

■ THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

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THE SOMM JOURNAL

Undiluted PERFECTION

HOW MERUS
WINEMAKER MICHAEL
BEAULAC HELPED TURN
A CULT "GARAGE WINE"
INTO A 100-POINT
CABERNET SAUVIGNON



PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN

Sixteen years after Bill Foley acquired Merus, a historic winery on the east side of Napa Valley, his patience has paid off with the help of winemaker Michael Beaulac (pictured at The Restaurant at Farmhouse Inn in Forestville, CA), who divulges his professional secrets in our cover story.

CHAMPAGNE
MAISON FONDÉE
EN 1776

LOUIS
ROEDERER

25
YEARS



THE SOMM JOURNAL

PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Meridith May
mmay@sommjournal.com
707-302-6877 ext. x108

CHIEF WINE AND SPIRITS CRITIC

Jonathan Cristaldi
jcristaldi@tastingpanelmag.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Ruth Tobias
rtobias@sommjournal.com

SENIOR STAFF EDITOR

Kate Newton
knewton@sommjournal.com

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

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Phone: 818-625-7107

Contact: Meridith May, Publisher

Email: MMay@sommjournal.com

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The SOMM Journal

5021 Verdugo Way; Ste 306

Camarillo, CA 93012

SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

Michael Viggiano

VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING

Bill Brandel, CSW

707-302-6877 ext. x102

bill@sommjournal.com

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

Edward Ricalde

ericalde@tastingpanelmag.com

707-302-6877 ext. x105

VP/FINANCE DIRECTOR

Anna Russell

arussell@tastingpanelmag.com

VP OF EDUCATION

Lars Leicht

lars@sommjournal.com

SENIOR WINE & BEER EDITOR

Jessie Birschbach

INTERNATIONAL WINE EDITOR

Chris Howard

ASSOCIATE WINE EDITOR

Dave McIntyre

GLOBAL WINE EDITOR

Deborah Parker Wong

EAST COAST EDITOR

Wanda Mann

EVENT MANAGER

Dawn Verdone

dverdone@tastingpanelmag.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Vince Anter; Abbie Bennington; Ivo Cooper; Allison Jordan; Vincent Madero; Helen Mitternacht; Elise Nerlove; Joe Roberts; Andrea Robinson, MS; Alexander Rubin; David Schulner; Joe Stephens

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Christina Barrueta; Virginie Boone; Stacy Briscoe; Randy Caparoso; Karen MacNeil; Rex Pickett; David Ransom; Allyson Reedy; Erik Segelbaum; Liz Thach, MW

Recognition Is a Form of Leadership



Meredith May

During stressful periods, people watch how leaders behave. Shifting trade dynamics and rising costs have made “business as usual” feel like a luxury: It’s tempting for wineries and wine companies to exclusively look forward in their efforts to chase the next production cycle, solve the next problem, get the latest releases sold, and meet the next seasonal sales goal. But there’s a different kind of work that’s just as essential, and that’s the work of remembrance.

Milestones are imbued with the weight of people, history, and purpose. Anniversaries, even when they arrive quietly, are not just ceremonial fluff. For wineries that have achieved success in the face of challenges, acknowledging such achievements is a practical, cultural, and economic act. It signals endurance, reinforces identity, and strengthens relationships with those who made that success possible: team members, growers, partners, sales leaders, distributors, and, of course, loyal customers.

A successful winery is the result of astute decisions repeated for years, and celebrating the passage of those years is a way of plainly saying that the effort mattered. Anniversaries—and, for that matter, the positive recognition they attract—give producers a platform, and we can turn those platforms into stories to tell.

Whether it’s the 35th, 150th, or 250th anniversaries of Paul Hobbs Wines, Beringer Vineyards, or Maison Louis Roederer, respectively; the awarding of winemaker Michael Beaulac’s first 100-point score for Merus Cabernet Sauvignon; a showering of respect for the latest releases from Penfolds; or a celebration of our annual Napa Valley SOMM Camp with dozens of winemakers and beverage-buying professionals, we’re honored to call out some of the industry’s most notable events within our pages. 

first  press



Beringer at 150

AN EARLY COMMITMENT
TO KNIGHTS VALLEY
IN SONOMA COUNTY
CHARTED A NEW COURSE
FOR A NAPA LEGEND

by Jonathan Cristaldi



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BERINGER VINEYARDS

*Beringer Vineyards director of winemaking
Margo Van Staaveren.*



An archival image of the Rhine House in St. Helena, CA, versus how it looks today.



Beringer's Knights Valley vineyards in the northeastern corner of Sonoma County supply grapes for its nationally distributed Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

If you've ever driven north on Napa Valley's idyllic Route 29 through the charming town of St. Helena, no doubt you've admired the beautiful tunnel of trees surrounding you, created by years of growth and pruning. While venturing through this little marvel, you may have even whipped your neck to the left in an attempt to take in the Victorian splendor of Beringer Vineyards' historic Rhine House, which comes into view just as you round a bend.

Similarly beautiful, Knights Valley, which lies about 17 miles away from the Rhine House, is inextricably linked with Beringer. As the winery celebrates its 150th anniversary, it's worth remembering that although Beringer is California's oldest continuously operating winery and a foundational name in Napa Valley, some of its most consequential vineyard investments were made just beyond the county line in that Sonoma appellation. Today, its holdings there help make Beringer the region's defining grower and steward.

The winery began acquiring vineyards in Knights Valley in the mid-1960s, first listing it on a label in 1974 and helping to secure its AVA status by 1983. Six decades since their purchase, those vineyards—tucked into the northeastern corner of Sonoma north of Napa County

and east of Alexander Valley and Chalk Hill—supply grapes for Beringer's nationally distributed Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, which now ranks among the winery's signature bottlings.

A Walk in the Founders' Footsteps

Beringer's legacy began in 1875, when Jacob and Frederick Beringer purchased 215 acres beside Charles Krug's estate in St. Helena for \$14,500. Jacob, Krug's former cellar foreman, directed the winemaking; Frederick supplied the capital. Marking their first harvest in 1876, the brothers installed gravity-fed production equipment and dug caves into the hillside. The business inched along nicely until Prohibition, but Beringer survived by making sacramental wine; after repeal, in 1934, it became the first Napa Valley winery to offer public tours to an educated audience eager to get off the wagon of abolitionist ignorance.

Frederick's aforementioned Rhine House, completed in 1884 and modeled after the family home in Mainz, Germany, encompasses 17 rooms and serves as a visually stunning composition of stonework, steep gables, turrets, carved wood, and 40 jewel-toned stained-glass windows in the Art Nouveau style. It stands in romantic contrast to the more utilitarian Old Winery building and tunnels behind it.

Those visiting the house for library tastings and other occasions “get to walk on the same floors that Jacob and Frederick Beringer walked,” explains Beringer director of hospitality Claire Wilkins. “They get to taste wines in the places where the family first envisioned the Napa icon we know as Beringer today. We use these spaces not simply as venues for tasting but as immersive storytelling environments that help guests understand the people, vision, and pioneering spirit that shaped both Beringer and the broader Napa Valley wine industry.”

Beringer's liquid legacy is now in the hands of director of winemaking Margo Van Staaveren, whose connection to the winery reaches back to an internship in 1979, when Myron Nightingale led the cellar and Ed Sbragia served as his assistant. Van Staaveren later joined Chateau St. Jean, and after that brand was acquired by former parent company Beringer Wine Estates in 1996, her work increasingly intersected with successive Beringer winemaking teams, including those led by Sbragia, Laurie Hook, Mark Beringer, and Ryan Rech.

The King of Knights Valley

That continuity of winemaking experience is especially relevant for Beringer's involvement in Knights Valley, where the



Jacob and Frederick Beringer marked their first harvest in Napa Valley in 1876.

producer is now the appellation's largest winegrower, farming 640 acres across three estate vineyards. Roughly 600 of those acres are located in Beringer Ranch (the principal source of the Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon), which sits in the heart of the AVA.

"There are historical blocks on this site that have consistently made up the final Knights Valley blend that we co-ferment," says Van Staaveren. "All other blocks are fermented separately, including those from Teviot Springs and Newman Ranch." Newer to the portfolio, both vineyards bring something special to the blend. As Van Staaveren explains, "Teviot Springs has clay loam and volcanic soils that restrict vigor and produce thick-skinned grapes that add dark fruit and spice flavors. Newman Ranch is one of the coolest sites in our portfolio, so it adds beautiful acidity. Both sites make up a small portion of the Knights Valley Cabernet and have truly become the focus of our single-vineyard Knights Valley Expressions program."

Knights Valley can be warmer than Napa Valley during the day, yet temperatures fall by as much as 30 degrees Fahrenheit at night. These diurnal swings preserve freshness as Cabernet ripens, while cobbled alluvial and volcanic soils provide drainage and naturally moderate vine vigor. Van Staaveren describes the resulting wines as "somehow both refined and rugged": in other words, elegant and approachable with terrific textures.

The 2023 Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon captures those contrasts. It was a vintage marked by a cool growing season: Harvest began as late as October 2 and lasted until November 9. "The mild

weather we experienced that year created exceptionally fresh wines characterized by excellent acidity and brilliant color," says Van Staaveren. The lots that make up the final blend—90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Merlot, 3% Malbec, and 2% each Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot—were monitored separately through vinification and aging. Extended maceration developed color; tannin, and mouthfeel; malolactic fermentation and 12 months of aging in (35% new) French oak rounded the texture.

One of the prettiest renditions of this wine in the past two decades, it's led by aromas of ripe blackberry, cassis, dark plum, mint, wild lavender, cedar, and black pepper with a mineral note. The medium-bodied palate is lifted, layered, and plush without becoming heavy as it moves from mixed red berries intertwined with fine cedar spices and earth to a creamy, silky character that resolves through grippy acid tension, crisp yet supple tannins, and more red-toned fruit and spice flavors that endure through the lingering finish.

In short, it clearly bears the elegance and freshness of the vintage. "We intentionally

craft the Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon to be inviting and approachable at a young age," Van Staaveren says. "The region's signature ripe blackberry and blueberry flavors are balanced by notes of lavender and thyme and acidity that make it a perfect partner for food" (her suggestions include eggplant Parmesan or a burger topped with caramelized onions).

At an SRP of \$40, it gives retailers a Cabernet priced below many luxury-tier bottlings while leveraging a recognizable California name whose expertise extends beyond Napa. For on-premise accounts, that accessibility as well as its supple structure and savory lift make it appealing for by-the-bottle service; premium by-the-glass placements are also possible, especially with Coravin programs.

For Van Staaveren, however, the value of Knights Valley is not merely commercial but historical. That perspective is reflected in Beringer's long-term stewardship of the region and continued investment in sustainable farming practices and initiatives, including certifications and renewable energy programs designed to protect the land for future generations.

"Having spent my entire career connected to Beringer, I have a deep appreciation for the traditions and winemaking philosophy that have shaped this estate for 150 years," she says, adding that its Knights Valley Cabernet exemplifies the extent to which "Beringer has long been known for producing elegant, ageworthy wines that express the sites where they are grown—and I take maintaining that consistent sense of style and quality very seriously. I believe the future of Beringer lies in continuing to deepen our understanding of those sites and embracing opportunities that allow us to express them even more precisely." 

A Knights Valley Tour and Tasting

Beringer Vineyards' new 75-minute Knights Valley Expressions Tour & Tasting (\$65) begins in its demonstration vineyard at the Rhine House in St. Helena, moves through its historic caves, and concludes with a tasting of some new single-vineyard wines. Aiming to serve as "a bridge between accessibility and discovery," according to Beringer director of hospitality Claire Wilkins, these rare bottlings reveal the distinctions among Beringer's various properties: "A guest may first encounter Knights Valley through [the nationally distributed Beringer Knights Valley Cabernet on] a restaurant wine list or retail shelf," explains Wilkins, "but after experiencing the site-specific wines, they have a much richer understanding of the region and what makes it distinctive."

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PHOTOS: ALEXANDER RUBIN



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Scholarship Applications Open for FLOurish Program

APPLICATIONS ARE NOW open for the 2026–2027 FLOurish Program, a fully funded, virtual leadership-development program for early- and

mid-career women working across the wine and spirits industry. The upcoming cohort will include at least 15 participants from across the U.S. and beyond, representing a wide range of roles, companies, and career paths. Now entering its sixth cohort year, FLOurish has graduated more than 100 women, positively impacted 80 employers, and delivered nearly 500 one-on-one coaching sessions.

FLOurish was created in 2020 by Dream Big Darling founder Amanda W. Higgins and Millinger Group founder Rona Millinger to honor the legacy of Florence Pramberger, an industry leader with a gift for spotting and nurturing talent. “Each year, we see participants gain clarity, confidence, and momentum,” says Millinger. “They make meaningful career moves, grow as leaders, and continue supporting one another long after the program ends. That ripple effect is exactly why FLOurish exists.”

The virtual program combines individualized coaching with peer connection, mentorship, and practical leadership development. Participants can expect a personality assessment and individual debrief to help them identify strengths and areas of focus; one-on-one coaching sessions; peer mentoring and cohort networking designed to build trust, accountability, and lasting professional relationships; and industry mentoring and technical skill-building focused on practical tools for continued career growth. The application window closes on December 4. For more information and to apply, visit dreambigdarling.org/flourish.

Napa Valley Vintners’ Marketing Initiative Aims to Help Wineries Reach Consumers

NAPA VALLEY VINTNERS (NVV) is making a significant investment in a new marketing initiative designed to help its members engage consumers amid shifting wine consumption habits. Over the past few months, a task force of a dozen winery leaders worked with NVV staff to develop strategies that built on NVV’s already extensive marketing efforts, conceiving a strategy that will focus on three areas.

A new promotional campaign, “Tonight, It’s Napa,” will encourage consumers to think beyond traditional wine occasions and enjoy Napa Valley wines across more of life’s daily moments. NVV will also significantly expand its presence in key markets, bringing the region’s vintners and wines to places where consumers already gather through events, partnerships, and experiences. And finally, new and expanded programs will give NVV member wineries more opportunities to connect with trade professionals who recommend, sell, and champion Napa Valley wines.

The first 15 months of the three-year initiative are already planned, with wineries joining NVV in markets this fall and throughout 2027 for consumer events, trade programs, and “Tonight, It’s Napa” activations across the country. Says NVV board member Emma Swain, CEO of St. Supéry Estate Vineyards & Winery, “Napa Valley has an opportunity to lead, and as vintners, we have always found [that] acting collectively benefits everyone.”

Saga Robotics’ Thorvald Named “Overall Agriculture Robotics Solution of the Year”

SAGA ROBOTICS recently announced that its Thorvald autonomous platform was named “Overall Agriculture Robotics Solution of the Year” at the seventh annual AgTech Breakthrough Awards, recognizing the autonomous UV-C crop protection system’s increasingly important commercial role in helping growers manage fungal diseases such as powdery mildew while reducing reliance on conventional fungicide programs. In 2026, the platform is treating approximately 2,500 acres of winegrapes in the United States.

Thorvald uses precisely delivered UV-C light at night to suppress fungal diseases. Rather than relying solely on chemicals, the lightweight, electric platform moves autonomously through the crop, delivering light directly to the canopy. “This award is recognition of a much bigger shift happening in agriculture,” says Caine Thompson, general manager, U.S. of Saga Robotics. “For decades, disease management has meant applying more chemicals with heavier machinery. Thorvald gives growers another path . . . allowing [them] to truly start regenerating their land with the removal of chemicals, carbon, and soil compaction.”

Winegrowers are already seeing the technology translate into visible results in the vineyard. Greg Gonzalez, director of viticulture at Bien Nacido Vineyards, which has worked with Thorvald for two seasons, says of the 2026 crop, “This is the best-looking and cleanest fruit I’ve seen in my 20-year career.” 

Post & Beam

Post & Beam pairs generations of Far Niente winemaking expertise with a fresh, approachable spirit. Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir deliver precision, quality, and versatility for everything from casual gatherings to life's most celebratory moments.



2024 Chardonnay
Carneros

2023 Cabernet Sauvignon
Napa Valley

2024 Pinot Noir
Sonoma Coast



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Why Your Operation Needs Premium RTDs

SALES IN THE ready-to-drink category have increased exponentially over the last decade. What started with the seltzer craze has broadened to a seemingly endless selection that runs the gamut from classic cocktails to original libations. In fact, RTDs have been the only segment of the beverage alcohol industry to show consistent growth. According to an August *Financial Times* article, “U.S. sales of RTD alcoholic beverages rose from roughly \$489 million in 2020 to \$3.8 billion in 2025. Since 2019, the category has grown at about 11% annually, even as the broader alcoholic-beverage market has struggled.” The article attributes this success to several factors, among them convenience, price, portability, portion control, branding, and appeal for younger consumers.

Alas, it seems the majority of the RTD industry is a race to the bottom, following the flawed logic that millennials and Gen Z simply like cheap, sweet, low-alcohol drinks served in cans. What this approach fails to consider are the millions of drinkers—myself among them—who care more about quality than the effects of alcohol. As a former corporate beverage director overseeing a national accounts program that brought in nearly \$500 million a year, I was frustrated that my

colleagues were leaving significant profit on the table by not offering cocktails that checked all the boxes for luxury environments—namely premium, single-serve, safe, and light packaging (i.e. cans rather than glass) as well as superlative taste and a compelling origin story.

To solve that problem, I created Certo in partnership with Danny Keefe, owner of acclaimed importer Grapejuice Group, and famed mixologist and “Forbes 30 Under 30” alum Carlie Steiner to fit an important yet underserved segment of the market: a single-serve RTD that exudes luxury and quality in terms of both packaging and flavor.

Our line includes an Espresso Martini and a Negroni produced on Italy’s Amalfi Coast with natural ingredients to serve what I define as “captive luxury” channels: airlines, airport lounges, stadiums, concert halls, catering venues, arenas, theaters, golf and country clubs, beach clubs, nightlife venues, high-end hotels, and upscale retailers. Whether the challenges they face involve the limitations of in-room hospitality, skilled labor, proper ingredients, or speed of service, Certo aims to serve as a solution. For instance, hotels can boost revenues by offering Certo through minibars, in-room dining, grab-and-go stations,

poolside bars, and events programming, and if it’s served in restaurants and bars, the production time goes from minutes to a few seconds, enabling bartenders to execute more efficiently while providing better service. Additional benefits include portion and cost control, protection from shrinkage/loss/overpouring, and consistency of product.

While this could be said of most RTDs, the key distinction here is that the quality of the product itself means that the first sale almost always leads to more purchases, something many competitors unfortunately fail to do. We have heard from countless luxury accounts such as the Four Seasons that they’ve seen much stronger performance from Certo in this regard than from other brands.

As a former high-volume beverage operator, I implore you not to sleep on RTDs in your operations, whether on- or off-premise. For those in luxury environments, it’s imperative that the product you choose looks like it belongs and tastes as if it was freshly made behind a bar. If you’d like to learn more about Certo or try it for yourself, email ciao@amalfibeverage.com. I’d be delighted to improve your operation’s profitability by putting our cans in your hands! 



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The Wines of Now

IS IT TIME TO STOP TALKING ABOUT AGEABILITY?

RECENTLY, while reading the wine news, I realized that nearly all of the headlines that day were about wine's ability to age. "Château X Can Age Gracefully!" "Time to Drink the 2006s From Winery Y!" "The Stunning Ageability of Wines from [insert your favorite place]!" On and on, article after article, it was all about age. Meanwhile, just the day before, I'd been talking with a Napa Valley vintner who sadly admitted that his winery had three years' worth of unsold vintages backed up in his cellar.

It's insane. Why are we hammering on about ageability when there's never been a more pressing time to drink wine now?

The more I thought about this, the more I realized how often and how quickly winemakers make the point that their wine can age. During interviews, I have come to expect that no more than 15 minutes will go by before they will trumpet that the wine we are tasting was built to last. And oh, yes, you can drink it now too. . . .

At a time when I suspect fewer and fewer people have wine cellars, a time

when many people age wine for as long as it takes to get it home from the store, we are stuck talking about a concept that lacks immediate relevance. I don't get it.

What I *do* get is what ageability signifies. A wine's *capacity* to age—20, 30, 50 or more years—is one of the hallmarks of greatness. Not only do such wines take on complex and unexpected flavors, they become a sort of historical document, transcending time and connecting the drinker with the place and the people who made them long ago. These characteristics make wine remarkable in a way nothing else is.

But that fact doesn't mean we should sidestep the present. What I'm always most interested in is what a wine tastes like *right now*. What can I look forward to in the next half hour? Why will this wine be compelling and memorable if I drink it *today*, not 20 years from now?

Although it sounds like the biggest PR line imaginable, I do think it's possible for a wine to taste great now and with

decades of age. Wines can be delicious and balanced when young yet become integrated when they're old, their flavors coalescing into a synthesis of their independent parts through the magical element of time.

I'd even go a step further and say that wine can be incredibly fascinating when it is no longer young but before it's really old. When you catch a great wine at this in-between moment, it often possesses a kind of ethereal beauty, poised in mid-prance between the bookends of its life.

But everything starts with a beginning. The "now" of wine is, I think, what we need to be talking more about—especially now. 

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



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The Golden Slope

REFLECTIONS ON A TRANSFORMATIVE TRIP TO BURGUNDY

WHEN PEOPLE MEET ME in Napa or Sonoma and learn I wrote the Pinot-praising novel *Sideways*, they show great appreciation for what it and the faithfully adapted film did for the wine industry. Then they often ask if I've been to Burgundy, the holy temple of Pinot Noir. Since *Sideways* romanticizes this grape that a mere two decades ago represented a paltry 1% of the red wine market and is now 20%, they naturally assume I make frequent pilgrimages there to sip the finest Pinots in the world (though some in Sonoma and Oregon would argue otherwise).

In fact, I'd never been until last year, when I finally got the chance thanks to the munificence of an individual with deep connections. We flew into Paris, where my partner on this adventure located a wine shop specializing exclusively in Burgundies. Its proprietor, a wiry-haired man named Phillippe, was a passionate aficionado through and through. While rhapsodizing about the region, he hauled out dense reference books on specific climats that date back a millennium. My excitement rose when he guided me down a sinuous stairway to his basement, where he showed off a veritable treasure trove of fabled wines from the Côte-d'Or. (Let me just conclude by saying that it helps to have written *Sideways*.)

