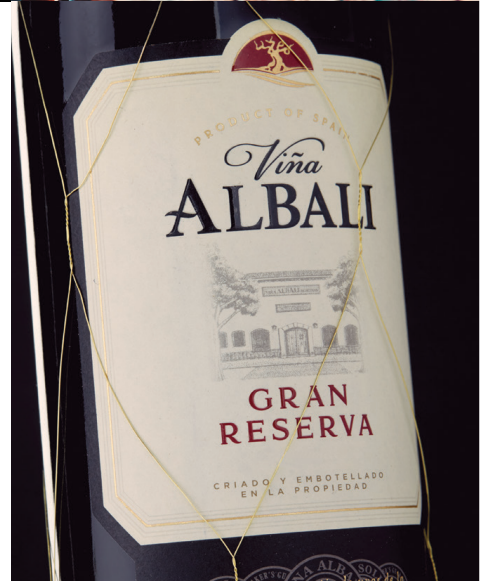
Before starting to run through the grid, I find it incredibly helpful to first smell through all wines of the same color. There's no value in smelling all six together, so

don't waste time smelling the reds right after the whites. The purpose of smelling all three in the same color group is to calibrate and identify overt differences. It is *not* to compare the wines. Remember, you are taking each wine in turn, so don't make the mistake of saying things to yourself like "higher acidity than the last wine." But it can be incredibly helpful to discern between an aromatic and semi-aromatic variety, to identify the use of oak and bâtonnage, et cetera. When it's time to taste, your first sip of each wine should be taken to calibrate or recalibrate your palate. When you take this sip, actively shut down your sense of taste (you can easily turn it off if you think about it) and rinse your mouth with it—swirl it around just like mouthwash. This will help reset your ability to accurately assess all of the wine's structural elements.

While these two tricks alone aren't going to bring you over the finish line, they will certainly help you to be well prepared to win that race. So good luck and go crush that exam! **SJ**









# A New Wave Down Under

WHY AUSTRALIA'S WINES WARRANT PLACEMENT IN YOUR PROGRAM

**TWENTY YEARS AGO**, retailers typically dedicated ample shelf space to Australian wines—from juicy, high-octane Shiraz featuring minty eucalyptus and jammy blackberry flavors to Chardonnay bursting with tropical fruit aromas. Today, Australia is often relegated to the “Other” section of the store, and many consumers associate its wine with inexpensive bulk brands such as [yellow tail].

Ask the experts what happened, and you may hear that consumer preferences have shifted away from the big, fruit-forward style or that Australia chased the China market at the expense of its stateside customers. There's some truth to that, but the picture is more complex: An economic boom in the mid-2000s strengthened the Australian dollar, making the country's wines more expensive and less competitive in the United States. In its wake, the global financial crisis of 2008 hurt demand and forced restructuring at home. And of course, the U.S. three-tier distribution system remains a daunting maze of regulations to navigate.

“We always say we have to sell the wine three times,” says Jane Lopes, co-founder with her husband, Jonathan Ross,

of Legend Australian Wine Imports in Nashville, Tennessee. The couple published *How to Drink Australian: An Essential Modern Wine Book* in 2023. “It's hard to get movement in the three-tier system, getting distributors on board, getting restaurants and retailers on board, and then ultimately getting consumers on board,” she points out, adding that the tight current wine market makes this even harder: Off- and on-premise buyers are wary of adding unfamiliar bottlings to their lineup, while consumers are leery because they view Australian wines as either overblown or cheap.

Economics are also not in Australia's favor: “Australia right now may be the most expensive place in the world to make wine,” says Ronnie Sanders, CEO of Vine Street Imports in Philadelphia, who notes that high labor prices are a major driver, with pickers claiming over AUS\$40 (about USD\$25) per hour in Tasmania. That, of course, leads to higher retail prices, which only increases retailers' reluctance to carry new Australian wines. And in a self-reinforcing dynamic, strong domestic demand in Australia has reduced the need for a robust export market and

made winemakers less willing to travel to the U.S. to help build demand here.

Yet on a recent visit to Australia, I was reminded of the wonderful diversity of the country's wine regions, from their terroir to their breadth of grape varieties and wine styles to their cuisine. Winemakers expressed their excitement about “alternative varieties” from Italy, Spain, and Portugal—and several offered Syrah rather than Shiraz. For some, the name change is a marketing ploy, but producers such as Matthew Pooley of Pooley Wines in Tasmania and Chris Mein, viticulturist at Longview Vineyard in Adelaide Hills, said that the use of the word “Syrah” on their labels is meant to signal a more restrained Old World style.

Longview's 2022 Macclesfield Syrah actually reminded me of why I used to love Aussie Shiraz: It featured lush texture and beautiful, jammy blackberry with a nice herbal edge; it was not overripe or too high in alcohol. There may not be space on U.S. retail shelves these days for Australia's Rhône-style Syrahs or for its crisp Arintos and Fianos. But for curious wine lovers with a sense of wanderlust, there's a whole world down under to explore. 

PHOTO COURTESY OF WINE AUSTRALIA



# Cool-Climate Beauties

FROM VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

*A Study of the Region's Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs*

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2025**

**1 P.M. PACIFIC / 4 P.M. EASTERN**



**HOSTED BY MARK DAVIDSON,**  
**Head of Education, Americas, for Wine Australia**  
**and Author of *Wines of Australia***

It may come as a surprise, but Victoria, Australia, is on the shortlist of the world's greatest sources for both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The unique combination of soil, aspect, and temperature and a deep passion for these two Burgundian varieties among Victoria's winemaking families has led to the production of world-class examples. One of the most impactful factors is the effect of the chilly water from the Southern Ocean that not only moderates the coastline wine regions but also reaches into the interior.

If Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, Yarra Valley, Geelong, Gippsland, Macedon Ranges, Beechworth, and Strathbogie Ranges are not part of your Chardonnay and Pinot Noir vocabulary, they should be. They offer a world of discovery like no other.

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Bird on a Wire  
By Farr  
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Fighting Gully Road  
Fowles

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Handpicked  
Innocent Bystander  
Mac Forbes  
Moorooduc  
Paringa Estate  
Patrick Sullivan

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# A True Taste of Europe

**PINARD WINE BAR BRINGS CONTINENTAL CHARM TO SCOTTSDALE, AZ**

**LIKE A HIDDEN GEM** plucked from a Parisian side street or Florentine alley, Pinard Wine Bar has transformed a corner of North Scottsdale into an enchanting European escape. Its name, French slang for “red wine,” hints at the convivial spirit within its walls, where founder Letty Ebel has recreated memories of her family’s adventures abroad.

with those together,” Ebel notes. “We did everything on our own, without contractors. Jason is very handy, so we did all the painting, build-out, and decorating ourselves.” Even their daughter, Kaia, a fashion major at Indiana University, lent her discerning eye to the decorating process.

True to its name, Pinard offers enophiles multiple opportunities for ex-



*Pinard Wine Bar  
sommelier Ali  
Amundson and  
owner Letty Ebel.*

“We love Europe—France, Italy, and Spain and all the spots,” Ebel shares, who opened the wine bar with her husband, Jason. “We just wanted to bring that feeling, that vibe, like you’re going into a little bistro in Europe.” It’s a vision that’s crystallized in an intimate space that feels both sophisticated and cozy.

Brick walls and French bistro mirrors frame the inviting bar, while the dining room welcomes guests with burgundy velvet-tufted chairs and crisp white tablecloths. Overhead, bespoke crystal and fringed drum chandeliers crafted by a lighting designer in Valencia, Spain, cast a glow across the space. “I told her what I was looking for and we came up

ploration, including 40 wines by the glass. Sommelier Ali Amundson guides a Saturday afternoon “Les Vins du Moment” tasting, which changes every three weeks to highlight new discoveries and seasonal selections. Special wine dinners round out the calendar, with the most recent event featuring Australia’s Penfolds.

Meanwhile, dedicated drinkers can retreat to a private members’ lounge decorated in Parisian blue for leisurely tastings and conversation. Le Club Pinard offers two membership tiers, Enthusiast and Connoisseur, with the latter introducing more ageworthy wines. “We have a release party every other month for members to pick up and sample their selections,” Ebel



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

*Parisian chicken in creamy mushroom  
sauce with garlic mashed potatoes and  
haricots verts.*

explains. “They can enjoy small bites and meet other wine enthusiasts as well.”

The culinary program, helmed by Cordon Bleu–trained chef Sidney Goodman, naturally encapsulates Pinard’s European ethos. Potato–Manchego cheese croquettes are studded with Iberian ham, while duck pâté spreads like silk across a French baguette. On the heartier side, wine-braised beef Bourguignon shares the stage with Parisian chicken draped in a creamy mushroom sauce alongside haricots verts and a juicy veal chop accompanied by pommes dauphinoise.

Hospitality runs in Ebel’s veins; her family owns establishments across both the Valley and the Midwest, including the Illinois-based Two Brothers Brewing Company. But Pinard Wine Bar is a deeply personal project that has already captured the community’s heart. “Everybody has been really excited about it,” Ebel beams. “They’re so happy we’re here. I feel like the neighborhood really needed a place like this.” 





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THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

# Beauty, Awe, and Wonder

## ON THE PURPOSE OF WINE WRITING

**I HAVE RECENTLY** found myself thinking a lot about the purpose of wine writing. What is it exactly?

To me, the answer is simple: to communicate wine's beauty, awe, and wonder.

I wonder if winemakers think about that enough.

Recently I conducted a video interview with a group of winemakers. With the camera rolling, I asked each of them—without the others around—just one question: Why is wine important?

You can see that they were taken aback for a minute. For a second, they didn't know what to say.

If I had asked whether maceration times for Cabernet Sauvignon were getting shorter these days or if they planned on using misters in their vineyards or if they thought concrete eggs were superior to stainless-steel tanks for Sauvignon Blanc, they would have responded immediately. But questioning why wine matters—arguably the most important question of all—stopped them.

Do winemakers have a responsibility to talk about wine beyond relaying the information that can be found on a tech sheet? Do wine educators have a responsibility to teach the historical, cultural, philosophical, and emotional roles wine plays in society? I think so.

One thing is true: Writers cannot write moving stories—can't emotionally touch readers—unless winemakers have something moving to say.

I'm reminded of the best comment a winemaker ever made to me. I asked him what he looked for when producing Pinot Noir: "A great Pinot Noir," he said, "should make you feel as though Grace Kelly just walked in the room." Nothing about oak, nothing about punchdowns, nothing about clonal types—though on all of those points, he could and did elaborate later.

The Harvard neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor has said, "We think of ourselves as thinking creatures who feel; but we are actually feeling creatures who think." On that note, there's one area of wine writing that worries me the most, and it's this: AI.

Generative AI can already write any basic wine piece. It gets the facts more or less right, and like a good WSET student, it parrots them back. But when AI becomes the dominant form of wine writing, wine communications will truly become an endless feedback loop of innocuous information that means nothing to anyone. Wine—so rich, so soulful, so capable of stirring passion—will become just another beverage. And just like that, 8,000 years of beauty, awe, and wonder will slip away. 

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*Karen MacNeil is the author of The Wine Bible and the editor of the digital newsletter WineSpeed.*

WHEN AI BECOMES  
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The Tasting Panel 6/24

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**91pts**

2022 Rock Carved  
Cabernet Sauvignon  
The Tasting Panel 9/24

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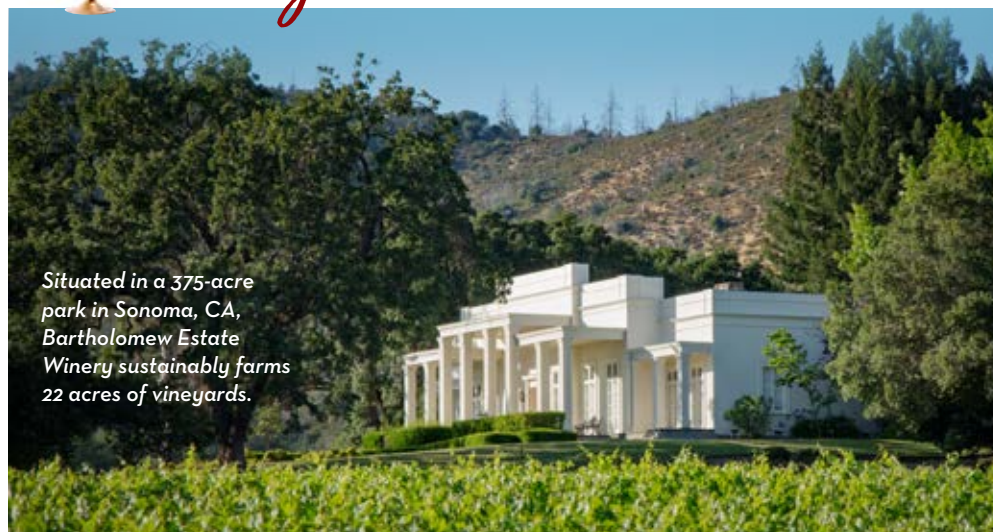


PHOTO COURTESY OF BARTHOLOMEW ESTATE WINERY

Situated in a 375-acre park in Sonoma, CA, Bartholomew Estate Winery sustainably farms 22 acres of vineyards.

## The Scenic Route

TAKING A WALK IN THE PARK AT **BARTHOLOMEW ESTATE WINERY**

**BARTHOLOMEW ESTATE WINERY** lies within the green oasis of Bartholomew Park, a 375-acre property considered to be the birthplace of California viticulture. Just a mile from the historic Sonoma Plaza in downtown Sonoma, it not only was home to the first privately owned vineyard in the Sonoma Valley but was once the residence of Count Agoston Haraszthy, known as the father of the state's wine industry.

In 1943, Frank "Bart" Bartholomew and his wife, Antonia, purchased the property, restored it, and established the Frank H. Bartholomew Foundation, a nonprofit trust that maintains the land as a public park that now features hiking and horseback riding trails, walking paths, picnic areas, ponds, and streams. The winery, which opened its doors in 2019, was founded by foundation trustee Anna Pope and winemaker Kevin Holt with a goal of preserving and protecting the park. —*Meridith May*



PHOTO: CAEL LIANOS GILBERT

Bartholomew Estate winemaker Kevin Holt.

### **Bartholomew Estate 2022 Marsanne/Roussanne, Fifth Hill Vineyard, Sonoma Valley (\$38)**

This whole cluster-pressed and co-fermented field blend aged four months in (10% new) French oak. A salty sea breeze glides across the palate as precious notes of pineapple, pear, hazelnut, and white tea are amplified by fine acidity and a high-toned, crisp finish. **93**

### **Bartholomew Estate 2021 Syrah, Viviano's Block, Sonoma Valley (\$48)**

Meaty, dusty, and dry, with structured, chewy tannins and a savory core. Boysenberry and charcuterie exude a French accent as they meld with violets and sweet earth. **95**

**Bartholomew Estate 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma Valley (\$65)** This dynamic, dramatic, powerful red surges with notes of espresso, slate, and black currant. Its gliding mouthfeel is tinged with black pepper, while its strength keeps the palate on alert. The finish is pumped up by blueberry and dusty cocoa. **94**

## Oh Terre! Auteur!

NATURE AUTHORS  
THESE STYLISH WINES  
WITH A PERSONAL  
TOUCH

**FOUNDED IN 2003** by Kenneth and Laura Juhasz, Auteur Wines creates small-lot Pinot Noir and Chardonnay sourced from some of the most renowned sustainably farmed vineyards along the Northern California coast. —*Meridith May*

**Auteur 2022 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$50)** Sourced from three prestigious vineyards—Durell, Bacigalupi, and Green Acres—this wine aged 11 months in (25% new) French oak. Toasty notes are sustained by high-profile acidity. Crème brûlée and pineapple upside-down cake make a dramatic impression as they're surrounded by bright lemon verbena on the keen mineral finish. **95**



**Auteur 2022 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$60)** Aged 11 months in (35% new) French oak, this wine boasts delectable notes of cinnamon-spiced pomegranate, hibiscus, and mineral-kissed earth. A pleasant, buoyant mouthfeel upholds black raspberry, a garland of rose petals, and salty mushrooms rooted out of the soil. **96**



# *From* VINEYARD *to* VICTORY

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From left to right: Andrea Fabiano, export manager, Feudi di San Gregorio; Francesco Vitulli, export manager, Cecchi; Elisabetta Nonino, CEO, Nonino; Alessandro Bindocci, winemaker/export manager, Il Poggione; Diego Cusumano, owner, Cusumano and Alta Mora; and Primo Franco, owner, Nino Franco.



# *extended* FAMILY

THE "ICONS OF ITALY" MASTER CLASS IN BOSTON, MA,  
HIGHLIGHTED THE PEDIGREE OF **TERLATO WINES'** PORTFOLIO

*story by* JESSIE BIRSCHBACH *photos by* JOSH REYNOLDS



*Terlato's "Icons of Italy" master class took place at City Winery.*



Taking a stroll (or a precarious drive) through the narrow streets of Boston's North End neighborhood, also known as Little Italy, makes you feel as though you're in Europe rather than America. The tightly packed historic brick buildings are teeming with cafes, shops, and restaurants, most of which are Italian, of course. One such beloved eatery is Prezza, and it was here that I met up with the crew behind Terlato's "Icons of Italy" master class, set for the following day.

The food was delicious, but what impressed me most was the depth of offerings on Prezza's wine list. I couldn't help but notice all the gems from Terlato's portfolio: a Feudi di San Gregorio 2016 Serpico, an Il Poggione 2018 Brunello di Montalcino, and Alta Mora's 2022 Etna Bianco, to name just a few. Enjoying these wines in a cozy restaurant with a large table of boisterous winemakers and the Terlato brass, I felt as though I were at an extended family dinner rather than a work affair.

The next morning at City Winery, I found myself in a large private space rushing to fill glasses with Kim Beto, Terlato's VP of fine wines and spirits development, and the Italian winemakers who comprised our panel as roughly 50 local beverage professionals flooded the room. Beto has a knack for keeping a crowd's attention, and this master class proved to be no exception. I'd be willing to bet, though, that the remarkable depth of Terlato's Italian portfolio and its enthusiastic representatives also played a role.

### ALTITUDE WITH ATTITUDE

The first wine of the day, Nino Franco's Rustico, a nonvintage Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore, is a blend of Glera grapes from hills between 900 and 1,100 feet in elevation, where the soil features fluvio-glacial deposits. "So we don't use the big tractor," said owner Primo Franco with a smile.

Nino Franco's Riva di San Floriano 2022 Valdobbiadene is sourced from even steeper slopes ranging from 980 to 1,100 feet in elevation; due to these extreme angles, only the oldest vines were historically able to be replaced, often with rootstocks that belonged to different clones, which in turn has promoted biodiversity in the vineyard while helping to make the vines stronger and more resilient over time. As Franco endearingly put it, "This population of grapes, they are like us. We are all different and stronger for it. There is not just one clone."

After Franco expressed a bit of lighthearted frustration with the denomination for not allowing him to label his unconventionally made Grave di Stecca wine as Prosecco—"which is bullshit!" he exclaimed—Beto jumped in: "And now you're out of time," he said with a laugh, adding, "We heard about his altitude, and now we've got the attitude!"

Venturing from Northern to Southern Italy, Andrea Fabiano, export manager at Feudi di San Gregorio, began with a bit of background on Campania and the subregion of Irpinia; there, in the small town of Sorbo Serpico about 40 miles from the Amalfi Coast, the producer farms over

740 acres of vineyards comprising mainly indigenous varieties, including Greco, Fiano, Falanghina, and Aglianico. Established by the Capaldo family in 1986, it is today the largest family-owned winery in Southern Italy.

Fabiano explained that Irpinia is an atypical southern region thanks to its cold winters and high average rainfall. He added that because they're located just 52 miles from Mount Vesuvius, "our soils are also different, of volcanic origin." Feudi di San Gregorio's 2022 Cutizzi, a mineral-driven Greco di Tufo, is proof of this. In the 10-acre Cutizzi Vineyard, located close to the largest sulfur mines in Southern Italy, the 30-year-old Greco di Tufo vines are grown at an elevation of 1,400 feet. "Walking through the vines, you see these big, bright yellow stones of sulfur. They look like they came from a different planet. They are unbelievable, and you can smell the sulfur," Fabiano said.

Although 30 years of age is quite old, the Aglianico vines that serve as the source for Feudi di San Gregorio's 2016 Serpico are older still. The Dal Re Vineyard harbors vines more than 180 years old, grown in the traditional pergola method in deep soils consisting of volcanic ash. Fabiano pointed to a picture of a proud elderly woman standing under one of the vineyard's 12-foot-high vines. "I would say it's 100% Aglianico, but it's not true, because this is a pre-phyllloxera vineyard," he said, meaning it likely contains a field blend.

Representing the island of Sicily was Diego Cusumano, owner of Alta Mora.



The lineup of wines for “Altitude With Attitude” (above) and “Technique or Terroir?” (below).

Cusumano and his brother Alberto, along with their winemaker father, Francesco, established the winery in 2013 with the intention of sourcing from vineyards within the villages of Guardiola, Feudo di Mezzo, Verzella, and Solicchiata, all on the northern slope of Mt. Etna. “We named our winery Alta Mora: ‘Alta’ because the altitude is . . . 800 meters [2,624 feet] above the sea and ‘Mora’ because it’s Etna—the color of the fruit is black and the soil is 100% lava,” said Cusumano.

Alta Mora’s 2022 Etna Bianco features Carricante grapes grown on ungrafted vines in Verzella, Pietramarina, and Ar-rigo. Cusumano waxed poetic about the uniqueness of the rich, high-acid variety: “People love this wine because it’s so different, but especially because of its longevity. . . . After ten years [it] offers incredible complexity.”

The producer’s 2019 Guardiola Etna Rosso, meanwhile, is 100% Nerello Mascalese sourced from 150-year-old vines grown at up to 3,000 feet in elevation. “A lot of journalists compare this grape to the Pinot Noir of Burgundy. For me it [has] the nose of Burgundy, but the character is more like a well-aged Nebbiolo from Piedmont, and you can drink this red with meat or fish,” said Cusumano. “And yet it’s a Nerello Mascalese sourced from 150-year-old vines at a fraction of what a single-vineyard Barbaresco or Barolo costs,” added Beto.

## TECHNIQUE OR TERROIR?

After a brief break, we shifted our focus to an age-old question: “Technique or Terroir?” Francesco Vitulli was in attendance to represent Cecchi, one of the oldest producers in Tuscany. Established in 1893, the winery is today led by Andrea Cecchi, a fourth-generation vintner who places quality, sustainability, and innovation at the forefront of his family’s business. “Nowadays the family owns six different estates all over Tuscany, controlling approximately 900 acres of vineyards,” said Vitulli.

The producer’s Villa Cerna winery in Castellina—described as “ancient” by Vi-

tulli, as “there are documents of production there from 1001 [A.D.]”—produces both the Cecchi 2019 Classico Riserva di Famiglia and the Cecchi 2020 Valore di Famiglia Chianti Classico Gran Selezione. “With the Riserva di Famiglia, we are tasting a wine that was first produced in 1987, and we can definitely say that this is a wine of the ’80s, as we have Sangiovese with 10% of Cabernet Sauvignon. In those years . . . there was a big change in the sense of Italian winemaking,” said Vitulli, alluding to the rise of Super Tuscans. The Riserva is made only in years in which the grapes meet Cecchi’s high standards, while the Gran Selezione Valore di Famiglia is made with Sangiovese from vines aging over 35 years old; it ages 30 months in tonneaux (900-liter barrels), followed by three months in vat and at least one year in bottle, prior to release.

South of Chianti in Tuscany is Montalcino, and “one of the wonderful things about Montalcino,” said Alessandro Bindocci, winemaker and export manager at Il Poggione, is how diverse the area is. “Unlike many other wine regions of the world, it’s not just vineyards, and the estate of Il Poggione is just the same”: Purchased by the Franceschi family in 1890, the roughly 1,300-acre property harbors just 336 acres of vineyards. “The majority of the land is forest and olive trees, some grains, and livestock. We’re an old-school farm, and we like to keep it that way,” said Bindocci. Old-school indeed: Now led by the fifth generation







"WE CONTROL EVERYTHING FROM THE VINEYARDS TO BOTTLING. AND FOR THIS WE CAN BE VERY PROUD. MY SISTERS AND I CONSIDER THE GRAPPA OUR FOURTH SISTER."

*—elisabetta nonino*

**Kim Beto, Terlato's VP of fine wines and spirits development, and Elisabetta Nonino offer an emotional toast to Nonino's late father, Benito, who died in July 2024.**

of proprietors, the Franceschis were one of three families to introduce Brunello di Montalcino to the marketplace, and their winery is one of the founding members of the region's consortium. And yet they remain forward-thinking. Although they have been farming organically for the past 50 years, Il Poggione officially received certification just this past year from the governing body Valorialta, and 2025 will be the first vintage to reflect it on the label.

As the conversation delved further into the role of terroir, Bindocci noted that the estate's reddish sandstone soil, layered with siltstone, clay, and marine deposits, helps to impart brightness in the Il Poggione 2021 Rosso di Montalcino. "For most winemakers, Rosso is an afterthought, but in our case, we have vineyards dedicated to Rosso di Montalcino," he said.

Planted in 1964, the Vigna Paganelli Vineyard is one of the oldest in the region and the source of Il Poggione's 2018 Brunello di Montalcino. As he presented the wine, Bindocci noted a special winemaking technique in which natively fermented wine experiences 20 days of submerged cap fermenta-

tion at 77–82 degrees. This way it "sees very high contact with the skins for the whole length of the fermentation, rather than letting them float to the top, adding more structure, color, and flavor," he explained.

Next, Diego Cusumano once again took the floor to present two wines, this time from his Cusumano label—the first wine his father produced. "Before we spoke about Mt. Etna. Now we speak about all of Sicily," he said. Established in 2001, the label showcases the northern, northwestern, and southern parts of the island as a blend of Cusumano's five estates in these areas—including Presti e Pegni in Monreale, the source of its 2021 Benuara. There, the Nero d'Avola and Syrah featured in the wine grow in clay soils alongside the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon that are also blended with Nero d'Avola to yield the Cusumano 2019 Noà. Calling the latter a "Super Sicilian wine," Cusumano noted that the blend ages in barrique for one year—but he added that, "for us, the secret is there is no technique. It's only about terroir."