Then it was on to Beaune, where we stayed at a B&B named La Cour de Beaune in the Côte de Beaune, which comprises the southern half of Burgundy and grows predominantly Chardonnay. There, Véronique Capmeil, a former artistic director for luxury brands who restored the property, introduced us to her wine fridge stocked with Burgundies. We chose half a dozen to take upstairs with us and sat by one of the windows to take in the majestic landscape. The view of the hills crosshatched with stone walls that date back hundreds of years was so



PHOTO: REX PICKETT

The author captured a view of his travels en route from the Côte de Nuits to the Côte-d'Or.

astonishing, so preternatural in its beauty, it was almost ineffable. Over generations, the vineyards have been divided and subdivided into little parcels of riches, and because of the uneven terrain, each climat is angled, ever so subtly, in a slightly different aspect; as the sun starts to set over the hills, it casts them in mythical colors, from saffron to apricot to iridescent orange. We uncorked a Bourgogne Blanc that was perfectly "chilled" to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, as these Chardonnays are so plush, opulent, complex, and beautifully structured that to serve them any colder would only tamp down their transcendence. They soar across the midpalate with nary a hint of disorganization, and the 16–18 months they spend in barrel only make them richer.

I'm not a sommelier by any means, but I like to think I have a pretty refined palate. The Pinots and Chards of the Pacific Coast can be spectacular, but there's something different about these Old World wines. One day we stopped for lunch at a stunning, modern, and very affordable restaurant in an old stone building in Chambolle-Musigny. I will

never forget this moment in all my life: As I leafed through the wine list, a page of Champagnes gave way to—get this!—20 pages of Bourgogne Blancs, followed by an equal number of pages of Bourgogne Rouges. No other country, not even another region in France: just Burgundy from its myriad of appellations and domaines.

In the U.S., costs incurred by shipping and the ridiculous three-tier system—whereby wine must go through an importer, then a distributor, then a retailer, each one jacking up the price—make these wines largely out of reach for anyone not in the top 1%. In Burgundy, however, they travel straight from the winery to the restaurant or wine shop, making it possible to revel in the finest wines in the world.

I now know why Burgundy experts like Allen Meadows (aka The Burghound) and my friend Raymond Blake visit the region regularly. No matter how much time you spend there, you will never be able to wholly understand its inscrutabilities and its glories. Every new vintage brings another layer of mystery, and that's what makes its wine so endlessly captivating. **SJ**



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Bangers and Ballers

WHERE I'M DINING AND DRINKING IN DENVER NOW

AS A DENIZEN OF—and food writer in—the Mile High City for nearly 20 years, I've been privileged to watch the dining scene here grow in both size and stature by orders of magnitude. Though demographics may forever limit our access to the breadth of international cuisines available in multicultural capitals like New York or Los Angeles, we Denverites can certainly lay claim to what I consider another hallmark of a fine food town: a plethora of fabulous neighborhood joints that ensure quality, creativity, and hospitality await around every corner, not just within the confines of a handful of special-occasion destinations.

Here are five examples, all of which opened no later than fall of last year (and three of them, Heretik, Pig and Tiger, and Rougarou, have since garnered MICHELIN recognition).

FiNO

Consummate cocktailian (and grape geek) Steven Waters operates this Mediterranean-inspired hot spot on the ground floor of a recently revitalized midcentury hotel that once housed notorious nightclub RockBar. While FiNO is way classier than its predecessor, Waters is savvy enough to placate the ghosts of debauchery that inhabit it via a freewheeling beverage program—think pistachio-infused Mai Tais and Vermentino Nero by the chilled bottle—that's built to complement such kicky small plates as anchovy-topped tonnato toast and charred Savoy cabbage in brown butter with crispy capers. finocolfax.com

Heretik

Chef Theo Adley, the multitalented maverick of Marigold (see my June/July 2025 column), has brought his offbeat sensibilities to bear on this Basque-influenced bistro, with predictably unpredictable—and utterly delightful—results. Sitting at the bar to snack my way through bangers like

PHOTO: CASEY WILSON



▲ A tablescape at Soda Club.

◀ Wines on display at FiNO.

uni-capped pan con tomate, deviled eggs crowned with dollops of tuna tartare, and boudin blanc—stuffed chicken wings in romesco sauce alongside sips of Txakoli and wild-fermented cherry cider is my idea of a dream date (companion or no). maisonheretik.com

Pig and Tiger

With an artsy-industrial vibe and a funky neo-Taiwanese menu to match, this instant favorite from chefs Darren Chang and Travis Masar feels like just the right place at the right time. Killer signatures include the jellyfish salad in soy vinaigrette and fried chicken in orange hot honey with chicken fat rice, but seasonal specials like silken tofu and century egg in scallion-ginger sauce keep me coming back on the regular, whether paired with a rose jam—and black tea-infused Old Fashioned or a sparkling blend of Cab Franc and Pinot Noir from the Loire Valley. pigandtiger.com

Rougarou

The First Couple of Denver's bar community, Yacht Club's Mary Allison Wright and McLain Hedges, have officially extended their reign to the restaurant realm with this casually clever tribute to their Southern roots. Crafted by Wright's brother, chef JohnDavid Wright, the menu's chock-

full of sophisticated spins on celebrated staples—from boiled peanuts with fermented collards, lime leaf, and chilies to blackened trout with beets, black currants, and mustard greens—while the beverage list showcases the dynamic duo's edgy panache: Take the Ain't My First Rodeo with Irish whiskey, Fino Sherry, peach wine, fermented ginger, and bergamot or the baller bottle selection highlighting the cool kids of Champagne and Burgundy. lerougarou.com

Soda Club

In 2018, Colorado-bred Death & Co co-founder Ravi Derossi graced Denver with the first satellite of the legendary cocktail bar outside of New York; now he and partner/wine director Drew Brady have done the same with this purveyor of plant-based Italian cuisine and natural wines from around the globe as well as mixed drinks. Murals, velvet banquettes, and stained-glass chandeliers fill the space with color, and so do plates such as rigatoni with sumac onions and fried black kale in pistachio pesto and pinsa with fried artichokes, smoked mushrooms, and fresh apple; beside them, bottles of skin-contact País from Chile's Maule Valley, off-dry Riesling from Seneca Lake, and Croatian Babić shine just as brightly. wearesodaclub.com 

PHOTO: LUCY BEAUGARD



Maria's

L E G A C Y



To dare is to *live*

It Started With a Knock

SOMMELIER **LEE CAMPBELL** REFLECTS ON A CAREER OF DARING TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY

WHO SAYS A MEAL can't change the trajectory of your life? When Lee Campbell walked into chef Nora Pouillon's influential eponymous restaurant in Washington, D.C., in the mid-1990s, she was an aspiring law student with dreams of working on Capitol Hill—but after dining there, “I felt transformed,” she recalls. “I woke up the next day, I knocked on the kitchen door, I asked for a job, and they gave me one.” Campbell's sudden change in direction surprised her family: “If you come from a West Indian family, nobody's encouraging you to go work in a restaurant,” she adds. “You're gonna become a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer, or a corporate worker, and that's the end of the story.”

But the year Campbell spent as Pouillon's personal assistant provided a powerful foundation for a career change. “I didn't just learn cooking; I didn't just learn service—I learned the business of running restaurants, and I also learned the cultural landscape,” she says. For instance, at the time, it was novel for a restaurant to list its purveyors on its menu, leading Campbell to realize that there was “a real, almost political” value to farm-to-table sourcing.

She then returned to her native New York and began working at Manhattan restaurants such as Gotham Bar & Grill, where she had another epiphany. “I had this floor manager position, which was a decent amount of fun. But the person who was actually having the most fun in the dining room was clearly the wine director,” she says with a laugh. The observation prompted her to pivot to wine and earn certification through the (now-defunct) American Sommelier Association. “As somebody who had studied political science in undergrad, loved to travel, had always studied languages, and spoke French, it just seemed like being a sommelier was actually a better fit,” she notes.

Recalling the lesson she'd learned with Pouillon, Campbell was an early cham-



PHOTO: BECCA BRADLEY

Lee Campbell is wine director at Borgo in New York City.

pion of the natural wine movement and the space it allows for what she calls “new voices” to be heard. How does Campbell define natural wine? She points to organic farming, minimal intervention, and the “thoughtful use of sulfur”—but ultimately, she chuckles, paraphrasing a Supreme Court justice, “You know it when you see it.”

After more than a decade building natural-leaning lists at restaurateur Andrew Tarlow's Brooklyn restaurants and an 18-month stint in Virginia—where, in 2022, she co-founded Common Wealth Crush, “an incubator project . . . to steward new brands”—Campbell launched the wine program at Tarlow's first Manhattan restaurant, Borgo, which opened in 2024. Summarizing her approach to her role as wine director, she explains, “I was always very clear that I was just looking for wine that was expressive of a terroir and expressive of a moment in time . . . wine that tastes alive.”

Earlier this year, Campbell became the second-ever recipient of the James Beard

Award for Outstanding Professional in Beverage Service. She admits she was surprised by the win but believes “it's good for [the James Beard Foundation] to recognize how important beverage is to the culinary landscape.” (Her family, meanwhile, has since come around to supporting her career: Her grandmother, for example, was won over years ago when Campbell was profiled in *Essence* magazine.)

While she has come a long way since knocking on that door in D.C., Campbell still draws on her past and encourages other sommeliers to do the same: “Don't forget those first wines that inspired you [or] those initial winemakers that you met. . . . I think it's always important to remember that this is based in farming, that this is based in community, that this is based in agriculture—and to be careful not to get too far away from that.” 

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



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The Acme of Anderson Valley

FERRINGTON VINEYARD MERITS MORE ATTENTION AS A CALIFORNIA “GRAND CRU”

TUCKED AWAY ON an unassuming south-facing hillside behind Boonville in the Anderson Valley AVA of California's Mendocino County, there's a vineyard that may legitimately claim to be among the nation's finest—a Grand Cru, if you will. Like Napa Valley's To Kalon, Santa Barbara County's Bien Nacido, or the Willamette Valley's Shea, Ferrington Vineyard has a decades-long track record of supplying outstanding grapes to various wineries. Along the way, it has helped solidify the reputation of Anderson Valley as a quality wine region.

Planted in 1969, Ferrington was purchased by Kurt Schoeneman and his family in 1996 and has been steadily managed ever since by Norman Kobler, whose parents opened Lazy Creek Vineyards, the Valley's second commercial winery, in the early 1970s. The Schoenmans are equally careful about managing their client list. Their marquee partner is cult Pinot Noir producer Williams Selyem in the Russian River Valley, which has made a Ferrington-designated Pinot for more than three decades. Other Sonoma County clients include Black Kite, Auteur, Reeve, Brick & Mortar, Ottavino, and Dutcher Crossing; closer to home, Anderson Valley wineries that source fruit from Ferrington include Baxter, Husch, and Lula.

The vineyard's location on the eastern end of Anderson Valley about 15 miles from the Pacific places it on the slightly



warmer edge of a cool-climate growing region, according to Williams Selyem winemaker Jeff Mangahas, whom I met for a tasting on a warm day on a bluff overlooking the vineyard. Mangahas poured five vintages of the producer's Ferrington Pinot, from the current release of 2023 back to the 1993. The wines have aged well; as he tasted the 2014, representing his first year as chief winemaker, Mangahas said, “The savory notes are beginning to emerge, but you still have that core of red fruits.”

This part of the valley receives the least influence from coastal fog, and that gives the wine more red cherry notes and bright acidity, Mangahas explained, though he stressed that those characteristics are also due to the fact that he harvests relatively early—before anyone else at the site, in fact. Further up the valley, where the fog arrives earlier in the day and lingers longer, grapes require more hang

time, resulting in black cherry and pomegranate flavors, he added. Overall, Anderson Valley's climate gives its Pinots more lightness and energy compared to the more powerful expressions of the Russian River Valley.

We tasted two other single-vineyard reds as well. Made by Phil Baxter, the 2023 Ella's Reserve Pinot Noir from Fathers + Daughters—the label of Kurt's daughter, Sarah Schoeneman, and her husband, Guy Pacurar—showed spicy cherry flavors with a hint of sarsaparilla. The 2023 Pinot from Lula Cellars, made by Matt Parish, was lithe and silky.

Ferrington also harbors Chardonnay, which Matt and Alexis Iaconis began sourcing for their label, Brick & Mortar, in 2020. Their 2024 Anderson Valley Chardonnay, made entirely from Ferrington fruit, displayed tension and the reductive intensity of some of the fine Chardonnays emerging from Oregon. And their designated 2022 Ferrington Vineyard bottling—exclusively containing the Old Wente clone and aged 22 months in new puncheons—was magnificent. Oakly and seductive, it reminded me of the finest Chardonnays from Margaret River, Australia, and Mendoza, Argentina.

The tasting was a delicious demonstration of the quality, depth, and ageworthiness of wines from a landmark vineyard. **SJ**

Ferrington Vineyard is located in the Anderson Valley AVA of California's Mendocino County.

PHOTOS: DAVE MCINTYRE

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FROM
SHOWRUNNER
TO
somm

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

Montage Moments

A WHIRLWIND TOUR OF THE NATION'S TOP TASTINGS

As a screenwriter, I think the best way to describe becoming a Level 2—certified sommelier with the Court of Master Sommeliers—is to employ an overused yet necessary device: the montage. Montages depict a character's growth over a long period of time through dozens of quick clips set to a killer three-minute song. Think Rocky Balboa training for the big fight. Or every romantic comedy when the two leads fall in love. As a sommelier, my montage moment came when I discovered that somms can volunteer to pour wine at events all over the country and be exposed in the process to bottles and vigneronns we've only dreamed about. So that's exactly what I did. All year long. Cue the music!

CUT TO: LA PAULÉE, LOS ANGELES—MONTAGE

I went from someone who had never tasted a Grand Cru Burgundy (i.e. a normal person) to someone who tasted almost 100 of them in one glorious, bacchanalian weekend (not normal but highly recommended). This was the most fun I've ever had with my pants on—and the greatest education on both Burgundy and wine service there is.

CUT TO: BOULDER BURGUNDY FESTIVAL—MONTAGE

In Boulder, Colorado, I sommed (not a playable word in Scrabble) with Master Sommeliers Brett Zimmerman and Bobby Stuckey at Frasca Food and Wine. I can't believe Bobby even let me through the doors of his venerable restaurant, but there I was, pouring next to a legend.

CUT TO: LA TABLÉE, NEW YORK CITY—MONTAGE

A celebration of the Rhône Valley—and my first taste of Rayas!

PHOTO: JAMES FRENCH



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID SCHULNER



▲ A team of somms at La Tablée in New York City.

CUT TO: LA FÊTE DU CHAMPAGNE, LOS ANGELES—MONTAGE

I represented and poured Krug. With Olivier Krug!

CUT TO: BORDEAUX, FRANCE—MONTAGE

For my 50th birthday, I flew to Bordeaux. Now that I was a somm, once-closed doors blew wide open: Cheval Blanc, Château Latour, Château Margaux, Vieux Certan, Figeac, Pavie. I asked my guide at Latour why he spent nearly three hours with me—didn't he have more important things to do? He said Latour didn't

◀ The author pouring Krug with Olivier Krug himself at La Fête du Champagne in Los Angeles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID SCHULNER



▲ Meeting Veronique Drouhin of Maison Joseph Drouhin at La Paulée in LA.

want its wines to become museum pieces. Sommeliers were the only ones who could keep its wines alive and relevant.

END MONTAGE

I knew there was a television series somewhere in all of this—a series about the joy of discovering something new and exhilarating later in life, about the beauty and history and sense of place conveyed in a special bottle of wine. I also knew the show couldn't be pretentious. It couldn't alienate people who didn't know anything about wine or, worse, felt intimidated by wine. It had to be funny, sexy, sophisticated, and filled with wish fulfillment. It should feel like *Sex and the City* or *Emily in Paris*. It should feel like a Darren Star show.

So I called Darren Star. 

To be continued . . .

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Spicing Things Up

THE WINES OF HIGH-ALTITUDE CALIFORNIA AVA **EL DORADO** OWE THEIR UNIQUE CHARACTER TO AN UNCOMMON SOURCE

EVEN LONGTIME wine professionals have always had a hard time pinpointing what distinguishes El Dorado, a California AVA since 1983. I confess to having known very little about this historic community, located along the mineral deposit belt known as the Mother Lode (gold was first discovered at Sutter's Mill sawmill in El Dorado County in 1848, an event that led directly to California's statehood in 1850), until a winemaker friend named Marco Cappelli moved there from Napa Valley in the early 2000s.

When I began visiting Cappelli up in El Dorado, whose vineyards are planted between 2,500 and 3,500 feet in elevation,



PHOTOS: RANDY CAPAROSO



Lava Cap Vineyard (above) and Edio Vineyards (left) are both situated at elevations over 3,000 feet in the El Dorado AVA.

of a small group of estates that began meeting monthly in May 2024. Their original objective was simply to taste and share technical information, but they quickly began

to recognize a commonality in their wines that they termed "Sierra Spice": a woody garrigue character derived from volatile terpenes released primarily from the forested areas surrounding virtually every vineyard in the AVA.

In other words, Sierra Spice is an airborne influence on the terroir specific to this region. Eventually, the El Dorado Eight identified four aromatic profiles in their wines corresponding to the flora prevalent in different corners of the appellation, namely Douglas fir; incense-cedar; Ponderosa pine; and blended notes of trees, shrubs, and native ground cover.

This past spring, I spent two days exploring El Dorado's mountain vineyards. Sometimes the Sierra Spice would be subtle—as with the Cedarville Vineyard 2022 El Dorado Zinfandel, which boasted

herbal/licorice-like qualities reminiscent of shrubs in the vineyard called mountain misery (*Chamaebatia australis*)—and sometimes pungent, as with the Lava Cap 2023 40th Anniversary El Dorado Blend (56% Syrah, 42% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 2% Cabernet Franc), redolent of peppery spice, black olive, and herbs tinged by notes of evergreen needles and savory-sweet tree bark.

Sierra Spice is most distinctive in reds comprising higher-phenolic grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon. One of several examples I tasted was the Edio Vineyards 2020 El Dorado Cabernet Sauvignon, sourced from a 3,000-foot site planted in 1981, whose varietal fruit is lit up by a "Christmas tree" variant of the regional spice, attributed directly to the Douglas fir; incense-cedar; and madrone circling the vineyard. Other members of the El Dorado Eight producing wines of similar ilk are Boeger Winery, Bumgarner Winery, Element 79 Vineyards, Madroña Vineyards, Miraflores Winery, and Starfield Vineyards.

It would be a dull world indeed if every Cabernet-based red tasted like one from Napa Valley or Pauillac. It is appellations such as El Dorado that are giving us fun and exciting alternatives. **SJ**

we often talked about the "granite" quality of these Sierra Nevada-grown wines. To us, it could be described as an iron-like grip derived primarily from accentuated phenolic sensations—qualities perceived on the palate rather than in the nose.

As is typical of high-altitude regions, El Dorado produces wines that are elevated in color, tannin, and acidity. This is due to both moderate temperature swings that mitigate daytime highs (diurnal swings can be as much as 10–20 degrees narrower in California regions higher than 2,000 feet) and higher ultraviolet light, which impacts fruit grown above the fog line by causing grapes to grow thicker skins to protect their seeds.

Granted, high phenolic content is far from unusual in California wines. Enter the "El Dorado Eight," to use the name

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by Deborah Parker Wong

Where There's Smoke, There's Taint

WINEMAKERS ARE SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO THIS INCREASINGLY COMMON PROBLEM

WITH WILDFIRES IN recent months threatening vineyards from Bordeaux and the surrounding Gironde to Spain's Meseta region and British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, smoke taint will certainly be a factor of terroir for the 2026 vintage in affected areas. But to what degree do the flavors it imparts negatively impact wine?

Smoke taint is primarily a problem in red grapes, although it can affect whites as well. Volatile compounds from wildfire smoke are trapped by the waxy cuticle on the berry skin and end up contaminating the wine during fermentation. Grapes are most vulnerable during and after veraison, which, for winegrowers in the regions mentioned above, began in early July. There's little doubt that vineyards there will be impacted by the recent fires.

Determining the degree of taint by measuring the compounds in the grapes alone doesn't guarantee the fruit will produce smoke-free wine. Smoke is composed of many different volatile phenols—the most common of which are guaiacol and 4-methylguaiacol—but these compounds don't act alone. The family of cresols, syringol, and a recently discovered compound known as thiophenol create a synergistic effect that results in the ashy aftertaste commonly associated with tainted wine.

Ironically, many of the same compounds that are found in wildfire smoke are also found in toasted wood barrels and contribute desired secondary characteristics to wine (although at much lower levels). Heavily charred barrels produce cresols, syringol, and guaiacol, while lighter toasts and seasoned wood contribute flavors of diacetyl (butter), malt, vanillin, clove, and hay, to name a few.

Depending on the amount of smoke exposure and the resulting taint, winemak-

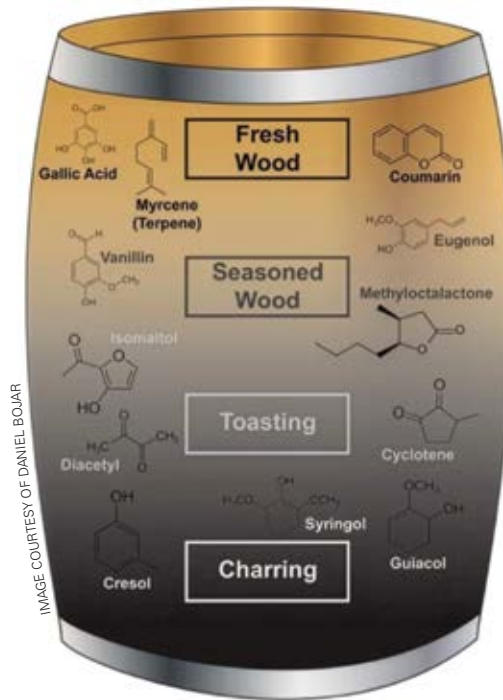
ers have only a few options. They can gently press whole clusters and make white wine or rosé; they may also be able to use oak aging to mask and integrate any undesirable compounds or simply blend with untainted wine to mimic oak aging.

After the 2020 fires in Napa and Sonoma counties, many Cabernet Sauvignon producers used a combination of laboratory analysis and small-scale bucket fermentations to check volatile phenols in an attempt to gauge the level of taint in their wines. Some ultimately chose not to harvest: One winemaker who left over 200 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon on the vine felt the amount of taint in the wines would not have been detected by consumers but would have never made it past the critics and buyers who were aware of vintage conditions and under-

stand that smoke taint increases with bottle age.

In 2017, winemakers in Oregon and Washington used techniques like whole-bunch pressing to minimize smokiness in Pinot Noir and Dolcetto and made rosé that they could get to market quickly. While the wines were a hit with consumers and ultimately sold, it was the reactions of the aforementioned gatekeepers that the wineries feared the most.

According to the Australian Wine Research Institute, about 20% of tasters cannot detect smoke taint, but for those who can, there is a relatively low threshold at which its flavors go from complex to unappealing. Winemakers in the globally impacted regions will be faced with some tough decisions in the weeks and months ahead. S|



According to the Australian Wine Research Institute, about 20% of tasters cannot detect smoke taint, but for those who can, there is a relatively low threshold at which its flavors go from complex to unappealing.

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Does Your Wine Club Live up to Its Name?

I'VE BEEN WANTING to start a wine club for years, but the timing never seemed quite right. And now, one could argue, it's worse than ever. Everywhere I look, the wine industry seems to be in free fall, with no shortage of headlines suggesting there's no saving it. Even so, in September, I finally launched the *V is for Vino* Wine Club. Why? Because I still believe people are willing to participate in wine clubs when given a compelling reason to do so.

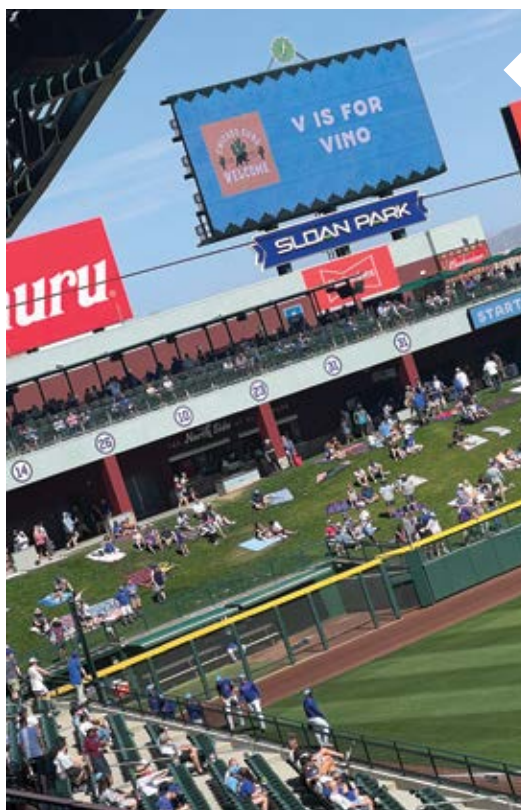
The latest direct-to-consumer shipping data supports that belief: While the overall market contracted last year, shipment volume for wines priced over \$100 actually grew 5%, according to WineBusiness Analytics. So as I started planning the *V is for Vino* Wine Club, I thought long and hard about what would make it feel like an actual *club* rather than just another wine subscription.

First, it would have to provide real value, which is tough, because wine sent to your door is never going to win on price; shipping and fulfillment are simply too expensive. So a wine club can't just say, "Here are three bottles you could also find at the grocery store or pick up in a tasting room," as it's objectively easier to grab a bottle on the way home than anticipate what you'll want weeks in advance and arrange to sign for a shipment.

Fortunately, the word "value" doesn't necessarily imply inexpensiveness or convenience. A \$100 bottle can be a great value if there's a good reason to spend \$100 on it. What members are really paying for is curation: interesting bottles that they might not otherwise have access to, placed within a context that makes them even more meaningful.

For instance, it's relatively simple to make a video explaining the wines in each shipment; to create educational materials, tasting guides, and pairing suggestions;

PHOTO COURTESY OF VINCE ANTER



Among the perks offered to V is for Vino Wine Club members are exclusive excursions such as a Chicago Cubs spring training game.

able parts of our business. If you can use your wine club to help members form a deeper connection with your brand and other people who are associated with it, they're more likely to become advocates. That could mean in-person events, virtual tastings, or a private online group where they can interact and share tasting notes. In short, create opportunities for members to get to know both you and one another—which should in turn create a community people genuinely want to remain part of.

My partner in this venture, SocialSomm, is a great example. Not only does the online platform help creators like me handle the logistics of curating and shipping wine, but every shipment also includes

or provide any other content that brings the wines to life. But leave some room for surprise: I'll occasionally include local products that complement the wines, like conservas or cured meats, and our early members are receiving extra gifts, such as tasting notebooks. The goal is to create enough anticipation that they can't wait to see what shows up next. We're not just selling a recurring shipment: We're selling a membership, and membership should come with perks.

Second, as with every other marketing initiative, you should always be building community. I talked about this in my August/September 2026 column after bringing 60 members of our audience together for a river cruise through Bordeaux, and it reinforced something I've long believed: Our community is one of the most valu-

videos of somms tasting through the wines as well as beautifully designed cards featuring everything from food pairings and tasting notes to music suggestions and personal stories.

I know sometimes we "influencers" can drive traditional wineries a little mad with all our talk about community, audience, and experience. But if I've learned one thing throughout this journey, it's that those things are precisely what help sustain my business even when times are tough. If we want our members to stick around, our wine clubs need to make them feel as valuable as we know they are.

Until next wine,
Vince

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MARLBOROUGH, NEW ZEALAND'S **VILLA MARIA WINES** PUTS THE VALUES OF COME OVER OCTOBER INTO PRACTICE by Christina Barrueta

FOR NEARLY 25 YEARS, David Roper has called Marlborough producer Villa Maria Wines home. He started there as a cellar hand “keen to learn everything,” in his words, and worked his way through the ranks to become group winemaker at Indevin New Zealand, which acquired Villa Maria in 2021. “It’s really exciting to still be contributing and playing a big part,” he says, though these days that contribution extends beyond blending and bottling. “A

mon on a Saturday afternoon for all of us to rock up to someone’s place with a bottle of wine and bring some food. But it’s not a serious tasting—it’s just connecting with friends.”

So when *Come Over October* came along, Roper strongly supported its mission. Given that Villa Maria is imported by Winebow, a major sponsor, “the opportunity for [us] to be a part of the campaign is perfect, because we want to



lot of my work now is connecting with customers and retailers—people around the world—about our wine and telling our stories, which I love to do.”

That perspective makes Villa Maria a veritable poster child for *Come Over October*. Conceived by wine journalist and *SOMM Journal* contributor Karen MacNeil and PR veterans Gino Colangelo and Kimberly Noelle Charles, DipWSET, the campaign encourages simply sharing a bottle with the important people in our lives. “Wine certainly brings everyone together,” Roper says, including his own comrades and colleagues: “It’s not uncom-

mon on a Saturday afternoon for all of us to rock up to someone’s place with a bottle of wine and bring some food. But it’s not a serious tasting—it’s just connecting with friends.”

A favorite example: Villa Maria Private Bin Sauvignon Blanc paired with seafood coming straight from New Zealand waters. “We’re very lucky to have amazing green-lipped mussels,” he says of the bivalves named for their distinctive shells. “I was in Marlborough recently, and we steamed them with Sauvignon Blanc, chili,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WINEBOW

◀ David Roper is group winemaker at Indevin New Zealand, which produces Marlborough brand Villa Maria Wines.

lemongrass, and shallots; they were crazy good.” But he’s just as happy to stick with the “very Kiwi tradition” of fish and chips, he adds: “Get some . . . from your local shop, head to the beach with friends, and open a bottle. Add a beautiful sunset, and that’s a great moment.”

For Roper, such simple pleasures echo what he calls the winery’s “humble beginnings.” In 1961, 21-year-old George Fistonich leased land from his father in Māngere, Auckland, planting just 1 acre to vines with a “dream of [introducing] the Villa Maria name into the world.” In October, Roper will spend three weeks in the U.S. to share the story of that one-man operation turned international sensation. “The way Villa Maria succeeded was by bringing people who love wine together,” he reflects. “I get so much enjoyment out of watching someone try it for the first time and seeing their eyes light up. Even though I love making the wine, seeing that connection and that response is always so rewarding.” 

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by Allison Jordan, executive director, California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, and VP of environmental affairs, Wine Institute

Work in Progress

A NEW REPORT FINDS SUSTAINABILITY MEASURES IMPLEMENTED AT SCALE

THE CALIFORNIA WINE SECTOR

continues to deepen its commitment to sustainable winegrowing as documented by the 2025 California Wine Community Sustainability Report, which shows widespread adoption of sustainable practices across both vineyards and wineries (to access the report, visit library.sustainablewinegrowing.org). Growers and vintners continue to make progress in conserving resources, strengthening communities, and building resilient businesses statewide, as more than 90% of wine is now produced in a certified-sustainable winery and approximately 70% of winegrape acreage is certified by a sustainability program.

Published every five years by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA), the report provides a comprehensive assessment of sustainability performance throughout California's wine community. Since 2021, growers managing 2,745 vineyards covering more than 350,000 acres have used the California Code of Sustainable Winegrowing to evaluate their operations, representing increases of 19% in vineyard participation and 34% in acreage. Winery participation has grown as well, with 282 wineries producing approximately 210 million cases annually completing sustainability assessments, a 23% increase from the previous reporting period. Drawing on aggregated vineyard and winery data, the findings indicate measurable progress since the previous report in 2020, showing improvements in 65% of the vineyard sustainability criteria and 53% of the winery criteria evaluated.

Among the report's vineyard highlights:

- 99% of participating growers reported using practices that support soil health, including cover cropping, applying compost applications, and/or promoting resident vegetation
- 97% implemented irrigation-pump

improvements to reduce energy use

- 85% relied on cultural pest-management practices to reduce pesticide use
- 83% used micro-irrigation systems to improve water efficiency

the continued progress in part to an expanding network of resources, education, and outreach designed to help growers and vintners put sustainable practices into action and continue improving

PHOTO COURTESY OF WINE INSTITUTE



According to the latest California Wine Community Sustainability Report, 99% of participating growers reported using practices that support soil health, including cover cropping, applying compost applications, and/or promoting resident vegetation.

Wineries also demonstrated strong sustainability integration, as 98% reported incorporating sustainability into their business strategy, 97% measured and monitored water use, and 96% completed an energy audit within the past five years to identify operational efficiencies and cost savings.

Beyond environmental practices, the report highlights ongoing community engagement throughout the industry. For example:

- 100% of participating growers provided neighboring communities with contact information and responded to concerns
- 97% of vintners contributed to volunteer efforts or other forms of local support
- 94% of growers maintained vegetation near waterways to support habitat protection
- 90% of wineries encouraged employees to contribute ideas that improve sustainability and operational performance

Reflecting several important milestones—including the CSWA's 20th anniversary in 2023, the 15th anniversary of Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing, and the 10th anniversary of the California Green Medal Sustainable Winegrowing Leadership Awards—the report credits

over time. Between 2021 and 2025, the CSWA launched the California Vineyard and Winery Climate Action Toolkit and published the fifth edition of the California Code of Sustainable Winegrowing. And since 2003, the CSWA has reached more than 19,300 participants through 716 educational events.

As climate resilience and the management of both natural and human resources remain critical business priorities, the latest findings suggest California's wine community continues to position itself as a leader in sustainable agriculture, demonstrating that environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and long-term economic success can advance hand in hand. 

Authored by Wine Institute contributors, "The Inside Sip on California Wine" offers an insider's perspective on the people, issues, and ideas shaping California wine. Wine Institute represents nearly 1,000 California wineries and affiliated businesses and is the only organization advocating for wine at the state, federal, and international levels while working across policy, market, and industry priorities to help California wine thrive at home and around the world.


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Actually Outstanding

FROM A CLANDESTINE ASIAN-INSPIRED CHEF'S COUNTER TO AN OPULENT STEAKHOUSE, SOMMELIER NISA PARIS BUILDS WINE PROGRAMS TO MATCH THE AMBITIONS OF **PRETTY DECENT CONCEPTS** IN PHOENIX, AZ

IN THE DINING room at Cleaverman, a Hollywood-glam steakhouse filled with velvet drapery and marble, sits an arched wine display case. Only when the back wall slides open is the entrance to Uppercut—a 16-seat chef's counter with a 14-course, Asian-inspired tasting menu devoted to beef—revealed. That secret space is one stop of many that Nisa Paris oversees as sommelier and manager at Phoenix, Arizona-based hospitality group Pretty Decent Concepts.

Led by culinary director Ivan Gonzalez, the company has built its name on 11 bars and restaurants (so far), each with a distinct persona. Paris oversees the wine programs at four, including Cleaverman and Uppercut as well as Filthy Martini, an amber-lit piano lounge also concealed within Cleaverman, and Roman God of Fire in Tempe, a collaboration with James Beard Award-winning chef Scott Conant featuring wood-fired Italian cuisine.

At Uppercut, Paris curates the pairings that accompany executive chef Jared Porter's multicourse feasts. Take the S.A. Prüm Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese she pours alongside a Vietnamese-style hot pot of *picanha* (top sirloin cap) with pickled vegetables in a shiitake broth laced with lemongrass, ginger, and black vinegar: "The vinegar makes it a challenge, but the Riesling works so well—I could eat the hot pot [with] a glass of it every single day," she says with a laugh. Or take the 60-day-dry-aged rib-eye with butter-poached shrimp, red curry, and Murasaki sweet potatoes accompanied by Clos de l'Oratoire des Papes Châteauneuf-du-Pape. "The curry is so spicy and flavorful that you don't want a lot of tannins, and the Grenache just sings with it," she comments.

Dinner at Cleaverman, meanwhile, might involve escargot in puff pastry with herb butter and a glass of Michel Sarrazin et Fils Bourgogne Pinot Noir Les Vieilles Vignes or Tohoku A5 strip loin seared tableside and served with CADE Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, which Paris calls one of her personal favorites. "It's great by itself, but when I have that with

too, recently including a magnum of Marchesi Antinori Tignanello and a double magnum of Tenuta San Guido Sassicaia. "And we anticipate our numbers growing as more people hear about us," she adds confidently.

Granted, those first-timers may be presented with a different selection. "I try not to stay stagnant, buying the same wines



▲ *Escargot paired, naturellement, with red Burgundy at Cleaverman.*

Pretty Decent Concepts sommelier/manager Nisa Paris. ▶



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA BARRUETA

a steak, I remember why I do what I do," she says.

Building the reserve list for the steakhouse, which opened late last year, has been one of her favorite responsibilities. "In the past three weeks, we've sold all our Château L'Évangile, two bottles of Le Petit Cheval, and a bottle of [Domaine de la Romanée-Conti]," she notes, clearly pleased. In a grand space that welcomes festive groups, large-format bottles move

over and over again," Paris explains. "When I sell out, I don't just repurchase what's comfortable. I like to look for something similar to compare and educate myself."

And her colleagues help her keep that fire lit. "The team shows so much appreciation and respect" for the education she provides, she says. "They're growing so fast, and it really motivates me to keep going, to keep learning, and to keep doing better. I've never been happier." **NS**



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*Verdicchio
(pictured),
Trebbiano di
Soave, and
Turbiana,
also known as
Trebbiano di
Lugana, are
genetically
identical.*

IN WINE FOR DUMMIES, respected authors (and dear friends of mine) Mary Ewing-Mulligan and Ed McCarthy, her late husband, say the major handicap of studying Italian wine is that most of it is made from indigenous grapes that don't exist elsewhere. Those that are transplanted outside of Italy tend not to perform well, and even when planted in different regions of Italy, the same varieties yield wines of diverse character.

Consider the long-lost triplets of Verdicchio from Le Marche on the central Adriatic Coast; Trebbiano di Soave from the Soave DOC east of Verona; and Turbiana, also known as Trebbiano di Lugana, from the Lugana DOC near Lake Garda, straddling the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. The latter two were mistakenly identified as Trebbianos, but it turns out they are genetically identical to the former.

The three do have much in common, including high acidity and notes of citrus, green almond, and white flowers that make for fresh, savory, and mineral-driven wines. But if you know anything about viticulture, you know that place matters.

The best Soave comes from the steep volcanic hills between Verona and Vi-

cenza west of Venice. Here, Trebbiano di Soave plays a supporting role only, with up to 30% permitted in Soave DOC to impart acidity, structure, and floral aromas to the dominant Garganega. A handful of producers bottle a 100% Trebbiano di Soave but must relegate it to the Veronese IGT designation. The results show bright lemon zest, tart peach, and delicate floral aromatics plus a distinctly zesty, saline finish.

In the Lugana DOC, a little over 20 miles to the east of Soave, Turbiana is the sole player. The terrain is mostly flatland or gently rolling hills set on mineral-rich moraines—accumulations of silt, pebbles, rocks, and clay pushed ahead of the glacier that formed Lake Garda over 1.5 million years ago. Lugana expresses ripe fruit flavors like white peach, apricot, and preserved lemon, along with white flowers and a slightly creamy mouthfeel akin to lemon custard.

In the Le Marche region, Verdicchio's heartland is Jesi, positioned between the bracingly cool air of the Apennine Mountains and warm, briny breezes from the Adriatic Sea. White specks of fossilized seashells from the Pliocene era

dot the soil, which are predominantly dense and deep *argilla* clay, keeping yields low. Wheat fields commonly grow alongside vineyards as the crop is well suited to the soils, meaning that Verdicchio here is surviving more than thriving at the technical limits of vine stress. (And stress—as editors and lawyers tell me—builds character.) Verdicchio is typically more crisp, savory, and aromatic than its northern counterparts; it also tends to have racier acidity, with the expected flavors of green apple and citrus but that pleasantly bitter almond finish seemingly kicked up a notch.

So, Soave, Lugana, or Verdicchio? Of course, each has a suitable moment and ideal pairing, but I often defer to Verdicchio. Both Soave and Lugana are positioned near highways and cities that bring visitors to the region and whisk those wines out to the world. But Le Marche is off the beaten path, and Verdicchio is not a wine you find often or casually drink. Its best renditions command attention and offer a depth of flavor usually seen only in red wines. So if the context is right, I suggest giving Verdicchio a try—handicap be damned. **SJ**

THREADCOUNT

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Last Call for 2026

SEVEN MONEY MOVES TO MAKE BEFORE
DECEMBER 31 by Joe Stephens

EVERY YEAR AROUND this time, I'll start asking people in the industry what the plan is for their strongest earning stretch of the year, and the same answer comes back: "Talk to me in January."

I get it. I've lived that fourth quarter—on the retail floor, on the supplier side, in the dining room. It's when many people in this industry earn a significant share of their income, and nobody has the bandwidth for a financial planning conversation in the middle of it. But some of the most valuable money moves of the year have deadlines that don't care how busy you are: Many of them expire at midnight on December 31, whether they're taken advantage of or not. Here are seven examples, most requiring less than an hour of your time:

■ **Open that Solo 401(k) you've been planning.** If you earn any 1099 income—consulting, education, brand work, private events—a Solo 401(k) is likely the most powerful retirement tool available to you. And while recent law changes (SECURE 2.0) give sole proprietors more flexibility around when they can establish a plan, waiting is still a mistake. If you already have a plan, you generally need to decide how much of your income you want to contribute by December 31. And if you're opening one for the first time, you may have some flexibility to wait until after year-end, but why leave it until then?

■ **Top off your retirement contributions.** For 2026, you can defer up to \$24,500 as an employee, \$32,500 if you're 50 or older, and \$35,750 if you're in the 60–63 "super catch-up" window. Self-employed professionals can add an employer contribution of up to 20% of net self-employment income on top. And if your W-2 employer offers a match, make sure you're on pace to capture all of it before the final payroll of the year. An unclaimed

match is simply compensation you decided not to take.

■ **Put your holiday windfall to work before it disappears.** The fourth quarter is when we tend to earn the most, but it's also when that money vanishes the fastest. Decide now what portion of your seasonal windfall should go to the future and move it the day it arrives. Even a simple rule, such as saving half of every windfall, will do more for you than the perfect investment strategy if you never actually set the money aside.

■ **Harvest your investment losses.** If you hold investments in a taxable brokerage account, year-end is the time to review them. Selling positions that have lost value lets those losses offset capital gains elsewhere in your portfolio and potentially a portion of ordinary income as well. The trade must be placed by December 31 to count for this tax year. One caution: Repurchasing the same or a substantially identical investment within 30 days triggers the wash-sale rule and disqualifies the loss.

■ **Spend your FSA dollars.** If you have a healthcare Flexible Spending Account through an employer, remember that unspent balances are typically forfeited at year-end unless your plan offers a short grace period or limited carryover. Check your balance now, while there's still time to schedule that dental visit or order a new pair of glasses.

■ **Make your charitable gifts count twice.** Gifts must be completed by December 31 to count for this tax year. And if you're giving anyway, consider donating appreciated investments instead of cash. Donate shares you've held more than a year, and you may be able to

deduct the full market value while never paying capital gains tax on the growth. For those fortunate enough to have built up investment accounts over the years, this can be one of the most tax-efficient ways to give.

■ **Get ahead of January's estimated tax payment.** If you earn 1099 income, your fourth-quarter estimated payment comes due in mid-January, right as holiday credit-card statements arrive. Don't let the two collide. Tally your self-employment income now, set aside what you'll owe, and treat that money as already spent. Then when January rolls around, the money will already be there.

Most of these steps don't require a huge investment of time but rather the same intention we bring to a wine list, a cellar, or a tasting. You know how busy things can get in the fourth quarter. A little planning now can help you head into the new year feeling prepared and in control. *JS*

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Joe Stephens, CFP®, is a Certified Sommelier and Certified Financial Planner with Associated Financial Planners, where he works alongside a team dedicated to helping wine and spirits professionals build long-term financial security. Stephens offers securities through Cambridge Investment Research, Inc., member FINRA/SIPC, and advisory services through Cambridge Investment Research Advisors, Inc.