The day concluded with what is perhaps one of the softest, cleanest, most

elegant versions of grappa I've ever had: the single-varietal Nonino Grappa. As CEO Elisabetta Nonino explained, "My parents had the idea to create a grappa from one single indigenous variety, Picolit, in 1973; they called it the Monovitigno Nonino." The distiller uses only freshly pressed Picolit pomace in an effort to best reflect the essence of the grape, which perhaps explains why the spirit remains balanced even at 100 proof. "We control everything from the vineyards to bottling, and for this we can be very proud. My sisters and I consider the grappa our fourth sister," said Nonino, which hardly seemed an exaggeration: During the video portion of her presentation, Nonino seemed visibly overjoyed by her family's legacy. It was almost more entertaining to watch her than the presentation, but at its conclusion, another reason for her pride was revealed: Beto, with tears in his eyes, suggested we all toast to her late father, Benito, to remember the man who helped elevate the grappa category as a whole. Cheers to Benito Nonino—and to this extended family of producers. 

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# Romancing the Stone

**FACETS**, A WELL-REGARDED LABEL FROM YOUNTVILLE ESTATE GEMSTONE, IS BACK AND BETTER THAN EVER

story by Jonathan Cristaldi / photos by Alexander Rubin

**TO WRAP YOUR HEAD** around the exciting return of Facets—a popular label created by Napa Valley producer Gemstone—to the market under the auspices of a new owner and winemaker, you need to know a bit of its backstory.

Initially planted in 1992 by Paul and Suzie Frank, Gemstone Vineyard sits on 22 acres in the Yountville AVA, 16 of which are currently planted to vine. The couple's vision was to capture the essence of the site through the lens of the Bordeaux varieties they cultivated. In that endeavor, they were aided by two successive winemakers, Paul Hobbs and Philippe Melka.

In 2008, feeling they'd taken it as far as they could, the Franks sold Gemstone to Michael Marks, who brought in Thomas Rivers Brown to make the wines until 2023, when Texas-based entrepreneur Jason Rebrook purchased the estate. Rebrook tapped Julien Fayard to oversee production in what amounted to a bit of a homecoming, given that Fayard worked at Gemstone under Melka.

Set on a steep hillside just west of the Silverado Trail and immediately south of Paraduxx, the estate vineyard is divided into 18 blocks that contain plantings of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and

two Cabernet Sauvignon clones that are rare in Napa: Jenkins, which was sourced from the vineyards of Bordeaux's Château Lafite Rothschild, and Jackson (also known as Clone 6, it came to California from Bordeaux in the 19th century). "This estate was built in Parker's era, when Cab was king," Fayard says with a grin before adding that "the wines do age really well, so we want to keep the age of the vines here for that structure, but we are thinking about other varieties to give us more options for a flagship blend."

Facets—whose trademarked name Paul Frank went to great lengths to





**Winemaker Julien Fayard is overseeing production at Gemstone Vineyard.**

protect against usage by jewelry companies—eventually went dormant after its purchase by Marks; believing the timing was right, Rebrook opted to bring it back. “Having a brand in that sub-\$100 range, made by someone like Julien Fayard, is a big deal,” he points out. The first new vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon under Fayard’s direction is the 2021, which was released last July.

Some fruit from the Gemstone estate goes into Facets, and Rebrook is sourcing additional grapes so that the wine can eventually be Yountville-appellated (for now, it’s a Napa Valley designate). Improvements at this stage are focused on the vineyard: replacing vines while keeping their age in mind, managing the canopy, and making soil amendments. Given the growing demand for lighter wines, he and Fayard are also rethinking their plantings, favoring more Cabernet Franc and Merlot for their approachability.

Trade professionals who fondly remember this label in its previous incarnation are now seeing it reappear in major markets like Texas and California, followed by Florida and South Carolina, among other states. As of this writing, Facets is being featured by the glass at Napa staples like Auberge du Soleil, Bouchon, and Angèle; as distribution expands, expect it to be priced at around \$30–\$35 per glass and



\$100 per bottle on restaurant lists. “We want it to be approachable but still . . . overdeliver for the price and the appellation,” says Rebrook.

Like the 2021 vintage, the 2022 Facets Cabernet Sauvignon—which will be released in March—is classically styled, with layers of pure, dark berry fruit; graphite; and polished tannins framing its smooth, medium-to-full body. “It’s a wine for the sophisticated consumer,” Fayard explains. “As you graduate to the cellar-worthy Gemstone and Rebrook wines [Rebrook’s high-end personal brand], Facets is still a very serious wine for the discerning drinker.”

That’s important, given the competition. Sinegal and Faust have long been many a buyer’s go-to Napa Cabs at the same price point of Facets. To contend with such brands, Rebrook emphasizes that in addition to a strong reputation for quality, “Good packaging [is] really important.” David Schuemann, designer and author of *Drink With Your Eyes*, created Facets’ new label, which appears textured, enticing you to touch the gems it depicts, but impressively, it’s an illusion—they’re flat.

Facets also produces a Chardonnay: Barrel-fermented and aged 18 months in French oak, the 2022 vintage hails mainly

from a Sonoma Coast site near Martinelli Vineyard, with additional fruit coming from the Petaluma Gap. Fayard says he’s fine-tuning the wine and plans to reduce aging to 14 months in subsequent vintages. “The amount of barrel fermentation may increase to maintain some of that succulent sweetness,” he notes.

Acknowledging the “tectonic shift in drinking and alcohol consumption right now,” Rebrook sees an opening for both Facets expressions off-premise as well as on. “High-end wine consumers are aging out,” he points out. “So how are you progressing and expanding your wine list? You want that entry point, and you want that young consumer to be able to taste it by the glass and find it in retail for \$65. With Facets, there’s also a story behind it and a sense of place. That origin story resonates with younger consumers. Wine is a connection point. If you drink vodka or other spirits with someone, there isn’t as much connection. But you sit down and open a bottle of wine, and strangers become friends. You talk about life.”

Fayard, nodding in agreement, chimes in, “In the end, we want consumers to sense that value and to be excited about wine that becomes part of their meal. . . . Wine is the great equalizer.” 



by Allison Jordan, vice president of environmental affairs, Wine Institute

# Love Bugs

## ATTRACTING BENEFICIAL INSECTS TO CALIFORNIA'S SUSTAINABLE VINEYARDS

**CALIFORNIA IS KNOWN** for its leadership in eco-friendly viticulture as well as its high-quality wines. Reliance on beneficial insects in the vineyard is one example. By preserving existing or creating new habitats in the form of cover crops or insectaries, winegrowers can attract these hard-working predators, parasitoids, and pollinators to keep pest populations under control, enhance vineyard ecosystems, and reduce the need for crop protection materials.

In fact, habitat conservation and biodiversity enhancement are key practices associated with Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and ecosystem management, two foundational aspects of sustainable winegrowing. The former takes a sustainable approach to managing pests by combining biological, cultural, and chemical tools in a way that minimizes economic, health, and environmental risks; IPM programs prioritize preventative, ecologically based methods such as using natural predators. The latter, meanwhile, protects and/or enhances ecosystem services—benefits that are typically provided by nature such as nutrient cycling, pest management, soil generation, and water and climate regulation. Effective ecosystem management also helps sustain vibrant, healthy, and biodiverse communities both within and beyond vineyards.

### Identifying and Attracting Beneficial Insects

Ladybugs, beneficial mites, bees, parasitic wasps, praying mantises, spiders, and other tiny insects patrol leafy grapevines, hunting for aphids, harmful mites, and other destructive pests. Here are just a few roles these helpful critters play in the vineyard.

■ **Predators:** Ladybugs feast on aphids, a common pest that can lead to a decline in vine health; they can consume up to 5,000 aphids in their lifetime. Lacewing larvae also consume aphids, along with mealybugs and other soft-bodied insects. And spiders catch flying insects that would otherwise damage vineyards.

■ **Parasitoids:** Parasitic wasps lay their eggs inside or on the bodies of pests—aphids, leafhoppers, mealybugs—killing them in the process and preventing vine damage.

■ **Pollinators:** Even though grapes are self-pollinating, pollinators such as bees and butterflies can enhance grape production by helping the vineyard ecosystem thrive through pollination of cover crops and other plants among and around the vines.

California winegrape growers use several methods for attracting these helpful bugs. For instance, they plant cover crops—including clover, mustard, and wildflowers—between rows to provide shelter and food sources to natural predators and pollinators. In addition, they maintain plant diversity in and around the vineyard to support beneficial insects, be it woodlands or riparian vegetation. Establishing insectaries that contain specific herbs and flowers to attract desired insects and create a balanced ecosystem is another common practice.

### Beyond Pest Management

While these predator and parasitoid insects alone may not be able to eliminate pest pressures, they can be an integral part of a winegrower's sustainable approach to crop protection while

providing additional environmental and economic value.

For instance, beneficial insects improve soil quality by recycling nutrients, helping decompose plant and animal waste, and aerating soil. They enhance biodiversity and wildlife habitat by pollinating crops and providing a source of food for other wildlife. And they provide an economic benefit too: According to the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, "In the United States alone, the value of beneficial insects to crop pest control has been estimated to be at least \$4.5 billion annually."

So the next time you see a ladybug or another beneficial insect in a vineyard, think of it as the ultimate winged superhero! 

*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.*

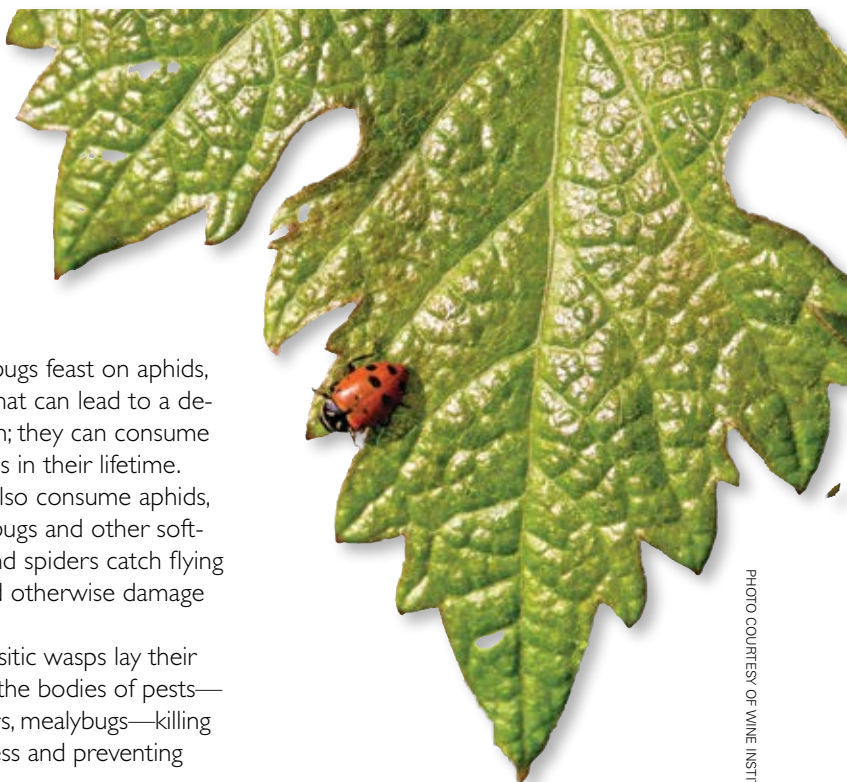


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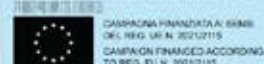


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# To a Tee

FOR SOMMELIER **FERNANDO SILVA**, A LIFE IN WINE IS PAR FOR THE COURSE

**AS THE LONGTIME** wine director of the GlenArbor Golf Club in the tony town of Bedford in Westchester County, New York, Fernando Silva has helped its members live their best lives by introducing them to some of the world's greatest wines and winemakers. It's been a long road to get where he is, and he's cultivated many meaningful industry relationships along the way, which he taps into regularly for the benefit of his loyal and knowledgeable clientele.

Originally from Argentina, where he got his start in the restaurants of Buenos Aires after pursuing a hospitality degree from ORT Argentina, Silva—who is certified by both the Court of Master Sommeliers and the American Sommelier Association—was pushed to the U.S. by the Argentine financial crisis of 2001, finally settling in New York after a brief stint in Europe. Fast-forward to 2025, and Silva has gained the respect of his peers in the industry as well as his well-heeled guests. We sat down with him to talk wine, work ethic, and country club life.

**Q: Tell us a bit about GlenArbor Golf Club.**

GlenArbor is a private golf club in a very affluent area just north of New York City. It includes an 18-hole course and clubhouse with various amenities for the membership to enjoy. The club is open year round, though the course is only open seasonally. Thankfully, we keep busy all year with various programs, including wine events, that inspire our members to stay involved.

**Q: How do clubs differ from public restaurants, and how do those differences impact your wine program?**

Public restaurants cater to new and differing clients every time they open their doors, and they purchase wines along certain stylistic trends or geographic parameters that they hope will resonate with

patrons. In a private club like GlenArbor, the clientele is always the same. They often know what they like and expect it to be available for them. Our membership is well traveled; quite often that travel involves wine regions, and they are wine savvy and champion quality wines as a result. It makes my job a dream as I can order great wines they are familiar with and then also present new wines I think will resonate with a willing audience.

Training is successful only when you see the staff become more confident and independent in offering recommendations to the guests. For me, the biggest reward is to see the staff getting motivated and curious about the beverages they serve, watching them cross the threshold of being just an order taker to becoming a hospitality professional, giving food and wine suggestions and making a connection with the customer.



PHOTO: MICHAEL FIEDLER

*GlenArbor Golf Club wine director Fernando Silva, right, with winemaker Michel Rolland.*

**Q: What other wine-related benefits do you offer members?**

We host wine dinners with winemakers and wine ambassadors, have loyalty programs, offer cellar space for our members, and in winter we put on our Winter Wine Academy. Our biggest program annually is our Traditions in Wine Excellence Awards, which celebrates a leader in the world of winemaking. Past recipients have included Laurent Drouhin, Paul Hobbs, Bo Barrett, and Michel Rolland, among others.

**Q: Given the level of service expected at GlenArbor, how do you know when you've successfully trained your staff?**

**Q: Describe an offbeat wine pairing you love to pour with a signature club dish.**

[The dish:] seared Hokkaido scallops atop a truffle cauliflower puree with roasted cauliflower; wild mushrooms, watercress, pickled raisins, Marcona almonds, and brown butter vinaigrette. The pairing: Alvaredos-Hobbs Godello from Ribeira Sacra.

**Q: What do you think people would be surprised to know about you?**

That I am a contemporary impressionist artist. I have shown in galleries in New York, the Hamptons, and Miami and at many international art fairs, and President Bill Clinton owns one of my paintings. 





PHOTO: CASEY WILSON



# The Definition of a Destination

THE REGULAR IS HARDLY ORDINARY

*The Regular's chorito a la chalaca, or mussels in jalapeño emulsion with Peruvian corn.*

## HOW TO DESCRIBE THE REGULAR?

More than a month after my first visit to the year-and-a-half-old restaurant in downtown Denver, I can still conjure the taste of the pristine oysters daubed in vivid parsley-thyme sauce, the juicy mussels in jalapeño emulsion with toasted corn kernels, the plump gratinéed scallops in tangy chipotle broth, the ultra-meaty chimi-churri-rubbed and grilled kanpachi head; based on that meal, you might assume it's a seafood spot, but it isn't per se. Nor is it strictly Peruvian, though the influences of chef Brian de Souza's homeland are clear on a menu teeming with terms like *choclo* and *chorito* and *chalaquita*. De Souza himself calls it a "neighborhood restaurant for people coming out of work and stopping by for some quick, delicious food before heading home," but (sorry, Brian) it isn't that either—on the contrary, it deserves the status of a major destination. Simply put, The Regular is anything but.

That's no doubt partly a function of the owners' eclectic backgrounds. De Souza's wife-partner, Sydney Younggreen, was a pre-med student at the University of Colorado, Boulder, when she developed an autoimmune disorder that led her into the kitchen in search of nutrition-based solutions—which led her in turn to the (now-closed) International Culinary Center in New York City, where she studied under famed Blue Hill chef Dan Barber and "really fell in love with the world of fine dining," in her words. As for her husband, his mother whisked him and his sister all over the world in their youth: In addition to Peru, which he dubs "a milkshake of cultures" in its own right—"Chinese, African, Italian, French, Japanese"—they lived everywhere from

Switzerland and Spain to Russia and China, so "I saw a lot of different food even before I was cooking."

However subtly, all those experiences inform their guests' own experience at The Regular, which unfolds in a handsome, low-lit and gem-toned space where even the most straightforward-seeming dishes—shiitake mushrooms in mushroom cream with white-pepper foam, say, or charcoal-grilled Pekin duck breast and leg with bourbon-apple puree—astound as they reveal layer upon layer of flavor and texture. To pair with it all, the bar program was designed by former beverage director Bruce Polack with two key criteria in mind: First, because "we are a small family-owned business," says Younggreen, it needed to "showcase wines and spirits from small-production, mom-and-pop operations," and second, it had to reflect the "global inspiration" of the kitchen.

Certainly the resulting cocktails display worldly flair commensurate with the food; take as examples the Insomniac Paints featuring pine nut-infused bourbon, sesame syrup, acid-adjusted green apple juice, and Thai tea-mascarpone foam or the No Small Potatoes, an amalgam of toasted pecan-infused mezcal, South African marula cream liqueur, *camote enmielado* (candied sweet potato) syrup, and egg white. As for the wine list, it's helpfully categorized by style and endowed with tasting notes for guests unlikely to spot any brand names they recognize: Under "Lush & Less Dry," for instance, is a Disznókő 2022 Tokaji Dry Furmint that's "balanced . . . with a silky texture, sweet stone fruits and almond, [and] lingering minerality," while "Unique & Inviting" reds include a 2019 blend from Peru's own

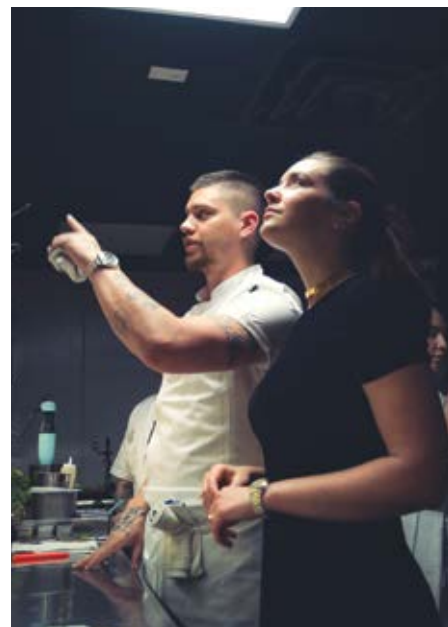


PHOTO: ALEX CHAMBIRO TREE PRODUCTIONS

*Brian de Souza (left) says of his and wife Sydney Younggreen's working relationship, "We do everything together as a collaboration, 50/50."*

Intipalka, which shows notes of "paprika, pickled plums, blackberry jam, graphite, and coffee bean."

Younggreen expects the program will see some changes under new beverage director Vanna Mullins, but overall, she says, months of experimentation have brought the couple to "a place where The Regular is what we always intended it to be. . . . We're always going to evolve, but I think that we've really found ourselves and the identity of the restaurant, and I'm excited to just lean into that and grow and build more relationships, more regulars." Count me among those future habitués who don't have to categorize the place in order to feel at home there. 

# Savoring History

**MASI HOSTED A SEMINAR AND DINNER AT SOMMCON 2024 TO SHOWCASE ITS ROLE IN THE EVOLUTION OF ITALY'S VENETO REGION**

story by Bob Paulinski, MW / photos by Rafael Peterson

**WITH OVER 250 YEARS** as a leader, innovator, and standard-bearer in the Veneto region of Italy, Masi remains the benchmark for outstanding, distinctive wines that display a keen sense of place. As its U.S. director, Tony Apostolakis led the seminar “Sipping the Veneto: The Flow of Crimson Nectar” at SommCon 2024 in San Diego to introduce attendees to the producer and explain how it has “taken many steps over the last 40 years to evolve [our] wine but to keep it intact in terms of varietals and tradition.”

## An Overview of the Veneto

The Veneto is an ancient wine region, with Valpolicella forming its historical reference point. The name Valpolicella is derived from Greek and Latin, meaning “the land of many valleys and cellars” (*poli* is Greek for many, *cella* is Latin for “cellars”). All of Masi’s vineyards are located in Valpolicella’s *zona classica*, so demarcated for its long-recognized history of producing the best wines in the region in a range of intriguing styles.

Serving as a counterpoint to Valpolicella, Valpolicella Classico, and Valpolicella Superiore, wines made by the *appassimento* and *ripasso* methods encapsulate the true magic of the region. These require a deeper look at the terroir, grape varieties, and techniques involved in their production.

The Veneto’s soils represent an incredibly diverse mosaic of volcanic deposits, limestone, and underlying clay, offering both good drainage and adequate moisture retention. In these soils are grown both mandatory and optional grape varieties. Corvina and Rondinella are mandatory, forming the core of Valpolicella’s blends; Molinara traditionally plays



**Masi’s U.S. director, Tony Apostolakis, led SommCon 2024 seminar “Sipping the Veneto: The Flow of Crimson Nectar.”**

a minor role. At Masi, the preferred ratio is typically 70% Corvina, 25% Rondinella, and 5% Molinara.

Today, the iconic wine of the Veneto is Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG. It’s on the short list of Italy’s most noteworthy wines along with the likes of Brunello di Montalcino and Barolo. That said, Amarone didn’t come into prominence until the 1950s, when it was championed by producers like Masi. Prior to that, Recioto—a sweet style—was the dominant wine of the region.



## The Art of Appassimento

The unique character of both Recioto and Amarone is linked to the aforementioned *appassimento* method. Translating as “withering” or “wilting,” the word refers to the process of partially drying grapes prior to fermentation to concentrate their color, aroma, sugars, acidity, and flavors. This is an ancient technique that’s well suited to the Veneto, which is surrounded by an amphitheater of mountains on three sides in close proximity to Lake Garda and the Adriatic Sea. These environmental conditions result in the ideal humidity level for a properly controlled *appassimento*.

*Appassimento* starts with newly harvested grapes that must be in pristine condition. Per Masi’s traditional approach, a single layer of bunches is set on bamboo racks and stored in special drying rooms (*fruttai*) for more than 100 days, during which the grapes lose up to 40% of their weight.

Corvina provides structure; increased body; and ripe, tart cherry notes. During *appassimento*, the variety is particularly susceptible to the formation of *Botrytis cinerea* (noble rot), which enriches glycerin content and enhances the cherry aromas while adding roasted hazelnut notes. In short, small, controlled amounts of *botrytis* add layers of depth, but too much “can result in gray rot, which is a detri-





*The seminar covered Masi's long history in Valpolicella.*

ment," as Apostolakos noted. Stipulations allow Corvinone to replace some of the Corvina in the blend, but it's not a mainstay for Masi, as the berries tend to be large and less concentrated, which makes them less than ideal for appassimento.

Rondinella is a reliable, generous, and generally easy-to-grow variety. It provides tannic structure, color, and a nuanced floral aroma. Appassimento deepens its color and softens its tannins.

Molinara is a wild card. It has fallen out of favor in the Veneto due to its lack of color along with its proneness to rot, so it's no longer a mandatory part of Valpolicella blends. At Masi, however, it's a small but critical component, giving the wine a lift of bright acidity along with a note of cracked black pepper.

### The Rise of Ripasso

Amarone and Ripasso (whose name means "repassed") are deeply intertwined. While Amarone and Recioto are made through the use of semi-dried grapes, Ripasso involves the reuse of the pomace from their production. The nutrient-rich pomace is added to freshly fermented Valpolicella wine, imparting heightened aromatics, color, weight, structure, and flavor.

Produced in 1964 to enter the market in 1967, Masi Campofiorin Rosso del Veronese IGT was a pioneering venture as the first commercially available Ripasso

wine, today commonly called a Super Venetian. Masi refined its technique in the 1980s: Instead of using pomace, it began adding semi-dried grapes (25%) directly to freshly fermented Valpolicella, a process it calls double fermentation, which results in the richer color; heightened aromatic profile; increased alcohol; and softer, more elegant tannins that define modern-day Campofiorin.

In 2020, production underwent another evolution: Harvest is now delayed by a week or two for the sake of further ripening, and the percentage of dried grapes used in the blend was increased from 25% to 30% to make the wine, which is aged in partially new Slavonian and French oak, even more harmonious, well rounded, and full-bodied, with more integral fruit intensity.

## Tasting Notes

Masi is deeply rooted in the traditions of the Veneto, yet it continues to evolve, experimenting with new methods to raise the profile of its wines. The end result is a portfolio of expressive and compelling wines that are unlike any others in the world. Over just a few short decades, Masi Campofiorin has become a prime example as it has established itself as a Veneto classic.

Tasting through six vintages of Masi Campofiorin was a history lesson on the amazing progression of its style over the decades as well as a demonstration of its longevity.



*Attendees tasted six vintages of Masi Campofiorin, the oldest of which was 1985.*

**1985:** Moderately deep core with fade and some browning at the edge of the glass. Wonderfully developed tertiary notes of coffee and caramel. Of moderate length, the wine is soft yet balanced and elegant, with a bone-dry finish.

**1999:** Deep core with fade and a slight browning at the edge of the glass. Lovely tertiary notes of forest floor, coffee, fig, prune, and mocha. Good density on the well-structured palate, which shows moderate length.

**2007:** Surprisingly vibrant, dense red core, with some fade at the edge of the glass (but no browning). Showing some bottle-aged notes—licorice, fig, prune—along with wonderful intensity, balance, and length, this is a fine wine that is just hitting its prime.

**2012:** From an exceptional vintage, this wine possesses superb depth of color; expressive, lifted aromatics; notes of dense red fruit, roasted coffee, subtle forest floor, and roasted hazelnut; and grip on the palate. Its potential for aging over the next ten years is excellent.

**2019:** Deep, dense core with a slight fade at the edge of the glass. Excellent aromatics are bright, lifted, nuanced, and pronounced. Medium- to full-bodied, with notes of ripe cherry, this wine displays exceptional balance, wonderful precision on the palate, and the structure to keep well for many years.

**2020:** Deep red core with a slight fade at the edge. Offering bright red fruit notes, this is weighty, round, full, and well structured and balanced, with good length. Another fine example of Campofiorin with excellent aging potential that's also ready to drink now.



# Valpolicella Past and Present

story by Jessie Birschbach / photos by Rafael Peterson

**ALTHOUGH THE SEMINAR** earlier in the day at SommCon San Diego (see page 38) offered an incredible, decades-spanning library tasting of Masi's Campo Fiorin, I'd argue those of us in attendance at the dinner hosted by the winery were luckier still: Like the seminar attendees, our group of sommeliers from all over the country enjoyed Masi's famously double-fermented wine, but we were also treated to a duo of organically grown Verona IGT dry white and red wines; two Amarones; and the rare Recioto dessert wine. These expressions, paired with a five-course meal at La Jolla restaurant The Amalfi Llama, not only revealed the full potential of Masi's winemaking capabilities but painted an expansive picture of the specialized traditional production techniques of Valpolicella.