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From Apathy to Appreciation

RETHINKING MERLOT WITH **RUTHERFORD HILL WINERY** by Rex Pickett

NOT A DAY goes by that I, as the author of *Sideways*, don't get asked about my supposed antipathy for Merlot, subject of the famous rant by Miles, my alter ego played by Paul Giamatti in the film version. "How do you feel about tanking the Merlot industry?" is a common opening line. I don't mind: It's validation of *Sideways'* timeless impact on the wine business and elsewhere, not to mention recognition for something I wrote in a blaze of inspiration, never knowing it was going to get published, let alone go on to become semi-legendary. (Besides, in my December 2025/January 2026 column in this magazine, I addressed the fact that I don't actually hate Merlot and pointed out that the grape had already fallen into disreputation by the time I wrote the novel.)

I recently had an opportunity to right the wrongs I had supposedly exacted on Merlot vintners—that is, the ones doing it out of passion for the grape as opposed to the shameless mass-market opportunists who jumped on the bandwagon following reports in the '90s about red wine being heart-healthy. I was importuned by Rutherford Hill Winery, which specializes in Merlot, to taste its wines and, if so inclined, evaluate them on their own merit. I'm not a wine critic, but I agreed.

Rutherford Hill Winery is, of course,

located in Napa Valley and overlooks the famed Rutherford Bench. Veteran winemaker Stephanie Jacobs has been crafting its wines for just the past year, so she didn't have a hand in the five Merlots I tasted. But all showcased the grip of wines made for aging, their tannins shouldering the plush, opulent fruit. Too many people make the mistake of not laying these bottles down until those tannins can soften, so I was pleasantly surprised by how fruit-forward, dense, and beautifully structured these wines already were, despite their youth and power. Here are my notes on four of them:

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Carneros, Napa Valley (\$85) Perhaps it's no wonder I loved this absolutely delicious—even sublime—wine: It hails from Carneros, where the nights are cooler and the winds fresher than in the rest of Napa. Tamed by 20 months in oak, it's gentle in its tannic structure.

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$38) Sourced from different vineyards and aged 14 months in barrel, this is what I call a good everyday wine.

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$85) Also aged 20 months in barrel, this wine was softer than the Merlots I'm accustomed to, boasting a multidimensional midpalate that soared until the tannins gripped my buccal mucosa. While it didn't appeal to me as much as the Carneros, it had a slightly longer finish and might have greater ageability.

Rutherford Hill 2023 Merlot, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley (\$85) I found this wine—which again spent a whopping 20 months in barrel—to be quite tannic, with a bit of greenness on the nose. I'd advise it be cellared for at least five years and it should sort itself out nicely.

Reflecting on the experience, I'd say I would gladly buy the Carneros if I was in the mood for Merlot: It was, at moments, awe-inspiring, demonstrating precisely what a great producer can do with terrific vineyard sites. Am I going to stop drinking Pinot Noir and Chardonnay? No. But the next time someone, citing the infamous line in *Sideways*, asks me if I hate Merlot, I'm now going to reply, "Have you tried Rutherford Hill's wines? I truly adore its Carneros Merlot." **SP**



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Awakening Brilliance From Ancient Terroir: Gilauri Wines

by Meredith May

CAN GEORGIA MAKE a luxury wine? Irakli Gilauri proved it can. The former CEO of the Bank of Georgia traveled the world, tasting great wines and becoming an avid collector of marquee bottles from Burgundy, Bordeaux, Barolo, and Napa Valley before deciding to create a winery of his own. Prior to that, Georgia had not produced a single world-renowned wine despite being near the birthplace of *Vitis vinifera* in the South Caucasus, a biodiverse hot spot that served as a refuge from the greatest impacts of the ice age.

To produce his wines, Gilauri sources fruit from his own vineyards in Kakheti, Georgia's main winegrowing region; armed with diverse soils, elevations, and cultivars, it has a viticultural history going back roughly 8,000 years. Its main variety is Saperavi, which translates as "dye," relating to the fleshy grape's inky dark-purple hue.

Gilauri studied winemaking at the University of California, Davis, where he learned the technical fundamentals. He relies on both Georgian and Argentine viticulturists and winemakers as well as Bordeaux-based consultants like Eric Moro and Mikaël Laizet, viticulture engineer and enologist, respectively, at Rolland and Associates. Gilauri's wines will release in the U.S. this fall; for contact information, visit gilauri.com. **SJ**

Gilauri 2025 Chardonnay, Gombori Mountain Vineyard, Kakheti, Georgia (\$125)

This truly exotic expression hails from a 2,500-foot-high vineyard planted on chalk and limestone. Its perfume is a fascinating mélange of gardenia, white tea, pineapple, and lime blossom, while the chalky palate is clean and pure, with notes of linen, kiwi, cinnamon, anise, and vanilla-drenched pineapple. **98**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GILLAURI WINES

Gilauri 2024 Resistance Saperavi, Kakheti, Georgia (\$190)

This wine was sourced from two vineyard sites, specifically the Duruji River Vineyard at the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains and the Papari Hills Vineyard on the right bank of the Alazani River on the Gombori mountain bench. Its name is meant to represent past political struggles endured by Georgia. Following vivid aromas of balsamic, black coffee, and blackberry, slate minerality maintains freshness and imparts a mouthfeel with chalky, sensuous tension. Cassis, sweet soil, hoisin sauce, and violets offer a Bordeaux quality and style: Smell it, taste it, breathe it in. **98**

Irakli Gilauri is the proprietor of Gilauri Wines in the Georgian region of Kakheti.

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A Who's Who of the Wine World

THE QUENCH PODCAST AIMS TO EDUCATE, ENTERTAIN, AND FOSTER CONNECTION

WHAT LURED ME off of Wall Street and into a wine career was one of those lightbulb moments: a tasting at New York City's International Wine Center where I realized, "This wine thing will never get boring." Decades later, what lured me into podcasting was the great author Karen MacNeil's Come Over October initiative (see also page 34). Like most of you, I live by its ethos, namely that wine's role in fostering connection is worth celebrating. With my livestream podcast Quench, I've turned that idea into action—not just in October but every month.

Departing from the classic audio podcast, Quench is a livestreamed wine talk show. Multiple cameras, graphics such as label and bottle shots, production notes, maps and vineyard photos, and audience polling give it high production value. Combining conversation, entertainment, and real-time tasting and discovery as well as great visuals, this format lets the show deliver an education that really sinks in.

In February, I partnered with the Culinary Institute of America at Copia and moved Quench from my kitchen to its Napa Valley Vintners Theater. It's an amazing venue that lets us host a ticketed, in-person audience for a tasting of about six wines, paired with bites from The Grove at Copia.

Quench has become a real industry collaboration, and I'm grateful for the support. To be clear, we don't have brand sponsors or branded content: Instead, wineries are invited to contribute six bottles of each featured wine along with their on-camera expertise and to promote the events to their own followings. Ticket sales partially cover food costs and service labor, while some complimentary seats are available for trade colleagues enrolled in programs such as the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas Wine & Spirit Education Trust, Napa Valley Col-



PHOTO: KIM OSHIRO, MMV

In September, Quench recorded its "Wines That See the Sea" episode with guest vintner Dan Petroski of Napa Valley's Massican.

lege; and many others. (Interested eligible students can apply at [tree/LU0E69](https://tree.luo69)).

Along with MacNeil herself, who appeared in the inaugural episode, my guests are a who's who of industry greats we all want to learn from: Master Sommeliers, Masters of Wine, vintners, authors, and journalists who keep us on our toes and on the wine trail. And with the help of such fascinating experts as master mixologist Dale DeGroff, we sometimes feature spirits and make cocktails, too! These stories of time, place, craft, and connection let us quench our thirst for authenticity and one another's company in a way that no AI bot ever could.

Next in the lineup: "New Cool/Old School Wines With Tank Garage Winery" (October), "Bottles That Rocked the World" (November), and "Favorite Things: Wines That So Overdeliver for the Price With Peter Yeung of Wente Family Vine-



yards" (December). January 2027 is TBD, but I'm toying with a counterweight to Dry January: How about "Thai January—Pairing Wines With Our Favorite Asian Classics"? Think cold sesame noodles, teriyaki, spicy sushi, and more—with the heat, sweetness, and umami they offer, there's lots to unpack. Whatcha think? 

Catch past episodes of Quench and subscribe for free to view upcoming episodes at youtube.com/@AndreaRobinsonMS. The podcast also streams live on Facebook, LinkedIn, Substack, and sometimes Instagram. To share ideas for upcoming shows, email andrearobinsonms@andrewine.com.



Viña Alicia

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The Restaurant Wine With a Hospitable Team: KHK

by Meredith May

JIM KELLER IS known for his real estate prowess in Napa Valley, representing the third generation of his family to be involved in the industry. He's also the proprietor of KHK Wines (his surname is indicated by the first letter "K" in the brand's name).

his sons Billy and Tommy Hall run Halls Chophouses, Slightly North of Broad, High Cotton, and Rita's Seaside Grill in South Carolina and Tennessee.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HALLS CHOPHOUSE



"It is awesome to be able to offer a glass of Yountville-sourced 100% Cabernet Sauvignon made by Thomas Rivers Brown. KHK's bold taste and smooth finish

[make it] the perfect pairing for your next steak dinner at Halls Chophouse." —Tom Weber, sommelier at Halls Chophouse

The legacy of the late William Ames Hall ("H") is the success of Hall's Hospitality Management, based in Charleston, South Carolina. Hall's previous career involved overseeing the hospitality programs of some of the country's most prestigious resorts, ensuring they were well run at Ritz-Carlton properties in Florida, San Francisco, and Pasadena. He applied this experience to his own business, which has steadily expanded; today,

PHOTO COURTESY OF HALLS CHOPHOUSE



in high-class Napa Valley." —Katie DeHart, sommelier at Halls Chophouse Greenville, pictured with Tommy Hall

The second "K" in KHK refers to Keller's friend Thomas Keller. The legendary chef behind Napa Valley restaurant The French Laundry and New York's Per Se (no relationship to Jim) is the winery's ambassador and co-owner of the magnificent Howard Backen Estate on Pritchard Hill with Jim and the Hall brothers. "My friendship with Jim grew out of our appreciation for Napa Valley and a mutual respect for great wine. KHK is an extension of that connection and made to bring people together around the table," says Thomas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HALLS CHOPHOUSE



with Tommy Hall

"A great wine, a great winemaker, and a great steakhouse with great friends—what else is there?" —Sean King, sommelier at Halls Chophouse Columbia, pictured

KHK's celebrated winemaker, Thomas Rivers Brown, is especially happy with the 2024 vintage, which "looks to be our best yet," he says. "We are staying nimble [with respect to] our fruit sourcing and pricing. If there's a silver lining to the current state of affairs, it's that potential."

Rivers Brown recalls being happily surprised when a sample of the wine was pulled in the cellar: "The cellar crew handed me a glass, and I thought it was the [more expensive] Hillside selection. It was so rich and concentrated. It's not often I am shocked by the quality of something, but here, when you combine quality and price at \$79, this wine is hard to beat."

According to the sommeliers (see images) at Halls Chophouse, which has three locations in South Carolina, KHK's food-friendliness keeps it front of mind in the front of the house. **\$**

PHOTO COURTESY OF KHK



KHK 2024 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$79) Juicy, with depth and concentration, this dynamic red also possesses a lifted character. Joining notes of blueberry tart, mocha, and oak, chewy tannins are inviting and seductively textured, and the expansive and continuous finish glides on angel wings. **95**

KHK 2024 Hillside Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiflett Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$125) Made with fruit sourced from the Shiflett Vineyard in the Oak Knoll AVA, this wine demonstrates quiet power, with blue and black fruit uniting in a silky arc. Dark cherry and blackberry are treated to a savory edge of umami and black coffee, maintaining elegant composure. **98**

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Single Vineyard Spotlights

10:15 a.m. Wednesday, November 4

What does a single vineyard really reveal—and how much of that story comes from soil, slope, climate, vine age, farming, or winemaking choices? This guided tasting will explore the power and nuance of single-vineyard wines through a comparative lens, highlighting producers for which site specificity is a central part of their identity.

As they taste, attendees will examine how place shows up in the glass in the form of structure, aromatics, texture, concentration, freshness, and ageworthiness. Encompassing legacy producers and regionally rooted estates, this session will move beyond the romance of vineyard designation and into the practical markers that help sommeliers, buyers, and educators communicate single-vineyard value with clarity.

Terroir Diversities and Common Threads

11:30 a.m. Wednesday, November 4

Great wine regions are often defined by contrasts: elevation shifts, changing exposures, soil diversity, vintage variation, and the differing choices made by producers. Yet across diverse sites and styles, common threads begin to emerge, expressed through balance, intention, regional identity, and a point of view rooted in place.

This session will bring together portfolios that offer different expressions of terroir, inviting attendees to compare how site and style intersect across vineyards, regions, and winemaking philosophies. Through a guided tasting and discussion, it will examine how professionals can move past broad regional generalizations and develop a more precise language for describing place.

World-Class Values: Acidity, Structure, and Ageability

9:45 a.m. Thursday, November 5

This global tasting will explore the relationship between acidity, structure, and longevity across wines from established producers and influential portfolios. Attendees will examine how these elements shape a wine's performance over time, its usefulness on a list or shelf, and its ability to meet guest expectations at multiple price points.

Exploring attributes from immediate drinkability to cellar potential, this session will help professionals evaluate value not as a discount conversation but as a quality conversation. The focus is practical: We'll discuss how to recognize wines that have staying power, selling power, and a clear role in a serious beverage program.

Terroir Tetris: Lining up a Sense of Place on the World Wine Stage

11 a.m. Thursday, November 5

In the global wine market, sense of place is no longer a simple matter of Old World versus New World. The context is more complex, involving heritage, climate, vineyard identity, regional regulations, producer philosophy, market expectations, and the evolving tastes of today's wine drinkers.

This comparative tasting will invite attendees to think of terroir as a layered puzzle—one where each piece must fit to tell a clear and compelling story. Featuring wines from international producers and portfolios, it will explore how place is expressed, protected, interpreted, and communicated on the world wine stage.

Micro-Wineries: A New Category for the Wine Trade

by Elise Nerlove

SMALL WINERIES ARE nothing new. What is new is seeing them band together around a shared promise—not only about what they produce but about the experiences they offer.

The Micro-Winery Guild is working to establish micro-wineries as a recognizable category, defining them as independently owned producers that make fewer than 5,000 cases annually and that are committed to personal, immersive experiences that connect guests directly with the farmers and winemakers behind the bottles. This commitment is especially important as the industry looks for ways to engage the next generation of wine drinkers.

Younger consumers are interested in learning about wine, but that process can be daunting, not to mention expensive. Traditional wine education can add to their sense of intimidation, often leading with appellations, varieties, vintages, and tasting notes before newcomers have developed a reason to care about any of those things.

Micro-wineries offer them another entry point: They can walk a vineyard with the person who farms it; taste wine with the person who made it; and ultimately gain insight through firsthand knowledge rather than through a list of product attributes. The Guild is partnering with Oklahoma State University to pursue research around these ideas and better understand how intimate winery experiences and a direct connection to nature influence consumer engagement, wine consumption habits, and overall well-being.

But successfully building a new category will also require participation from the trade. Distribution has always been challenging for micro-wineries. Margins can be difficult at small volumes, and micro-wineries rarely have enough inventory to support conventional distribution models.

What if we built a different model whereby micro-wineries identify the right accounts, build the necessary relationships, and create the demand, while distribution partners provide the logistics

invitation to visit the vineyard, meet the farmer, and/or talk to the winemaker.

The Micro-Winery Guild is doing the work to bring these producers together, define the category, and create de-

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELISE NERLOVE



Elise Nerlove is co-founder/president of the Micro-Winery Guild.

and fulfillment to make it possible? A restaurant could then become known for its rotating selection of impossible-to-find micro-wines available by the glass. An independent wine shop could create a dedicated shelf that gives customers an opportunity to discover new wines from tiny producers. And sommeliers could pour Micro-Winery Guild wines knowing that when they select a bottle for their customers, it comes with an implied

mand around what distinguishes them. Now we're looking for forward-thinking members of the trade willing to innovate alongside us.

Micro-wineries are forging a new path into wine. Who wants to help us pave it? 

Explore the growing list of Micro-Winery Guild members at microwineryguild.com or email info@microwineryguild.com.

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A Lesson in Every Bottle

FOUR SOMMELIERS SHAPING THE CHARLESTON, SC, WINE SCENE

by Helen Mitternacht

OVERSEEING EVERYTHING FROM award-winning restaurants to mobile bars, sommeliers in Charleston, South Carolina, are not just serving wine, they're educating their guests by instilling in them a tangible sense of appreciation for all things vinous. Read on to meet some of the professionals making a mark.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHONY UNGARO



Anthony Ungaro
The Restaurant at Zero George

Anthony Ungaro used to identify as a beer guy, but a trip to Piedmont and Tuscany made him fall in love with wine. Now certified WSET Level 3, he serves as head sommelier at The Restaurant at Zero George, a New American eatery that appeared in the inaugural MICHELIN Guide American South in 2025 and is known for its innovative tasting menus.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?

Our food is extremely creative, but I would describe our list . . . as “everlasting” because it’s full of classic wines. We do have a few wines that are a little more “risky,” like a pét-nat from Cypress and a skin-contact [bottling] from Umbria. The younger consumer finds these a little more fun and refreshing, but I would say our average guest is more in line with Hermitage and Burgundy and Bordeaux if they’re ordering bottles, although they can get a little more adventurous if they’re doing a menu pairing and not having to commit to a whole bottle.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

I’m a sucker for Meursault, so at the moment, it’s a Jean-Philippe Fichet Meursault Le Meix Sous Le Château. It has a very good balance, and I can sit on the patio on a warm day and enjoy [it].

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

We’ve introduced more zero-proof pairings, and those have been a huge hit. And we’ve definitely had people literally requesting “funky wines,” whatever that means. They’re surprised to hear that most of our list is natural but still very clean. People think “natural” [automatically] means “funky.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN FRANKLIN



Brian Franklin
Merci

A hospitality veteran of almost 40 years, Brian Franklin is certified at the Introductory level by the Court of Master Sommeliers and has helped launch wine programs in several

restaurants, including the one he oversees at the tiny 26-seat Merci, which was a James Beard Award finalist for Best New Restaurant this year.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?

My list is limited to what I have in storage space, so [it] is now fewer than 100 bottles. But we change out our menu about once a week, so I am always getting a new wine or a new vintage. We are 100% organic or biodynamic or regenerative . . . and I try to source from small producers. At first, we were more French-driven, but we’ve evolved as a restaurant to be more [broadly] European-driven, so we have wines from Spain and Italy. We are 100% Old World, but a lot of these up-and-coming producers are third or fifth generation and are producing Old World grape varieties in new and modern ways. A lot of them are . . . using [natural methods as well as] concrete and unique fermentation techniques, but [their vines] are still old-growth vines.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

Right now I’m really into a white Slovenian wine, a Malvasia by Hedele. It has a really nice, salty, crunchy Mediterranean style.

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

The price per bottle ordered may be going down a bit. But I think we have an approachable price point that invites people to enjoy an extra glass.

Latasha Tavelle-Williams

Fermented Vines

PHOTO COURTESY OF LATASHA TAVELLE-WILLIAMS



In 2023, Latasha Tavelle-Williams—Charleston's first Black female sommelier—started Fermented Vines, a mobile bar that brings wine and wine education to homes in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, where she conducts

private tastings. Although her business is fairly new, it's already a success: She was the runner-up in the "Best Sommelier" category at the Best of Charleston Awards last year. Her first glass of wine, she recalls with amusement, was a Riunite Lambrusco that she ordered at the bar in her local Olive Garden.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?

The wine collection I carry is pretty much high-quality [and] elevated, [going] from fun and vibrant to serious, classy, and sexy. "Classy and sexy" is going to be like a Burgundy . . . with a long potential [for] aging. It's soft, beautiful, silky, and elegant, and you can drink it easily. "Fun and vibrant" is going to be a Prosecco [from a producer] like Don Luchi. It's fun, lively, and fruity; has high acidity; and is refreshing. That's the wine to get the party started.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

Cabernet Sauvignon from . . . Bordeaux that is rich, dark, bold, [and] fruity and has a high alcohol content. [This category] pairs well with steak.

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

What I've been noticing is that people, instead of going to restaurants and having dinner, would rather have wine at their home. It's less expensive and you can get more people in the room [to share it with]. I have seen a decrease in the number of bottles purchased and the price. People are buying wines that are \$20–\$25 instead of the \$50 or \$60 bottle they used to purchase.

Femi Oyediran

Graft Wine Shop

PHOTO: LIZZY ROLLINS



Graft Wine Shop, opened in 2018, is known for its club-like atmosphere, which invites customers to linger and drink interesting wines. Co-owners Femi Oyediran and Miles White were semifinalists at this year's James Beard Awards for "Outstanding Professional in Beverage Service." Both worked at the famed Charleston Grill, where the sommelier piqued their interest in wine after starting an impromptu blind-tasting program for interested staff. They also own Tutti Pizza next door to Graft—an ideal location, as Oyediran says pizza is

the "gateway drug" to wine purchases.

Q: How do you curate your wine selection?

I think it's changed over the years. I always wanted what was on the shelf to reflect the mind of someone trying to put together the best playlist of their life. Throughout high school, I would always [make] playlists. [They're] a big part of the culture at Graft. . . . Think of your categories, say Cabernet: Here's my playlist of Cabernets from different price points. Our Gamay has eight slots, from \$15 to an \$80 bottle. We thought about our selection for a long time, and we interviewed a lot of friends and spoke to people about what wines are important to them.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

I don't have a favorite wine. It always comes back to playlists. I listen to so much music every day; it soothes my brain, and as my moods change, my brain changes. It's the same thing with wine. You may hear a great song, but you don't want to hear the same song for six months or you'll lose your love for [it]. With wine, you don't want to drink the same thing for six months either. That's [also] part of the culture of Graft. We have regulars who come in and know to ask, "What's new?"

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

Charleston is one of the best markets for winegrowers, but we have a lot of work to do in educating people. It used to be that the only place they could get some of these high-end wines was in restaurants, where you only have about five minutes to educate a guest on a region or grower. Retail is the battleground where guests become smart diners. Without great retail, you can't build a true community of educated drinkers. Once you have someone who comes to see you every week to buy a bottle of wine for dinner, it's a very different relationship than [you have with] someone who goes out to a restaurant on occasion and orders wine. I do believe a lot of sommeliers in restaurants should be thanking us, because our customers are going into restaurants more excited to order wine. 

A Thousand Soils

MIL SUELOS MAPS THE TERROIRS OF MENDOZA by Chris Howard

WHEN ALEJANDRO SEJANOVICH and Jeff Mausbach left Bodega Catena Zapata in 2010—Sejanovich as viticultural director, Mausbach as the education director who spent years spreading the good word about high-altitude Malbec—they set out to identify Mendoza's microterroirs one by one. "We wanted to make wines that reflect the region, the appellation, the single vineyard, the single

parcel, and even the single soil," Mausbach says.

Sixteen years on, three of their labels—TintoNero, Buscado Vivo o Muerto, and Estancia Uspallata—are gathered under an umbrella brand whose name doubles as a mission statement: Mil Suelos, which translates as "a thousand soils." With fellow Catena alumnus Jorge Crotta, who has since come aboard as partner to steer in-

ternational growth, they are still exploring. "While we have not yet achieved a thousand soils," Mausbach admits, "we continue to discover beautiful, unique places that deserve an expression in wine."

Farming specifications and winemaking methods are constant across the portfolio. The former include hand-pruning and judicious irrigation; no green harvest or leaf removal; and early picking. In the



cellar; it's all about small-batch fermentations with native yeasts, no acid additions, gentle extractions, and aging in used oak. Despite these commonalities, the aforementioned labels couldn't be more different—which is precisely the point. Poured side by side, the wines read as three singular accounts of what Mendoza is.

TintoNero pays tribute to the Italian immigrants who laid the foundations of Mendoza's wine industry, and its top bottling honors another piece of living heritage: Finca La Escuela, named for the century-old rural schoolhouse still operating on the site of the 4-hectare vineyard. It sits in Paraje Altamira, Argentina's first recognized Geographical Indication, on a patchwork of four distinct soils: silt, limestone, gravel, and sand. Rather than smooth over their differences, the team aimed to highlight them by planting Malbec in a lot of each type.

These lots are harvested separately at various times throughout the season, then co-fermented in small batches in different combinations with varying proportions of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot before blending in pursuit of "the most complex wine possible," according to Mausbach, who adds that "while it is a lot of work for one wine," it makes for "a much more seamless integration of the aromas, flavors, and textures of each varietal. . . . It is our best interpretation of this singular place." The varied terroir shows in the glass: cherry and floral notes from the silt, bright wild berries and a saline edge from the limestone, structure from the gravel, generosity from the sand.

Buscado Vivo o Muerto began with Sejanovich's years-long hunt for marginal, often forgotten vineyards along the edges of the Uco Valley; the label's name, which means "wanted dead or alive," commemorates how stubborn the search proved.



Mil Suelos partners Jeff Mausbach, Jorge Crotta, and Alejandro Sejanovich.

The range includes Chardonnays and co-fermented red blends whose sources stretch from Gualtallary in the north to Las Pareditas in the south, but Sejanovich's journey culminated in San Pablo, where he discovered La Verdad. "At 4,500 feet in elevation, with limestone-driven soils and cold, southerly exposure, it is one of the Grand Crus of the Uco Valley," Mausbach asserts of the vineyard, which was planted in the 1980s.

First vinified in 2013, La Verdad Chardonnay is the star of the lineup. A deliberate rebuke to the buttery varietal stereotype, it offers steely citrus and green apple with wild herbal tones; bracing acidity preserved by the lack of malolactic conversion; and a light, creamy texture built through extensive lees aging. Restrained and elegant, it lives up to its namesake by expressing the truth about Mendoza's cooler side.

If La Escuela represents Mendoza's roots and La Verdad its hidden gems, Estancia Uspallata is the region's frontier. At 6,560 feet in the Quebrada del Minero—a canyon close to the Chilean border—this site occupies a sliver of a nearly 100,000-acre mountain ranch owned by the Saud family, who partnered with Mil Suelos in 2015. It's considered to be the highest vineyard in Mendoza by far, and experts warned against planting there. "We were told that the temperatures were too cold for viticulture at these alti-

tudes [and] that the soils were too poor to sustain vines," Mausbach recalls.

What happened instead was a revelation: Frigid nights eliminated heat stress while constant intense sunlight drove unusually efficient photosynthesis, shaving three to four weeks off the growing season. The stems as well as the grapes ripen until they blush red, and whole-cluster fermentation lends the wine a savory herbal register. As for the low-yielding colluvial soils—granite porphyry with quartz and limestone, tumbled from the canyon walls over millennia—they contribute what Mausbach calls "a salty minerality that we didn't see anywhere else in Argentina . . . or the world." The resulting Malbec is deep, dark, and brooding yet fresh and balanced, with explosive aromas of wild herbs, black pepper, and spice—a savage combination that has led international critics to call Estancia Uspallata "the Saint-Joseph of Argentina."

Poured together, these three wines refute the preconception of Argentina as a land of rich, robust, sun-baked reds alone. Just as Mendoza boasts a diversity of terroirs shaped by differences in altitude, geology, climate, and viticultural history, so Malbec serves as a prism through which they can be viewed—and the whites Mil Suelos makes, it seems, are every bit as interesting. But by the founders' own count, that leaves somewhere short of a thousand soils still to find. **SJ**



Larkmead Vineyards proprietor Kate Solari Baker is an established artist who created the beautiful labels for the Research Block series as well as this map, using her mother's original ledgers from managing the vineyard.



IMAGE COURTESY OF LARKMEAD VINEYARDS

Vinous Vanguard

LARKMEAD VINEYARDS' CONTIGUOUS 115-ACRE SITE TELLS A STORY OF SOIL, HISTORY, AND INNOVATION IN NAPA VALLEY by Meridith May

ONE OF THE OLDEST family-owned wineries in Napa Valley, Calistoga's Larkmead Vineyards was founded in 1895. In 1948, it came under the stewardship of the Solari family, who now cultivates 115 acres to produce a portfolio of estate wines. After years of organic farming, it earned certification by the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) in 2023. "[Our] family has long espoused organic farming in our vineyards. Achieving the CCOF status was the last piece of the puzzle," says Larkmead proprietor Kate Solari Baker.

PHOTO: LEIGH-ANN BEVERLEY



Larkmead winemaker Avery Heelan.

Originally from the East Coast, winemaker Avery Heelan has been with the winery since 2019. She studied chemistry in Boston but decided that a career in pharmaceuticals or DNA research was not for her. Her fondness for wine led her to the viticulture and enology program at the University of California, Davis.

I recently tasted through some current releases with Heelan while discussing her winemaking philosophy. Noting that Bordeaux varieties need extraction while oak "needs to be unnoticeable," she explained, "I aim to strike a balance between acidity, minerality, and salinity with the intention to make our wines approachable on release." **\$J**

PHOTO COURTESY OF LARKMEAD VINEYARDS



Larkmead 2024 Lillie Sauvignon Blanc, Calistoga, Napa Valley (\$75) The founder of Larkmead, Lillie Hitchcock Coit, was such a wild child that her parents banished

her from their property for smoking cigars. After being rescued by a fire while living in San Francisco, "Firebelle Lil" became a patron of the city's firefighters and the benefactor for the construction of Coit Tower. This bon vivant's namesake, whole cluster-pressed in French barrels, is appropriately expressive, with startling notes of lemon blossom and honeyed white-tea flowers that seem to create a bright light as you sip. Mineral tones are integrated into the spice at its core. **96**

PHOTO COURTESY OF LARKMEAD VINEYARDS



Larkmead 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Calistoga, Napa Valley (\$125) The grapes for this wine come from all over the estate, whose soils vary between gravel, clay, and sand.

Sturdy black-tea tannins attest to its ageability along with a saline quality. Black fruit is a focal point, accented by Worcestershire, graphite, and dried violets. **97**

PHOTO: ROBB MCDONOUGH



Larkmead Research Block 2024 Chenin Blanc, Napa Valley (\$75) In 2020, Larkmead established its 3-acre Research Block, planting it to eight different grape varieties and

releasing its first wine—a 2023 Chenin Blanc—in 2024. Proprietor Kate Solari Baker oversees this visionary experiment in sustainability and blending with an

eye toward ensuring the future of Napa Valley wine in a changing climate. In its second vintage, this wine aged 11 months in French oak shows stunning presence. Lemon sorbet glistens with an ethereal thread of gardenia, wet stone, sweet basil, and green apple. Salty sea spray demonstrates sapidity that coincides with savory, mouthwateringly electric energy. Vanilla and lanolin coat the tongue with waxiness on the memorable finish. **98**

Larkmead Research Block 2023 Contour Estate Red Blend, Napa Valley (\$85)

The contour of a slope can determine how much sun and wind the vines receive as well as where water flows and collects; as a result, it can influence erosion and deposition, creating variances in soil depth and rockiness. These topographic patterns define the Research Block and impact this inaugural blend of 40% Tempranillo, 28% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Aglianico, 12% Malbec, and 8% Zinfandel in particular: Dusty plum-skin tannins adhere to the teeth, while a juicy surge of more plum washes over the palate. Bittersweet chocolate and sweet violets form a union upheld by the muscular finish of graphite. **98**

Larkmead Research Block 2023 Keyline Estate Red Blend, Napa Valley (\$85)

Keyline is conceived as a wine that crosses boundaries by blending disparate varieties together. With 29% Shiraz, 17% Malbec, 15% Petite Sirah, 14% Charbono, 14% Touriga Nacional, and 11% Zinfandel aged 20 months in neutral oak, it does just that. Showing an inky black-crimson hue, it's concentrated and coherent, with a built-in tension that unites its components with precision and elegance. Intense crushed boysenberry and vanilla latte are lifted by floral and graphite notes as freshness and tannins converge. **99**

CRIMSON VEIL

BECKSTOFFER CRIMSON RIDGE VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON

RICH VOLCANIC SOIL.
LEGENDARY GROWER.
UNCHARTED TERRITORY.

93^{pts}
Forbes 2026



In the shadow of Mt. Konocti, Beckstoffer Crimson Ridge Vineyard sits at 2,500 feet on steep slopes, often veiled by early morning fog. A challenging terrain, but the wine was crafted on a belief that Lake County will be California's next great wine country.

Compare and Contrast

J. LOHR LETS ITS CABERNET SAUVIGNONS FROM PASO ROBLES AND NAPA VALLEY SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES *by Christina Barrueta*

NOW APPROACHING HIS 90th birthday, Jerry Lohr has spent several decades recognizing California's potential for viticultural greatness. Two Cabernet Sauvignons in J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines' portfolio—one from Paso Robles, one from St. Helena in Napa Valley—show exactly where those instincts have led, 260 miles and a world of terroir apart. Pour them side by side, and you get a clear picture of how geography influences what ends up in the glass.

The full story actually starts in Monterey County, where Lohr and his team successfully established vineyards in the cool-climate Arroyo Seco region in the early 1970s, growing primarily Chardonnay. But Cabernet Sauvignon needed heat that Monterey couldn't offer, so by the mid-1980s, Lohr had set his sights on Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County. Paso was then still an unproven bet, but its 50-degree diurnal temperature swings turned out to be exactly what the grape needed—enough warmth to ripen fully, enough cold at night to preserve acidity—and its gravelly soils imparted concentration. Planting his first Cabernet vines there in 1986, Lohr was instrumental in turning the region into one of the state's most respected addresses for Bordeaux varieties.



J. Lohr farms more than 2,000 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon across five sub-AVAs in Paso Robles.

J. Lohr Vineyards and Wines founder Jerry Lohr at Carol's Vineyard in Napa Valley with his children and co-owners Lawrence, Cynthia, and Steve Lohr.



"My father farmed his family's land in South Dakota from an early age," says Lohr's daughter, Cynthia, a second-generation co-owner of the winery and its chief brand officer. "As he built J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, he understood that matching a potential growing site's climate and soils to the specific needs of the variety was critical to achieving our benchmark quality." Today, that commitment encompasses more than 2,800 acres of estate vineyards across five Paso Robles sub-AVAs, along with years of clonal research and innovation in sustainable farming and irrigation practices.

Red wine production takes place at the J. Lohr Home Ranch, where the Lohr family, VP of winemaking Steve Peck, red winemaker Brenden Wood, and their teams continue to refine the winery's interpretation of Paso Robles Cabernet. First bottled in 1995, the J. Lohr Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon is part of its Vineyard Series; the 2023 vintage contains fruit from some of its highest-elevation Paso sites and was aged for 16 months in French oak, yielding layers of ripe blackberry, black cherry, and savory spice framed by minerality.

Napa entered the picture in 1984, when Jerry bought land near the Silverado

Trail in St. Helena, staking his claim next to some of the Valley's most notable Cabernet pioneers. After phylloxera compromised the original vines and replanting was completed in 1999, he named the property Carol's Vineyard for his late wife, Carol Waldorf Lohr; it remains the winery's northernmost outpost and the sole source for the J. Lohr Carol's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. Limited morning fog keeps St. Helena warmer than appellations to the south, though maritime breezes funnel through the valley corridor in the afternoon and evening, helping to preserve acidity in a climate that continues to draw Bordeaux comparisons, reinforced by well-drained, gravelly, sandy loam soils that likewise echo Left Bank terroir.

The 2023 Carol's Vineyard leans further into Petit Verdot than past vintages have; comprising 8% of the blend, it adds color and intensity to the wine's black-fruit profile. Aging for 19 months in (53% new) French oak, meanwhile, contributes fragrant notes of black cherry and cassis, with fine tannins carrying warm spices and cocoa through the finish.

The differences between the Hilltop and Carol's Vineyard wines run deeper than their physical origins: Each site gets its own clones, its own proprietary yeast



J. Lohr VP of winemaking Steve Peck.

strains, and a tailored barrel program. As Peck describes, "Hilltop has evolved over its many vintages to become a kind of best-of-the-best selection of our most elevated, sustainably farmed vineyard properties in Paso Robles . . . all leading to a Paso-centric statement Cabernet that speaks to the region. Carol's is a bottling of clone 337 Cabernet with a bit of Petit Verdot; it's basically a classic Napa Valley single-vineyard offering."

The latter wine also carries a purpose beyond expressing its prized terroir. Each October, J. Lohr's *Touching Lives* campaign donates \$3 from every bottle of Carol's Vineyard Cabernet sold to fund National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc., programs, raising more than \$1 million since 2009. The partnership also features wine-maker dinners for both trade members and consumers throughout the month. "We honor our distributors and key account partners who have joined our crusade throughout the years," Cynthia says. "There are meaningful ways to get involved and help bring hope to women and their families."

Decades of experience with growing Cabernet across two very different California regions have allowed J. Lohr to explore just how distinctly the grape can express its DNA. Hilltop brings the warmth, fruit, and energy of Paso Robles; Carol's Vineyard offers the structure, finesse, and depth of Napa Valley. Together, they make the case that Cabernet may be a Bordeaux grape, but it's a California godsend. **SJ**



J. Lohr 2023 Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$35)

Composition: 96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot

Aging regimen: 16 months in (50% new) 225-liter French oak barrels from Berger & Fils, Marcel Cadet, Nadalié, Saint Martin,

Sylvain, and Taransaud

Tasting note: Dynamic, with bold black currant, chalky tannins, and breezy acidity. You can taste the soil and sunshine against a backdrop of graphite, soy sauce, and the ripest of blackberries. Sixteen months of aging in French oak resulted in a seamless texture. **94** —*Meridith May*



J. Lohr 2023 Carol's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$60)

Composition: 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Petit Verdot

Aging regimen: 19 months in (53% new) 225-liter French oak barrels from Nadalié, Saury, and Sylvain

Tasting note: A love letter to Jerry Lohr's late wife, Carol, this vintage shows opulence and power. Some tension adds to its character; deepening on the midpalate. Black tea, licorice, blackberry, and dried herbs lend complexity and style. **95** —*M.M.*

Freak of Nature

AUSTRALIAN RIESLING IS A SUCCESS STORY WAITING TO HAPPEN

by Abbie Bennington

OFTEN CALLED “the queen of grapes,” Riesling yields some of the finest wines in the world, yet it still faces challenges—namely getting into consumers’ glasses.

There remains a sizeable gap between what the trade knows about the variety and what many consumers think they know about it. This is especially true in the context of Australia, which has been making serious Riesling for generations: Ask a sommelier about the great dry Rieslings of the Clare and Eden valleys and there’s usually no shortage of enthusiasm. Ask their guest sitting at the

table and the response can still be, “Isn’t Riesling sweet?”

The good news is that once they taste the wines, these consumers are often converted. That’s particularly relevant for Australian winemaker John Hughes, a fervent fan of the grape who fittingly named his brand Rieslingfreak. Since they launched in 2009, Hughes’ wines have found their way onto some serious North American wine lists, and for good reason: They’ve been ranked by international critics as among Australia’s best.

Take The Little Nell in Aspen, Colorado, whose wine director, Chris Dunaway, is a fellow Riesling enthusiast. He acknowledges

that misconceptions of the grape as the source of exclusively sweet expressions persist even among guests who are generally knowledgeable about wine: “As much as we’d like to think the market has moved beyond this stereotype, it nevertheless is still a barrier.” His description of Aussie Riesling, however, is much more upbeat: “[It’s] electric, buzzing with freshness, and extroverted in a charismatic and accommodating way.”

At Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach, California, beverage director and Master Sommelier Steve Poe has reached much the same conclusion. “Riesling is generally a tough sell,” he says, adding that “the key is to get it in



Australian brand Rieslingfreak sources fruit from vineyards in both the Eden Valley, pictured, and the Clare Valley.



the glass at the right time.” When a table recently ordered a spicy ahi tuna hand roll, Poe recalls, he simply poured them a taste of Rieslingfreak to accompany the dish, then walked away “and waited for the inevitable ‘Come back here!’ wave that allows us to return and fill the glass.”

Clare Valley and Eden Valley remain the best-known heartlands for the grape Down Under: Grosset’s Polish Hill and Springvale wines are benchmarks from the former, while Pewsey Vale has an extraordinary history with Riesling in the latter, dating back to the 19th century. Howard Duncan, commercial manager at Rieslingfreak, points to both producers as well as Tim Adams Wines and Peter Lehmann Wines—where the legacy of late winemaker Andrew Wigan lives on through its Eden Valley Wigan Riesling—as names that belong in any discussion of quality Australian Riesling. Despite the grape’s reputation for sweetness among consumers, Rieslings like theirs are virtually synonymous with the opposite in the trade: dry, taut, and citrus-driven.

Very few of these vintners, however, have built a brand like Rieslingfreak, which aims to serve as a proverbial one-stop shop for the Aussie Riesling experience in terms of both style and regionality. (To help consumers, it includes bar graphs on its back labels that clarify sweetness levels.) The No.55, for example, is the Clare Valley Growers Off-Dry Riesling, with 13 grams per liter of residual sugar. Tasted alongside drier wines in the range like the No.2 or No.33, it’s noticeably more generous in body, but its acidity keeps it fresh, making it particularly versatile with food.

Restaurants, therefore, are perhaps better positioned to introduce the category to the public than retailers. “It’s a slow climb, but I wear proper somm boots to trudge the mountain,” says Poe, who is emphatic that the dishes traditionally served at “Japanese *izakayas* [casual bars] . . . anything tempura-fried, Japanese croquettes, and the like—are magical with Australian



John Hughes owns Rieslingfreak with his wife, Belinda.

Riesling.” Dunaway, whose own discovery of Rieslingfreak happened when visiting Sushi Room in Brisbane, also points toward sushi and umami-rich foods as a pairing recommendation. He’s chosen to pour Rieslingfreak No.33 by the glass at Little Nell outlet Ajax Tavern.

For Dunaway, pouring Aussie Riesling by the glass helps indicate to guests its “intersection of quality, value, and versatility.” If the demand for a bottle is not necessarily there yet, a BTG selection gives sommeliers the perfect chance to create it.

As for those consumers who do already appreciate Riesling, competition from Germany and Alsace can pose its own problem. “It is an absolute David versus Goliath situation, isn’t it?” Duncan says, noting that those regions own Riesling in the minds of many drinkers, who associate their expressions with ageworthiness due to their balance of racy acidity with natural sugar. But even when it’s young, Australian Riesling is distinctive, with no need to imitate its European counterparts. The

best Clare Valley wines have their own lime- and citrus-driven character; taut acidity, and mineral notes reminiscent of fine wines from the Saar River such as Scharzhofberg, while the Rieslingfreak No.2 Polish Hill River Riesling can be compared to wines from Wehlener Sonnenuhr in the Mosel Valley due to its generous profile of apricot and peach. The latter in particular, according to Poe, remains elegant and drinkable while exhibiting “intensely floral notes, electric acidity, and fierce minerality. In my experience, it is truly unique in its expression.”

In short, Rieslingfreak is among the brands making the breadth of Australian Riesling easy to enjoy as it represents subregions spanning from Polish Hill River to the high slopes of Eden Valley in styles from Kabinett to Spätlese, ensuring something for every palate and most every dish. Judging by two very different stateside wine programs, the answer to the category’s misperception is not a grand marketing slogan: It’s a matter of matching the appropriate Riesling with the right pairings, introducing a sommelier prepared to explain the wines, and, above all, encouraging guests to try a taste—after all, it’s hard to beat a 20-year-old Aussie Riesling with blue cheese. As Duncan puts it, “The proof is liquid on lips.”



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Merus winemaker Michael Beaulac at The Restaurant at Farmhouse Inn in Forestville, CA.

Undiluted PERFECTION

HOW **MERUS** WINEMAKER MICHAEL BEAULAC HELPED TURN A CULT
“GARAGE WINE” INTO A 100-POINT CABERNET SAUVIGNON

STORY BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI / PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER RUBIN

Merus' modern history began in a two-car garage in Napa, where Erika Gottl and winemaker Mark Herold produced their inaugural Cabernet Sauvignon in 1998. The tiny-production wine quickly earned cult status worthy of its name, Latin for “pure” or “undiluted.”