Starting the night alongside fine cheeses, cured meats, and crab cakes were the Fresco di Masi White Wine Verona IGT and the Fresco di Masi Red Wine Verona IGT made with grapes organically grown near Lake Garda; both were unfiltered, spontaneously fermented, and aged in stainless steel for a few months. With ABVs of 11% and 11.5%, respectively, the bright, dry wines lived up to their name (which of course means "fresh" in Italian). Served with short rib empanadas, meanwhile, was the Masi 2016 Brolo Campo Fiorin Oro Rosso Verona IGT.

Overall, the meal's uncommon marriage of flavors highlighted the complexity of Masi's wines. As Luciana Rankins, beverage director at The Amalfi Llama, explained, "We draw from two inspirations: flavors from the Amalfi Coast and



*Tony Apostolakos, Masi Agricola's U.S. director, and Martha Bednarek, estate brands and event manager for Santa Margherita USA.*





Guests enjoyed five courses paired with a variety of Masi wines.



**Teddy Thompson, bar manager at deVine Wine Lounge Maui in Kihei, HI; deVine owner Candice Seti; and Justin Tyler, manager of Ristorante Mascarpone's in Orange, CA, pose before being seated for dinner at The Amalfi Llama in La Jolla, CA.**

the cooking techniques [of] Patagonia. I'm very proud of the unique way in which we prepare our menu, using white oak to fuel our coal and a wood-fire grill and oven: Whether [we're making] a pizza or grilling protein or vegetables, you're going to get those flavors from the fire."

Tony Apostolakos, Masi Agricola's U.S. director, was as humorous as he was knowledgeable, comparing the time-consuming practice behind the

restaurant's dry-aged steaks to the appassimento process with one major caveat: "After around 90 days, maybe 10%–15% of grapes develop botrytis. As a result, gluconic acids start to develop, as well as some glycerin during fermentation. This contributes greatly to the velvety, textural component in Amarone. Also, there is genetic activity happening [during appassimento] in which genes are switched on and off. . . . So it's a transformation

of these grapes, not just dehydration. By law we're only allowed 40% weight loss. They're not raisins[, though] the grapes look like they've been living on the beach: They're wrinkled, but they're still alive."

Apostolakos' lighthearted joke proved apt: Masi's Amarones were as vivacious as they were rich and chewy. Both from the 2018 vintage, the Masi Costasera Amarone Classico was served with a creamy, peppery cacio e pepe, while the Masi Riserva Costasera Amarone Classico accompanied a prime New York strip. Apostolakos noted the differences between their aging regimens; while the Costasera goes through 100 days of appassimento, the Riserva sees 110, with those extra ten days providing an additional 3% weight loss while increasing the alcohol content of the resulting wine by half a percent, not to mention determining the "new aromatics and flavor profiles that emerge," he added. These elements, compounded by more time in Slovenian oak and the addition of the indigenous Oseleta grape (a rare variety resurrected by Masi in the '80s), "weave in a layer of fine tannin not typical of Amarone," in Apostolakos' words, making the Riserva shine bright in the Amarone universe.

As privileged as we felt to enjoy Masi's Amarones, it was the last wine of the night that made the evening feel extraordinary. The Masi 2019 Angelorum Recioto della Valpolicella Classico served with a carajillo cream tiramisu simultaneously represented the origins of winemaking for Valpolicella and the end of our night. "You can't understand Valpolicella without understanding Recioto. Amarone is the offspring of Recioto, the dry version," said Apostolakos, noting that Recioto dates back to 450 A.D. in the form of a wine called Retico, made by the ancient Rhaetian people who lived around the hills of Verona. Today, Recioto della Valpolicella must achieve at least 14% alcohol through the appassimento process and contain roughly 50 grams of residual sugar. "In Italy this isn't a dessert wine—it's a wine for the winters in Verona. The acid is there. The balance is there. But how many people here have had a Recioto in the last year? If I could take one wine to represent our area it would not be Amarone—it would be Recioto," he concluded. 



*Volcanic views from the Brassfield estate.*

# *tectonic* TERROIR

**BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY CAPTURES  
THE ESSENCE OF VOLCANIC SOILS IN  
CALIFORNIA'S HIGH VALLEY AVA**

*story by Randy Caparoso / photos by Alexander Rubin*



**“TECTONIC TERROIR”** sounds cool, but more importantly, it refers to something tangible—something every sommelier can put an organoleptic finger on.

In his book *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*, John Szabo, MS, suggests that volcano-influenced terroirs around the world produce a shared set of sensory characteristics. Chief among them are elevated acidity and moderate ripeness due on the one hand to the smaller-berried clusters born of relatively infertile soils and on the other to the type of flavor concentration associated with the longer hang time that can result from decreased access to water on hillsides. Additionally, he says, “volcanic wines” have savory and sometimes salty or earthy qualities often likened to minerality.

These qualities are reflected in the wines of Brassfield Estate Winery, which is practically a monopole in the High Valley AVA of Lake County, California. But as you would expect, they are not exactly the same as those you find in the wines of Mount Etna in Sicily, Somló-hegy in Hungary, Santorini in Greece, or even the neighboring Red Hills AVA.



**Brassfield Estate Winery president Chris Baker, proprietor/CEO Jerry Brassfield, general manager Jonathan Walters, and CFO Simon Whetzel.**

Wherefore art thou, High Valley? Established in 2005, the appellation straddles a cinder cone volcano called Round Mountain. During a 2017 Lake County SOMM Camp sponsored by *The SOMM Journal*, attendees noted several distinctions in Brassfield Estate’s wines compared not only to other Lake County wines but to other “volcanic” wines around the world: The Sauvignon Blancs had more-than-ample natural acidity combined with floral and tropical notes and a near-complete absence of green pyrazines. The inky-black Cabernet Sauvignons showed luxuriously textured, concentrated black fruit, also with minimal pyrazines. And the Syrahs (with up to 10% co-fermented Viognier) offered lavish, violet-like fragrances as well as vibrant acidity and meaty phenolic content, achieving the proverbial “iron fist in a silk glove” profile. In other words, the wines defied the austere (or, in Szabo’s words, “not always soft and cuddly and lovable”) character and pervasive non-fruit notes often associated with volcanic expressions.





These strengths have undoubtedly played a role in an almost improbable state of affairs for Brassfield Estate as a brand: Over the past four years, it has been enjoying double-digit increases in sales across the country—even as the wine market continues to struggle with declining growth.

## A FOUNDATION IN FARMING

Jerry Brassfield—who founded his namesake estate in 1998—attributes this success to several factors, including sales and marketing, yet the driving force has always been the wines themselves. Granted, Brassfield Estate was not an overnight success: Its story is one of trial and error. As Brassfield tells it, “I came from a lower-middle-class farming town

*Brassfield Estate Winery is located in Lake County, California’s High Valley AVA.*





*Just 500 acres of Brassfield Estate's 5,000-acre property are planted to vine; the remainder is currently wild.*



called Porterville, in San Joaquin County. This gave me the basic foundation—values like ‘work hard’ and ‘tell the truth’—that eventually led to my being able to buy my first property in Lake County, a 1,600-acre ranch,” in 1973.

Brassfield ran his Lake County property as a cattle ranch for 25 years—until he saw Clay Shannon of Shannon Family of Wines planting vineyards on neighboring land. “That triggered something in me,” says Brassfield, “because my brother Robert . . . had founded a small winery with me in the Santa Cruz Mountains during the 1970s. Our winery was called Felton Empire, which we built up to about 10,000 cases before reaching an impasse. Felton Empire was a 10-acre property, with maybe about 7 acres of vineyard. In order to sustain ourselves as a business, we needed to increase production, which meant buying grapes in regions as far away as Salinas Valley and Sonoma County. The problem with small wineries with limited resources is that you have to work with farmers whose priority is high tonnage, not high-quality grapes. Eventually you settle for the fruit that you can get and end up resorting to winemaking practices that I call manipulation.

“So in 1987 we sold that winery, and around 1996 I saw Shannon planting vineyards. I started thinking, how can I do this—this time around the right way? First thing I did was ask a Napa Valley group

called Crop Care to assess the possibility of growing for quality first and tonnage second. We did soil testing in 100 different sites, in areas we planned to plant first and areas we hoped to plant in the future. We set up 12 weather stations and collected weather data every 15 minutes for two years, between 1997 and 1999.”

Brassfield has never strayed from his original plan to leave no stone unturned when it comes to ensuring the quality of his grapes and therefore of his 100% estate-grown wines. Brassfield Estate general manager Jonathan Walters, for instance, describes the winery’s ongoing focus on its volcanic identity: Given its location on a high-altitude cinder cone, “We farm for the highest levels of phenolic content. Most of our recent plantings are on mountain slopes, so we install irrigation systems that give us precision control—designed to increase the water at the top of the slopes where soils are well drained while reducing water at the bottom where organic matter holds more water.” In fact, he adds, “Precision viticulture allows us to achieve consistent quality in all our sites, drilled down to every subsection of every block.”

It should be noted that the estate also contains Franciscan series (sedimentary sandy loam) and Wolf Creek loam (sandy clay loam) soils. According to Brassfield, “It is the ridges, hillsides, and benches that have more volcanic influence: lower vigor



yet well-drained soils where grapevines might struggle, great for red wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Our first plantings were on gravelly alluvial soils eroded off the hillsides over thousands of years. I call this our 'valley floor'—but keep in mind that our valley floor sits at an 1,800-foot elevation, over 400 feet above Clear Lake."

But High Valley is defined by far more than volcanic soils and elevation. Because the AVA runs east-west, says Brassfield, "the other major factor is the wind coming straight off the ocean, sucked further inland by hotter air in San Joaquin Valley. This has tremendous impact on the

vines—enough to shut them down during certain parts of the day, giving the fruit longer hang time throughout the growing season.

"Combine that with the cool air and unimpeded sunlight you naturally get in a region that is higher in elevation than most of California. The key is that the fruit doesn't sugar up too fast, giving flavors the time to develop, which shows up in the quality of the wine. That's what makes our wines *High Valley*."

While farming according to the guidelines of the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, Brassfield describes his ethos as going "beyond sustainable." Over



*Jerry Brassfield with renowned sculptor Douglas Van Howd, whose works are displayed throughout the estate.*



the years, with the addition of adjoining parcels, the property has grown to 5,000 acres, just 500 of which are planted to vine. "Most of it sits on rugged topography that's too steep for anything but grapes," says Brassfield, with the highest ridges reaching 2,500–3,000 feet; meanwhile, "over 4,000 acres are maintained in their natural state—meaning what we have planted to grapes is surrounded by wildlife: bears, mountain lion, coyotes, deer, all the wild turkey in the world, you name it. We are, however, built to grow. We have identified another 2,000 plantable acres on hillsides [with] the necessary water infrastructure. In the next two years, we'll probably plant about 140 acres to keep up with the demand for our wines. We have always kept potential growth in mind and all our [efforts are] centered around maintaining control throughout the entire process" (including the operation of their own bottling line).

## A LIMITLESS VISION

In a wine market that he describes as "always unforgiving," Brassfield attributes the brand's steady growth to winemaking and sales and marketing equally. Says Brassfield, "From the beginning, we decided to take on consultants to enhance our winemaking. Our first consultant was Nils Venge from Napa Valley. Here's a winemaker who has made 100-point wines and played a huge part in getting us off the ground. For a few years David





Ramey was our consulting winemaker. Who doesn't love and respect everything David does?

"Today we have the wonderful husband-and-wife consulting team of David and Katherine DeSante, who work closely with our winemaking team of Megan Anderson and Joe Vonk. After all these years, I consider this team to be the best of all the full-time winemakers we have had. Joe and Megan are our varietal program winemakers. They work very closely with each other and with Francisco Dominguez, our cellar master [formerly of Ferrari-Carrano and Rack & Riddle], to maintain our very high standard of winemaking [while] expressing the terroir of this unique AVA."

Longevity is another trait Brassfield values in his employees across all departments, from sales to distribution. "Our VP/national sales manager, Billy Ayer, for instance, has been with us for 20-something years," he notes. "Like Jonathan and others in the winery, he has a real understanding of what we are, where we've been, and where we're going."

Meanwhile, Chris Baker is new to the operation, having joined Brassfield Estate as president in 2023. Nonetheless, says Brassfield, "He has been a godsend, taking us further in the national and global market. Over the years we had built out from a solid base of direct-to-consumer, retail, and on-premise sales, but it's Chris, with his previous experience with DAOU, who has taken Brassfield to the next level."

According to Baker, "I had actually retired from the wine industry twice before, when Jerry gave me a call in 2023. At the time I was on an off-road motorcycle trip across the country. But after the way Jerry described his vision for the brand, particularly his commitment to 100% estate-grown wines, I was convinced that a return to the business was more than worthwhile. I devoted my first year with Brassfield to reorganizing the sales team's focus on Cabernet Sauvignon, to which 56% of our vineyards are planted; and starting in 2025, we will be aligned with the largest and best wholesaler nationally, Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits."

Says Brassfield, "The on-premise market, as you know, has not exactly been on solid ground over the past few years. The biggest challenge is simply holding on to placements in existing accounts. I'd say that the first 'rule,' as we'd call it, for our own business model has been to overdeliver on quality with more than competitive pricing. That's where vineyard management and winemaking come in."

His longevity in an up-and-coming region also helps: "A major reason we have been able to hold our ground and in fact increase our positioning is that we don't have any land cost up here comparable to costs paid per acre in regions such as Napa or Sonoma County. Back in 1973 we paid \$350,000 for the entire 1,600 acres, which included all its cattle and the horse barn that was eventually converted into our warehouse and tasting room.



Once we started planting in 2001, our cost of putting in the vineyard was about \$20,000 an acre. It's gone up to \$40,000 today, but relative to the \$300,000, \$500,000 or more per acre that it costs to plant in Napa, there is no comparison. This means we can offer a Cabernet Sauvignon or Sauvignon Blanc equal to Napa in quality for a much better price."

Although it does not contribute directly to the brand's success, Brassfield's vision may best be epitomized by his lifelong friendship with renowned sculptor and painter Douglas Van Howd, recognized for his lifelike bronze sculptures. Both have channeled their passion into their respective creations over the course of the decades, sharing similar hopes that their work will be appreciated and protected well beyond their lifetimes. Van Howd tells us, "I've known Jerry for 50 years, watching him put his heart and soul into his winery. It's truly his passion. That passion may be gleaned in the impeccable quality of his wines, but you can see it in the winery itself. It is a destination because it is maintained as a beautiful natural landscape with lakes, magnificent 500-plus-year-old oak trees, water birds, and deer roaming the grounds. I'm grateful to play a part in it—Jerry has collected many of my sculpture pieces for 40 years, which are on display in the tasting room and throughout the grounds. While Jerry always talks about his vision for the winery as being without limit, believe me—he means, and he backs up, every word of it!" SJ

# Making Waves

KNOWN FOR HIS CONSULTANT WORK, **JULIEN FAYARD** CRAFTS ELEGANT CABERNETS AND LOW-ALCOHOL WINES FOR HIS PAIR OF LABELS IN NAPA VALLEY

by Liz Thach, MW

**GROWING UP IN PROVENCE**, France, Julien Fayard never dreamed that he would one day become a well-respected winemaker in Napa Valley. “As a teenager, I loved surfing,” he told me in a recent interview and tasting at his wine shop, Maison Fayard, in downtown Napa. “But now I surf off the Sonoma Coast, and on the drive over, I stop and check the status of some of the vineyards from which I am making wine.”

Julien is no stranger to vineyard work, having assisted his uncle in the vineyards and wine cellars of their family winery, Château Sainte Marguerite, in Provence as a teen. At university, he continued his wine studies, obtaining a master’s degree in agri-business from L’École Supérieure des Agricultures in the Loire Valley as well as a master’s in winemaking from Univer-

sité Toulouse III — Paul Sabatier and, later, an MBA from the University of California, Davis. He also worked in Bordeaux for several years at producers such as Lafite Rothschild and Smith Haut Lafitte before moving to Napa in 2006.

Once there, he was hired as Philippe Melka’s director of winemaking, a position he held for eight years, during which he was introduced to the great vineyards of the region. This experience informed the eventual launch of his own wine brands: Julien Fayard Wines, which focuses on elegant Napa Cabs, and Les Vins Julien, a collection of low-alcohol wines from various California regions and carefully selected French imports. Fayard also serves as a winemaking consultant for a select group of wineries throughout Napa and Sonoma counties (see page 32 for one example).

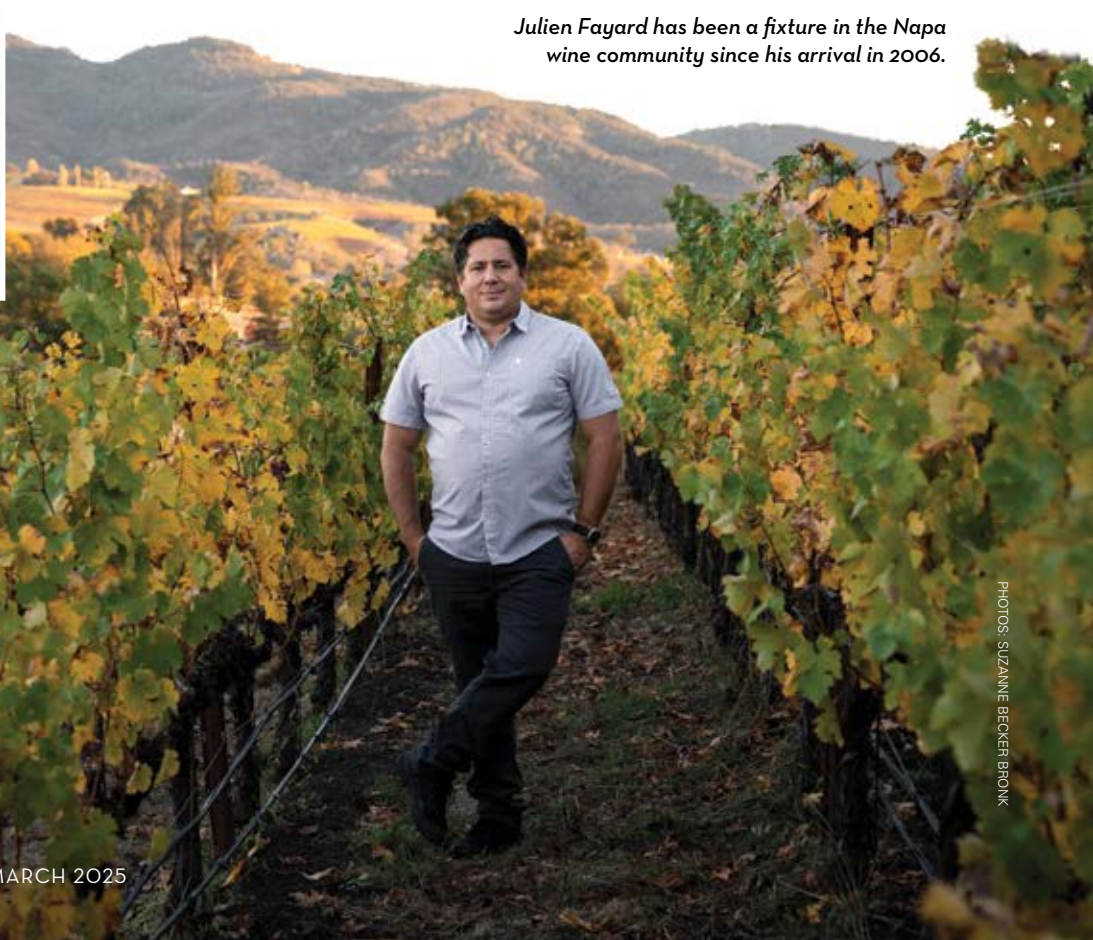
## **Crafting a 100-Point Napa Cabernet**

In 2018, just a year after launching his eponymous label, Fayard crafted a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Sleeping Lady Vineyard in the Yountville AVA that netted him a perfect 100-point score from wine critic Antonio Galloni of *Vinous*. “A Cabernet of mind-blowing intensity and purity, the 2018 dazzles from start to finish,” stated Galloni in his review. I had a chance to taste the 2021 vintage (\$250) and was equally dazzled by its velvety tannins, intense concentration, and elegant freshness.

When crafting the Julien Fayard collection, which includes a Sauvignon Blanc, a Chardonnay, a Pinot Noir, and multiple



*Julien Fayard has been a fixture in the Napa wine community since his arrival in 2006.*



PHOTOS: SUZANNE BECKER BRONK



single-vineyard Cabs, Fayard believes strongly in letting the vineyard site “speak through the wines,” in his words; he spends as much of his time in the vineyard as he does in his winemaking facility south of Napa, where he utilizes state-of-the-art technology and equipment.

### Tapping Into the Low-Alcohol Trend

Flush with the success of the Julien Fayard brand, Fayard decided to launch a new label, the aforementioned Les Vins Julien (LVJ for short), in 2021 to make his own foray into the low-alcohol trend. “The TTB actually has a category called light wine, which is 8.5%–11% alcohol. So I’ve decided to focus on that point,” Fayard said, noting that he works with local growers to source grapes that provide great flavors but are low in sugar (16–18 Brix) and thus alcohol. “I look for older vineyards or challenged vines and ask the farmers to leave the grapes on the vine longer so I get all of the fresh fruit but a naturally lower alcohol,” explained Fayard, adding that another effective method is to let the vine grow naturally and not drop clusters. When slightly overcropped, the resulting fruit is naturally lower in alcohol and sugar—the way Mother Nature in-

year). In addition to the low-alcohol wines, which include a Russian River Pinot Noir and a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, he imports a Rhône Valley red (\$22) and a Provence rosé (\$25) called Just Pink, a delightfully fruity wine with fresh strawberry and melon notes.

While he tries to keep the LVJ wines within the affordable price range of \$22–\$38, Fayard doesn’t cut corners, utilizing all of the technology and sophisticated equipment at his Napa winery to produce them. “Once the grapes arrive, I use our destemmer and the optical sorter to only select the best,” he said. “After all, the machine is sitting there in the winery—why not use it to make these wines as well?”

As for expanding the LVJ line, Fayard said that there’s certainly more to come in the future. “When I’m out doing my consulting work with other wineries,” he added, “I often find these great vineyards and have the opportunity to buy the grapes for my own wines. So why not?”

### Giving Back

Making great wine and surfing—which he does on a weekly basis—are not Fayard’s only interests: The father of three is also concerned about sustainability and environmental conservation, asking himself, “How do we become both better at what we’re doing and less impactful?” To this end, he is a 1% for the Planet member, donating 1% of his gross profits to the organization each year. He also promotes the use of lightweight bottles, which he utilizes for his LVJ wines to help reduce the carbon footprint of shipping, on his website and in his tasting room; additionally, he uses bamboo to construct the cases for some of the Cabernets, as they’re more environmentally friendly than traditional pine cases due to their lighter weight and bamboo’s high growth rate.

Over the course of his tenure in Napa, Fayard has proven himself to be a dedicated and passionate winemaker when it comes to not only his own wines but also those he makes for his consulting clients. Consumers can get a taste of the fruits of his labor by dropping by Maison Fayard—which also offers imported mustard, honey, escargot, vinegar, and many other products, along with glassware—for a tasting or by purchasing the wines online at [maisonfayard.com](http://maisonfayard.com). 



### Tasting Notes

**Les Vins Julien 2023 Le Blanc Light, California (\$28)** This field blend from winemaker Julien Fayard has only 70 calories per serving and comes in at 11% ABV. Crisp pear, Fuji apple, and honeysuckle are clean and stark on the palate. Fresh, high-toned acidity adds to a squeeze of lemon-lime on the finish. **92** —*Meridith May*

**Les Vins Julien 2023 Chardonnay Light, Alder Springs Vineyard, Mendocino County (\$35)** An ethereal yet balanced, exactly precise, and modern white wine with wispy notes of linen, vanilla crème fraîche, and lemon bar. **93** —*M.M.*

**Les Vins Julien 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$35)** Following a mesmerizing perfume of basil, chervil, and lime zest, the first sip immerses the palate in a wash of wet stone and grapefruit. The gossamer texture is slightly creamy, with candied pineapple and racy acidity contributing a spark on the finish. **93** —*M.M.*

**Les Vins Julien 2022 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$35)** Cherry and earth create an aromatic lift on the nose, followed by flavors of jasmine, wet stone, espresso, and tobacco. The palate possesses just enough weight to carry all this savoriness to the finish, amplified by a nip of black-peppered plum and walnut. **92** —*M.M.*

**Les Vins Julien 2022 Côtes du Rhône Red Blend, Rhône Valley, France (\$22)** Earthy and aromatic, with rose petals weaving through grilled meat, flint, plum skin, and ripe cherry. Complex and layered with bright, lively acidity. **93** —*M.M.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAISON FAYARD



*The Maison Fayard wine shop and tasting room is located in downtown Napa.*

tended. “You just have to wait a bit longer and be more patient,” he added.

Together we tasted the LVJ 2023 Chardonnay Light, which is only 11% alcohol and 70 calories per 5-ounce serving. Extremely aromatic, it has notes of white flowers and pear, with refreshing acidity reminiscent of lemon zest.

Also 11% alcohol at 70 calories per glass, another impressive effort is the LVJ 2023 Le Blanc Light, a highly aromatic old-vine field blend of Viognier, Trouseau, Grenache Blanc, and Vermentino from Mendocino, Sonoma, and the Sierra Foothills (Fayard changes the blend each

# Prescience and Progress at Davis Bynum

THE LEGENDARY WINERY THAT PUT THE RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY ON THE MAP FURTHERS ITS QUALITY-DRIVEN LEGACY *by Stacy Briscoe*

**ONCE UPON A TIME**, Napa was a place where a humble wine lover could buy grapes from a guy off the side of the road and try their own hand at winemaking. That Davis Bynum happened upon Robert Mondavi unloading Petite Sirah from the back of a truck in 1951 was a stroke of luck that no one could have foretold, marking the beginning of a Pinot Noir-producing legacy. Bynum became immersed in the then-emerging Northern California wine boom, kicking up tractor dust with the likes of Louis Martini, the Wentes, Lee Stewart, and other iconic industry names.