Acquired by Bill Foley in late 2007, Merus joined the growing portfolio of what is now Foley Family Wines & Spirits (FFWS), moving to a new physical home tucked into a canyon off Crystal Springs Road east of St. Helena that initially housed the Rossini winery in 1891. After Prohibition, it fell silent, joining Napa's ranks of so-called ghost wineries. Previous owners Nils and Kirk Venge had restored the property's stone buildings, added caves, and developed a custom-crush operation in the mid-1990s, but Foley fur-



Pictured at sunset on the Farmhouse Inn patio are some shining stars in the Foley Family Wines & Spirits (FFWS) portfolio, including Ferrari-Carano, Chalk Hill Estate, Chateau St. Jean, Foley Johnson, Lancaster Estate, and Silverado Vineyards as well as Merus.



A Martini crafted with FFWS brand Lighthouse Gin by Farmhouse Inn mixologist Abraham Ostling and served with a risotto of brassicas, Parmesan, and aged balsamic.

ther transformed the ranch while making it Merus' permanent estate home, refurbishing 7,000 square feet of caves, installing new tanks and barrels, and polishing up two tasting salons.

Built on its Merus Cabernet Sauvignon (\$225), Merus' portfolio is now expanding to include another Cabernet-based expression, the small-production Precelis (\$325), which will be available to wine club members as of October (as well as select accounts upon inquiry). Featuring world-class grapes culled from exceptional vineyards scattered across Napa Valley, both were crafted with a singular aim: to be bold, harmonious wines offering early drinking appeal backed by the structural bones to cellar beautifully.

"In a Good Spot"

The newly bottled Merus 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon delivers on that promise with uncommon force. It is the first vintage for which winemaker Michael Beaulac controlled the process from vineyard to bottling—choosing the sites, calling the picks, directing the fermentations, and assembling the blend. The result earned 100 points from *SOMM Journal* publisher/editor-in-chief Meridith May, a benchmark for a label now positioned as the flagship luxury wine in the FFWS portfolio. It has been quietly building toward this pinnacle after receiving 98 points from May for the 2021 (available in the market now) and 99 points for the 2022 (available online and at the winery).

"[Merus] has been a rotating door of people and philosophy," Beaulac told me at a recent dinner at The Restaurant at Farmhouse Inn in Forestville in Sonoma County. "But we are in a good spot now, with a great winemaking team and fruit sources."

That spot began to take shape late in 2022, when Foley called with a pointed request: "Michael, you've been in Napa for 30 years," Beaulac re-



A mini-vertical of Merus Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon: the 2021 (available now) and the 2022 and 2023 (releasing soon).

called him saying, “You know the growers and the appellations, and you can buy what you want. I want you to buy the best fruit for our flagship wine.” It was a winemaker’s rare blank check. “Bill gave me the chance to make the kind of Napa Cabernet I wanted to make,” Beaulac said, “one that would do right by the Merus label and the Foley family.”

He began recasting Merus as a highly curated, multi-appellation blend, picking from meticulously selected individual blocks—sometimes just a handful of rows—multiple times. He gravitates toward fruit east of the Napa River and in the Valley’s south, where cooler conditions yield grapes with hardy skins that contribute excellent color saturation but that must be tended to properly in the

cellar so as not to extract excessive or harsh tannin. His Cabernet Sauvignon sources have included Shadybrook in Coombsville, Stagecoach on Atlas Peak, Ink Grade on Howell Mountain, Silverado Vineyard in the Stags Leap District, and Three Minutes by Tractor on Mount Veeder, with varieties such as Merlot and Malbec used as blending tools.

“For me, great Napa Cab is about richness and depth and texture,” said Beaulac. “Color and aromatics are critical, but tannin must remain proportional.” He wants bound anthocyanins, a low enough pH to support longevity, and, just as importantly, “an upfront deliciousness” along with the structure to benefit from long-term cellaring for those patient enough to wait.

Merus 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$225) From its inky and majestic hue to its intense purity of black fruit, this remarkable red aged 31 months in 100% new French oak is pure energy, with tremendous ageability. Winemaker Michael Beaulac sourced fruit from Atlas Peak’s Stagecoach Vineyard as well as from sites in the Stags Leap District and Coombsville to find the right pieces of the puzzle. “This wine gets a lot of attention in the vineyards,” says Beaulac, who noted that this particular vintage, his first for the label, was about patience and precision. Like a hockey team gliding on the ice to victory, the liquid surges across the palate, bolstered by polished tannins and notes of black fruit, graphite, anise, and dark chocolate.

100 —Meridith May

Such patience isn’t required in the cellar, where Beaulac moves quickly. There are no extended cold soaks; fruit may move from vine through stainless-steel fermentation and toward barrel in about ten to 15 days. Ferments run relatively hot to build extraction, after which the wine is drained to another tank and held near 72 degrees Fahrenheit. “That’s when we’re getting the binding of anthocyanin to create mouthfeel,” he explained. “That creates richness.” Lots remain separate through *élevage*, and free-run and press fractions are evaluated independently to ensure only the strongest components make it into the final blend.

Beaulac makes the process sound simple, but when you taste the wines, they’re anything but—they’re complexly layered, aromatic, deeply flavorful, and full of soul. That “dialed-back” style of winemaking only comes after one has thrown a lot of things at the wall and waited, vintage after vintage, to see what stuck.

A 100-Point Winemaker Waiting in the Wings

Years before he joined Merus, Beaulac sold enough Murphy-Goode wine while running a jazz dinner club in Portland, Maine, to catch the attention of co-founder Tim Murphy, who told him that if he ever came west, there would be a job waiting.



Ferrari-Carano's Tre Terre Chardonnay from the Russian River Valley served with charred octopus set atop a bed of charred leeks and cannellini beans in a smoked prosciutto broth.

Beaulac eventually took him up on it, and in 1989, despite having no winemaking experience, he crossed the country for harvest. His wife, Cathy, found work at the now-closed MIXX Restaurant & Bar in Santa Rosa, where she heard that a cellar position at Domaine Laurier had opened; Beaulac was hired to work there alongside winemaker Merry Edwards, and when Laurier folded, he returned to Murphy-Goode to help build its Pinot Noir and Zinfandel programs. Markham followed, as did a vice presidency of winemaking at St. Supéry and an 11-year stint as general manager and winemaker at Pine Ridge.

In 2011, Foley recruited him to oversee winemaking at his family's crown jewel, Chalk Hill Estate Vineyards, and the neighboring Roth Estate. Then came the late-night call from Foley asking Beaulac whether he wanted to take charge of Napa winemaking for Merus as well as for Foley Johnson. Beaulac didn't blink before accepting. While Foley Johnson is centered in and on Rutherford terroir, Merus gives him the entire Valley as a palette.

FFWS is now a top ten supplier of wines \$15 and over as well as a top 25 revenue growth spirits supplier, according to Circana data for the 52-week period ending August 9, 2026. But that success



The Merus 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon paired with 28-day-dry-aged New York strip from Flannery Beef in a red wine-summer truffle sauce, accompanied by potato pavé and Jimmy Nardello peppers.

starts with old-fashioned word of mouth: The company's iconic estate wineries turn visitors into impromptu brand ambassadors who continuously seek out the wines at retail and in restaurants after their wine

country experiences. Positioned for the on-premise alongside Foley Johnson and other labels such as Sonoma's Lancaster Estate, New Zealand's Vavasour, and Alsace's Lucien Albrecht, Merus is FFWS's luxury Napa brand—a cellar centerpiece that holds considerable weight at the table.

Beaulac summarized his move to Foley Johnson and Merus as “fortunate,” but that fortune is enhanced by a team to whom he gives all due credit. “Surround yourself with excellent people, listen when they have a better idea, and let successful experiments become new protocol,” he said, singling out Foley Family Farms director of winegrowing Will Thomas and associate winemaker Sierra Zeiter. “They’re smarter than I am—I trust them wholly.”

That humility may be the most revealing ingredient in the 2023 Merus. Beaulac still remembers the Beaulieu Vineyard 1978 Cabernet Sauvignon as a formative bottle for his own appreciation of wine; now he has made a wine likely to become one for somebody else. The score may be indisputably perfect, but the method, at least for this exacting winemaker, remains open-ended: Keep learning, keep questioning, and trust that the sum can surpass its formidable parts. SJ

A Harmonious Table

At a recent dinner at The Restaurant at Farmhouse Inn in Forestville, I joined winemaker Michael Beaulac in tasting a vertical of Merus Cabernet Sauvignon that included the 100-point 2023 vintage.

Located on 6 wooded acres in the Russian River Valley, the 25-room Farmhouse brings a bit of posh hospitality to Sonoma County's distinctly relaxed sensibility. Executive chef Juan Cabrera shapes menus around seasonal ingredients from local farms as well as produce from the culinary gardens at Chalk Hill Estate, another member of the Foley Family Wines & Spirits portfolio. The cooking is refined, with coastal influences and without excessive flair: Fresh seafood, humanely sourced meats, and vegetables from within a 100-mile radius come together harmoniously on the plate, creating a “natural dialogue between the food, the land, and the wines of the region,” says Dare Sturges, regional director of marketing for The Foley Collection.

The cocktail program follows the same garden-to-glass ethos, drawing on seasonal fruit, herbs, house-made infusions, and garnishes for drinks built for food pairing. The Merus Cabernets, with their ultra-fine tannins, deeply flavorful notes of ripe fruit and spices, and undercurrent of acid-driven freshness, likewise shined with all the dishes we tasted, from charred octopus in smoked prosciutto broth and Hokkaido scallops with hollandaise sauce to roasted chicken drizzled in jus and 28-day-dry-aged New York strip from Flannery Beef with red wine-summer truffle sauce.

An Enduring Sense of Place

LIVIO FELLUGA UPHOLDS ITS LEGACY AS THE PIONEER OF MODERN FRIULIAN WINEMAKING *story and photos by Kate Newton*

PERCHED IN THE HILLS of Friuli between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, the Abbazia di Rosazzo has served not just as a sacred religious site but as a viticultural hub for roughly 1,000 years. As the abbey changed hands over the centuries from Augustinian friars to Benedictine monks, imperial troops from the Republic of Venice who razed it to ruins, Dominican friars who helped to rebuild it in the 16th century, and, finally, the Archdiocese of Udine, grapevines remained a constant reminder of winemaking's cultural significance in this northeastern Italian region.

Today, those vines are under the stewardship of Livio Felluga, a producer with its own history of enduring through adversity. Its eponymous founder returned to the area after fighting in World War II amid an exodus of farmers leaving in search of manufacturing jobs in nearby towns, "and with a lot of determination ... he decided to invest [in] and rebuild

this land and bring back the [winemaking] quality that he knew [had existed there]," says export director Vittoria Felluga, Livio's granddaughter. "Another reason why Livio Felluga was considered to be a visionary, one of the pioneers of Friulian viticulture, is because he was the first one to actually bottle and put a label on the wine."

Ushering Friulian wine into the modern era was impactful enough, but the label itself now has its own legacy: Debuting in 1956 and marking its 70th anniversary this year, the artwork was inspired by an ancient Friulian topographical map that Livio hoped would transport those who drank the wines to the territory, no matter how far-flung they may be. "Throughout the years, there's been an evolution of the geographical map, but it's ... become our identity card in the countries where we are distributed—it became a really iconic label," Vittoria adds.



Livio Felluga enologist/production management assistant Daniele Vuerich leads a tasting in front of a tapestry of the geographical map featured on the winery's labels for the past 70 years.

A view of the surrounding vineyards from the Abbazia di Rosazzo in Friuli.

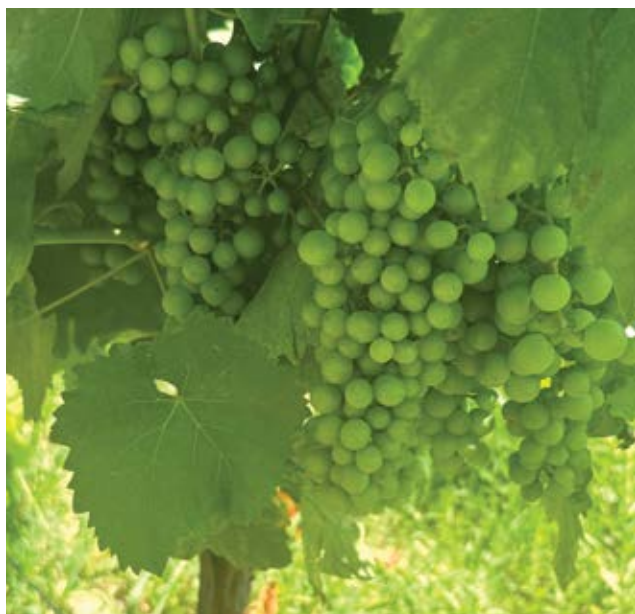


While Friuli houses a smaller roster of producers—and, as a result, less wine tourism—compared to more well-trodden Italian regions, Livio Felluga and its cohorts “are starting to open ourselves to the world,” she says, a transition exemplified by the decision to host appointment-based tastings and tours on the property the producer shares with the Abbazia di Rosazzo starting last year. There, visi-

Felluga family completed negotiations to become stewards of the abbey’s vines. “The idea [behind Terre Alte] was to make a white wine with extra complexity, with aging potential—a wine that could stand alongside some of the best whites of Italy,” says enologist/production management assistant Daniele Vuerich. He notes that due to regulations at the time, it couldn’t be appellationed: “Livio Felluga didn’t like that . . .

winemaking: ageworthy.” “Since the beginning . . . the aim was always to create . . . a wine that can really age, wine with great complexity, with great sense of place,” says Vuerich, who singles out the hallmarks of their evolving characters, namely Abbazia di Rosazzo’s soft yet enveloping texture, notes of dried citrus, and earthiness and Terre Alte’s “sage quality” and “mineral edge”—both of which he views as “fingerprints of Rosazzo”—in addition to the creaminess derived from extended lees aging. Given their elegance and finesse, their gastronomic potential is all but guaranteed: Friulian wines have long been crafted to complement the region’s distinctive blend of mountain- and marine-influenced cuisines, encompassing an array of game, fish, cheeses, and produce. Speaking to these shared strengths, Vittoria notes, “All the wines are very much representative of the winery . . . [but each] has a different price range, different positioning: Some are [meant to be sold] by the glass, some are more by the bottle. . . . The most important thing is [that] you know what you’re getting in the glass,” namely “the elegance, the balance, the complexity, the layers.”

Highlighting Friuli’s historic position as “a crossroad” to Eastern Europe, Vuerich acknowledges that “it really was a region where different populations throughout the centuries came and dominated, but every culture left something [behind]. And what is good . . . is that [these] different populations really were respecting the wine philosophy, the wine culture that was already present, from the Romans and the Lombards to the Republic of Venice and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and so on. So this region has a lot of history, and the wine was something that was a link between these different shifts in power.” That Livio Felluga was able to help preserve that culture at a pivotal turning point for his homeland serves as a perpetual source of inspiration for the modern-day stewards of his legacy, Vuerich among them: “We are capable of making these wines . . . thanks to the history of this estate [and because] Livio Felluga made the best choices possible,” he says. “As a student at university, I looked at this estate as one of the best representing my region [as a] Friulian[, and now,] when I see this label in the world, I’m very proud.”



Friulano is among the varieties Livio Felluga cultivates for both single-varietal wines and blends such as Terre Alte and Abbazia di Rosazzo.

tors can take in panoramic views of the aforementioned hills blanketed with vines planted on the region’s signature marl and sandstone soils (known as *ponca*), step into an 800-year-old cellar recently restored for experimental aging trials in clay amphorae, and taste the 19 wines Livio Felluga crafts from 14 grape varieties planted across its 187 hectares of vineyard, some of which contain the original vines planted by Livio.

The winery is perhaps best known for its single-varietal Pinot Grigio, Friulano, and Sauvignon as well as its Ribolla Gialla, which is indigenous to Friuli Colli Orientali. But the pair of Rosazzo DOCG wines at the pinnacle of its U.S. import portfolio are Terre Alte—an estate blend of Friulano, Pinot Bianco, and Sauvignon from its namesake vineyards that debuted in 1981—and the aptly named Abbazia di Rosazzo, a blend of Friulano, Sauvignon, Pinot Bianco, Malvasia Istriana, and Ribolla Gialla that launched in 2009 after the

so at the beginning [it] was released with a white label. But the wine was so exceptional, so successful, that after a few years it gained the geographical map label.”

Exhibited by their current vintages, the 2022 Terre Alte and 2021 Abbazia di Rosazzo, the wines have similarly nuanced palates due to the presence of Friulano grown “very close as the crow flies,” Vuerich notes. And while “both evoke the light of Rosazzo—Rosazzo is an open place [where] the tops of the hills are hit by this beautiful quality of light that plays an important role in the maturation of the grapes”—they represent “two different aromatic profiles and absolutely two different characters. I find Terre Alte very generous on the nose with tropical fruit—very intriguing . . . and multifaceted. Abbazia, [meanwhile, needs] more time in the glass to open up, but it [also] has this . . . fascinating depth and mineral layers.”

Back vintages of both wines exhibit another imperative of Livio Felluga’s

Pio Cesare purchased 10 hectares in the prestigious Mosconi vineyard in Piedmont's Monforte area in 2014; they now supply Chardonnay, Nebbiolo, and Barbera for both blends and single-vineyard wines.

Gaining Generational Ground

CELLAR EXPANSIONS AND VINEYARD ACQUISITIONS ARE AMONG THE DEVELOPMENTS FURTHERING **PIO CESARE'S** CONTEMPORARY REPUTATION

by Kate Newton

AFTER THE EPONYMOUS FOUNDER

of Piedmontese winery Pio Cesare and his son Giuseppe Pio sought to establish a reputation as pioneering producers in the iconic Italian wine region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the subsequent three generations of family ownership again and again found themselves climbing their own hills on which to plant their respective flags.

Giuseppe's daughter, Rosy, coaxed her husband, Giuseppe Boffa, into taking a one-year break from his successful engineering career that turned into 50 years managing the winery together, during which they modernized and expanded its cellar beneath the family's home in the historic center of Alba while working tirelessly to elevate Pio Cesare's Barbaresco wines to the same esteem as its Barolo. During his 40-year tenure at the helm of the winery, Rosy and Giuseppe's son, Pio Boffa, likewise labored to boost Barbera's reputation as a wine as worthy of premium status as Nebbiolo. But the most indelible impact on his career arguably occurred during his travels beyond the borders of his home country, as a visit to Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley led him to become enamored with Chardonnay and, in turn,

the Langhe's then-untapped potential for producing white wines whose complexity and ageability could rival those of the reds.

Today, fifth-generation proprietor Federica Boffa, who took over Pio Cesare at 23 following her father's death in 2021 and oversees operations with her cousin Cesare Benvenuto, continues to traverse new territory in the rolling hills of Piedmont. She perhaps does this most notably by carrying on her father's passion for white winemaking: This year, the winery is releasing its first vintage of Timorasso, an indigenous Italian variety often referred to as "the white Barolo," sourced entirely from its own vineyards in Tortona in the Colli Tortonesi DOC, the only appellation it produces wine from outside of the Langhe.

Some of the most recent endeavors dictating the future of Pio Cesare are unfolding underground in that aforementioned cellar and elsewhere on the property: A recently completed expansion has vastly increased fermentation and aging space for the white wines that now make up roughly 30% of the winery's production in addition to the reds it has long been known for as well as areas for bottling, shipping, storage, and, of course, tasting.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAISONS MARQUES & DOMAINES

Federica Boffa represents the fifth generation of family leadership behind Piedmontese producer Pio Cesare.

Yet even amid this latest push toward modernization, artifacts like the ancient Roman wall that supports part of the cellar's infrastructure and her grandfather's long-defunct bottle elevator, constructed to spare workers ceaseless trips up



While roughly 30% of Pio Cesare's production is white wine, red wines such as the Barbaresco d'Alba Superiore Fides Vigna Mosconi, Barbaresco Pio, Barolo Pio, and Barolo D.O.C.G. Mosconi still make up the bulk of its portfolio.

and down the steep staircases, serve as constant reminders of "how Pio Cesare has always really been a handcrafted, kind of boutique winery, even if we have been very lucky to gain a lot of success and prominence throughout the years," says Boffa. "We really remain how we were born: as an artisanal family and as an artisanal producer." Key to that identity is limiting production to roughly 500,000 bottles annually—the vast majority of which are made with fruit from the roughly 80 hectares of vines they own—that are then exported to more than 50 countries, including the United States, its second-biggest market after Italy.

The roots of the project now realized in the 2023 Derthona Timorasso Riserva date back just a decade—a modest span compared to the winery's 145-year history. But the fellow Pio Cesare wine that helped pave the way for its debut, the Piodilei Langhe Chardonnay, traces its origins to the late 1970s, after Pio Boffa returned from Napa and promptly moved to replace 1.5 hectares of Nebbiolo in the Bricco di Treiso vineyard with Chardonnay. The response from his peers was incredulous, as virtually no one was growing Chardonnay in Italy at the time—let alone opting to vinify it entirely in new oak to emulate California. Over the years, what Federica calls that initially "super-oaky, super-buttery, super-intense" style exemplified by the inaugural 1985 vintage has transformed to become more reflective of the terroir behind the wine, now a blend of multiple Langhe DOC vine-

yards with a variety of aspects, altitudes, soils, and microclimates—including the prestigious Mosconi vineyard in Monforte d'Alba—that ferments in stainless steel and ages in (one-third new) French oak: Reflected most recently by the 2024 vintage released in September, it "shows of course the power and the structure but also the gentleness [and] the elegance [as well as] the harmony and the balance of our region, creating a Chardonnay that can age for so many years but at the same time is drinkable young," she adds.

Timorasso, also beloved by Pio, hasn't faced the same uphill battle to Piedmontese popularity that Chardonnay did—Federica estimates that while just four wineries crafted it in 2000, an influx of Barbaresco and Barolo producers buying up vines has forced limitations on its production outside of Tortona. Earning an exemption to craft the wine in Alba, Pio Cesare planted its vines in June 2021, posthumously realizing Pio's goal of sending the winery's own rendition of Timorasso into the world with a limited production of 3,000 bottles aged a year on the lees in stainless steel and two years in bottle. With a slight savoriness and vibrant yet refined acidity, it "shows the dynamic side of a very traditional producer," in Federica's view, while reinforcing that "in Piemonte we can make great white wines not only with international grapes but also with local [varieties]."