It wasn't until 1972 that Bynum was introduced to Joe Rochioli Jr., who "had just planted his Pinot Noir block in 1968; it was a tiny little block that his dad didn't want him to farm," recounts Greg Morthole, winemaker at Bynum's eponymous winery. "He was dropping fruit on the ground, halving the quantity because it upped the quality—he was the only one doing that." At the time, Rochioli Jr. was fetching \$150 per ton for his grapes, selling to folks who were blending them to

produce bulk wine. But Bynum recognized quality when he tasted it and offered him \$350, more than double the asking price. "I asked him what it was about that Pinot Noir; what turned him on," Morthole adds. "And he said, 'It just reminds me of Burgundy.' He just loved the bright red fruit, the acid balance and velvety tannins." The deal was sealed on a handshake and good faith.

The label on Bynum's first bottling, the 1973 vintage, read, "These grapes come from Joe Rochioli Jr.'s fruit on Westside Road in the Russian River Valley," says Morthole, "and this predated the Russian River Valley AVA being created ten years later in 1983. He called it out. From that moment on, he just started making single-vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot. People were drawn to that."

And they still are. Morthole, who assumed his winemaking role in 2010, spent several years under the founder's tutelage before Bynum died in 2017; he seeks to carry on Bynum's legacy while also contributing his own expertise, continuing to evolve the winery's practices to suit

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVIS BYNUM



**Greg Morthole has served as winemaker at Davis Bynum since 2010.**

the modern market even as it adapts to changing climatic conditions.

Davis Bynum's current portfolio includes four single-vineyard Pinot Noirs

*A bird's-eye view of Davis Bynum's Russian River Valley estate.*





that Morthole produces with a hands-off approach, letting the fruit dictate how and when he intervenes. “[I’m] knitting together what Mother Nature gives us and what I’m sensing and then using that to make my winemaking decisions,” says Morthole. “Analytically, pH is a real marker for me, monitoring it at harvest and picking early enough to make sure it’s not above 3.65. It helps with that fresher mouthfeel, and that’s what keeps people coming back.” He’s also meticulous when it comes to

to be around 22–23 Brix. “It means the wines have natural acid and freshness, and I only acidify if I need to in really warm vintages,” he says. The jewel in the Davis Bynum Chardonnay crown is the Spring Mountain selection of Chardonnay. “[It’s] one we’re lucky enough to have at our River West Vineyard,” located on the winery’s Russian River Valley estate. “We’ve never had any other source of this selection of Chardonnay in my 19 years,” he adds. “I didn’t realize that it

some native ferment on Pinot and Chardonnay but have walked away from doing native ferment with the Sauvignon Blanc because it wasn’t showing much tropical fruit,” he says. “After doing all that work leafing the canopies, using cultured yeasts rewards you with what you’ve been tasting in the vineyard.”

The quality of Davis Bynum’s wines is also driven by its sustainability-related efforts. Its estate vineyards have achieved California Certified Sustainable Winegrow-



**Chardonnay on the vine in the River West Vineyard.**



tannin management—an area in which, he says, he has some wiggle room to play: “With our Pinot Noir, there’s a delicacy of the skins that, I think, I can push extraction a bit further,” he adds. “Philosophically I’ve changed over the years: After a period of shorter fermentations, I’ve doubled the time on skins more recently.” And his extended barrel-aging regimen, averaging about 14 months in oak versus the previous practice of ten months—another shift Morthole has brought to the program—enables the wines’ structural components to come together and yield concentrated but finessed expressions that are enjoyable now yet can certainly age gracefully for years to come.

White wines, too, are an important part of the portfolio. “I’ve never been ‘ABC,’” jokes Morthole. “I guess I’m ‘ALC’—I’ve always loved Chardonnay.” Since he started his tenure, he’s been picking earlier and earlier, finding the sweet spot for harvesting Chardonnay

was so uncommon around here.” What makes this specific clone so unique is, as Morthole describes, its exotic expression of tropical fruit and floral notes. “It also brings richness to the mouthfeel with a pleasantly oily texture,” he continues. “It feels luxurious.”

Sauvignon Blanc has always represented a small percentage of the portfolio, and with the recent acquisition of River West Vineyard, the team has opted to plant more of the variety. The character of the Sauvignon Blanc is developed in the field. Morthole and his vineyard team found that adding T-arms to spread the canopy and deleafing the vigorous green material early in the season aid in increasing airflow and decreasing disease pressure. The resulting dappled-light effect also allows for an ideal level of sun exposure that Morthole says helps drive the tropical fruit precursors he wants in his wines. In the cellar, “I continue to do

ing certification, and while they’re not certified regenerative, vineyard manager Alli Dericco points out that several regenerative practices are in place, including low- and no-till regimens and the utilization of diverse cover crops to prevent erosion, build soil organic matter, and attract beneficial insects and pollinators. Hedgerows, raptor perches, and bird and owl boxes attract beneficial predators, while weather stations, soil probes, and leaf porometers along with drought-tolerant rootstocks enable drip irrigation to be used on an as-needed basis. “The goal,” says Dericco, “is to focus on creating and maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem by aligning vineyard practices and natural processes to benefit both the environment and agricultural productivity. This approach ensures high-quality grapes while improving environmental resilience”—which guarantees in turn Davis Bynum’s continued success for decades to come. 

# *maiden* VOYAGE

**THE FLADGATE PARTNERSHIP**  
VISITED BOSTON, MA, TO CELEBRATE THE U.S.  
DEBUT OF ITS PORTUGUESE TABLE WINES



*Fladgate Partnership CEO Adrian Bridge sips the Milagres  
2019 Alvarinho at SAVR in Boston's Seaport District.*





*From left to right: João Rebelo, sales manager, North America, The Fladgate Partnership; Shaun Hubbard, food and beverage director, MIT Endicott House; Ana Navarrete, beverage director, Sonsie; Jen Ziskin, owner/wine director, La Morra and Punch Bowl; Adrian Bridge, CEO, The Fladgate Partnership; Kate Webber, proprietor, Webber Restaurant Group; Athip Treenawong, owner, Hobgoblin; Dan Finet, wine manager, Kappy's Fine Wine & Spirits; Cody Breaz, head sommelier, ZUMA at the Four Seasons; and Nick Treenawong, general manager, Hobgoblin.*

*story by* **JESSIE BIRSCHBACH** *photos by* **JOSH REYNOLDS**



**The short walk from my** hotel to American restaurant SAVR in Boston's Seaport District provided several striking examples

of the modern architecture the waterfront neighborhood is known for today. As I stared up at the St. Regis residential building in which SAVR is located, hard-pressed to believe that the area was once a natural harbor used by Native Americans, I remembered an important bit of American history: By the late 17th century, almost all imports made their way into the colony through Boston Harbor. It was fitting, then, that The Fladgate Partnership (TFP), the parent company of iconic Port producer Taylor Fladgate—itsself established during this era in 1692—recently paid a visit here, inviting some of the city's sommeliers to enjoy a lunch sponsored by its importing

partner, Kobrand Wine & Spirits, while celebrating its entry into the production of table wines that began arriving on the U.S. market last year.

Graciously hosting our five-course luncheon was the man responsible for the company's success over the past two and half decades, CEO Adrian Bridge. "We've been making Port for 332 years, but table wine is relatively new for us," said Bridge, flashing a smile while casually estimating that TFP represents about one-third of the world's quality Port. That said, according to Bridge, TFP's foray into the category had been a long time coming.

Over the past 20 years, TFP has maintained steady growth within what Bridge calls its "special" category of Port wine, including Vintage and Rosé expressions, among others. Its Port houses—namely Fonseca Guimaraens, Croft, and,

of course, Taylor Fladgate—have been precious with their grapes sourced from the Douro, using them solely for their fortified wines, which has prompted the company to look beyond the historic region for its possible table-wine production. Bridge also noted the strong growth in interest in Portuguese table wine thanks to an exponential surge in American tourism in recent years: "A decade ago, there were about 30,000 Americans who went on holiday in Portugal. In 2023, there were 2 million."

That same year, the stars aligned for TFP when the company Ideal Drinks, formerly owned by Portuguese businessman Carlos Dias, went up for sale. TFP's acquisition of Ideal Drinks in August 2023 included its brands, wineries, and, notably, nearly 500 acres of vineyards outside of the Douro. "It also came with a huge amount of stock [inventory,] and

that's what we'll be drinking today. It's the first time I've presented them here in America," said Bridge. Ninety-five percent of Ideal Drink's wine, made by consulting winemaker Pascal Chatonnet, formerly of Vega Sicilia, had only been sold in Portugal, and these lucky Bostonians were the first to enjoy them on American soil.

The first two wines presented at the luncheon, Quinta da Pedra's 2022 Graça da Pedra (\$18) and 2019 Milagres (\$29), hail from the Alto Minho region of the Vinho Verde DOP, where Quinta da Pedra's history dates back to the 17th century. The producer's 155 dry-farmed acres in the center of the

and offer great value to wine lovers, the Alvarinhos showed a side of the grape often unseen and were my favorite from the day."

The back half of the lineup of table wines comprised two reds: the Principal 2012 CalCariO<sub>3</sub> and the Principal 2013 Grande Reserva, grown, according to Bridge, "about an hour and 20 minutes south" of Porto in the Bairrada DOP, a flat coastal region that experiences a moderate Atlantic climate and significant rainfall of roughly 39–47 inches a year. Within this region is the small village of São Lourenço do Bairro, home to the dry-farmed 151-acre vineyard that has already become TFP's flagship estate for

in new and used French oak barrels followed by an additional six years in bottle. "As an older 2012 vintage, CalCariO<sub>3</sub> would be of great benefit on a wine list to sommeliers" with a suggested price of \$28, said Bridge. The 2013 Grande Reserva—a blend of 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Touriga Nacional, and 20% Merlot retailing for \$150 that aged 24 months in new and used French oak barrels and another eight years in bottle—was "elegance in a glass, where every drop was a journey of smooth sophistication and complex flavors that danced on the palate. We enjoyed the entire selection," said Nick Treenwong, general manager at local bar Hobgoblin.



**Katie Webber of the esteemed Webber Restaurant Group in Boston, MA.**



**Cody Braez, head sommelier at ZUMA at The Four Seasons.**

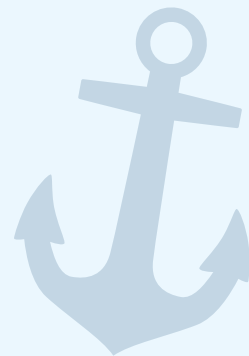
town of Monção and Melgaço consist purely of granitic soil, which perhaps is why most of the group noted a remarkable austerity in both Alvarinho-based wines. That said, they were quite different: Whereas the Graça da Pedra was aged in stainless steel for six to nine months, the richer, fuller-bodied Milagres spent at least a year in used French oak, undergoing lees stirring for half of that period. Noted Bridge, "We don't typically tend to talk about Vinho Verde because Vinho Verde often conjures up ideas of [bulk] wines, whereas I think when you look at the Minho—and in this case the Alto Minho, which is right on the Spanish border at the top of Portugal—this is an area that is very, very good for the Alvarinho grape." Cody Braez, head sommelier at ZUMA at the Four Seasons, agreed: "Although Taylor Fladgate's new wines from Portugal were all delicious

its red table wines: Quinta Colinas de São Lourenço. "We're about 20 kilometers from the Atlantic Ocean, so this is a region that still has the influence of the sea," said Bridge.

Planted on rolling hills consisting of clay-limestone soils is the indigenous Touriga Nacional, along with a slew of classic grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Sauvignon Blanc. These Portuguese and French varieties are blended in a classical style to create wines reminiscent of Bordeaux that have been produced in a gravity-flow facility with minimal sulfur and newly rebranded as Principal by TFP. Thanks to the inventory procured last year, the current release of Principal's entry-level wine is the aforementioned 2012 Principal CalCariO<sub>3</sub>, a strikingly fresh bottling named for the calcareous limestone soils in which it's grown; it's aged 24–30 months

By the dessert course, a similar sentiment had seemed to ripple through the group. But for Bridge, the four table wines—launched in seven states in September 2024 before expanding into the rest of the country in January—represented not just fine wine but a whole new category: "We think these wines will come to be known as 'Super Portuguese.' As you know, people can be nervous about spending money when they're not sure what they're going to get. With Super Portuguese, professionals will be able to offer wines in which they're confident that their flavor profile will resonate with the American palate while simultaneously forwarding [their] guests' education. As sommeliers, our job is to open our guests' eyes and take them just a little bit further to enrich their wine experience. This Bordeaux style of wine from Portugal should be of great interest to a lot of people." 





*Boston-based sommeliers enjoy a five-course lunch at SAVR.*

# THE LOFTY BISTRO LUNCHEON

The five-course lunch was quite the elaborate affair.

On its website, SAVR dubs itself a “spirited American bistro,” but the level of service and quality of the menu belied the informality of that label. The result was befitting of the wines, and the richness and warmth of the soulful food was welcomed by the group on a cold and rainy Boston day.



Served alongside tuna tartare with avocado, cucumber, sambal, soy, and sesame nori chips was the fresh, fragrant, and citrusy **Quinta da Pedra 2022 Graça da Pedra Alvarinho**.



The creamy opulence of the **Quinta da Pedra 2019 Milagres Alvarinho** paired beautifully with the richness of assorted imported cheeses, while the wine's bright stone-fruit character helped to cut the fat.



For the third course, seared pork belly with Asian pear salad, Aleppo chili, cilantro, and hot honey was served alongside the **Principal 2012 CalCariO<sub>3</sub>**, whose flavors of fresh red fruit and tobacco complemented the dish's umami overtones.



The **Principal 2013 Grande Reserva** accompanied spinach-prosciutto ravioli with braised short rib, Sherry, wild mushrooms, and Parmigiano. Its full-bodied profile of black fruit and fresh basil stood up proudly to the beef.



SAVR fittingly had some 20-year-old **Fonseca Tawny Port** on hand to serve with the honey-lavender crème brûlée: a final pairing that hit the sweet spot in terms of both its sugar level and its age.

# A Message From Our Board Chair

## DEAR BEVERAGE PROFESSIONALS:

We are writing to you with a farewell, though hopefully not a permanent goodbye. After years of effort in raising funds for the life-changing educational opportunities SommFoundation offers, we are now making the choice to take a hiatus in 2025 in order to build up an organization that can be stronger than ever when we reopen in 2026.

Since early 2022, SommFoundation has lost over \$200,000 in funding, which means we have some tough choices to make. We have sadly seen cuts to philanthropic spending; changes in industry priorities regarding education and outreach; and decreased giving to corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This year, we will work with our partners to fine-tune our mission so that we can best meet the needs of aspiring professionals and the industry at large while building a sustainable model for the future.

As you know, SommFoundation champions and supports a long-term vision for the accessibility and continued growth of the beverage-alcohol business, which is worth \$200 billion in the U.S. alone. We believe this requires support for the passionate, knowledgeable, dependable, driven individuals from diverse backgrounds who represent its future. In the process of making this difficult decision to pause operations, maintaining transparency concerning our mission to provide career-changing educational opportunities to these individuals—many of whom otherwise couldn't afford them—has been at the top of our priorities.

In mid-November 2024, we launched a month-long fundraising campaign on social media. We were blown away by the support we saw from you, our community. The number of Instagram accounts we reached during this short period of time went up 144%, with engagement up 219%. The clicks on our external links were up 550% and we had almost 20,000 impressions on our posts. We see each and every one of you out there who did everything you could to spread the word



*Participants in the 2024 Rudd Round Table, co-organized by SommFoundation.*

that SommFoundation provides an essential service and needs financial support to keep going. Your messages regarding what SommFoundation has done for you and why we are needed are deeply moving to read. We are grateful for all of you.

However, we were unable to raise the necessary amount. To remain in good standing with our supporters, donors, vendors, and most importantly our applicants, then, SommFoundation is auctioning off the wines that remain in our cellar, which had been in reserve for our educational programs. By doing this, we hope to ensure that our nonprofit can remain active as we continue to fundraise, albeit without our small but mighty support staff or incurring any other costs outside of the bare minimum needed to avoid dissolution. Meanwhile, we have offered to refund all donations made toward scholarships and enrichment trips that we cannot fulfill at this time, although our intention is to resume all our endeavors in 2026.

We hope that we, as the all-volunteer board of directors, will be able to renew the large gifts that used to sustain SommFoundation and help over 2,000

individuals since 2003 to access education that fueled their passion and success. While it deeply saddens us to be in the position we are in (in truth, it breaks our hearts—nonprofit work is inherently emotional, after all), we remain hopeful that we will come back in a stronger position to offer another 20 years or more of service.

During this time, please share our story and our website with your networks, your employers, and anyone who may contribute to future educational opportunities. SommFoundation was built by and for the wine community, and you are what has made us successful for more than two decades. If you are interested in supporting our mission, please contact me at [thomas.price@sommfoundation.com](mailto:thomas.price@sommfoundation.com). Thank you again—we can't wait to be a part of your education and positive growth next year. SJ

*Thomas Price, Master Sommelier,  
Chairman of the Board,  
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# Montepulciano Gets a Makeover

**IF YOU GREW UP** in an Italo-American community in the Northeast, chances are “Monty” was a household word, referring to your family’s wine of choice. Montepulciano d’Abruzzo gained that status when the price for a straw flask of Chianti outgrew the average budget for a cheap and cheerful everyday bottle. It was stocked at the liquor store in magnums, often bought by the case; inevitably served by the glass at neighborhood restaurants; and sold in plastic cups at saints’ feasts. Monty was reliable and uncomplicated, delivering value as well as flavor. No wonder it’s Italy’s second-most widely planted variety after Sangiovese.

As traditional Sunday dinners have faded into the past and our lifestyle, tastes, and expectations have changed, so too has Monty evolved. Abruzzo’s array of terroirs, marked by distinct river valleys stretching from snow-covered Apennine peaks to sandy Adriatic beaches, is finally getting the attention it deserves.

Starting with the 2023 vintage, the region’s subzones and microclimates are being listed on labels per the new rules of the denomination. Montepulciano d’Abruzzo DOC will be identified as coming from one of eight subzones, including the provinces of L’Aquila, Teramo, Pescara, and Chieti in addition to the smaller areas of Vestini, Tirino, Peligni, and Teate. A new DOCG, Casauria, will join the previously existing Colline Teramane and more recent Tullum (Terre Tollesi). The dominance of the Montepulciano grape is implied but not mentioned on the labels of three other red DOCs: Villamagna, Ortona, and Controguerra. The same applies to the d’Abruzzo DOC red, which can also have provincial identification. The IGTs currently have nine sub-territorial identifiers, though starting with the 2024 vintage they will all fall under the singular Terre Abruzzesi IGT.

Confused yet? An Italian friend and wine producer once told me, “If chaos and confusion didn’t already exist, we

would have had to invent it in Italy.” So far, local authorities aren’t talking much about organoleptic distinctions between the four provinces, let alone their sub-subzones, but official descriptions will be coming, so somms should be on the lookout and be ready to taste through the wines—that’s part of our role, after all!

The point of this hyperlocalization, I submit, is to highlight the wines’ sense of place, even if the definition thereof is elusive. In an age of concern about our carbon footprint, we can justify shipping a bottle of wine around the world because it speaks whence it came. Montepulciano d’Abruzzo wines are unique beyond any shadow of a doubt and merit discovery despite the initial confusion their labels may cause.

That producer friend of mine also advised me to look at a bowl of spaghetti as illustrative of Italian culture: Strands are going every which way, sauce coverage is spotty, and nothing is orderly about it, but in the end, it is simply delicious. 





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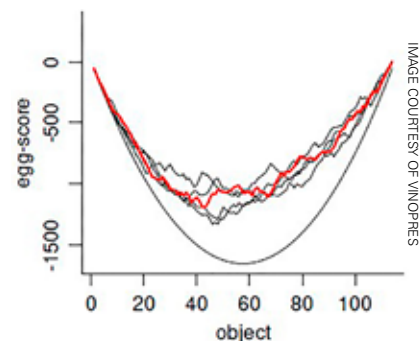
# The Metrics of Medals

## NEW ANALYTICAL MODELS SHED LIGHT ON THE INNER WORKINGS OF WINE COMPETITIONS

**IN 2021**, the prestigious Concours Mondial de Bruxelles (CMB) wine competition began using artificial intelligence developed by Winespace, a Bordeaux-based firm founded by Sylvain Thibaud and Julian Laithier in 2015, to synthesize its judging protocol as a value-added feedback mechanism for producers. (CMB also collaborates with UCLouvain in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, on further analysis that evaluates the performance of its juries and judges.)

tasting notes in as many as eight different languages. The technology seamlessly translated and analyzed those notes and compiled a sensory analysis for each wine.

According to Thibaud, the resulting reports, which have been shared with producers for the past two years, offer a collective picture of the wine's quality and style in the form of summarized tasting notes, an aroma wheel, a list of specific strengths and weaknesses, and comments for improvement. "From the CMB's



use," explains Thibaud. "We can also identify the criteria they seem less sensitive to and areas where they are less expressive."

This type of rigorous analysis soundly debunks the commonly held belief that wine sensory evaluation is purely subjective. For example, analysis of my five-person jury for the 2024 Sauvignon Selection competition (provided by CMB and prepared by Christian Ritter of Ritter and Danielson Consulting along with UCLouvain) revealed a highly correlated panel working with astounding consistency.

The eggshell plot depicted above illustrates the performance of a coherent jury, one that arrived at a consensus in their scoring when evaluating wines of the same or similar quality (namely Sauvignon Blancs from world-class regions). The panelists' close alignment is represented by the cluster of jagged curves just above the smooth curve, which is the control metric for a theoretical jury with identical scores.

This is one of half-a-dozen metrics reported by Ritter, all of which are immensely useful in understanding my performance and the performance of my colleagues over the course of the competition. Metrics of this caliber could help the industry address valid concerns about inconsistency in scoring caused by the different models and scoring systems used by commercial wine competitions. 



**Winespace's aroma wheels for two entries in the Concours Mondial des Bruxelles competition—one white wine (left) and one red.**

I first experienced Winespace's rubric for sensory analysis when judging the México Selection by CMB, held in Guanajuato, Mexico, in 2021. At the time, its technology was a promising prototype, and the collaboration with CMB helped Thibaud and Laithier to commercialize what is now a robust platform called Taste AI that has since been adopted by CMB and others.

In April 2024, I used the AI tool again during the Sauvignon Selection by CMB held in Leibnitz in the Austrian state of Styria, where a panel of judges recorded

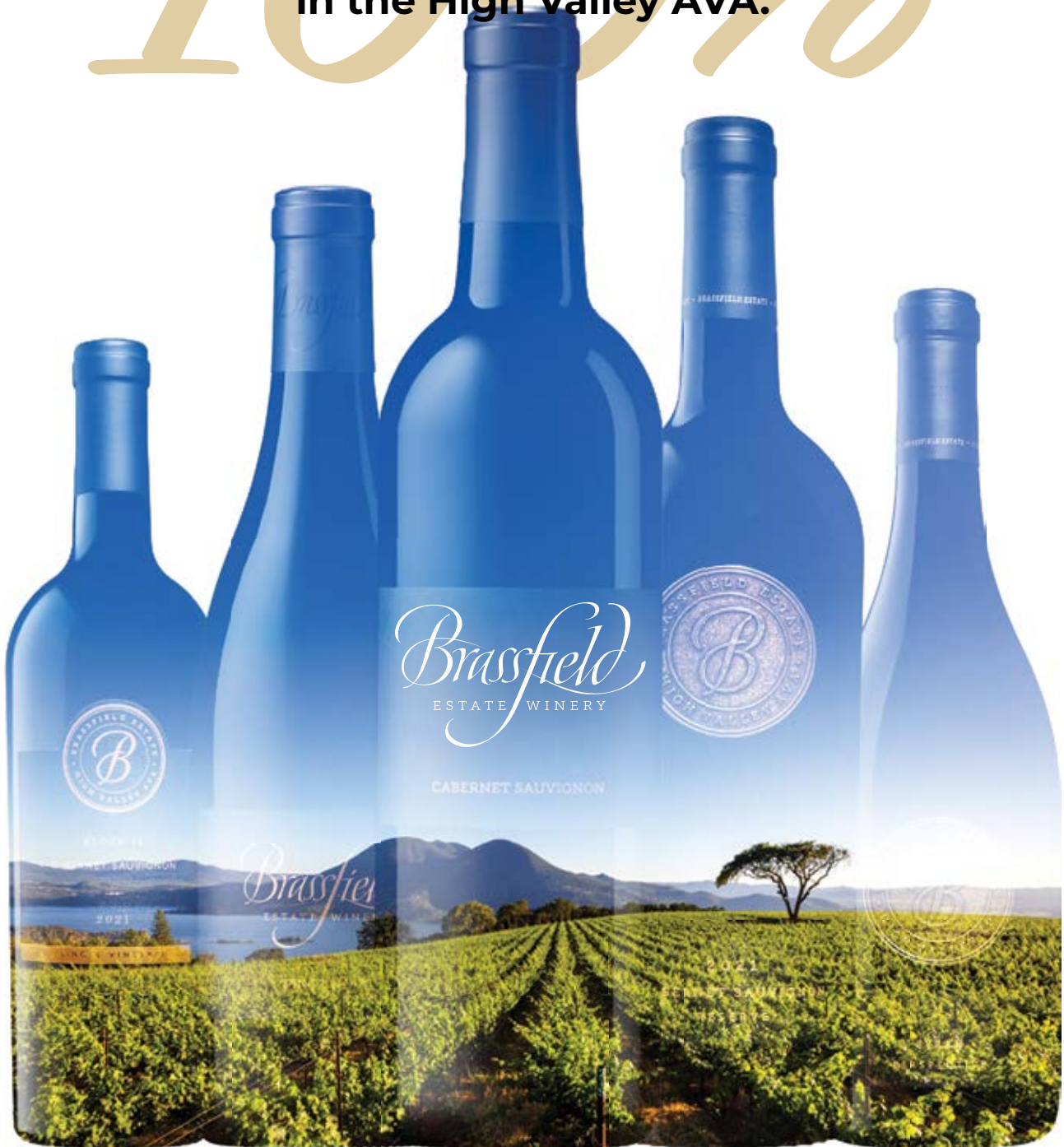
point of view, this approach also reflects a desire for transparency in the wine assessment process, thereby reinforcing the industry's confidence in the seriousness and value of the medals awarded," he observes.