Staking a claim in coveted Monforte terroir with the 2014 purchase of 10 hectares in the aforementioned Mosconi property



Old vintages dating back to the early 20th century are housed in Pio Cesare's historic cellar in Alba, which recently underwent an expansion.

was another longtime dream of Pio's; in addition to Chardonnay for the Piodilei, the site now yields Barbera for the Barbera d'Alba Superiore Fides Vigna Mosconi as well as Nebbiolo for the single-vineyard Barolo D.O.C.G. Mosconi and the flagship Barolo Pio, a blend of nine vineyards. Compact soils threaded with the area's characteristic blue-gray marl contributes to the "longevity and the power and the structure of the wines," Federica notes, adding that "the Fides is a very similar expression to Nebbiolo in the sense that, [while] Barbera [generally is] a variety very high in acidity and very low in tannins ... you almost feel a little bit of tannin, a little bit of astringency [here]. ... It's a Barbera that tastes like a Barolo—that is the terroir typical of [Mosconi]. ... There are very, very few examples of a Barbera cultivated in such a premier area." Meanwhile, the Barolo Mosconi and the Barolo Pio are embodiments of Pio Cesare's "mission, now and in the future, to [demonstrate] that Barolo is not anymore a wine that you [only] open after 15 years ... but a wine you can open [now] and enjoy," Federica says, adding that "our wines in general are gastronomic wines but also affordable wines." "With an SRP under \$90, the Barolo Pio in particular is "a more democratic Barolo that can be offered to a wider group of consumers."

Tucked away in the cellar, dust-covered vintages of Barolo Pio and Barbaresco Pio as old as 1916—"one of the very first examples of wine bottled and labeled in our region," according to Federica—can be admired by visitors, but her family saves some old bottlings, including some of the first vintages of Piodilei, for their private stock to occasionally open and savor. "It's amazing to see how future-forward my father was already, almost 50 years ago," she says. It seems all but assured that the generations to come will say the same of her. 



The Boisset Collection celebrated its bicontinental heritage this summer with the release of an original graphic novel, 250 Years of Friendship.

The French Connection

THE BOISSET COLLECTION CELEBRATES 250 YEARS OF FRANCO-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP by Joe Roberts

WHAT DOES AMERICA'S 250th birthday have to do with France, fine wine, or graphic novels? Most people would say "nothing." But Jean-Charles Boisset—known to much of the wine world simply as "JCB"—isn't most people, and those are precisely the things on his mind as the United States celebrates its semiquincentennial.

To understand why requires a quick history lesson. In August 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette—the last surviving major general of the Continental Army and a pivotal French ally during the American Revolution—returned to the United States. He was greeted by tens of thousands who gathered to welcome his landing in New York. Over the next 13 months, he traveled to every state in the Union, where he was hailed as "The Nation's Guest," a living

symbol of the friendship between France and the young republic.

Two centuries later, France and the United States have become almost inseparably joined through diplomacy, commerce, art, culture, food—and, of course, wine. The viticultural histories of the two nations are so intertwined that neither would exist in its current form without the other. American vintners have long looked to France for inspiration, adopting and adapting grape varieties, farming techniques, and cellar practices pioneered in Burgundy and Bordeaux. Later, American vineyards helped save France's wine industry itself. When phylloxera devastated Europe's vineyards in the 19th century, French growers preserved their *vinifera* vines by grafting them onto resistant American



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOISSET COLLECTION

Jean-Charles Boisset (right) with his sister, Nathalie, on their estate in Vougeot in Burgundy.

rootstocks (a practice that remains fundamental to present-day viticulture).

In 1976, during America's bicentennial, California stunned the establishment at the now-legendary Judgment of Paris, where French judges ranked Napa Valley wines ahead of some of France's most prestigious bottlings in a blind tasting. Rather than starting a rivalry, the tasting proved that there was ample room for world-class wine on both sides of the Atlantic.

While modern examples of Franco-American collaboration can be found throughout the wine world, few illustrate it quite as well as the Boisset Collection. Founded in Burgundy in 1961, the family-owned company today stewards not only some of France's most historic estates but also many pioneering California wineries.

Jean-Charles Boisset himself is a living, breathing embodiment of that transat-

Those ideas are reflected across the Boisset Collection portfolio. From Burgundy, Bouchard Aîné & Fils' Beaune Clos du Roi encapsulates its appellation's long tradition of terroir-driven Pinot Noir, while Jean-Claude Boisset's Les Ursulines Pinot Noir offers a contemporary, approachable take on Burgundy. Domaine de la Vougeraie's Vougeot Premier Cru Le Clos Blanc de Vougeot provides a rare glimpse at the famed Côte de Nuits, also closely associated with Pinot Noir, through the lens of Chardonnay. And JCB No. 21 Crémant de Bourgogne presents yet another perspective on Burgundy, bringing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay together in a traditional-method sparkler named for the Côte-d'Or's department number.

In California, meanwhile, Boisset

If Buena Vista and Raymond represent California's foundations, DeLoach Vineyards and Elizabeth Spencer point toward its prospects. DeLoach's long-standing commitment to sustainable viticulture reflects an industry increasingly focused on environmental responsibility, while Elizabeth Spencer's bottlings showcase the combination of freshness, precision,



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOISSET COLLECTION

The Boisset Collection portfolio includes both Burgundian and Californian wineries.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOISSET COLLECTION



Boisset acquired historic Sonoma winery Buena Vista in 2011.

lantic perspective, as his life and career have been shaped almost equally by both countries. Asked in a 2013 interview with the French-American Foundation what drew him to the United States, he replied, "My parents and grandparents instilled in me from an early age a deep appreciation of American culture." That admiration has guided his philosophy ever since, he added: "Both France and America are rich with winemaking history, terroir, and commitment to fine winemaking. The union of the two cultures is a vital theme that ties us together. While oceans may separate us, wine unites us."

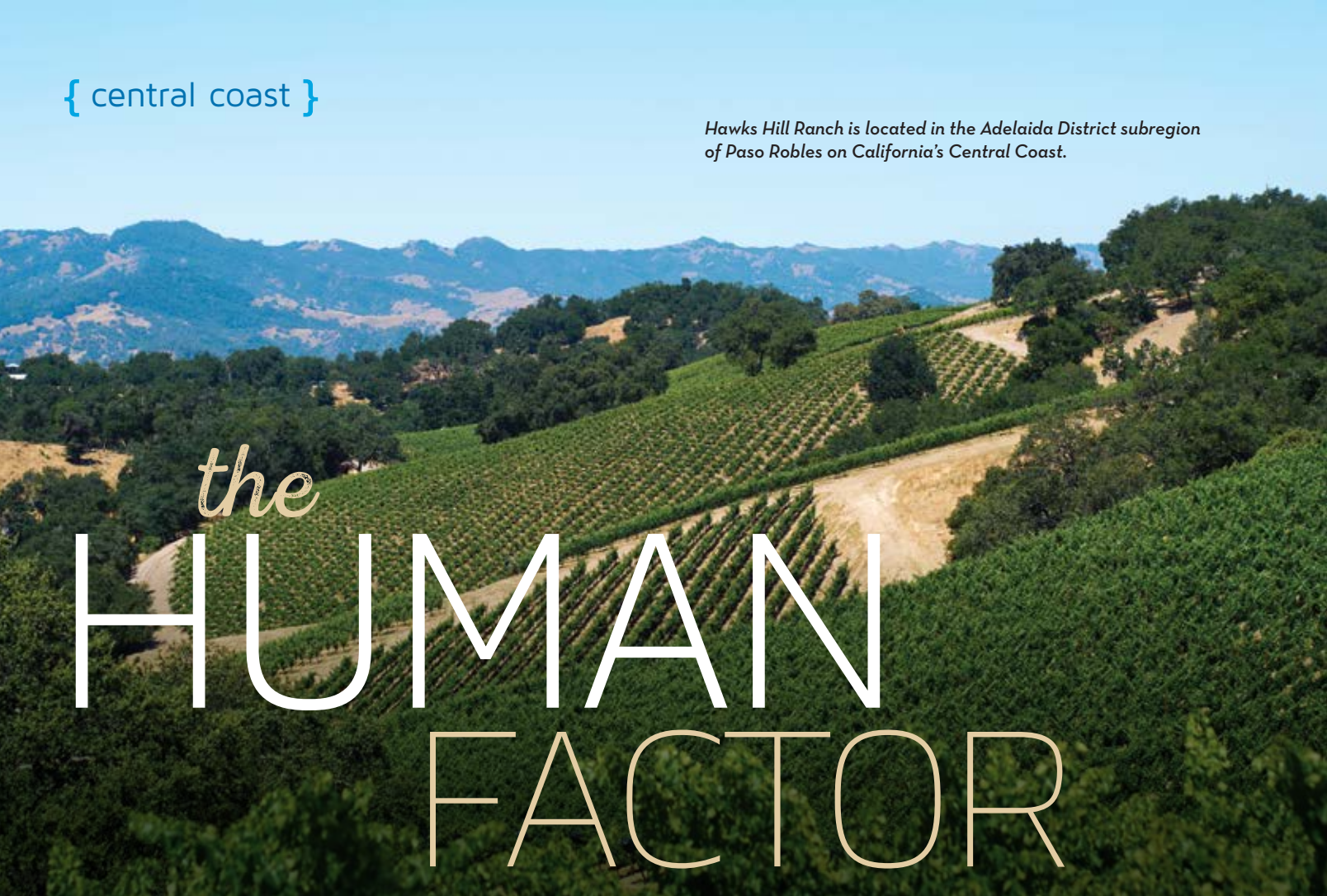
is equally interested in preserving wine history while shaping the future. Speaking about Buena Vista Winery to the French-American Foundation, he explained, "Buena Vista has been a long-held dream, as I have always been charmed by the oldest stones of the California wine world. We revere its history as California's first, and finest, winery." He acquired Raymond Vineyards in 2009 with similar respect for its legacy. That much is evident in labels like Chateau Buena Vista Cabernet Sauvignon and Raymond's Reserve Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, both rooted in Napa Valley's long-established reputation for top-tier Cabernet.

and sense of place that have come to define the Golden State's modern fine-wine identity.

This summer, the Boisset Collection commemorated its bicontinental heritage in an unexpected way: with the release of an original graphic novel. Created with French publisher Glénat Éditions in consultation with historian Farid Ameur, *250 Years of Friendship* features artwork by Laurent Seigneuret. Boisset describes the project as an ode to "a fraternity born of adversity, nourished by faith in freedom, woven into the fabric of history... and consecrated, from the very beginning, by a universal rite: the sharing of wine." As a comics fan, I can report that it's a genuinely entertaining—and occasionally surprising—exploration of the remarkable historical connections between France and America.

When Lafayette toured the United States in 1824, he was feted as the symbol of an alliance that had already helped shape a nation. Two centuries later, the story of Franco-American friendship is still being written in wine (and even in comics about wine). The Boisset Collection is one of its key authors, promoting an enduring exchange of ideas, traditions, innovations, and bottles that continue to link Burgundy and California. *SJ*

Hawks Hill Ranch is located in the Adelaida District subregion of Paso Robles on California's Central Coast.