In the future, Winespace plans to provide feedback to each judge on their taste preferences, scoring style, and other criteria. "One of the aims of analyzing comments is to identify the preferences and writing habits of each taster and to better understand the frequency of the concepts and descriptive vocabulary they



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# A People Business

**DESMOND ECHAVARRIE, MS,** TRACES HIS JOURNEY FROM WINE SERVICE TO BOUTIQUE DISTRIBUTION AND PRODUCTION by Stacy Briscoe



*After years on the hospitality side of the business, Desmond “Des” Echavarrie, MS, founded Scale Wine Group in 2016 to serve as an advocate for small, family-owned brands.*

## **DESMOND “DES” ECHAVARRIE,**

MS, started his career in hospitality at the age of 14. “My mom said, ‘I have a birthday present for you, but I can’t wrap it.’ She tossed an apron at me and announced, ‘I got you a job,’” he recalls. This humble beginning in the kitchen of a small mom-and-pop Italian joint in his home state of Arizona was all it took to hook Echavarrie. “I loved the environment, the people, the communal experience,” he says. “By the time I was 17 I was closing up the place at night.”

Echavarrie climbed the hospitality ladder from saucier to server to sommelier in the span of just a few years, working at ever-more-prestigious restaurants alongside legendary chefs and eventually landing in Napa at Thomas Keller’s The French Laundry; while there, he achieved the coveted title of Master Sommelier. Ever the curious-minded entrepreneur seeking to propel his career to even loftier heights, Echavarrie asked himself, “Where do I go from here?”

The answer, he found, lay in learning “a new side of the business,” he says. “I didn’t yet have any business skills, but my background in wine, my wine studies, and the MS credentials . . . were all great stepping stones. And I was able to parlay that experience into my position at Realm.” Now a notable Napa name, the boutique winery, which was founded in 2002, had recently undergone a restructuring when Echavarrie stepped in as director of sales in 2014. There, he was able to immerse himself in the wine business from another angle. “I had some incredible mentorship,” says Echavarrie, “and it helped solidify in my mind that I wanted to start my own wine business





*Des Echavarrie works with winemaker Britt Richards (left) on his boutique label, Alta Nova.*

and carve a career working with small, independent producers.”

And so in 2016, Echavarrie founded Scale Wine Group to do just that, working with up-and-coming brands to help them get their foot in the door of the wholesale market. “It’s getting harder and harder in this challenging market for small producers to have a presence. Larger-volume companies have such a priority with major distributors. We are one of the last advocates for small, family-owned brands,” he says, adding that his philosophy is built on an often-forgotten mantra: “The wine business is 100% a people business.” For him, successfully connecting his clientele with the right outlets is all about cultivating relationships. “It might sound cheesy, but when you have the right relationships with distributors and accounts that you can rely on, they’ll let you know what [wines] they’re looking for in their portfolios,” he explains. “And I’ve developed what I believe is a good sense of where we can sell and what’s going to be successful.”

He’s also investing in his own team, growing a robust roster of regional salespeople who can work more closely with distributors in specific markets. “What we need to do is give more support to the distributors, coordinate closer connections between them and the boutique wine brands, and get these brands more involved in the target market space,” says Echavarrie. “And really that’s just taking

a cue from the consumer: This DTC-like approach makes it feel like they have a personal connection with the owner, vintner, and winemaker and brings excitement—and then *they’ll* become advocates for the wines.”

From hospitality to wholesale, Echavarrie is now taking what he’s learned from the business side to craft his own wines, founding his boutique label, Alta Nova, with the 2016 vintage. As the name implies, it sources mountaintop Napa fruit to produce both single-vineyard expressions and wines celebrating the broader Napa AVA, with an annual production of 2,000–3,000 cases. Echavarrie refers to himself as the vintner and works alongside winemaker Britt Richards, who oversees production. “We’re in sync every step of the way,” says Echavarrie. “I know what I want, she knows how to make it, and we’re constantly talking and tasting together.”

Another project Echavarrie has in the works is a relaunch of Band of Vintners, a label he took over in 2023 that was previously based on one wine, a collaborative effort from several esteemed Napa winemakers. Echavarrie’s vision is to work with up-and-coming winemakers separately to craft something experimental that’s interesting to them. “Instead of seven cooks in the kitchen making one dish, we’ll bring on new voices with unique stories and give them carte blanche to make their wine,” he says. *SJ*



*With an annual production of 2,000–3,000 cases, Alta Nova features both single-vineyard expressions and wines celebrating the broader Napa AVA.*

## TASTING NOTES

**Alta Nova 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$33)** Tobacco, garrigue, anise, and leather meld on the palate of this big-boned Cab; showing style, substance, and balance, it’s powered by blackberry-lathered graphite. The dusty mouthfeel is energetic and shadowed with earthy charisma. **94** —*Meridith May*

**Alta Nova Cellars 2022 Lot 1981 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$40)** Violets bloom on the nose, leading to silky, spicy notes of dried heather, vanilla, and boysenberry. Luscious and delicious, with round, seductive tannins that dry the palate amid notes of cocoa and walnut. **94** —*M.M.*

**Alta Nova 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$63)** Boysenberry and tobacco are bound in leather and held in check by sultry, round, dusty tannins. Structured and intense, graphite stands firm, contributing midpalate tension. It’s an overall luxurious wine dressed in a velvet robe. **95** —*M.M.*

**Alta Nova 2019 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$95)** Dusky notes of black tea, tilled soil, molasses-soaked cedar, and walnut show depth and glamour. Plum and espresso are deep and resonant on the dramatic finish. **97** —*M.M.*



*The SommCon 2024 “Technique or Terroir?” panelists with moderator David Glancy, MS, CWE (kneeling): Brassfield Estate Winery general manager Jonathan Walters; Wente Vineyards senior winemaker Alec Fraser; DAOU Vineyards and PATRIMONY ambassador Laura Reynolds; Cobalt Brands CEO and founder Sean Perry; and Altos Planos co-founder Juan Coronado.*

# THE GREAT DEBATE

**AT SOMMCON 2024, AN AGE-OLD QUESTION—TECHNIQUE OR TERROIR?—EXPANDED ITS SCOPE**

**STORY BY KATE NEWTON / PHOTOS BY RAFAEL PETERSON**

**“TECHNIQUE OR TERROIR?”:**

This abbreviated question, meant to examine whether production or environmental conditions are more responsible for the flavors, aromas, and other desirable qualities—what one may call the “true essence”—of a given alcoholic beverage, has been a recurring subject at various seminars, webinars, and tastings that *The SOMM Journal* and sister publication *The Tasting Panel* have hosted over the years. The fact that it yields such nuanced discussions every time is a

testament to its perennial nature—and to each contributing panelist who brings a fresh perspective that imparts yet another dimension to a timeworn topic.

Our latest examination at SommCon 2024, which unfolded October 5–7 in San Diego, California, featured not only three wines—the traditional lens through which technique and terroir are explored—but also a pair of spirits, namely a Scotch and a mezcal. Their involvement reflected SommCon’s ongoing efforts to expand its focus to other facets of the al-

coholic beverage industry—an approach praised by attendee Steph Waters, a New Jersey-based sommelier who was drawn to the session in part because it was moderated by David Glancy, MS, CWE, from whom she had previously taken a class through the San Francisco Wine School, founded by Glancy in 2011. “This year was particularly intriguing because of the integration of the wine, of the spirits, of the saké, and of the beer,” said Waters after the seminar. “It makes me want to understand more about the





**Attendees praised the inclusion of spirits in a discussion typically reserved for the wine world. “Wine and spirits, it’s all the same family,” said SOMM Journal publisher/editor-in-chief Meridith May (right), pictured with David Glancy.**

spirits side . . . and at the end of the day what consumers are looking for. [This way,] we’re uplifting the industry together [and asking] how we can build together.”

Glancy, for his part, uplifted the voices of each of the five panelists in turn, deftly guiding the group through discussion points that might have veered into the esoteric without his expertise as an educator: “We want to make this, as usual, a fun, interactive tasting [while] learning really at the essence what these products are,” Glancy began before providing some additional context on his view of the topic at hand. “I did a session many years ago at a Society of Wine Educators conference called ‘Can Terroir Be Tasted?’, and I co-presented with a Master of Wine. I led off and said, ‘For starters, we disagree on this basic issue, and the problem is that we don’t agree on the definition of the word *terroir*.’ That’s something we can talk about, but what is *terroir*? Is it purely the mineral content of the soil, or is it slope, elevation, aspect, drainage, plants and animals nearby, wind, sun, rain, snow, fog—is it all of these different elements as well as in some cases the traditions of man in the region? We’re not dealing with anything Old World here, so it’s a very open question”—one whose pertinence only grew with each passing presentation.

## THE BURJ KHALIFA OF LAKE COUNTY: BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY

In terms of *terroir*, Brassfield Estate Winery’s 2019 Perspective Syrah, blended with roughly 8% Viognier, is certainly unique: Overlooking Clear Lake and Mount Konocti, its eponymous vineyard in Lake County is set on well-drained, volcanic Franciscan series soils just under 3,000 feet above sea level—“to be precise, the same height as the tip of the [Dubai skyscraper] Burj Khalifa,” said Brassfield Estate Winery general manager Jonathan Walters. “There are no vineyards 5 miles to the west of it, about 100 miles to the north of it, about 2 miles to the east of it, and another 5 to the south, so this is a very isolated site. . . . It’s quite high—probably 1% of vineyards are planted at this elevation.”

According to Walters, the elevation plays a “major role” in the character of the wines it yields, particularly the Syrah: “Syrah is traditionally a very large grape, but the Syrah at this site is smaller than our Cabernet berries up there. We have 10%–15% more [ultra-violet light] at that site [than our other properties], so the berries get very small and very powerful. Not to mention the wind—it’s constantly about 30 miles per hour. High Valley is a transverse valley—it goes east to west—so it really pushes all that wind [from the coast] across the site and down the valley to cool us off. . . . We actually had an ET sensor up there that measures the evapotranspiration of the vine, and it basically said you need to water nonstop seven days a week because of the wind and the soil. So we took that sensor out because it wasn’t telling us anything that we needed to know,” he said to laughter from the group. “We water it as much as we can, but we let this [vine] just do what it wants. It flops down and naturally protects itself from the sun. . . . So technology hasn’t really led to any real changes in how we want to grow, because the vine takes care of itself in this scenario.”



The wine underwent temperature-controlled fermentation inoculated with native yeast before aging in (90% new) French and Hungarian oak. “Some intervention is usually needed, and I think the wine is showing great,” said Glancy. “The color, the tannin, and yet the acid—that balance is something you do find in high-elevation wines.” Responded Walters, “We try to get this off quick—at that elevation, if you let it hang too long it will be raisinated. . . . Syrah to me is a freaky grape. It can be like licking a pepper grinder all the way to licking boysenberry syrup—and I like it when it’s in between!” Boasting bright acid on entry, the wine certainly struck a balance between those extremes, showing notes of blackberry, boysenberry, and tobacco as well as power and towering structure on the palate—not unlike the Burj Khalifa. (For more on Brassfield Estate, see the cover story on page 42.)

## THE LURE OF LIVERMORE: WENTE VINEYARDS



Also located in a transverse valley—Livermore, to be specific—is Wente Vineyards, whose 2021 Wetmore Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon was presented by senior winemaker Alec Fraser. “We’re about 30 miles directly east of the San Francisco Bay . . . and we get a lot of maritime winds coming off of the bay and through our valley, so we get these big diurnal shifts,” he said. “It’s pretty warm and mellow during the daytime,

usually hitting about 90 degrees during the growing season; then it drops at least 30 Fahrenheit every single night. So part of our terroir is that we’re getting this really good color development, tannin ripeness, and sugar accumulation, and then at night when we get that big temperature drop very quickly, we’re retaining a lot of our acid and the sugar stops accumulating overnight.”

The Wetmore Vineyard is “160 acres mostly planted to Cabernet, and this wine really expresses what Niki Wente, our director of viticulture and fifth-generation winegrower, calls Livermore dust, so it’s not a huge fruit bomb,” added Fraser. “There’s this really complex, earthy, dusty layer to it.” Those aforementioned cool nights extend the growing season at the site to mid- to late October, while the gravelly sandy-loam soils result in water stress that yields abundant color and tannin in the grapes. “On the technique side, we’re just really trying to showcase what our viticulture partners are doing in the ground out there. This is only 40% new French oak. I think it’s hard to [show] terroir with 100% oaked wine—you’re really hiding that sense of place,” he continued. “We want all the color we can get coming from those skins—that’s mouthfeel that you’re adding and where your flavors and aromas are coming from. Tannin is great to a certain level; we can get over-astringent wines, so we measure every single day during our fermentation what our color and tannin extraction is. That guides how we’re managing the caps, how much we’re pulling out of it, as well as our pressing decisions.”

Glancy noted that “not many hands went up” when the audience was asked if they were familiar with the Livermore Valley and reiterated how much of an influence the consistently strong winds can have on winegrowing. “Those breezes come through like they do not in Napa Valley, and that’s not a knock against Napa Valley, it’s a uniqueness of the terroir” in Livermore, he said. The wine, which Glancy referred to as a “great, great value” representative of the “massive spectrum” of wines produced by Wente, certainly showed both mouthwatering acidity and dusty complexity that lingered through the finish.

## THE PINNACLE OF PASO: DAOU VINEYARDS



Brothers and DAOU Vineyards founders Daniel and Georges Daou had terroir top of mind when they came to Paso Robles to establish a winery nearly 20 years ago, but the vastness of the AVA made finding the ideal spot a challenge. “It took them a really long time,” said Laura Reynolds, ambassador for DAOU and its PATRIMONY label, to settle on the Adelaida District, establishing a vineyard on what’s now known as

DAOU Mountain roughly 14 miles from the Pacific Ocean at 2,200 feet in elevation. Morning fog nourishes the vines, allowing the vineyard to be almost entirely dry farmed, and the calcareous clay soil is full of limestone, imparting minerality and acid structure—and thus ageability—in the wines. “On the east side [of the appellation] it could be 120 [degrees Fahrenheit] and on the west side it could be in the 90s or 85, so we have a large temperature range,” Reynolds explained. “Because we’re so high up, we range anywhere from 8 to 10 degrees cooler than downtown [Paso Robles], which is really beneficial for our Cabernet.”

Case in point was the 2021 vintage of DAOU’s flagship wine, *Soul of a Lion*, which comprises six different Bordeaux clones—three from Pauillac and three from Saint-Émilion—and boasts that throughline of acidity weaving through blue and black fruit before giving way to baking spice on the finish. “We wanted to hone in on more of an Old World meets New World wine, looking for Old World soil but California sunshine,” she noted, adding that because the Daou brothers came into winemaking from the tech industry, “they’re heavily into always experimenting. . . . You’d never expect it, but fermentation on this wine is only five days; Daniel has found a natural yeast within DAOU Mountain which has a bit of resistance to heat during fermentation. We have a rigorous pumpover system, so we are able to extract color quickly. . . . We’re using about 12 different cooperages, but for *Soul of a Lion* we’re using a specific wood called *bois rosé*; it’s a pink-hued wood less than a millimeter in diameter for that barrel stave. We’re really trying to let the wine do its thing—this specific wine, the 2021, was really a nice balance between both Mother Nature and technology.”

On the topic of experimentation, Reynolds noted that DAOU is currently producing small lots of sulfur-free wines for its estate program with the aid of tools like barrel sensors that detect temperature changes and bacterial growth: “It’ll be interesting to see how we’re able to do that in the cellar, to keep it temperature-controlled with no bacteria. It’s going to be a big feat, but so far there are a lot of smiles coming out of the cellar, so we’re hoping it works out.”



## THE WAY OF WATER: FABLE WHISKY



Pivoting to the spirits side, Sean Perry, CEO and founder of Cobalt Brands, began by instructing the audience on how best to taste a cask-strength single cask whisky, in this case the Fable Linkwood 12 Year Old from the Scottish Highlands: "Sip it very lightly, then add one or two drops of water and see how the whisky completely changes." The spirit's intriguing floral aromatics led to notes

of cinnamon-dusted apple and honey that became more prominent with the addition of water, melding with hints of buttery toffee and melon on a palate that felt buoyant despite the ABV of 56.3%.

Perry and his partners, Andrew Torrance and Calum Lawrie, established Fable as an independent bottler that exclusively sources single cask whiskies from some of Scotland's most renowned distilleries, which they then further age or finish in different combinations of barrels. "I have a wine background, and when I think of terroir, the first thing that comes to my mind is Burgundy and the specific regions that really produce different wines; two regions can be so close but produce two totally different outcomes. That's where whisky comes in, as a cask made by, for example, the Linkwood distillery. That same cask, if we distilled it in 2011 or 2012, those two casks are totally different. . . . That's one aspect of the terroir in Scotland," Perry said, adding that, "in a more macro sense, terroir is based on the ingredients of the specific region. In Scotland it's wheat and in America it's corn, maybe, for bourbon; in Mexico it's the indigenous plant of agave. . . . Going back to more of the micro [view] and what makes each distillery different, that's a lot more [related to] technique. Linkwood has a lot of honey flavor and long tannins; the distiller does that by having a longer fermentation period. Normal fermentations in single malt are about 14 days—Linkwood goes even up to 20 days. Then obviously there's technique in what happens after the initial aging, where you have Sherry casks and all types of cask variations [for finishing]."

Glancy chimed in with his own tips for tasting, also noting how much adding water "increased the aromatics rather than decreasing them": "Nosing it as a wine person . . . my favorite thing is not using my nose, just my mouth, so get your mouth open wide over the glass and breathe in, and you can really sense everything that's there aromatically without burning every single hair out of your nose." Added Perry, "You really get the best nose right out of the bottle—the first two seconds [after it's poured] into the glass."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALTOS PLANOS

## THE INHERENT TRUTH OF TERROIR: TRES TRIBUS

For the final spirit of the seminar, Tres Tribus Mezcal, "terroir is everything," noted Juan Coronado, co-founder of the brand's parent company, Altos Planos. "We consider terroir all that touches us, that we touch, that we breathe, the moisture, the air, the aromas, the soils, and whatever is underneath that soil too. Mexico is also home to 18 denominations of origin [as well as to] 150-plus species of agave, a beautiful palette of colors that we can [use to] create different styles of mezcal."

Tres Tribus is produced on an estate in southern Mixteca in Oaxaca, situated at an elevation of over 6,500 feet and featuring a mix of soil types—among them *Cascajo*, which is calcareous and rich in minerals, and *tierra roja*, a red soil also found in the highlands of Jalisco—atop of a layer of limestone abundant in iron, magnesium, and potassium. "Most maestro mezcaleros will not put mezcals into barrels because they already come with that rich complexity from the soil and the altitude," Coronado said, noting that "the only technology that we apply to this [spirit] is reverse osmosis . . . so we can make this over and over. We [also] do two distillations; some mezcals will react to copper and others not, hence the fact that we use two different methods, artesanal and ancestral in clay pots. . . . You add in such a beautiful layer of minerality," which in this particular expression was balanced by light and airy confectionary notes and a complex, peppery, slightly green character that lingered through the finish.

"From head to toe, this mezcal took 16 years in ground and nine months in production. Hence why some mezcals are very expensive; it's because of not only the labor but how long the plants have been living in the ecosystem," said Coronado, adding that as the Tres Tribus team ferments in ground, "We use the heat of the soil to propel the fermentation . . . and cover with volcanic stones to catch the heat. We want to showcase the true flavor of the agave, not cover it with a curtain of smoke."

As the audience revisited their glasses for parting sips of the featured products, Glancy announced, "Now that everyone has talked about their products and process and terroir, did we settle the question? I don't think so—it's both! And a real shout-out to Meredith May and *The SOMM Journal* for breaking down the line" between the realms of spirits and wine. "It's very important. Wine and spirits, it's all the same family," responded May, all but assuring that as long as this debate exists, our pages will continue to amplify the insights it coaxes from the industry's leading voices, no matter where their expertise lies. **\$**

# A Yountville Legacy: Goosecross

**YOUNTVILLE EAST IS** part of the Yountville AVA, nestled between the Oakville and Stags Leap District AVAs, where afternoon breezes and overnight fog make it one of the coolest areas in Napa Valley. Set on well-draining alluvial soils, this unique, under-the-radar pocket of the appellation is home to Goosecross, a boutique winery that Christi Coors Ficeli and her family acquired in 2013. Over the next decade, Christi and her husband, Dave Ficeli, made thoughtful transformations to the entire property, including numerous vineyard enhancements, a state-of-the-art cellar, and a gleaming new tasting room. In fall 2021, the duo purchased the winery outright, realizing a longheld dream that made them only the third owners in its history.

At the outset of their stewardship, they enlisted winemaker and Duckhorn alum Bill Nancarrow, who immediately recognized the potential of the Yountville East estate. In the decade-plus since, Nancarrow has taken great pride in Goosecross' home vineyard, State Lane, making it a centerpiece of the portfolio with such authentically expressive bottlings as the Goosecross State Lane Cabernet Franc and Holly's Block Cabernet Sauvignon. To round out the lineup, Nancarrow also sources fruit from other prestigious locations throughout the Valley, from Howell Mountain to Carneros. —Meridith May SJ



a briar patch of flavors, including wild strawberry, tobacco, red beet, black tea leaves, charcoal, and black cherry. **94**



shows the tremendous character of Goosecross' State Lane Vineyard. It's dusky and brooding with husky notes of soy sauce, blackberry, violets, pencil lead, cinnamon, cedar, and blackstrap molasses. **95**

**Goosecross 2021 Tempranillo, Napa Valley (\$57)** Sourced from St. Helena and Calistoga, this small-production Tempranillo with 8% Grenache spent 15 months in (25% new) French oak. It offers

**Goosecross 2021 Cabernet Franc, State Lane Vineyard, Yountville, Napa Valley (\$90)** State Lane Vineyard contains three blocks devoted to Cab Franc; this example aged 19 months in (50% new) French oak. Following an earthy bouquet of soil and scrub, it demonstrates a luxurious flavor profile of jasmine-kissed boysenberry, lavender, and red plum. Gentle suede tannins meet a wash of white-peppered blueberries and sarsaparilla that spreads generously across the palate. The effect is well-structured elegance. **95**

**Goosecross 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Holly's Block, Yountville, Napa Valley (\$185)** Named after Christi Coors Ficeli's grandmother Holly Coors, Holly's Block is located just off the back patio of Goosecross' tasting room. This wine's brilliance of color and deliriously inviting aromas of blooming violets and blackberry tart lead to shiny-penny minerality on the boldly opulent palate, whose cashmere mouthfeel is layered with black cherry, new leather, and espresso. A river of expressive, juicy fruit contributes grip on the midpalate before finishing with spice-tinged notes of cedar and licorice. **96**



## Tasting Notes

The following wines are imported by Kysela (kysela.com).



**Castelmaure La Buvette, Vin de France (\$15)** Produced in the Corbières village of Durban, this blend of 60% Grenache and 40% Carignan grown on schist and limestone soils is reminiscent of a lighter Beaujolais and shows hints of strawberry, cassis, and blueberry on the nose along with spice, violet, and dried cherry on the palate. A refreshing everyday red meant for early consumption.



**Domaine Manoir du Carra Beaujolais-Villages Non-Filtré, France (\$21)** Containing 100% Gamay from 70- to 100-year-old vines set on south-facing slopes, this wine is unfiltered, adding to its complexity and mouthfeel. Semi-carbonic maceration during fermentation followed by four months on the lees in neutral oak casks delivers ripe fruit and a somewhat robust body not normally found in a Beaujolais-Villages. Drink now or hold a few years.



**Manoir du Carra Fleurie Vers le Mont, AOC Fleurie, Beaujolais, France (\$26)** This 100% Gamay was grown on pink granite soils on southeast-facing slopes at 450 meters in elevation. The grapes are handpicked and sorted; 70% of the fruit is then destemmed prior to carbonic maceration and oak aging. Intense color and lovely floral notes of violet and lily give this Fleurie depth and elegance.



**Manoir du Carra Combiat, AOC Brouilly, Beaujolais, France (\$29)** Handpicked 100% Gamay from 50-year-old vines grown in the nutrient-poor and highly acidic pink granite soils of Brouilly village Saint-Étienne-la-Varenne underwent whole-cluster fermentation and spent three to four months in oak, giving this ripe, delicious wine delicate notes of raspberry and florals. Best consumed while young.

The vineyards of the Castelmaure cooperative in the Languedoc-Roussillon appellation of Corbières.

# A Full-Blown Crush

THESE QUAFFABLE FRENCH REDS ARE FINDING FAVOR AMONG YOUNGER CONSUMERS

by David Ransom

**MANY CONSUMERS EQUATE** a good bottle of red wine with a full body and notable tannins. But not all producers would agree: Based on the grapes they grow, the climate in which they work, and other factors, plenty of winemakers favor ripe, lush, and quaffable styles to big, bold ones—and a growing number of enophiles are getting onboard with these fruity, crushable reds.

While such wines are made across the globe, two French regions leading the charge are the southern Bourgogne appellation of Beaujolais and Corbières in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of southwest France, where three grapes known for making wines of softness and approachability—Gamay in the former case and Grenache and Carignan in the latter—drive production.

Kysela Pere et Fils is the longtime importer of two brands currently, well, crushing it in the marketplace: third-generation Beaujolais producer Domaine Manoir du Carra and the historic SCV Castelmaure cave cooperative in Corbières, founded in 1921. Company owners Fran Kysela, MS, and son Joe think the trend toward lighter reds is growing as a way to get young consumers involved in wine. “Young wine drinkers aren’t focused on collectibles or high-ticket wines; they want immediate gratification and drinkability ... without breaking the bank,” says Fran—and as Joe points out, “Grapes like Grenache, Gamay, and Carignan are able to produce fruit-driven wines that are fun, versatile, and easy to drink; they’re perfect for a Wednesday store grab or to feature in a by-the-glass program.” SJ



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#### **Sparkling**

Christina Lopez, Acquiesce Winery, Lodi

#### **Viognier**

Vince Vidrine, Cowhorn Vineyard,  
Applegate Valley, Oregon

#### **Obscure White Rhone - Clairette Blanche**

Dominic O'Reilly, Doctor's Orders Natural Wine  
Company, Ojai

#### **White-Rhone Blend**

Herb Quady, Quady North, Rogue Valley, Oregon

#### **Rosé**

Brett Curran, Mid-Point, Templeton Gap District,  
Paso Robles

#### **Obscure Red Rhone – Vaccarèse**

Jason Haas, Tablas Creek Vineyard,  
Adelaida District, Paso Robles

#### **Grenache**

Wynne Sargeant, Peake Ranch Winery,  
Sta. Rita Hills

#### **Mourvèdre**

Sterling Kragten, CASS Winery,  
Geneseo District, Paso Robles

#### **Syrah**

Randall Grahm, The Language of Yes,  
Santa Maria Valley

#### **Red-Rhone Blend**

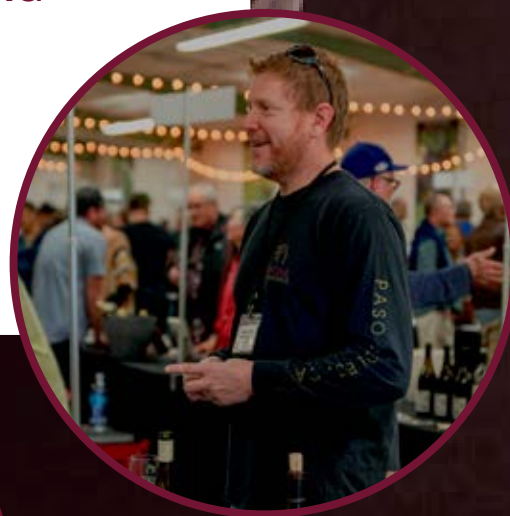
Danielle Langlois, Lasseter Family Vineyard,  
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THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

*Skiing is both a hobby and a means of transportation between restaurants for Sean Costa, sommelier at Colorado's Beaver Creek Resort.*

# High Altitudes, Hearty Appetites

FOUR SOMMELIERS SHARE THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DINING WELL IN THE MOUNTAINS *by Adam Kaufman*

**WHETHER CARVING DOWN** snowy slopes or warming up by a crackling fire, wine professionals who are based in or near mountain communities find inspiration in the white-capped peaks and crisp mountain air surrounding them. I asked four sommeliers for their insights on how their favorite winter activities and wine intertwine as well as for food and wine pairings that make the most of the season's hearty bounty.

## **SEAN COSTA, sommelier, Beaver Creek Resort, Beaver Creek, Colorado**

For Sean Costa, sommelier at Beaver Creek Resort, skiing is more than just a passion; it's an essential part of his job. Helping to oversee 11 beverage programs across the sprawling resort, he has found that the most efficient way to travel between work locations is often via a combination of chairlifts and ski runs. "Skiing is a great part of my life," he says. "There is nothing better than those two or three runs on my way to work."

There is something serendipitous about Costa's career given his upbringing on the slopes of New England (where his grandfather was a ski patroller at Butternut), followed by his discovery of wine. "Two of the things I love happen to be in the same place," he remarks, smiling. "Never in my wildest dreams could I have thought I'd have this job. I still pinch myself!" That said, managing beverage programs in the mountains comes with its own unique set of challenges. "Sometimes deliveries can be delayed a week and we can run out of volume items," Costa explains. "We had an event a year ago and one of our sales reps had to drive eight hours around a storm to deliver our wine."

Costa's favorite wintertime pairing is inspired by his nostalgia for the time he spent living in Switzerland. "I love a cool, dry Riesling or German Pinot Noir paired with rich, hearty German cuisine," he says. Additionally, he has a strong affinity for Northern Rhône Syrahs and Bordeaux, particularly in the context of robust Rocky Mountain fare. "We're pouring 2014 Château Canteemerle at Beano's Cabin, and I love to pair it with game," he notes, adding that he also enjoys "playing with dessert menus and wines. [The latter's] unctuous body and sweetness go well with cold weather."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZACK VASILEV

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEAN COSTA

*Zack Vasilev, right, with his daughters at Nevada ski resort Lee Canyon.*

## **ZACK VASILEV, director of wine, Barry's Downtown Prime, Las Vegas, Nevada**

While Las Vegas may not come to mind as a city with access to ski resorts, Lee Canyon is less than an hour away—allowing Zack Vasilev, director of wine at Barry's Downtown Prime, to hit the slopes even on a workday. "It's such a luxury [for a winter sports enthusiast] to work in a restaurant," Vasilev remarks. "I can snowboard all [morning], be back by 2:30 p.m. to shower and dress, and be at work by 4 p.m."

For Vasilev, snowboarding serves two purposes: It's a fun and meaningful way to spend time with his daughters and it provides respite from Vegas' fast-paced, high-pressure fine-dining scene. "I love the cold, the calmness of the mountain. It's the opposite of what I do for a living. Snowboarding is a nice counterbalance that shakes up your thoughts, recharges your batteries, and connects you with nature," he shares. "On days off, I'll hit the slopes with another wine professional and we'll bond over our shared passion for wine and winter sports."

In cold weather, Vasilev loves to indulge in a well-aged bottle of Dom Pérignon or Telmont Champagne paired with a selection of artisanal cheeses. To follow, he suggests creamy mushroom risotto paired alongside a rich domestic Chardonnay such as Summer Dreams Lazy Lounging from the Sonoma Coast. And of course, as a steakhouse somm, he would be remiss not to recommend a prime steak with a bold Napa Cab. But he also admits to equipping himself with a flask of mulled wine on the slopes: "It's easy to make, easy to drink, and warms you up without being fancy."



**SEAN RAZEE, MS, wine educator, Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits of Colorado**

Sean Razee, MS, has a profound understanding of the intersection between wine and winter sports. Having managed food and beverage programs at luxury hotels and restaurants in Beaver Creek, Colorado, before spending over three years as the corporate beverage director for Vail Resorts—the largest ski-resort company in the world with 42 properties spanning the globe—he is well versed in accommodating the diverse needs of the travelers who flock to the slopes from around the world each winter.

"Ski resorts are in a unique position to cater to international travelers expecting international wine programs of a very high caliber," Razee explains. "They're here on vacation, they're willing to splurge, and oftentimes they want to spend that money on fine wines. With that knowledgeable, well-traveled customer, you can offer the best brands and people will know them and be willing to spend money on them."

For après-ski sessions, Razee always recommends bubbles. "There's just something special about great Champagne after a day out on the mountain," he says. Come dinnertime, he appreciates the European influence that is prevalent at many ski resorts; one of his go-to winter meals is escargot en brioche at the Crêperie du Village in Aspen paired with a glass of Vocolet Chablis or Roc de L'Abbaye Sancerre. But "we also have a prominent steakhouse [scene] in the mountains," he says, while cold weather "nurtures this desire to drink bold red wines. I love a good rib-eye with a full-bodied Cabernet from Napa or Washington."



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEAN RAZEE

**Sean Razee, MS, says that "one of the great things about managing beverage programs in the mountains is that people are here to have fun . . . and unlike in the city, they're excited about snow."**



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRASCA FOOD AND WINE

**BOBBY STUCKEY, MS, founder/partner, Frasca Hospitality Group, Boulder, Colorado**

Bobby Stuckey is an unlikely skiing enthusiast, hailing as he does from the blisteringly sunny metropolis of Phoenix, Arizona. But his career in the hospitality industry led him to Aspen, Colorado, where he spent five years as a sommelier at The Little Nell. "When I moved to Aspen, I was ironically one of the few to go there *not* for the skiing," he reflects. But he eventually took to the slopes: "I mostly skied with Jay Fletcher, another Master Sommelier; who would quiz me on theory questions during gondola rides," he adds.

Following four years as wine director at The French Laundry in Yountville, California, Stuckey returned to Colorado in 2004 to open Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder; the Michelin-starred flagship restaurant of what is now the Frasca Hospitality Group. Both the restaurant group and the founders' wine company, Scarpetta Wines, focus primarily on the cuisine of Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region.

Winter in the Rocky Mountains conjures cravings for rich, hearty fare that warms the belly and the soul, and Friulian cuisine is replete with such dishes. "A dish that's been on the menu since we opened is *frico*," Stuckey notes. "It's a traditional Friulian dish with cheese, potatoes, and onions. It snowed four inches in Boulder yesterday—think of how good that will be! And it pairs perfectly with Friulian white wines." He also suggests *cjalsons*, a regional pasta, stuffed with rabbit and paired with Schioppettino from Petrusa.

When he's not working, Stuckey enjoys skiing at various resorts across Colorado, including Vail, where he recently opened a second location of Denver's Tavernetta; he's also an avid runner. "I love winter," he says. "It can be zero degrees and I'll still run—no problem. I love the serenity and the beauty—I love what Mother Nature can do." ❄️

**Bobby Stuckey works the floor at Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, CO.**



*The Rodney Strong estate in  
Healdsburg, CA.*



# Know Your Place

**RODNEY STRONG  
VINEYARDS IS  
UNDERGOING A  
REINVENTION—  
OR EVEN A  
RENAISSANCE**

*by Meridith May*

*"Toys are really not as innocent as they look. Toys and games are the preludes to serious ideas." —Charles Eames, American designer, architect, and filmmaker*

**It started with location:** Alexander Valley in California's Sonoma County. Rodney Strong Vineyards' decades of stewardship in the region has ensured the producer a place of prestige in the wine industry. Varietally focused, its popular lineup of labels has long been admired, receiving national and international attention as well as wide placement in stores and on wine lists.

In 2018, when Justin Seidenfeld was promoted to senior vice president of winegrowing and winemaking, determination of how the business would be run—that is, how the grapes should be grown and the wines should be made—took a beneficial turn: maybe not in the eyes of bookkeepers but in the perception of wine buyers and, ultimately, end consumers. "We undertook a soup-to-nuts transformation," attested Seidenfeld at a recent meeting, where he tasked me with tasting 11 new releases to challenge my palate memory. The exercise truly transformed my impression of the winery, which was already positive: There's a seriously bright new era ahead for Rodney Strong.





Seidenfeld's vision encompassed a handful of reorganizations that amounted to a multimillion-dollar project, including the opportunity to build his own team to execute his strategy of replanting hundreds of acres; upgrading viticultural practices such as irrigation and sustainability initiatives; and decreasing yields and case production.

"We went from a sales-driven mindset to making a higher-quality product," he explained. While most of the grapes they use are estate-grown, Seidenfeld also works with growers in prestigious subregions of Sonoma County to ensure the incoming fruit is up to his standards. He also has the winery investing in barrel futures, and he travels regularly to forests and cooperages throughout France to bid for the finest oak. Some of the staves are boiled instead of charred, removing harsh tannins and unwanted flavor nuances. The barrels themselves spend an average of 36–48 months in seasoning yards and are lightly toasted.

When it comes to the wines, he pointed out that balance is key, and these stellar releases represent a story of transcendence, revealing something more than just a beverage: the result of meticulous human intention. Seidenfeld knows his place, and it's Sonoma County.



**Justin Seidenfeld, senior VP of winegrowing and winemaking for Rodney Strong Vineyards, knows Sonoma County.**

## A Stellar Selection



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2023 Charlotte's Home Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma County (\$18)** From a late harvest, this wine saw extended hang time that helped develop its complex character. With 85% of its fruit fermented cold in steel tanks and 15% fermented in barrel, it offers bright aromatics and expressive

flavors. Baby's breath and a clean sweep of lemon, gem-like minerals, and tropical fruit play a major role. Richness on the midpalate doesn't take away from the crisp acidity. Imagine a pineapple sliced and topped with meringue before a finish of lime zest. **93**



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$25)** Sancerre-like with a dollop of California sun, the winery's first Sauvignon Blanc from Alexander Valley is a glistening beauty aged in stainless steel (59%), French oak (40%), and a small tank (1%) that winemaker Greg Morthole

refers to as a "sideways concrete egg." Viognier and Sémillon (3% each) add volume and aromatics, while the Sauvignon Musqué clone only intensifies the exotic nature of this complex white. Lemon sorbet and salinity whisper on the first sip. Honeysuckle petals develop midway, lengthening the well-rounded palate. Ripe melon and a squeeze of white grapefruit captivate on the finish. **94**



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2022 Chalk Hill Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$30)** Rodney Strong was the first producer to plant Chardonnay in Sonoma County in 1962. The grapes for this wine, which senior VP of winegrowing and winemaking Justin Seidenfeld refers to as "Meursault-esque," grow in silica-based volcanic soil, yielding

small berries with a core of minerality. The fruit is whole cluster-pressed before spending 14 months in (36% new) French oak with monthly bâtonnage. "We

get the wine out of the barrel and let [it] sit for four to five months to rest and recuperate"—or rather re-cooperate—"to harmonize and refresh," he explained. Harmony is indeed the right word. The wine's notes of caramel-coated pear with marzipan, butter pecan, and a midpalate highlight of nectarine and grapefruit add to the lush texture on the tongue. A whoosh of toastiness completes the cycle. **93**



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2022 Reserve Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$50)** Though this wine is barrel-aged longer than the Chalk Hill Chardonnay (18 months versus 14), it possesses a lighter, airier profile, with notes of green apple; the use of larger barrels makes a difference in its character. An

ethereal perfume of egg custard and melon translates right to the palate. The balance of acid and clean tropical fruit is apparent, ushering in gardenia and white tea leaves for a floral arrangement. The liquid practically prances along the palate, sparked by a salty mineral zing. **95**



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2023 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$30)** Seidenfeld and Morthole took clonal and vineyard selection seriously to bring in fruit from several cool-climate sites for this curvaceous red, released in mid-November 2024. Along with its ruby-red hue and chocolate-plum nose,

its unctuous mouthfeel of oily rose petals is quite disarming. Earthy, wet leaves surrender to cinnamon, exotic incense, and ripe black cherry, smoothing out on a toasty, satiny finish. **93**



**Rodney Strong Vineyards 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$25)** "This is the most important wine we make," noted Seidenfeld. "And we work with people who care about where their grapes come from." Fruit sourced from Cooley Ranch and other sites in Alexander Valley, Knights Valley, Dry Creek, and Russian

River Valley influence the character of this label—one of the portfolio's bestsellers. That plus aging in 100% French oak prove that the team has upped their game with respect to their goal of making a world-class Cab at an affordable price. Plush, round, and fresh red berries form a parade with red tea, hibiscus, and a hint of sweet basil. Complex and balanced, with a cocoa-mint finish, it's ready to pair with an array of cuisines. **92**

## A Ladder for Luxury Labels

When it comes to selecting grapes, Seidenfeld takes a "sweet-spotting" approach, targeting blocks, not rows: He walks the vineyards with the Maps.me app and emails the viticulture team with exact locations. Optically sorted fruit from each block is placed into its own tank (depending on the size of the sweet spot) and inoculated with native yeast.



### Rodney Strong Vineyards 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$28)

Carmine-black in hue, this graceful appellation-level Cab contains only free-run juice, which aids in its refinement. Aged in (50% new) French oak for 18 months, it boasts an elegantly sleek mouthfeel. Black cherry

is slathered across the palate along with cocoa and hints of espresso and slate as acidity steels the tongue. Though it's sturdy, it's also plush, exemplifying Alexander Valley's present and future potential. Without any herbal tones, it's chewy and just weighty enough, and the ripeness of the fruit is just right. **93**



### Rodney Strong Vineyards 2019 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$60)

Unfined and unfiltered, this wine, like the others in the Reserve tier, is sourced from individual lots in specially selected Sonoma County vineyards, including the winery's own Cooley Ranch, Rockaway, and Brothers. It encapsulates

the purity of Cabernet Sauvignon through its color, aromas, structure, and density. Chocolate-covered rose, cassis, soy sauce, heather, slate, and minty raspberry parade up and down the palate alongside smooth tannins. Midpalate notes of jasmine, coconut, and chocolate lead to a finish of sweet earth. **94**



### Rodney Strong Vineyards 2019 Symmetry, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$70)

Crafted in the Artisan Cellar at Rodney Strong Vineyards, Symmetry is the ultimate nod to its name, encapsulating the art of balance. The Bordeaux-style blend consists of 80% Cabernet Sauvignon with

smaller portions of the four other blending grapes and was aged in (75% new) French oak for 24 months. The 2019 vintage is a paragon of fleshy, perfumed complexity, featuring the fresh herbs of a mountain forest, the intensity of dark and dried fruits, and the exotic floral notes of ylang-ylang. Chocolate-covered pecan and a whisper of dusty cedar linger on the silky finish. This is a pedigreed wine of style and substance. **96**



## A Triumvirate of Single Vineyards

### Rodney Strong Vineyards 2020 Alexander's Crown, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$90)

Recognized in 1974 as the first property in Alexander Valley to produce a single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, the 63-acre Alexander's Crown sits on a hill of over 350 feet, caressed by the breezes off the Pacific. "This is the epitome of terroir in Sonoma County," Seidenfeld pointed out as we tasted the wine, whose nose was perfumed with peach blossom, Luxardo

cherry, jasmine, rosemary, and linden. On the palate, flavors of Mediterranean scrub, blackberry, tangerine bitters, cherry, and candy cane adhered to soft, sensual tannins. As it continued to open up, the flavor of blueberry jelly meshed with luxe mocha creaminess. The elegant texture stays in my mind as I write this. **97**

### Rodney Strong Vineyards 2020 Rockaway, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$90)

Sinewy and fleshy from midpalate to finish, this single-vineyard 100% Cabernet Sauvignon is made from fruit planted on a hillside that reaches 750 feet in elevation. Its 360-degree aspect makes it vulnerable to wind, which stunts the vines, while also granting it exposure to the sun. The grapes therefore maintain a natural balance that affects the wine's texture and flavor profile. Brambly spice and red currant amaze the senses. The texture is liquid bliss, awakening the palate with clove, damp earth, and broken rock. Top notes of red beet and rooibos tea are underlaid by savory tones of balsamic, anise, walnut, and cedar. **98**

### Rodney Strong 2020 Brothers Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$90)

The vineyard from which this wine is sourced spans 141 acres and rises to 1,000 feet above sea level near Cloverdale, where it's gifted with the warmest temperatures in Alexander Valley. Its western-facing slopes enjoy plenty of sunshine. Relative to Rodney Strong's two other single-vineyard expressions, Brothers is the most powerful, with notes of black cassis and a Napa-esque density. From its pecan pie nose to its dollop of dark fudge and splash of Worcestershire, it's powered by ripeness—an engine purring with graphite, used saddle leather, and blackberry in aspic. If Alexander's Crown is a cashmere sweater and Rockaway a leather bomber jacket, Brothers is a tuxedo. **99**

Rodney Strong's shift in approach, made up of little steps that equate to big changes, is more of a passion play than a business move. Seidenfeld's quote from golf master Ben Hogan sums some of this philosophy up: "If you can't outplay 'em, outwork 'em." **99**





# CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE: THE 2024 SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL WINE COMPETITION

Raise a Glass to the Finest Wines of 2024

## Best in Show White



*Covert  
Wineworks  
"Madison"  
2023 Story  
Petit  
Manseng*

## Best Overall Rosé



*Eberle 2023  
Cotes-du-  
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## Best in Show Red



*Mettler  
Family  
Vineyards  
2021  
Epicenter  
Zinfandel*

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# Divide and Conquer

PASO ROBLES POWER COUPLES MAKE THEIR MARK ON THE WINE AND SPIRITS INDUSTRY by Cindy Lowe Rynning

*"A powerful couple isn't perfect. It's just made of people that refused to give up."*  
—Caitlin Gibson

**AMONG THE MANY** members of Paso Robles' burgeoning beverage industry are four couples making a significant impact. Due to their perseverance, mutual respect and support, shared vision, and, yes, their production of exceptional wines and spirits, consumers are taking notice.

## **Building a Strong Foundation:**

### **Gibsey and Josh Beckett, Thibido Winery**

Gibsey Beckett, who was raised by educators, and Josh Beckett, who hails from a winemaking family, met at the University of San Diego. "It was inspirational having watched Josh's parents build the Peachy Canyon brand together and create a wonderful lifestyle," explains Gibsey. While Josh continues to be involved with Peachy Canyon as general manager, he and Gibsey founded Thibido Winery in 2018 in the Willow Creek AVA to produce wines from Rhône varieties. "We wanted to do something for just us," says Josh.

Gibsey is responsible for everything from marketing, sales, branding, and labeling to compliance and communication, while Josh oversees the production of small-lot wines from the vineyard to the winery. "I'm very fortunate to have a business partner, wife, and friend who is all-encompassing and trusting. We think alike, and it flows," he shares. Adds Gibsey, "We're clear on the direction of the brand, so it's easy and seamless because we have a foundation. We're now gliding, and it feels really good." As for the future, continues Josh, "We are full steam ahead right now, and our vision is to . . . keep evolving Thibido. If our two daughters who are in college and high school want to come back to do it, that's great. But I want to do things right."

*Gibsey and Josh Beckett.*



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOP WINERY

*Elena Martinez and Stanley Barrios.*

### **Finding Yin and Yang: Elena Martinez and Stanley Barrios, TOP Winery**

"How we met is a fairytale story," recalls Elena Martinez of walking into an algebra class of predominantly boys as a nervous freshman in high school and finding a seat next to sophomore Stanley Barrios. "I felt comfortable sitting there, and one day I told him that I liked his shirt," she says with a laugh. "We became good friends, have been married for 17 years, and have been co-owners of TOP Winery, producer of Rhône varietal wines from premium California vineyards, for 11 years."

The pair initially pursued different careers: Elena comes from a commercial real estate background and Stanley from a management position in the finance industry. When he developed a love of good wine and learned how to make it, they decided to start TOP in 2014 with eight barrels and 200 cases. "We still had full-time careers in the Los Angeles area and did not want to leave because we needed the cash," says Elena. After commuting to Paso Robles on weekends, Stanley resigned from his job in 2017; two years later, Elena followed, and the couple has been in Paso Robles full time since 2019. "The move was a huge change in momentum for TOP. [We invested] our hearts, our devotion, all our energy to get TOP where we wanted," adds Elena, noting that Stanley "is [the] creative, and I handle everything else. It's a nice yin to the yang. We balance each other out and support each other. . . . It's so satisfying." Why the name TOP? "We're like a top," she says. "Its intentions are to keep spinning steadily while maintaining balance within itself."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THIBIDO WINERY



### ***Following the Dream:***

#### **Denise and Scott Schramm, CRUSH Vineyard**

When Denise and Scott Schramm met at the office while working in New York's fashion industry, the last thing on their mind was to own a winery in Paso Robles. However, the business provided them ample opportunities to travel internationally and domestically. "Our many travels allowed us to find our palate when we visited various wine regions," says Scott. When they flew to Los Angeles, the couple often extended their trip to visit Napa Valley. "Back in the 1990s, Napa was evolving, and we were able to meet winery owners and pay little if any tasting fees. The entire experience was enticing," he adds.

By 2018, their two daughters were attending college in Southern California. "One of our daughters knew how passionate we were about wine and suggested that we visit Paso Robles. We loved it and decided to look for property. We realized that our dream could be a reality," says Denise. "We found property already planted to vines, built our house, and moved from the East Coast to California." CRUSH Vineyard now produces up to 850 cases a year of Tempranillo and Tannat, and while the couple plans to add new varieties to their portfolio, "we want to remain small," Denise continues. "It's a family endeavor and our girls love to participate, but they are embarking on their own careers before they make a commitment to CRUSH. Now, Scott and I divide and conquer—he's more farm-based and I handle marketing and social media." Adds Scott, "We want to get better every day, week, year."

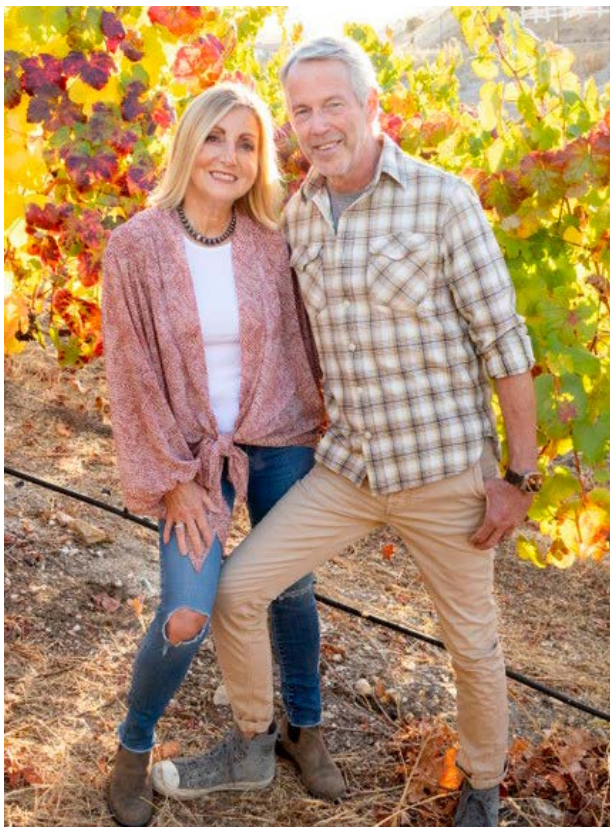


PHOTO COURTESY OF CRUSH VINEYARD

**Denise and Scott Schramm.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF RE:FIND DISTILLERY

**Alex and Monica Villicana.**

#### ***Taking Risks:* Monica and Alex Villicana, RE:FIND Distillery**

Monica and Alex Villicana met at the University of Southern California and have been married for 30 years. Alex was inspired to join the wine industry after working three harvests for a Paso Robles producer; in 1993, he was able to pick fruit from the winery's vineyard and make his own wine. Although both Monica and Alex had full-time jobs in Los Angeles, they opted to purchase their current Paso Robles property, Villicana Winery, in 1996. "Everything lined up perfectly," says Monica. "We decided to plant vines ourselves with family and friends helping. Because of our jobs . . . we'd come to Paso on weekends. It was tiring but invigorating because we could see a tangible result of what we were doing."

By 2002, the couple had come to a crossroads: With two small children in tow, life had become complicated. "We could either sell out with no regrets and still have great jobs or quit our jobs and see if we could make the winery work. We threw caution to the wind and just did it!" Monica says. Then, in 2011, they launched RE:FIND Distillery to "find a reuse for saignée, the juice removed to improve wine quality before fermentation, by refining it into top-shelf spirits. We purchase the runoff juice from other wineries and are able to produce a premium gin and vodka that are recycled and reclaimed," explains Monica. In his role as president of the California Distillers Association, Alex is an advocate for the industry, and along with overseeing three distilleries in Paso Robles, the couple started the Paso Robles Distillery Trail, now a destination. "At this point, we're running with, not against, the wind," Monica adds. SJ



{ appellations }

# Elevating Its Validity

THE **RATTLESNAKE HILLS AVA** GETS A BOOST FROM A CONSORTIUM OF LIKE-MINDED GROWERS AND WINERIES KNOWN AS **THE HILLS**

*by Meredith May*



*A view of the Rattlesnake Hills AVA from the vantage point of Two Mountain Winery.*





*Says Marissa Dineen of Dineen Vineyards, "Thanks to our elevation and a unique geological history, wines from The Hills exhibit distinctiveness from the rest of the state."*

**IN THE WESTERN FOOTHILLS** of the Rattlesnake Hills mountain range in the Yakima Valley, the Rattlesnake Hills AVA is shedding the skin of obscurity. Thanks to a consolidated group of 14 growers and estate wineries, there will now be a dedicated organization—known as “The Hills”—to promote its unique terroir in Washington State.

“We’re excited to take this step and bring our outstanding vineyards and distinctive wines to the forefront of the conversation about Washington wine,” says Marissa Dineen, owner of Dineen Vineyards and board member of The Hills. “Thanks to our elevation and a unique geological history, wines from The Hills exhibit distinctiveness from the rest of the state. We’re looking forward to showcasing these differences and the dynamism they bring to Washington wine.”

While most of the Columbia Valley’s wine-producing areas were shaped by the great Missoula floods during the last ice age, the Rattlesnake Hills AVA stands apart, with all but a few of its lower-elevation vineyards located above the ancient floodline, contributing to a bright, mineral-driven terroir influence. **SJ**

## *The following wines are some of the stellar selections from members of The Hills.*



### **Two Mountain Winery 2023 Riesling, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$20)**

The winery’s name represents Mt. Adams and Mt. Rainier, which can be seen from the estate’s Copeland Vineyard. Aromas of honeyed pear and ylang-ylang attract attention to the almost brittle acidity that accompanies the mineral-driven mouthfeel, flavors of orchard fruits, and subtle hints of spice, all of which show the typicity of Rattlesnake Hills Riesling. The palate also shows purity through notes of lemon oil, chamomile, fresh linen, and lychee. **92**



### **Sheridan Estate 2021 Merlot, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$30)**

Sheridan sits on a hilltop with an elevation of 1,120–1,230 feet, where shallow soils naturally keep yields low. The weather, free of winter frost, affords extended hang time so that the winery can maximize phenolic ripeness without excessive sugars while still maintaining acidity. Striking aromas of cocoa and blueberry lead to luscious and well-defined notes of chocolate-slathered graphite, black raspberry ganache, lavender, and espresso; generous fruit; and sturdy tannins. **95**

### **Pollard Vineyard 2019 Red Blend, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$35)**

Ripe red fruit, red tea, and vanilla are prominent in this blend of 53% Merlot, 31% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 16% Cab Franc. Strawberry shortcake lingers on the palate with round and silky tannins. **93**



### **Dineen Vineyards 2022 Syrah, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$42)**

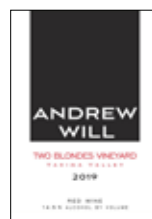
This Syrah expresses the characteristics of its vineyard, which is situated at an elevation of 1,100 feet on a predominately south-

facing slope that captures plenty of solar radiation. The vineyard’s cool nights slow down sugar development, allowing a long hang time that yields a soft yet supportive tannin structure. Energetic notes of violets are laced with white pepper, and plush tannins surround a core of Mediterranean scrub and melting dark chocolate. Deep notes of graphite, boysenberry, and spiced sandalwood make for an exotic profile. **96**



### **Pomum Shya Red 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$50)**

Sourced from the winery’s Konnowac Estate Vineyard, planted 35 years ago in the western Yakima Valley, this wine aged in 59-gallon (50% new) French oak barrels for 20 months and matured in bottle for 17 months. It’s focused and dramatic, with French lavender and wild blueberry anointing the palate. Striking acidity accents its verve, expressed by vanilla and sandalwood, and the tannins are soft but evident. Notes of tilled soil and chocolate-covered raisin add a plush texture on the finish. **96**



### **Andrew Will 2019 Two Blondes Red Blend, Rattlesnake Hills, Yakima Valley, Washington (\$70)**

Mulberry, black raspberry, and mocha add to an exquisite mouthfeel with a touch of pencil lead, cherry tomato, and wet earth in this rich and creamy blend of 58% Merlot, 23% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, and 4% Malbec. White-peppered floral tones enter midway, joining round tannins and balanced acidity. Blue fruit fills out the palate on the long finish. **95**

# Making a Sunshine State Splash

MEET THE MOVERS AND SHAKERS OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA WINE SCENE by Lyn Farmer

**MANY TALENTED SOMMELIERS**, beverage directors, retailers, and other professionals are powering the consistent growth of Miami, Florida's wine community. Here are eight examples who are making a significant difference in the market.

PHOTO: DANIEL ROSENSTRAUCH



**Allegra Angelo, wine director, Vinya Wine & Market and Vinya Table**

Allegra Angelo has been an influential figure in the South Florida wine scene for nearly 20 years. Today she is wine director of Vinya Wine & Market in Key Biscayne and Vinya Table in Coral Gables, where she manages both on- and off-premise sales alongside a Mediterranean-themed menu. "I'm connecting wines to

people," she says. "Within that role come the infinite tasks of research, listening, and storytelling"—a mission that has led her to champion "native grapes from historical European wine regions like Freisa (Piedmont), Graciano (Rioja), Albillo (Castilla y León), Alfrocheiro (Dão), and Poulsard (Jura)," the discovery of which keeps her many customers coming back.

PHOTO COURTESY OF COURTNEY BURRAGE



**Courtney Burrage, beverage manager, Barcelona Wine Bar**

Courtney Burrage came to the Wynwood branch of Iberian-themed chain Barcelona Wine Bar after working for the restaurant group in other markets. "Previously, most of my love for wine went into staff training and tasting. Lately I have been working on the fun and entertainment side of wine, spending my time curating wine dinners, events, and

gatherings," she says, adding that "at Barcelona, over half our wine list is organic, vegan, low- or no-sulfite, or biodynamic, [and] guests are intrigued, wanting to taste the craft and love that go into each of these wines." Clearly they enjoy exploring the list's diversity: By-the-glass wines outsell bottles two to one.

PHOTO: ERIC SALTZ



**Macarena Carrillo, head sommelier, COTE Miami**

Overseeing a list of nearly 1,300 wines at Michelin-starred steakhouse COTE Miami, Macarena Carrillo says, "Our goal is that everyone will have wine with their meal." While big reds are always popular with beef, she notes that the wine program goes well beyond the usual suspects: "I love making bubbles cool again! We have three pages of great grower

Champagnes. Additionally, our list is ever-changing, responding to our guests. There's so much growth happening that we must remain curious and open-minded—the South Florida wine market never stops!"

PHOTO: STARCHIEFS



**Amanda Fraga, director of beverage and social media, The Genuine Hospitality Group**

Amanda Fraga has been an integral part of the Miami wine scene for well over a decade, serving as beverage director for James Beard Award-winning chef Michael Schwartz's The Genuine Hospitality Group and as a notable mentor for young sommeliers in the community. "Over

the last few years, a lot of homegrown people have moved into wine-buying positions, and we have seen an increase of top wine buyers from around the country moving to Miami as well," she says. With them has come a fresh perspective; for instance, says Fraga, "We have a large South American section our staff loves . . . and guests are willing to try."





**Shannon Gable, wine director, Recoveco**

Wildly popular since it opened early in 2024, Recoveco seats just 30 people; the likewise small but ever-changing menu challenges sommelier Shannon Gable to curate an imaginative, eclectic program that takes interesting regional detours (Jura, for example) while emphasizing wines made with minimal

intervention. Recoveco's lengthy by-the-glass selection has also been a draw for an increasingly devoted clientele.



**Brian Grandison, head sommelier, The Surf Club Restaurant**

Brian Grandison started his career in Miami before moving to other markets; now he's back to handle the wine program at famed chef Thomas Keller's first area restaurant, The Surf Club. "The market has definitely grown [in recent years]," he says. "The pandemic added

more wine drinkers to the market, which in turn led to more retailers [and] more out-of-town restaurant groups moving in." No stranger to fine dining, he notes, "We are pretty classic, with a major focus on Champagne, Burgundy, Bordeaux, Napa Cabernet, and Pinot Noir from California." The hardest requests to fulfill? "Guests are always requesting the most popular and most difficult to replace—older Burgundy."



**Julien Sahut, wine director/head sommelier, Sexy Fish**

Sexy Fish is every bit as splashy as its name suggests. Locals and well-heeled out-of-towners alike come here to party, and the wine flows freely. Julien Sahut's mind-boggling list features around 1,000 selections by the bottle (including 250 different Champagnes and other

sparkling wines) and more than 50 wines by the glass. "We are successful because we span the entire spectrum, from affordable to luxury," he says.



**Craig Teriaca, head sommelier, JW Marriott Turnberry Resort & Spa**

At JW Marriott Turnberry Resort & Spa, Craig Teriaca spends the majority of his time at the restaurant Bourbon Steak, part of the nationwide Mina Group. "The group's reputation gives us a unique advantage—it creates trust," he says. "Diners feel confident exploring wines because they know we're curating something exceptional."

Regarding trends, he adds, "There's a noticeable shift toward Old World wines, particularly Italian and French selections. Guests are increasingly open to exploring these more nuanced styles, which reflects a growing sophistication in the market."



**Andrew Lampasone, owner, Wine Watch, Fort Lauderdale**

Andrew Lampasone was already an experienced sommelier when he and his wife, a chef, bought quirky shop Wine Watch 25 years ago. Today it encompasses a wine bar, a catering company, and—with more than 6,000 wines on the shelves and on its website—an inventory deeper and more eclectic than that of any other store in South Florida. "The market is constantly changing, and we have changed . . . to keep our selections

unique from other stores," says Lampasone. "Wine consumption is down among younger consumers, [so] we need to constantly educate [the] audience" to stay relevant. So far, that approach is working with newcomers as well as with longtime collectors.



**Matthieu Yamoum and Philippe Vasilescu, Maison Mura**

Maison Mura co-founder Matthieu Yamoum calls his elegantly appointed shop an "experiential retail venue celebrating the joie de vivre of wine and spirits"; both the main showroom and

the 14-seat private dining room have the air of a luxury fashion boutique. With partner Philippe Vasilescu, Yamoum strikes a careful balance between exclusivity and accessibility, and Miamians have responded with enthusiasm and thirst for the presentation of fine wine in a refined atmosphere. *SJ*

# Aiming for the Moon

**MOON HOLLOW ESTATE STRIVES FOR—AND ATTAINS—EXCELLENCE** by Meridith May

## A VISIT TO DOWNTOWN

Sonoma last summer put me on the path to the tasting room of Moon Hollow Estate on the plaza. It was there that I saw an old acquaintance, Christophe Tassan, who introduced me to the producer's wines from the Moon Mountain District.

Born in Avignon, France, Tassan grew up on the banks of the Rhône River and gained expertise through tasting in the cellars of local vintners. He came in second in the Best Young Sommelier of France competition in 1988, won the title of "Best Sommelier—South of France" in 1992, became a Master Sommelier through the Union de la Sommelierie Française in 2000, and received the title of Meilleur Ouvrier de France Sommelier in 2004.



**Christophe Tassan is wine director at Moon Hollow Estate.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOON HOLLOW ESTATE

and Casino before moving to Sonoma in 2020 to manage Moon Hollow, owned by the Birch family. His reputable palate is a testament to these fine wines.

In 2012, famed organic and biodynamic farmer and viticulturist Phil Coturri replanted the estate's 18 vineyard acres. Winemaker Mark Herold, who created the

Merus brand (highly lauded by *The SOMM Journal*), joined the Moon Hollow team in 2017 to curate the grapes with utmost care, crafting these sleek, small-production wines that capture the Moon Mountain District, accented by sunshine and sustainable practices. **SJ**

He was hired on as wine director for Georges Perrier at legendary Philadelphia restaurant Le Bec-Fin in 2005; I first met him in 2008, when he was serving as wine director at Alain Ducasse's miX in Las Vegas. From there, he took the role of wine director at Mandalay Bay Resort



*The logo on the label of Moon Hollow Estate's wines illustrates one of the producer's hardy Kunekune pigs, a much-awarded heritage breed. The 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon is bold and savory.*

**Moon Hollow 2022 Sauvignon Blanc, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County (\$60)** Blended with 5% Viognier, this crisp and clean white glows like a star with pink grapefruit and gardenia. Pure and sleek mineral tones are met by just-ripened kiwi and a dollop of lemon meringue. **94**

**Moon Hollow 2021 Grenache, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County (\$80)** Co-fermented with 5% Mourvèdre, this Grenache relays its message with ripe sweetness in the form of wild strawberry freshly plucked from the earth. Hibiscus and Luxardo cherry perfume both the nose and palate, exuding graceful liveliness with a French accent. Tannins are delicate, and there's a nip of salty minerality on the finish. **97**

**Moon Hollow 2021 Syrah, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County (\$85)** Violets and blueberries rush to greet the nose. The palate is deep, fleshy, and teeth-grabbing with anise, dried heather, and grilled meats; its cashmere mouthfeel is disarming, capturing the essence of the wine's full-flavored athleticism. **97**

**Moon Hollow 2021 Cabernet Franc, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County (\$150)** Chalky, teeth-grabbing tannins unite with violets, sage, and plum skin. A midpalate surge of boysenberry, tilled soil, black tea, and graphite bolsters the intensity of this wine, which glistens with energy and youthfulness, teasing out sandalwood and blackberry on the finish. **96**



**Moon Hollow Estate Vineyard.**





# HEAD TO HEAD

COMPARING AND  
CONTRASTING NAPA  
VALLEY CABERNET  
SAUVIGNON AND  
MENDOZA MALBEC

BY MOLLY BROOKS





The panel for “A Capital Comparison: Napa Valley Versus Mendoza” at SommCon 2024, from left to right: Justin Cardwell, wine and spirits training manager, Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits; Ezequiel Acosta, commercial director, North America, Nieto Senetiner; moderator Jessie Birschbach, senior wine editor, The SOMM Journal; Mari Wells Coyle, winemaker, Foley Family Wines & Spirits; Carlos de Carlos, director of international sales, Paul Hobbs Wines; and Ramiro Barrios, general manager, Clos de los Siete.

**O**n a sunny morning last October in America's Finest City (to use San Diego's nickname), representatives of producers in Napa Valley, California, and Mendoza, Argentina, came together to talk terroir while examining the history and future of these two premier New World regions at “A Capital Comparison: Napa Valley Versus Mendoza,” a seminar held during SommCon. It wasn't a competition, the audience was reminded, but rather a conversation. “Sure, Cab and Malbec can be similar in body, but what's most interesting to me is [to] look at both of these well-known regions—the wine capitals of their respective countries—and ask *why* Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa's signature grape, and Malbec, Mendoza's flagship, thrive where they do. My hope is that these examples

today will help us to find that answer,” said our moderator, *SOMM Journal* senior wine editor Jessie Birschbach. She went on to remind the crowd of the major differences between the two locales: “Mendoza, a very large wine region, cultivates over 360,000 acres of grapes, and Malbec is by far its most planted at 86,484 acres. Napa, one of the *smallest* wine regions in the world, is planted to around 45,000 acres of grapes, of which Cab is its most planted at around 25,000 acres. Napa has a Mediterranean climate and Mendoza's climate is desert-like.”

It may not have been a competition, but given the energy pulsing through the room as Birschbach welcomed each panelist to their seat via their own personally selected walk-up song representing their respective wines, it certainly felt like a sporting event, and our team of experts was warmed up and ready to play. Let's examine the lineup, shall we?

### **Force & Grace 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley**

**Presenter:** Justin Cardwell, wine and spirits training manager, Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits

Force & Grace is what some might call a *négociant* project. The winery partners with growers across Napa Valley's 16 (and soon to be 17) AVAs, though it focuses particularly on five storied subappellations recognized for their excellent Cabernet Sauvignon: Oakville, Rutherford, Oak Knoll, St. Helena, and Mt. Veeder. In a region where vineyard real estate is dwindling in supply and skyrocketing in value, partnering with established vineyards is a way to support





smaller suppliers while crafting a quality product. Handpicked fruit from these growers arrives at the winery whole; it's then blended and barreled for 18 months in (50% new) French oak before bottling. The goal of the program is not to put a microscope on any one aspect of Napa terroir—say, mountain tannins or benchland fruitiness—but to present a balanced expression of Cabernet that represents the region as a whole and presents the consumer with a fresh, approachable wine meant for youthful enjoyment. Or as Justin Cardwell, wine and spirits training manager at Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits, put it, “Force & Grace strives to present the best of California’s Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay growing regions, tempering the force of nature that is California grape growth with the grace of its terroir. The wines are bold and forceful, with the grace in the glass to drink early in the vintage.”

Force & Grace’s 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, coincidentally complemented by 4% Malbec, opens with bright, juicy, red-fruited aromas surrounded by herbal accents. Black cherry, pomegranate, cocoa, and plum mingle with caramel and a touch of toast. Juicy and accessible, with structured but friendly tannins, the wine is a great overview of Napa in a bottle—and one that need not be sequestered in the cellar, as it’s easy to enjoy now.

### **Nieto Senetiner 2021 Villa Blanca Malbec, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza**

**Presenter: Ezequiel Acosta**, commercial director, North America, Nieto Senetiner

Nieto Senetiner is a winery with over a century of history in Mendoza, where it produces a broad range of wines from entry-level Malbec to appellation- and site-specific expressions like this bottling, which is designed to encapsulate the character of a single vineyard in one of Mendoza’s most prestigious subregions, Luján de Cuyo. Villa Blanca, which translates literally as “White House,” is the Senetiner family’s estate; founded in 1888, it’s surrounded by a



Malbec vineyard that was planted in 1900. These gnarly 125-year-old vines produce less fruit than do younger, more robust vineyards in the fertile hillsides, but what they do yield tells a story of Mendoza’s heritage, from its humble beginnings to its world-class reputation for expressing Argentina’s flagship grape.

Malbec has an uncanny ability to tie together fruit and earth in a way that few grapes can. Villa Blanca, Nieto Senetiner’s most terroir-driven Malbec, still possesses a playful drinkability. Dark but inviting flavors of blackberry, roasted beet, chocolate, and anise roll around in peppercorns, potting soil, and vanilla bean. With a dusty and savory finish, this is a wine for savoring.

### **Foley Johnson 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley**

**Presenter: Mari Wells Coyle**, winemaker, Foley Family Wines & Spirits

Whereas Force & Grace’s Cabernet served as a snapshot of Napa Valley, Foley Johnson’s Rutherford-appellated version proved a study in specificity. Foley Family Wines & Spirits owns property throughout California—where its sustainability efforts include using renewable energy resources, dry farming wherever possible, and integrated pest management—but its Foley Johnson label focuses primarily on this sub-AVA. The presented Cabernet highlights the signature “Rutherford dust” that has become the appellation’s claim to fame as well as the intensity of both valley floor and benchland fruit, which the winemaking team emphasizes rather than leaning on a heavy use of the oak that is the hallmark of many a cult Napa Cabernet. On the dark and brooding side, it balances a bounty of boysenberry, black currant, and black cherry with dark chocolate, tobacco, and vanilla bean. In some circles, “pyrazine” is a dirty word, implying that a wine is too lean or green, but Foley Johnson’s Cabernet eschews the terse crunch of green bell pepper



for roasted, savory, and ripe red peppers. Menthol and cherry mingle with toasted flavors, and succulent tannins with a touch of grit result in an expression that’s oh-so-drinkable now but capable of a few years of bottle age as well.

From its eco-friendly practices to the innovations it’s making in the vineyard, Foley Johnson continues to elevate the quality of its wines. “The Foley family is committed to sustainability as stewards of estate vineyards in six iconic sub-AVAs within Napa Valley,” said Foley Family Wines & Spirits winemaker Mari Wells Coyle. “Our Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon is an example of this commitment to bring the best expressions of Napa Valley forward to each bottling. Similar to Argentina, we have extensive clonal selections in our vineyards, but unlike Argentina, we are now digging much further into rootstock selections, which are the next steps to elevating quality in the Napa Valley.”

### **Viña Cobos 2022 Bramare Malbec, Valle de Uco, Mendoza**

**Presenter: Carlos de Carlos**, director of international sales, Paul Hobbs Wines

Paul Hobbs is a winemaker of diverse passions. Born into a cider-producing family in upstate New York, he cemented his claim to fame in California, crafting world-class, critically acclaimed Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Sauvignon in Sonoma and Napa counties. He has also been shining a light on historic but underrepresented wine regions, including Armenia, New York’s Finger Lakes, and what he calls his “second home”: Mendoza. Here, he saw great terroir for bold, fruity Malbec—high-desert climate, ample sunshine, well-drained soils—and set out to express it; in turn, Mendoza as a region has responded to international attention by elevating its winemaking practices. For instance, there’s a new-found focus on organic and sustainable viticulture, technological improvements such as optical sorting have increased





*SommCon attendees tasted through a handful of exemplary Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec wines.*

quality and longevity, and the use of new oak has also spread.

Viña Cobos represents Hobbs' exploration of elevation in Mendoza, which spans 3,000–10,000 feet in altitude. In the 2022 Bramare Malbec from the Valle de Uco, intense aromas of chocolate, tobacco, roasted beet, baked blackberry, and mocha combine for a refined yet rich, flavorful wine with dense, chewy tannins.

### **Clos de los Siete 2021, Mendoza**

**Presenter: Ramiro Barrios**, general manager, Clos de los Siete

Clos de los Siete had the distinction of being the only blend in the seminar lineup. Michel Rolland is one of the most prolific consultants for Bordeaux-style winemaking around the world, from Bordeaux itself to Napa to Argentina. As Ramiro Barrios, general manager for



Close de los Siete, explained, “Michel found in Argentina three things that eventually changed his life: the unique, hyper-continental terroir provided by the Andes Mountains; the unexpected huge potential of Malbec [in these] particular climatic conditions; and the spirit of Argentini-ans to learn and show their capabilities to the world.”

While Cabernet and Merlot are king in the former regions, Malbec thrives in the higher altitude and intense sunshine of Mendoza; the Clos de los Siete project was born of Rolland's desire to bring his celebrated brand of winemaking to the region while respecting local viticultural traditions and supporting local producers. “Thirty-five years later, Clos de los Siete, Mendoza, is his second home, and Michel has become a rock star for Argentini-ans,” added Barrios.

Land in Mendoza is not priced at the premium that exists in Napa, but many of the best Malbec sites are held closely by individual estates. Clos de los Siete is a testament to the importance of blending in creating a delicious and satisfying wine at a value-driven price point, as using fruit from several sources is typically

less expensive than crafting a wine with grapes from a single estate. Clos de los Siete starts with Malbec but also contains Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and other Bordeaux grapes to round out the palate, adding plush black and red berry fruit, tobacco, and herbal notes as well as mocha and plum. In addition to its fruit-forward approachability, the wine shows toasty intensity, a signature of Rolland's. *—SJ*

**“WHAT’S MOST INTERESTING TO ME IS [TO] LOOK AT BOTH OF THESE WELL-KNOWN REGIONS . . . AND ASK WHY CABERNET SAUVIGNON, NAPA’S SIGNATURE GRAPE, AND MALBEC, MENDOZA’S FLAGSHIP, THRIVE WHERE THEY DO.”**

**—JESSIE BIRSCHBACH**





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PHOTOS: JAMES C. FRENCH

*La Fête du Champagne co-founders Peter Liem and Daniel Johnnes at the Gala Dinner in New York City.*

# The Sparkling Standard

LA FÊTE DU CHAMPAGNE CELEBRATES TEN YEARS

by Wanda Mann

**LEGEND HAS IT** that in the 17th century, winemaker Dom Pierre Pérignon exclaimed, “Come quickly, I am tasting the stars” when he held aloft a glass of Champagne, the sparkling libation that revolutionized the wine world. Almost 400 years later, La Fête du Champagne attendees were not only sipping but seeing stars at tastings and dinners held in New York City and Houston, Texas, over the course of a week last fall: Luminaries from the famed French region crossed the Atlantic bearing bottles of bubbly and ebullient energy for the tenth anniversary of the festival.

Wine industry veterans and longtime friends Daniel Johnnes and Peter Liem joined forces in 2014 to create La Fête. Johnnes, the wine director for Daniel Boulud’s The Dinex Group, is also the founder of Pressoir, a company that produces premier wine events; it launched in 2000 with La Paulée, an annual stateside celebration of the wines of Burgundy. Liem, an American residing in Champagne, gained acclaim as the founder of *ChampagneGuide.net* and later for his award-winning book *Champagne: The Essential Guide to the Wines, Producers, and Terroirs of the Iconic Region*.

Liem had always wanted to produce a Champagne festival in the United States: “That was kind of my big ambition,” he says. He saw that the timing was right for an event that would showcase “what was going on on the ground in Champagne. We never wanted to focus on either growers or houses. I wanted to focus on Champagne as a whole.” Johnnes, for his part, believes that he and Liem had a “sixth sense” that made their launch of La Fête fortuitous. “Ten years ago, and even a bit more, there was a lot of talk about Champagne,” he points out, generated by “a big movement in Champagne



toward better viticulture [and] grower bottlings."

The featured producers must be invited to participate in La Fête. "They have to be producing really interesting, good Champagne. There has to be a commitment to the region. There has to be a commitment to their family, their history, and their future," explains Johnnes. "We always want to balance [the lineup] between the Champagne houses and the growers."

The 43 producers who received one of the coveted invitations to La Fête 2024 view it as a worthwhile investment of time and resources. "La Fête du Champagne is immensely important for the Champagne industry as a whole, as it brings together passionate Champagne enthusiasts from across the United States and beyond to taste, educate, and collaborate. This dynamic wine deserves a proper conversation, and La Fête du Champagne gives it the perfect stage," says Edouard Cossy, global director for Grand Siècle at Champagne Laurent-Perrier. "It's in the DNA of Champagne to come together in this way, and it's wonderful to see this collaboration and community here in the U.S.," adds Lori Russo, director of the Bureau du Champagne, USA.

Rita Jammet, the "chief bubble officer" at La Caravelle Wines, agrees, calling the event "the ultimate Champagne festival in the world [and] by far my favorite Champagne/wine gathering. I would venture to say that even on their own turf, the Champenois rarely get to meet in such numbers." And Mathieu Roland-Billecart, CEO of Champagne Billecart-Salmon, encourages us not to discount the value of



*Participating producers included Chartogne-Taillet, Philipponnat, and Tarlant.*

a fun soirée: "La Fête gathers some of the best Champagne producers out there, and it is also a great bunch of people to party with. Daniel, Peter, and their team have managed to harness the diversity there is in Champagne producers while offering unique access to well-renowned producers to all the guests—and that's why the event continues to be a success a decade after its creation."

Another integral part of La Fête's success is the stellar team of sommeliers that provide wine service; in 2024 there were 80 from across the U.S. and beyond. In this mutually beneficial arrangement, La Fête is enhanced by top-tier talent, and sommeliers gain valuable experience. "I started my career as a sommelier, and I really believe in nurturing a generation of wine professionals. Sommeliers keep the profession alive. Educate people; give them stories to talk about so they can provide a great experience for diners," said Johnnes.

Competition is fierce for the coveted service spots. Etinosa Emokpae, a sommelier working for Skurnik Wine & Spirits in Philadelphia, believes somms are drawn to La Fête because it is "the perfect mix of learning through tastings, dinners, and seminars. Additionally, you are networking with some of the best in the business

and just celebrating everything that makes Champagne special. Plus, getting to pour and taste rare, high-end bottles doesn't hurt!" Meanwhile, Matthew Conway, owner of The Tippling House in Charleston, South Carolina, praises La Fête's sense of community: "I've worked these events for a decade, and most of us do it for the camaraderie with our peers. To work a night with incredible wines and the producers that make them, serving them to guests with deep appreciation for the wines, is meaningful. To be able to do that with the most talented sommeliers from across the country (and world) is beyond priceless." That sentiment is shared by Travis Padilla, sommelier at Il Buco Alimentari & Vineria in New York: "Being a sommelier can be a lonely job. Most restaurants only employ one or two, and it's rare for us to work at the same time. Events like La Fête create a unique space where sommeliers come together to work alongside those they respect and admire."

Given the level of talent involved and the fact that said events regularly sell out, La Fête has clearly tapped into an insatiable thirst: "Champagne is bigger than ever. In our lifetimes the demand has never been so high," asserts Liem.

To learn more, visit [lafeteduchampagne.com](http://lafeteduchampagne.com). 



*La Fête guests at the Grand Tasting in New York.*

# A Rite of Passage

## RECAPPING AN IMMERSIVE TRIP TO SONOMA COUNTY

by Kyle Billings

**WHO KNEW THAT** a 20-minute quiz could prove so fruitful? Last May, GuildSomm, in partnership with the Sonoma County Winegrowers association, held its annual online exam, “The Wine Champs Quiz,” covering all aspects of the wine world. The 15 top scorers were treated to an all-expenses-paid trip to Healdsburg on September 22–24, 2024, which included seminars, tastings, and an immersion into all things Sonoma County, along with a \$500 scholarship. It has become a rite of passage for some of the world’s top wine professionals.

I was one of the fortunate few to earn a spot last year. It would be impossible to appraise the value of the trip simply by airfare and room and board—the bonds of fellowship between grape geeks in California wine country made the experience priceless. Here’s a snapshot.



*A welcome dinner at J Vineyards & Winery in Healdsburg was prepared by estate chef Forest Kellogg and sous chef Ramiro Leon Ramirez. The menu featured the producer’s 2014 Late Disgorged Brut Sparkling, 2018 Annapolis Ridge Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 2021 Eastside Knoll Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, and NV Russian River Valley Demi Sec.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONOMA COUNTY WINEGROWERS

*On their trip to Sonoma, winners of GuildSomm’s “Wine Champs Quiz” joined GuildSomm partners and Sonoma County Winegrowers president and CEO Karissa Kruse outside the latter organization’s headquarters.*

### DAY 1

Having made the trek from countries as far-flung as Germany and the United Kingdom, the winners congregated in the lobby of the Hotel Trio for a welcome toast from Jenny Hemmer, executive director of GuildSomm, and Karissa Kruse, president and CEO of Sonoma County Winegrowers. We then made our way onto buses to spend the evening at J Vineyards & Winery.

Sonoma’s reputation as a farming community doesn’t preclude its capacity for world-class hospitality, as demonstrated by the team at our first destination. Upon arrival, we were escorted into the Bubble Room, where long, elegantly appointed tables were illuminated by chandeliers shaped like translucent globular clusters. J Vineyards head winemaker Nicole Hitchcock and estate chef Forest Kellogg gave us a rundown of the four-course menu.





**Attendees witnessed a nighttime harvest led by Kris Hicks of Vimark Vineyard Management.**

We tasted numerous wines from the winery's portfolio, including sparklers, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and dessert wine. One standout was the 2020 Barrel 16 Russian River Valley Chardonnay, which Hitchcock shared her fondness for: "Barrel 16 is the best 16 barrels of any given vintage," she said. "It's our team that goes through and does hand-selection of all of the barrels and identifies which barrels, which vineyards are really shining on any given vintage. . . . This is one of my favorite Chardonnays that I've ever made."

Back at the hotel, we concluded the evening around the fire pits on the premises, sharing our exam stories and more wine, including German Sylvaner from Bocksbeutel and Champagne (saber, of course).

## DAY 2

We started early the next day, departing promptly at 7:30 a.m. under a brilliant blue sky dappled with wisps of white clouds. Kruse welcomed us into the vine-covered farmhouse that serves as Sonoma County Winegrowers' headquarters. Her passion for the region and the organization was unmistakable. "Sonoma County Winegrowers serves to promote and protect local agriculture and enhance the value of winegrapes," she explained.

We took our education outside, strolling over the grassy cover crop between lush vines replete with protruding bunches of dark grapes. Kruse shared the strategies her group promotes to combat the challenges of the changing climate and discussed its ongoing efforts

to advance sustainability in Sonoma, including a groundbreaking program in association with Ford Pro whereby three area farmers are piloting the viability of electric trucks, vans, and charging stations for their operations.

After the vineyard tour, we kicked off a series of seminars with a session on Sonoma's sparkling wine production. Equally effervescent was presenter Joy Sterling, CEO of Iron Horse Vineyards: A gifted storyteller, she shared how a local politician's connections in Washington, D.C., led to Iron Horse being served at the White House for the past seven administrations.

A roundtable discussion with local growers followed, moderated by GuildSomm's director of education, Chris Tanghe, and featuring Steve and Jordan Dutton of Dutton Ranch, Steve Sangiacomo of Sangiacomo Family Vineyards, and Julie Pedroncelli St. John of Pedroncelli Winery. A litany of topics was explored, from family legacies to the fading utility of the Old World/New World dichotomy to the challenges of demand in the wine market. In the former case, Sangiacomo shared how grateful he is for the wisdom of his forebears. "We've learned so much from previous generations about the art of grape growing," he said. "We call it shoulder-to-shoulder farming: We stand shoulder to shoulder with our parents and our grandparents."

Tanghe then conducted a lively seminar on Sonoma Zinfandel, providing details on its history in California and on viticultural techniques that bring out the best in the variety. While its tight bunches make it susceptible to bunch rot, it's a fine blending grape that is often co-fermented. The greatest takeaway, however, was perhaps how versatile it can be with food—not to mention how delicious it is, as illustrated by a tasting of selections from Bedrock, Louis Martini, Nalle, St. Francis, Hartford, and Martinelli.

Dinner was held at Vino Farms' family ranch home in Healdsburg, overlooking a breathtaking panorama of rolling hills and russet-colored foliage. The meal was informal yet offered an embarrassment of riches: Dozens of wines were poured, including selections from Williams Selyem, Peay, and Hanzell, among others.

We concluded the evening under the stars in Cloverdale, where a nighttime harvest was being conducted under the

direction of Vimark Vineyard Management's Kris Hicks. Legend has it that one of the attendees even operated one of the tractors—with distinction.

## DAY 3

The final day began in a vineyard in the Alexander Valley, where we were all welcomed with pruning shears by the charismatic Bret Munselle of Munselle Vineyards and given an hour to fill buckets with ripe Chardonnay grapes.

After breaking a sweat, we traveled to Trione Vineyards in Geyserville for a tour of the winery. Trione winemaker John Duckett gave us a demonstration of the pumpover process as grape juice circulated through large steel fermentation tanks.

We then enjoyed a tasting of four Trione wines, conducted by managing director Denise Trione. The 2018 Sonoma Coast Zinfandel served as a particular point of pride for her: "We're waiting for everybody to catch up with the Zinfandel category," she said.

The festivities finally ended as we ate lunch, played bocce, and basked in the warmth of the late morning with a glass of rosé. Jenny Hemmer thanked Sonoma County Winegrowers for its partnership as well as the GuildSomm members. "It's amazing that we can experience this during harvest—and in an amazing place like Sonoma County," she said. *SJ*

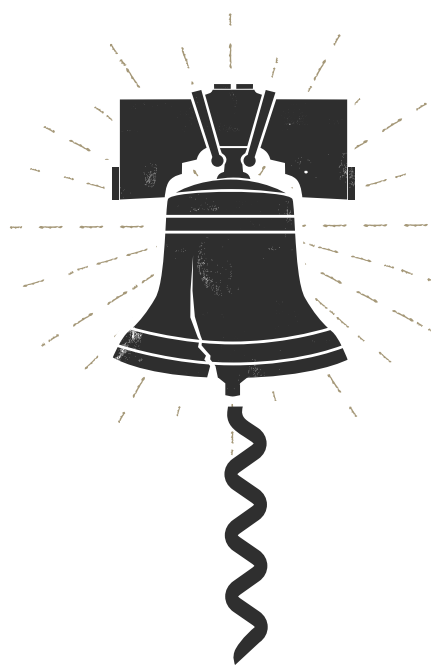


**At Trione Vineyards & Winery in Geyserville, owner/managing director Denise Trione guided guests through the historic Stone Building, built on the property in 1908.**

# Taking Liberties

PHILADELPHIA SOMMELIERS SHARE HOW THEY NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES OF OPERATING IN A CONTROL STATE

*by Brian Friedman*



**ASSEMBLING A GREAT WINE PROGRAM** is challenging in the best of circumstances: Issues of budget, storage space, and pairing compatibility with the menu, among other factors, have to be taken into consideration. For sommeliers and beverage directors in control states, those obstacles are multiplied in many unexpected ways.

Pennsylvania is notoriously one of the most difficult control states in which to operate in the entire country. Despite recent court decisions—including a 2024 state Supreme Court ruling that many millions of dollars in refunds were owed to restaurants and bars as well as consumers in Pennsylvania following the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board's (PLCB) implementation of a \$1.75 fee on each bottle of “special-order” wine it sold—the PLCB maintains a remarkably strong grip on the sale of wines and spirits in the commonwealth.

But that hasn't stopped some of the most exciting restaurants in the country from opening up and flourishing there. In just the past decade, two Philadelphia standouts were awarded “Outstanding Restaurant” at the James Beard Awards: Friday Saturday Sunday in 2023 and Zahav in 2019, both of which boast fantastic beverage programs. And Ellen Yin, founder and co-owner of High Street Hospitality Group, was awarded “Outstanding Restaurateur” in 2023.

I spoke with six of Philadelphia's top wine professionals to understand the nature of the hurdles they face and how they continue to thrive in the face of adversity. These are their abridged insights, in their own words.





PHOTO: GAB BONGHI

**ZACHARY BOURNE**  
General manager, Jansen

"The deadlines that have to be worked with for orders based on how long the orders take to process through the PLCB can make things challenging, especially for people that have not worked with the system before. [Fortunately,] everyone in a management position currently at Jansen has only worked within the PLCB [system] in their careers, so nothing seems out of the ordinary to us.

"The biggest tricks of the trade are common in many other professions: You put in the time and effort, and it will show on your list. Be active in tasting the new products that are becoming available and be aware of the rules and regulations that we have to abide by living and working in Pennsylvania. Most importantly, try new things; nothing is exciting about leaving the same items on your menu for an extended period of time. Even if it does sell well, there is always something more interesting waiting around the corner."



PHOTO COURTESY OF HIGH STREET HOSPITALITY GROUP

**KEVIN DENSON**  
Beverage director, Fork

"The amount of red tape our distributors deal with made it challenging to even receive product in a timely manner before direct delivery was available. Achieving sustainable growth to keep a beverage program exciting and full of value for our guests is also a great challenge. So much of the product we want to sell is already gone by the time it is available in the Pennsylvania market, and what does get in is often marked up to levels that [require us to] make sacrifices in other parts of the program.

"I started buying in the Pennsylvania market in the summer of 2020, and I quickly realized that I had to use every contact advantage I had to deepen strategic relationships while completely avoiding others. I can't buy from every vendor, so identifying the most fruitful partnerships as quickly as possible will yield powerful results. A buyer needs to rely on the network of associates they have in the market to find opportunities, because they rarely present themselves without prompting.

"[Despite the challenges,] the best part of the system [in Pennsylvania] is some of the lovely people I have met that work within it. I have called customer support many times and have had some extremely insightful and helpful folks get me on the right track, not to mention the amazing managers and frontline workers at [state-run] Fine Wine & Good Spirits that I have come to know at my local stores over the years."



PHOTO COURTESY OF HIGH STREET HOSPITALITY GROUP

**FRANK KINYON**  
Beverage and service director, a.kitchen+bar

"Aside from the fact that everything costs more in Pennsylvania than in our direct neighbors of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and beyond, the most frustrating thing for me is how little wine ends up in the state. Oftentimes I'm fighting over bottles, not cases, of wine I want with several other accounts that my sales rep wants to keep happy. . . . Most of the time we only receive three to four bottles of the really allocated labels we are seeking.

"[That said,] I think the hindrances this government-controlled system has put on us have pushed us to create a really awesome, tight wine community here in Philadelphia. It's a small group, but it's very passionate. We all support each other and what we are trying to achieve. There's no fighting or bitterness; we all have each other's best interests in mind. . . . That's what I love about the wine scene here: the community."



PHOTO: BONDFIRE MEDIA

### TERENCE LEWIS

**Beverage director, Safran Turney Hospitality**

"The biggest obstacle is availability. There are many wines available in just about every state with a major city that we do not have access to in Pennsylvania. Importers, distributors, and sommeliers all are frustrated by the various roadblocks and bureaucratic gatekeeping that Pennsylvania puts on the wine industry. The wines on the shelves throughout the state are [generally] of much less quality than in New Jersey—and at a higher price. Restaurants are basically tied to what is available to us or what a distributor is able to sell directly after jumping through the many hoops.

"The only way to build a great wine program is to learn and study over a long period of time. . . . Have an open mind and remember: Your palate isn't everyone else's. Choose wines that are well made and stable, but every bottle doesn't have to align with your current tastes or trends. Don't chase the trendy labels—those are hard to make your margins on anyway. Read, explore, taste, and make sure there is balance and craveability on your wine menu. 'Craveability' is basically defined as wines people would be attracted to or that the service staff would be excited about. Intimidating the guests for the sake of trends is a short-sighted mistake."



PHOTO COURTESY OF PUNCH MEDIA

### GORDANA KOSTOVSKI

**Co-owner/sommelier, Townsend Wentz Restaurant Group**

"Pennsylvania has some great distributors that shoulder a heavy burden of navigating the regulatory issues we have to deal with here. Many of the challenges we face [involve lack of] access to portfolios that you can get elsewhere and dealing with the public perception from a cost standpoint: Our state system costs us significantly more than our neighboring states.

"The worst part . . . is having the state limit what comes into the commonwealth. Yes, the costs we pay are artificially inflated through fees and taxes, which are then also taxed by the city, but [limited] access to all the options out there is the hardest to justify for me. Our distributors do a phenomenal job of seeking out the best in the world and bringing it to Philly, but it shouldn't be as difficult and limiting as it is."



PHOTO COURTESY OF PUNCH MEDIA

### BENJAMIN KIRK

**Beverage director, Bastia and Caletta**

"One of the biggest challenges is dealing with system glitches that disrupt ordering and inventory management. The PLCB's technology often feels outdated, leading to inefficiencies and delays that can make it hard to keep the program running smoothly.

"[To circumvent this,] I've developed an obsessive approach to curating wines that align with the concept. I deep dive into all of my reps' catalogs, exploring every option to find wines that fit under the program's umbrella. It's about understanding the vision and being relentless in finding selections that resonate with it. Take the time to research all the offerings from your wine reps—don't just stick to their bestsellers or top recommendations. Ask [them] what they're genuinely excited about, as those picks often carry unique stories and standout qualities that guests appreciate. Building a relationship of trust can yield unexpected treasures." 



# SOMM/CON<sup>™</sup> Concours d'Vin



## 2024 RESULTS

### AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE

Brecon Estate 2022 Reserve Mourvèdre, Paso Robles (\$88)  
Fetzer Vineyards NV Reserve Port, California (\$11)

### DOUBLE GOLD MEDAL WINNERS

Alamos 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendoza, Argentina (\$13)  
Breathless Sparkling Wines 2011 Late Disgorged Brut, Sonoma County (\$75)  
Bricoleur Vineyards 2023 Viognier, Kick Ranch Vineyard, Fountaingrove District (\$40)  
Bruno Giacosa 2022 Roero Arneis DOCG, Italy (\$40)  
Copper Six 2023 Gamay, Alisos Canyon (\$50)  
Donnafugata 2023 Lighea, Zibibbo Sicilia DOC, Italy (\$25)  
Fellow 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Clarksburg (\$20)  
The Landing 2023 Rosé, Northland, New Zealand (\$23)  
Mermaid Valley Vineyard 2020 Merlot, Ramona Valley (\$36)  
Pedernales Cellars 2021 Texas GSM Mélange, Texas (\$26)  
Ricasoli 2021 Brolio, Chianti Classico DOCG, Italy (\$26)  
Shadow Mountain Vineyards NV Old Gus Blend Red Table Wine, San Diego County (\$36)  
St. Avalo 2021 Nero d'Avola, Los Olivos District, Santa Barbara County (\$50)  
St. Avalo 2022 Vermentino, Los Olivos District, Santa Barbara County (\$35)  
Wautoma Springs 2021 Fork + Spoon Cabernet Franc, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$50)  
Wautoma Springs 2021 Long Vine, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$100)

### GOLD MEDAL WINNERS

Alamos 2021 Red Blend, Mendoza, Chile (\$13)  
All Saints Estate NV Muscat, Rutherglen, Australia (\$25)  
Barefoot Bubbly NV Extra Dry, USA (\$10)  
Barefoot Bubbly NV Moscato Spumante, USA (\$10)  
Barefoot Cellars NV Sauvignon Blanc, California (\$7)  
Bibi Graetz 2021 Casamatta Rosso Organic, Tuscany, Italy (\$28)  
Black Box NV Sauvignon Blanc, Chile (\$20)  
Bolero at Europa Village 2021 Estate Garnacha Rosa, Temecula Valley (\$39)  
Bonarrigo Family Wines 2023 Heritage Select, Texas (\$30)  
Bricoleur Vineyards NV Flying by the Seat of Our Pants Brut, North Coast (\$50)  
The Calling 2022 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$37)  
Chalmers 2021 Greco, Heathcote, Victoria, Australia (\$32)  
Chalmers 2022 Vermentino, Heathcote, Victoria, Australia (\$30)  
Cuda Ridge 2022 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$45)  
Donnafugata 2019 Dolce & Gabbana Tancredi, Terre Siciliane IGT Rosso, Italy (\$52)  
Donnafugata 2021 Sul Vulcano Bianco, Etna Bianco DOC, Sicilia, Italy (\$39)  
Donnafugata 2021 Sul Vulcano Rosso, Etna Rosso DOC, Sicilia, Italy (\$35)  
Exit West 2022 Mount Collection Estate Reserve Red Blend, Red Hills, Lake County (\$75)  
Fellow 2023 Chardonnay, Clarksburg (\$20)  
Fellow 2023 Chenin Blanc, Clarksburg (\$20)  
Force & Grace 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$55)  
Galloway Company NV Pecan Pie a la Mode Wine Cream Prototype, Wisconsin (\$20)  
Gloria Ferrer 2021 Royal Cuvée Rosé Reserve, Carneros (\$35)  
The Landing 2022 Boathouse Vino Rosso, Northland, New Zealand (\$25)  
Le Vigne Winery 2021 Paso Series Sangiovese, Paso Robles (\$28)  
Mermaid Valley Vineyard 2020 Petite Sirah, Ramona Valley (\$36)  
Oak Ridge Winery 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Lodi (\$15)  
Obsidian 2022 Triple Junction Volcanic Red, USA (\$30)  
Pedernales Cellars 2020 Tempranillo, Texas (\$50)  
Starfield Vineyards 2020 The Miner's Inch, El Dorado (\$38)  
Starfield Vineyards 2022 Cinsaut, El Dorado (\$38)  
Starfield Vineyards 2022 Cunoise, El Dorado (\$36)  
Starfield Vineyards 2022 Mourvèdre, El Dorado (\$42)  
Starfield Vineyards 2023 Marsanne, El Dorado (\$36)  
Theopolis Vineyards 2021 Petite Sirah, Yorkville Highlands, Mendocino County (\$42)  
Wente Vineyards 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Livermore Valley (\$35)  
Whitehaven 2023 Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$20)  
Willamette Valley Vineyards 2023 Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$24)

# SOMM/CON<sup>™</sup> Concours d'Spirits



## 2024 RESULTS

### AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

New Amsterdam Vodka, USA (\$15)

### DOUBLE GOLD MEDAL WINNERS

1800 Añejo Cristalino Tequila, Mexico (\$60)  
Galloway Company Prototypes Chocolate Mocha Cream Liqueur Prototype, USA (\$20)  
Hard Truth Distilling Co. Sweet Mash Wheated Bourbon, USA (\$55)  
High Noon Black Cherry Vodka Seltzer, USA (\$10)  
New Riff Distilling 8 Year Old Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey, USA (\$70)  
Royal Mash British Vodka, UK (\$50)  
Salt Point Vodka Mule, USA (\$17)  
Stranahan's Sherry Cask Single Malt Whiskey, USA (\$70)

### GOLD MEDAL WINNERS

1800 Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$40)  
Familia Camarena Reposado Tequila, Mexico (\$17)  
Good Omen Distillers Purple Potato Vodka, Ecuador (\$39)  
Hard Truth Distilling Co. Sweet Mash Rye, USA (\$70)  
Gran Centenario Reposado Tequila, Mexico (\$30)  
New Riff Distilling 100% Malted Rye Whiskey, USA (\$65)  
New Riff Distilling Barrel Proof Single Barrel Bourbon Whiskey, USA (\$55)  
Salt Point Greyhound, USA (\$17)  
Stranahan's Diamond Peak Cask-Finished Whiskey, USA (\$80)  
Uncle Nearest 1856 Premium Aged Whiskey, USA (\$60)

### SILVER MEDAL WINNERS

1800 Blanco Tequila, Mexico (\$30)  
1800 Cucumber & Jalapeño Tequila, Mexico (\$30)  
Don Fulano Imperial Extra Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$190)  
Familia Camarena Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$17)  
Familia Camarena Silver Tequila, Mexico (\$17)  
Fishers Island Lemonade Half & Half, USA (\$16)  
Gran Coramino Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$100)  
High Noon Grapefruit Tequila Seltzer, USA (\$22)  
High Noon Grapefruit Vodka Seltzer, USA (\$10)  
High Noon Passionfruit Tequila Seltzer, USA (\$22)  
High Noon Pineapple Vodka Seltzer, USA (\$11)  
New Amsterdam Vodka, USA (\$15)  
New Riff Distilling 8 Year Old Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, USA (\$68)  
New Riff Distilling Bottled in Bond Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey, USA (\$46)  
Salt Point Gin Highball, USA (\$17)  
Stranahan's Blue Peak Colorado Single Malt Whiskey, USA (\$43)  
Stranahan's Original Colorado Single Malt Whiskey, USA (\$55)  
Uncle Nearest 1884 Small Batch Premium Whiskey, USA (\$50)  
Uncle Nearest Master Blend Edition - Batch 032 Premium Whiskey, USA (\$150)  
Uncle Nearest Single Barrel Premium Whiskey - Batch 905, USA (\$80)



# Lessons in Chemistry

AT **HERD PROVISIONS** IN CHARLESTON, SC, GENERAL MANAGER **ETHAN SCHNEIDER** APPLIES DIVERSE SKILLS TO A DOWNHOME STYLE OF HOSPITALITY

by Ruth Tobias

## FARM-TO-TABLE RESTAURANT AND

and butcher shop Herd Provisions in Charleston, South Carolina, has its origins in a CSA that owner and cattle rancher Alec Bradford used to operate. Its general manager, Ethan Schneider, has similarly down-to-earth roots. "My family would sit down to a home-cooked meal pretty much six nights a week," he recalls. "The food that we ate was stick-to-your-ribs, really hearty, including a lot of game. So from a young age I was ... encouraged to have an adventurous palate."

He was also inspired to cook: "I loved playing with fire and knives," he half-jokes. While attending the College of Charleston, he began doing exactly that in restaurants around town—"but after a while, I realized that the one thing I loved about cooking was taking my time, and that's not necessarily a luxury you're afforded when you're doing line service," he admits. The idea of transitioning to front of house began to appeal to him, especially after a stint behind the concierge desk at a hotel—where "I picked up some much-needed social skills that I think I was lacking at the time; it helped me grow a lot"—followed by a gig as a server, during which "I fell in love with hospitality. I really enjoyed curating experiences for others and seeing regulars over and over again and hearing about what was going on with their lives," Schneider adds.

That mindset perfectly echoes the ethos of Herd Provisions, where he eventually found himself working behind the bar while completing a degree in chemistry: "We're a locally oriented, very intimate restaurant; we like to get to know our guests. It's really a matter of being one with the neighborhood," he explains—just as it is for the back of the house, whose "culinary philosophy is and

PHOTO: MCKENZIE WATSON@SHOTSBY\_MW



always has been local, seasonal, and sustainable." In addition to Bradford's Leaping Waters Farm in Virginia, the source of the restaurant's grass-fed heritage beef, chef Jeanne Oleksiak's team works with as many as 30 area purveyors on a rotating basis while asking themselves, in Schneider's words, "What's fresh? What's cool? How can we highlight these ingredients to give respect to the people who have put all this time and effort into them?" Needless to say, the bar program follows suit. "We change it every three months or so ... because we want to make syrups and tinctures and infusions and things that are really seasonal, utilizing ingredients at their peak freshness," he says.

While the wine list is overseen by wine director Kellie Holmes, Schneider works closely with his bar manager on

the cocktail menu and the beer selection—he happens to be an avid home brewer and Certified Cicerone—with an eye toward apt pairings. A recent favorite, he shares, was a fall salad of local greens with roasted delicata squash and beets, cranberry goat cheese, and smoked nuts in apple-sage vinaigrette, which he recommended alongside either the Golden Harvest with 12-year rum, apple brandy, spiced pear liqueur, and allspice dram or the cranberry-tinged Scarlet Sage, featuring vodka washed with a coconut oil that was itself infused with coconut flakes and sage. "Both of those cocktails highlighted nostalgic and historically relevant fall ingredients," he points out, "so they really aligned" with the spirit of the dish. Another top pick: the breaded, pan-fried

pork chop with North Carolina brewery Wicked Weed's Session Sour. The meat is "crispy on the outside, juicy on the inside, and it's served with a piccata butter of capers, lemon, shallots, garlic, and parsley," he explains, while the beer is "kind of punchy, kind of fruity, and it cuts through that richness really well and also complements the acidic components in the butter—it really brightens things up."

Clearly, Schneider's background in both cooking and chemistry is serving him well as he aims to serve his guests well in turn through his knowledge of how food and beverage interact with one another—demonstrated with that downhome sensibility he was raised on: Working at Herd Provisions, he says, "is just a nice neighborhood feeling that I'm really happy to be a part of." ■





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