the HUMAN FACTOR

EXPLORING
PASO ROBLES
TERROIR
WITH **SERIAL**
WINEMAKER
JEFF
KANDARIAN

~~~~~  
*story by*  
Jessie **Birschbach**

*photos by*  
Vincent **Madero**

*Let's settle this once and for all:* People are a part of terroir. The very first vineyard ever created required a human to determine what to plant where, not to mention which direction to orient the rows; how far apart to space the vines; how to train them, prune them, and water them; and when to harvest them—to name just a few of the decisions that are often, by the by, dictated by *local* winemaking practices. I will never understand why some prefer to restrict the definition of terroir to geology and climate when we humans are so clearly shaping both of those elements and many others.

For the myriad examples of the human factor of terroir I encountered, I will forever fondly remember my trip to Paso Robles last summer, trying my darnedest to keep up with Jeff Kandarian—the gritty, outspoken, incredibly sharp executive winemaker for Serial Wines—as we visited vineyards and spoke with growers in four distinct subregions of the Central Coast AVA, California's largest.

A few years ago, Serial's founder and vintner, John Anthony Truchard, and Kandarian set out to create a Paso-centric label for which they would source fruit from not just their own estate but choice vineyards throughout the region. Kandarian, who began his illustrious winemaking career there, has drawn from his roots to identify the best sites from which to make both Paso-appellated wines for broader distribution and small-production expressions from single subregions and even single vineyards to sell DTC to the fiercely loyal regulars at Serial's downtown Paso tasting room.

Although Kandarian and I intended to get our boots dusty and focus on the land, my eyes would eventually turn to the people who tend it. Trust me, it's not easy to upstage century-old Zinfandel vines in sandy, gravelly loam soils or a thriving block of Syrah set on a calcareous 2,000-foot hill in the shade of a 200-plus-year-old manzanita grove, but all four of the growers we met would inevitably steal my attention and even a little slice of my heart.



▲ Senior wine and beer editor *Jessie Birschbach zooms in on an old photo of the original house on Benito Dusi Ranch in the Templeton Gap District AVA.*

◀ Fourth-generation winegrower *Matt Dusi and Serial executive winemaker Jeff Kandarian examine a Zinfandel vine on the ranch.*

## “The Most Stubborn SOB’s in Town”

Located off Highway 101 next to an open-pit mine in the Templeton Gap District AVA, Benito Dusi Ranch isn't the prettiest vineyard I've ever seen, but its lack of pretense only reinforces its soulful charm. (Plus, the mine allows for a more immersive glimpse of the cobbled soils of gravelly, sandy, and shaly loam in which the ranch's gnarled, head-trained old-vine Zinfandel flourishes.)

Fourth-generation grape grower Matt Dusi grew up working on this historic property owned by his family, who have been lovingly tending to the 40 acres of vines planted on the 80-acre site for five generations; some of the aforementioned Zin was planted by Italian immigrants more than 100 years ago, including in 1925 by Caterina and Sylvester Dusi. Now Matt and his own wife and children live in the sweetly humble home it encompasses, last occupied by his great-grandmother. There, we marveled over a picture of her, her husband, and their son, Dante (Matt's grandfather), standing on the stoop of the house, whose cellar holds bottles of Ridge Vineyards' Benito Dusi Zinfandel dating back to 1967. Since then, Benito Dusi has been the only vine-

yard from which the acclaimed Sonoma County-based producer sources Zinfandel south of the San Francisco Bay Area.

While calling himself “a huge Ridge fan,” Kandarian pointed out another bottle, this one from Meridian Vineyards, in an old tasting room across from Matt's home that today serves as a virtual trophy case, filled with wines featuring the vineyard's grapes. “I was working at Meridian back when I would see [Matt's] nephew, Dante, as a little baby in a truck,” he reflected. “They would come into the scale house there in the early 2000s. And now that baby is who I contact to ask about Brix measurements.”

At the time of our visit, the Serial Wines 2025 Benito Dusi Ranch Zinfandel was still going through malolactic fermentation, but Kandarian noted that the fruit was his favorite of last year's Zin harvest. Benito Dusi's dry-farmed, handpicked grapes are certified sustainable, but they're “grown pretty much organically,” said Matt. “We've been doing this for a while and we like to let the old girl do her thing.” It's able to thanks in part to the wind coming through the Templeton Gap, which helps to mitigate vine disease.

“Every afternoon [it] starts blowing at 3 o'clock, just screaming through here,” added Matt, noting that the cold air that also funnels in causes dramatic diurnal swings.

“Believe or not, these are the first grapes we harvest,” said Kandarian, “even before the whites, and what's crazy about Zin is the variability within each vine. You have all these differently aged clusters, so if you're looking for Zin to be spot-on ripe, you're gonna have 90% raisins.” But the results are worth the challenges. “The color and flavors I'm getting even right now: raspberry with just the right amount of spiciness and brambliness,” he remarked. “It's going to be a special wine.”

As we stopped in front of a newly planted vine, Matt agreed. He noted that head-trained vines need deeper roots, so a laborious protocol of manual watering with 5-gallon buckets in the widely spaced rows is required to get them to take. But for his family, the only pioneers of the area still growing Zinfandel, the effort is par for the course. “We're the most stubborn sons of bitches in town,” he said proudly as the wind rustled the equally stubborn old vines behind him.





*Birschbach, Kandarian, and FARM Paso Robles vineyard manager Jason Yeager at Deseo Vineyard in the Estrella District AVA.*

## The Winemaker's Farmer

Serial's estate property in Paso, Deseo Vineyard, is located in the warm and dry Estrella District. Visiting it feels a bit like finding a Spanish oasis among the AVA's many gently rolling slopes. The red-roofed white-stucco manor popped against the green surroundings, while the afternoon breeze carried drops of cooling relief from a lawn fountain as Kandarian and I greeted Jason Yeager of vineyard management company FARM, which was founded by Truchard in Napa Valley before he expanded its reach to Paso in 2023. Deseo's roughly 110 acres of vines, planted in the 1990s, were acquired by Truchard in 2018, and following FARM's expansion, he tasked Yeager with managing the estate.

Born in Napa, Yeager grew up helping his grandfather tend to his own head-trained Zinfandel. At 23, he began working at a local nursery, where none other than André Tchelistcheff, an azalea as well as a winegrape lover, took a liking to him and suggested he get a degree in horticulture and viticulture from Napa Valley College. Yeager recalls being the only student there who knew how to set up a disc on a tractor. After graduating, he landed jobs at Flora Springs Winery and Garvey Vineyard Management before heading to Paso, working for Niner Wine Estates prior to joining FARM Paso Robles.

Pointing to a patch of limestone in the distance, Yeager compared Estrella to the Pope Valley in terms of climate, but "down here, we're on the Pacific plate of the fault line rather than the North American plate up there [in Napa Valley]," he explained. "So [we have] less fertile volcanic soils [with] more limestone and stratification, because this was the bottom of the ocean for a few million years." To underline the wildness of the area, meanwhile, he listed the challenges he faces farming in accordance with SIP sustainable standards while managing the intrusion of animals such as red-winged blackbirds, elk, and even bears.

Having already ripped out Tempranillo and some Chardonnay vines, he and Kandarian have increased their Cabernet plantings, "and we're planning on adding some Sauvignon Blanc for distro," said the winemaker. At the moment, Deseo fruit makes its way into a Syrah-based rosé that Serial sells DTC as well as a soon-to-launch Serial Estrella Cabernet and single-vineyard Deseo Cabernet.

Yeager is grateful that he's able to call upon the experience of Kandarian and Truchard—the latter himself a viticulturalist who learned to farm from his father as well as a few of Napa's most notable names, among them Tchelistcheff, Mike Grgich, and Joe Heitz—in his work at FARM Paso Robles. "I'm very much a winemaker's farmer," he said. "The fruit should be good enough to just put into a tank and ferment and put into a barrel. That's the way it should be. It's my reputation on the line too, you know?"

## The Deepest Roots

The Adelaida District AVA is arguably the source of Paso's greatest wines, and Hawks Hill Ranch Winery is a case in point. Its 240-acre property, which includes 32 acres of steep hillside vineyards ranging in elevation from 1,000 to 2,000 feet, is easily one of the most impressive properties in the bucolic subregion, already teeming with some of Paso's most sought-after sites.

Over the past two decades, owner/vintner Kit Kuyper has taken a grower-first approach to managing his estate, methodically planting vines—at times block by block—to optimize its varying microclimates, orientations, and slopes layered with shale, mudstone, and calcareous strata. Also thoughtfully built into the terroir of Hawks Hill are animals. Grazing on native grasses, a flock of 300 sheep boosts soil health by depositing "fertilizer"



*Kit Kuyper is owner/vintner of Hawks Hill Ranch Winery.*

while lessening fire risk. Helping to guard them are seven dogs, and a few cats, goats, and alpacas are thrown in for good measure.

Kandarian and I bounced around in Kuyper's side-by-side while the vintner pointed out the blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel from which Serial sources. I remembered the purity of the elegant yet powerful 2021 Serial Hawks Hill Ranch Cabernet I had tasted the night prior in downtown Paso as Kuyper spoke of eschewing pesticides and herbicides; though Hawks Hill isn't certified organic or biodynamic, "it's basically what we do," he said.

Soon we were standing at the top of a hill among the largest manzanita trees I have ever seen—all of them, according to Kuyper, 250–300 years old. The grove kept us cool

as he gestured toward a few blocks of Syrah, planted on both east- and north-facing slopes at roughly 2,000 feet in elevation: "We have the ability to harvest Syrah as early as late August and as late as mid-November. . . . That's what allows Jeff to co-ferment our Syrah with the Cab [in some expressions]. As soon as the Cab is ripe, we'll pull some Syrah for him too." Notably, Kuyper's dedicated full-time vineyard crew, who live on-site, harvest entirely by hand.

We then stopped at the future site of a tasting area. A large, amphitheater-like cutout in the hill showed off a thin layer of dark topsoil above a gleaming white calcareous shelf, reminding me of the porous rock's ability to store more water for the vines while providing ideal drainage—and in turn of Kuyper's ability to connect more deeply with the grapes through his regenerative approach to farming.



**A thin layer of topsoil and calcareous shelf exposed on the side of a hill on the Hawks Hill estate.**

## Natural-Born Builders

Erin Faulkner, owner/vineyard manager of Defiance Vineyard, stood at the foot of an east-facing hillside vineyard in the Creston District AVA. Her kind but sharp eyes traveled up the fairly steep slope peaking at about 1,500 feet, taking in its north-south-oriented rows of Bordeaux varieties. "Thirteen years ago there was nothing here but cattle," she said. "I remember when my parents called me and my brother—we had been looking for a piece of land for six years—and said, 'Oh my god, we found it.' We took one look and signed the papers right away. . . . We've planted and built everything ourselves, even that chicken coop over there." Pointing to a neat little structure that perfectly matched the tasting lounge and



**Defiance Vineyard is in the Creston District AVA.**

other buildings on the property, she added, "That's what we do—we're builders."

Indeed, she and her father, Defiance proprietor Bill Faulkner, have been successful in the construction business, which has helped them to fund the family affair that is this roughly 94-acre estate winery. At 77, Bill did all the woodworking and still drives around in the tractor, while Erin's sister, Brianna, serves as the winemaker. But it's mainly Erin who tends the 50 acres of vines, and after spending a few hours with her, I could see how much they mean to her.

She dotes on her animals too—including Ella, her 13-year-old Anatolian Shepherd, whom she lectured for chasing a jackrabbit at her age while pointing toward a block of head-trained Petite Sirah. "This district grows phenomenal Petite Sirah," Erin noted. "It really likes the daytime heat and cool at night. I know it's hot right now, but I was wearing a sweater this morning." Driven by breezes from the Templeton Gap and cold air draining off the small but mighty La Panza Range, 25- to 35-degree diurnal swings define the climate of the Creston District. Frost can be a problem for Defiance's lower blocks of Cabernet, but thankfully water access is not an issue in the Creston Valley. "Those hills over there off the 58 [highway] are solid granite," Erin said. "So water comes down, hits that granite, and then just rolls off into the valley and sits there. Even in times of drought, our water table is full. We got a good amount of rain this year [and] a good fruit set. I thinned the hell out of it." Added Kandarian, "They do all the right things they need to be doing—dropping fruit when they should, reducing those yields."



**Defiance owner/vineyard manager Erin Faulkner and Kandarian.**

Erin also showed me her herbicide-free vineyard, whose soils consist mostly of clay loam over limestone and sandstone. She hand-farms all the vines, most of which are "ballerina style-trained" to mitigate Creston's intense sunlight. "One side is up and the other flops down so that it's protected," she explained. "Everything we're doing is specific to our terroir. I've learned so much since we've first started. That's why I like to hook up with Jeff and sell him our fruit—I also get to suck his brain dry."

The no-nonsense approaches to technique that Kandarian and Erin share combine to make a serious wine—namely the firmly structured, multilayered Serial Defiance Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. The two spoke excitedly of future plantings, considering more whites like Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon. But when Kandarian asked about a small block of Barbera, Erin replied, "No plans for that. That's my dad's hooch." 



# THE *Long* RIDE

AT A DINNER CELEBRATING 35 YEARS OF **PAUL HOBBS WINERY**,  
THE MAN HIMSELF SHARED STORIES AS COMPELLING AS HIS WINES

*by Jonathan Cristaldi*

*At a dinner celebrating the 35th anniversary of his namesake Sonoma County winery, Paul Hobbs (seventh from left) was joined by Chris Hyde, Jonathan Cristaldi, Francis Schott, Agustina Hobbs, Mark Pascal, Cristina Hobbs, John Holdredge, Rolando Herrera, Julian Gonzalez, Roberto Ruiz, Matt Hobbs, and Phil Pollock.*





**BY THE TIME** Paul Hobbs began talking about the bicycle, dinner had already settled into the rhythm of old friends telling tales of how things really went down.

On a Friday in late July, I was seated next to Hobbs at an invitation-only gathering in the library room at Lindsay House, perched on a knoll in his Katherine Lindsay Estate north of Sebastopol, California. Around the table were family members, growers, winemakers, business partners, and restaurateurs whose lives had intersected with that of Hobbs and his namesake winery over the past 35 years.

Many of you reading this know the oft-told narrative: Hobbs was raised on a western New York fruit farm. He studied at the University of California, Davis; joined the inaugural Opus One team; and became a winemaker at SIMI. His namesake winery launched with the 1991 vintage, and since then, he's earned more than 20 100-point scores spread across a portfolio spanning seven wineries around the world. Yet the raw and positively hilarious stories I heard during that dinner were focused on moments when Hobbs was, by his own admission, "a lone wolf"—a time when his success was not assured.



### The Broken Bicycle That Launched a Winery

By the late 1980s, after seven years at Robert Mondavi and five at SIMI, Hobbs was being pulled away from the cellar. SIMI became part of LVMH in 1987, board meetings multiplied, and his ambition to make Pinot Noir found little traction. "I'm still young, and I want to stay in the 'kitchen.' I want to be in the vineyard," he recalled.

During this time, while on his first Wine Country Century ride, the chain fell off his bicycle in Sebastopol. As he fiddled with it, a cyclist named Jane Kroesche chuckled at him as she passed, but once he was back on the road, Hobbs came upon Kroesche repairing her own chain. He stopped to help, and they continued their 100-mile journey through Sonoma County together, swapping life stories. Hobbs told her he wanted to start a winery, and Kroesche, an environmental attorney, said she had a lead on someone who would be interested in helping. She then introduced him to corporate lawyer Phil Pollock of Skadden & Arps, who—after Hobbs proved he had grape contracts in hand—structured a partnership-based California entity, Paul Hobbs Winery, L.P., in 1991.





*Left: Hobbs greets his cellar master of 22 years, Roberto Ruiz. Right: Lawyer Phil Pollock helped structure Paul Hobbs Winery as a partnership-based California entity.*

What in hindsight seems like destiny actually began as a wager made with rented facilities, scarce fruit sources, and just enough believers to get Hobbs' winery off the ground. He pursued Larry Hyde in Carneros and Richard Dinner on Sonoma Mountain, growers he knew from working at SIMI. Miraculously, Matanzas Creek relinquished part of Dinner's Block C to him, while Hyde supplied Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. Those grapes became the 1991 vintage, led by the Dinner Vineyard Chardonnay released in August 1993.

But against the backdrop of the Gulf War, a national recession, and California's phylloxera crisis, the winery needed a small but critical infusion of capital. Incredibly, Hobbs' lawyers came to the rescue: Pollock's colleagues invested modest sums to close the funding gap—and 35 years later, those silent partners remain so today.

### **Hobbs' Accidental Grip on Beckstoffer To Kalon**

Following the Burgundian model, Hobbs built his reputation on vineyard-designated wines. One such source, Liparita Vineyard on Howell Mountain, had been firmly established in the market by Hobbs, who lamented losing it after Jess Jackson acquired it.

In Hobbs' wry telling, Jackson became the well-capitalized beneficiary of his own viticultural instincts. "I had this sense that Jess Jackson kept tracking me," he said. "He had the money, and I didn't. And so I was his truffle-hunting dog." Hobbs can laugh about it 35 years later, but he

hasn't forgotten the blow: "All that market work was gone. For a guy like me, that was devastating."

A bit hardened by the loss of one of his best fruit sources, Hobbs was determined not to be similarly exposed going forward. In 1996, while consulting at Vine Cliff, he called Andy Beckstoffer looking for some Chardonnay. Beckstoffer mentioned that he was developing his portion of To Kalon Vineyard—known as the old BV4 block, it had produced some legendary Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour wines under André Tchelistcheff—and asked whether Hobbs wanted some Cabernet Sauvignon. Hobbs agreed to buy the fruit after he was assured that the vineyard would remain in Beckstoffer's control. "We are growers, not winemakers," Beckstoffer told Hobbs.

It proved a stroke of terrifically good luck. Hobbs chose the westernmost portions of several blocks, far from Highway 29, favoring their rockier soils and lower proportion of loam—blocks that have since proven their potential by yielding 100-point scores for a number of producers from top critics over the past couple decades. At the start, Beckstoffer ribbed Hobbs a bit: "You're kind of a small [player]," he poked, "so I'll give you the sections you want, but fewer rows." Hobbs gradually took more and began to produce the knockout Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet he's known for today.

In fact, his 2002 Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon became the first To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet to be awarded 100 points by a major critic—his winery's first perfect score. Hobbs,



*Dinner unfolded in the library room on Hobbs' Katherine Lindsay Estate near Sebastopol, CA.*

whose cellar team at the time included Rolando Herrera and Julian Gonzalez, recalled that all three men sensed the quality of that wine "within three days of fermentation." Granted, getting there was challenging. The team wanted to do three pumpovers evenly spaced across 24 hours, but Laird Family Estate, where they were making the wine, closed at 8 p.m. To return near midnight, they had to jump the fence every night for weeks—a fact Hobbs had never revealed before.





The wine was worth the risk. In February 2005, Robert Parker declared it “one of the greatest young Cabernets I have tasted from California,” saying it reminded him of “the way the 1986 Mouton-Rothschild tasted at age two or three,” in the review that accompanied his perfect score. It was a watershed moment for Hobbs.

### Friends in High Places

Among the other guests at Lindsay House were Francis Schott and Mark Pascal, hosts of “The Restaurant Guys” podcast and owners of restaurants Stage Left Steak and Catherine Lombardi in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Boisterous, hilarious, sentimental, and brimming with personality, these two early—and crucial—advocates of Hobbs kept the table laughing through the five hours the intimate dinner lasted.

Their story with Hobbs began in 1993 at a Winebow tasting in New York City’s Puck Building, where they met a young Hobbs pouring behind a table from three unlabeled shiners. Schott, sensing he was tasting something quite refined “from a nobody,” in his words, shot a direct opening: “Who the [expletive] are you?” Schott recalled the wine had “California power coupled with acidity, brightness, and sophistication,” not to mention “scholar-athlete character.” They pressed Hobbs to release the wines early to their restaurant clientele.

Schott then became a one-man sales force: When an influential customer sat down, he would drag a wired telephone from the host stand to the table, call

Hobbs, and hand over the receiver to give Hobbs a chance to further pitch his wines, leaving producer and prospective buyer equally bewildered. The conversations were awkward, but they sold bottles. The restaurateurs’ now-annual Hobbs dinners, which began in 1993, draw more than 100 guests each year, and they believe it may be the longest-running wine dinner series in North America. “These guys were really passionate about seeking new producers no one had ever heard of,” Hobbs said. Decades later, he still encounters people around the world who started working on the floor under Schott and Pascal.

Other memories arose between these stories throughout the night. Hobbs recalled Hyde arriving at SIMI in a battered truck with the most beautiful Chardonnay bunches Hobbs had ever seen, then giving him botrytized fruit free of charge. Hobbs made four barrels of sweet Chardonnay that he believed could “go toe to toe with Château d’Yquem.” Schott remembered Hobbs pointing to rows at Katherine Lindsay and declaring that they would become Cuvée Agustina: “I don’t care what it costs. I don’t care what I have to sell it for. It’s going to be the best Pinot Noir I’ve ever made, and it’s for my daughter, Agustina.”

Katherine Lindsay, established in 1998 and first harvested in 2003, is now one of Hobbs’ eight California estate vineyards. Beyond them stretches a global portfolio that includes Viña Cobos in Argentina, Crocus in Cahors, Yacoubian-Hobbs in Armenia, and Galicia’s Alvaredos-Hobbs—

reflecting a reach that Hobbs could scarcely have envisioned when that bicycle chain broke in the late 1980s. So, after 35 years of Paul Hobbs wines and the chance to hear the stories that started it all, let me offer one last toast in memory of that July evening: *Here’s to truffle hunting, old friends with rotary phones, and your good health and future, Mr. Hobbs. Now, let’s crack open some ’86 Mouton and see how it compares!* 



New Jersey-based restaurateurs Mark Pascal (left) and Francis Schott (right) were early boosters of Hobbs’ portfolio, and they host an annual dinner to showcase it to this day.





Our panelists for the “World Values: Acidity, Structure, and Ageability” seminar included Priest Ranch winemaker Cody Hurd; Lisa N. Brown, director of communications for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA; Foley Family Wines & Spirits vice president of luxury brands Alan Crawford; Dandelion Vineyards co-founder/winemaker Elena Brooks; Force & Grace consulting winemaker Jean Hoefliger; Silverado Vineyards winemaker Alison Rodriguez; Chimney Rock winemaker/general manager Elizabeth Vianna; Far Niente director of winemaking Nicole Marchesi; and Agustina Hobbs, founder of ALH Wines and business manager for Viña Cobos.

# Aging Gracefully

THE “WORLD VALUES: ACIDITY, STRUCTURE, AND AGEABILITY” SEMINAR  
EXPLORED WHAT MAKES A WINE WORTH CELLARING

story by **CHRISTINA BARRUETA** / photos by **ALEXANDER RUBIN**



Tasting usually happens in the present tense. How is a wine drinking? Is it balanced? Is the fruit expressive? But at Silverado Vineyards, our “World Values: Acidity, Structure, and Ageability” seminar that helped kick off this year’s Napa SOMM Camp—themed “Napa Meets the World” and sponsored by Napa Valley Vintners—appropriately asked an international group of winemakers to reflect not on how a wine tastes now but on how will it taste in the future as we explored a lineup of ageworthy bottlings.

Following breakfast on Silverado’s terrace complete with Spritzes featuring the winery’s Miller Ranch Sauvignon Blanc, we headed upstairs to the Silverado Room. *SOMM Journal* publisher and editor-in-chief Meredith May opened the discussion by describing acidity as “that bright line that turns sweetness into balance, brings flavor to life, and [serves as] the energy that provides lift and tension,” then ceded the floor to moderator Alan Crawford, vice president of luxury brands for Foley Family Wines & Spirits, to guide the panel through ten wines. “We’re going to talk about different countries, different climates, different varietals, and different winemaking practices,” said Crawford, “so we’re in for a great ride.”



Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker/general manager at **Chimney Rock Winery**, opened with the **2023 Elevage Blanc**, born from a request by the winery’s late owner, Anthony Terlato Sr., to create a Napa homage to Bordeaux’s Château Haut-Brion Blanc. “In the pursuit of a white wine that would age, be thought-provoking, and have a lot of complexity,” Vianna said, the team landed on a blend of Sauvignon Gris and Sauvignon Blanc from a Rutherford vineyard with clay soils suited to aromatic whites. Sauvignon Gris was chosen instead of the Sémillon used for traditional white Bordeaux because “Napa is warm, and Sémillon tends to lose acidity,” she noted. “One of the things that really enchanted

us about Sauvignon Gris are its floral hints as it ages—we call this the white wine for the red wine drinker, because it has ageability and a lot of depth.”



Our attention moved east to the volcanic slopes of the Vaca Mountains as **Priest Ranch** winemaker Cody Hurd introduced his **2024 Grenache Blanc**, the first vintage from a newly planted block at Somerston Estate and a departure from the proprietary red blends the winery is best known for. “A 100% Grenache Blanc is kind of rare for Napa Valley,” he said, describing “massive clusters” with a fruit set of 10–12 tons per acre compared with roughly 3 tons for the estate’s

Cabernets. Growers drop over half that amount so that the remaining clusters get full sun exposure “and the phenolic ripeness can happen as the acids align with the sugars,” he explained. “It’s also a really tannic white,” with thick skins and relatively dry pulp requiring gentle pressing. Aged seven months in stainless steel with regular lees stirring, the wine showed a full-bodied, robust texture and structure that spoke to its longevity.



Next, Elena Brooks, co-founder and winemaker at South Australia’s **Dandelion Vineyards**, poured the **Enchanted Garden of the Eden Valley Riesling** while making a confession. “Fun fact,” she said with a laugh as she pointed to her husband, Zar, across the room, “I actually married him because he has the most amazing cellar full of old Rieslings and Hunter Valley Sémillons.” In Brooks’ words, Riesling is “an absolutely perfect variety” for discussing ageability. “What excites me is the acid and tannin tension, and every great wine has that. The idea that a wine can outlive us I find so fascinating.” In Eden Valley, high altitudes and cold nights preserve that acidity, and the region’s signature floral perfume is unmistakable as well, she added: “You open a bottle 2 meters away, and when you get a whiff, you know exactly what it is.”





Nicole Marchesi, director of wine-making at Napa's **Far Niente Winery**, presented its **2024 Chardonnay**, sourced from sites in Coombsville and Carneros that both benefit from the cooling breezes of San Pablo Bay. "We're trying to set up the wine to have great structure, to have that acidity, to keep it lively ... for many years to come," Marchesi said. "A signature piece of our style is that we intentionally block malolactic fermentation. It's a huge part of our acidity and freshness and a decision we've held to since day one." A recent tasting of the 2015 vintage reinforced the effectiveness of the philosophy: "There were more dried floral notes but still lots of layers, and [it was] so vibrant on the palate," Marchesi said. "Why is that? It's because of the acid and the structure. It's because there's a lot of good body to balance out that acid, to carry the wine as it ages."



Lisa N. Brown, director of communications for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA, then took the discussion to Provence with **Domaines Ott's 2025 Château de Selle Rosé**, challenging the notion that rosé should only be enjoyed in its youth. Founded in 1896 by Marcel Ott, the estate has built a reputation for rosés with the structure to evolve. The current release, Brown noted, has the potential to develop with time due to its "minerality and acidity and tannin tension that Elena was talking about"; with age, she added, "You will get a little bit more richness, more honey, and more red fruit." Brown also discussed Étoile Vin de France, a blend of fruit from the estate's three properties, as proof that rosé rewards patience: "It's a rosé made for ageability," she said, "with more tannin structure and balance. It shows that it's not too late to drink a rosé after three, four, or five years. It just gets more interesting."



Shifting our focus back to Napa, global wine consultant Jean Hoefliger, the winemaker behind the **Force & Grace 2022 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon**, summarized his philosophy in the cellar: "The backbone of a wine is acidity, and the skeleton is tannin. The bigger and more concentrated the wine, the more you need that backbone and that skeleton to hold it together." The science behind such balance, according to Hoefliger,

comes down to polymerization. "I've been studying this for 19 years since I started Alpha Omega," he said, describing the natural process by which anthocyanins, polyphenols, and polysaccharides—compounds that contribute color, texture, and mouth-feel—bind into more stable chains. "Why?" he asked. "Because it makes chains that cannot be cut by the saliva enzyme. Wine has to be drinkable at age zero or 20 years or 50 years, so polymerization helps you have a wine that is accessible earlier without affecting ageability."



The conversation turned from science class to a family affair as Agustina Hobbs, founder of ALH Wines and business manager for Viña Cobos at Paul Hobbs Wines, tasted us through two wines: her father Paul's **Viña Cobos 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon** from Mendoza and her own **ALH 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon**—only the label's second vintage—from Coombsville. Despite the distance between the two wines' origins, they shared cool-climate character, she pointed out: Mendoza's high-altitude vineyards near the Andes experience pronounced diurnal shifts and a long growing season, while Coombsville's volcanic soils and fog drifting in from San Pablo Bay encourage slower ripening. "There's more dark cacao, cherry, currant, and sage in the Hobbs Cabernet, whereas ALH has Coombsville hallmarks of blue fruit, savory notes, and graphite," she said. "But stylistically, they both have phenomenal texture, tannin, and acid."



**Silverado Vineyards** winemaker Alison Rodriguez brought the panel full circle with the **2013** and **2023** vintages of the estate's **SOLO** label, whose name reflects its use of a single clone (See) of a single varietal (Cabernet Sauvignon) from a single vineyard (Silverado). Her philosophy on the role of acidity traces back to a formative season she spent at Schloss Johannisberg in Germany's Rheingau region,

where she helped the winemaker taste through the estate's *Schatzkammer*, or "treasure chamber," of older vintages, moving through decades of history in a single sitting. "That one day in my winemaking career really illustrated for me the importance of acid as a component of ageability," she recalled, noting that it "helps wines remain alive and vivacious throughout their entire lifetime, which will, if we're all doing our jobs up here, definitely outdate all of us." In comparing the two vintages, she found them "quite analogous to one another, both of extremely good, deep, dark color, with wonderful tannins," though she felt the 2023 was "a little bit more powerful."



**SOMM Journal publisher/editor-in-chief Meridith May welcomed campers to the seminar.**

Its youth, she explained, also allows for the polymerization Hoeffler had described, bringing "that softness, that suppleness that makes wines ready to drink early, with the acidity and tannin that makes them able to age."

As the seminar wrapped with a Q&A, Marchesi posed a question of her own, asking campers about consumers' interest in and experience with mature wines. Joseph Barton, director of beverage at Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, Florida, noted that the conversations he has with guests about dry-aged steaks

at the property's chophouse segue easily into the topic of back vintages. "It's a similar experience," he pointed out, in which "there is some education involved, but if you get the staff behind it, you can grow that." Kolin Juckins, wine director at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, agreed that the trade has a role to play. "I think we haven't done a good enough job as sommeliers and wine educators in educating people on what wine does as it evolves," he said. "But I think that by asking the right questions and recommending the appropriate wines, there's a lot of potential for consumers to enjoy wine with more age."

Rodriguez returned to what makes that transformation so rewarding.

"That balance of structure and acidity, that softness of the tannin, that integration and the acidity, that richness that happens with age—[it's] really exciting to turn people onto that if they haven't experienced it before," she said. "It's not for everybody, but it's really fun when you get the chance to have that conversation or that staff training."

And for anyone curious to experience it firsthand, she offered a simple invitation: "There's a lot of wineries within the Valley that have older vintages available. So don't be afraid to ask!" 



A SOMM Camp dinner was held in B Cellars' subterranean Grand Salon.



# A Blowout at B Cellars

A BIG NIGHT IN OAKVILLE  
SHOWCASED SOME VERY  
SPECIAL WINES—AND GUESTS

story by CHRISTINA BARRUETA  
photos by ALEXANDER RUBIN

*The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow* across the Vaca Mountains as we arrived at B Cellars Vineyards & Winery in Oakville for a Napa SOMM Camp dinner to remember. Beneath the dappled shade of olive trees, servers offered chilled glasses of B Cellars Sparkling Albariño before we made our way toward the cave doors set into the hillside.

There, Jonathan Cristaldi, chief wine critic for *The SOMM Journal* and sister publication *The Tasting Panel*, joined B Cellars co-founder Jim Borsack, master winemaker Kirk Venge, and general manager Curtis Strohl in welcoming us. In keeping with the camp's theme, "Napa Meets the World," Cristaldi described Napa Valley as "an epicenter of wine knowledge, thoughtfulness, and winemaking in a global sense," noting that the knowledge the region has inherited from France and Italy as well as from generations of immigrants was precisely what made it the perfect setting for pouring wines from all over the world. "Let's create a conversation around Napa being a staging ground for global conversations about wine," Cristaldi urged.



Steve and Dennis Kreps, second-generation proprietors of Quintessential, with Jeff Degner, business development manager at TX-based Spec's Wines, Spirits & Finer Foods.





With that invitation, we entered the Grand Salon, where executive chef Derick Kuntz had prepared a family-style feast. Served alongside Little Gem Caesar salad and pappardelle in pork ragù, the first three wines began their tour around the table.

Representing Terlato, Northern California sales manager Shelby Walshaw Patton began by presenting the **2024 Tee Sauvignon Blanc** from Marlborough, New Zealand's **Loveblock**, a unique project from Kim and Erica Crawford. Upon selling their namesake brand, the couple took nine years to plan their next step before buying a vacant hillside property in Awatere Valley and committing to organic and regenerative farming. "They wanted to continue to make Sauvignon Blanc, but as a new expression," Patton explained of the Crawfords' decision to replace added sulfur with green tea extract. "When you smell it, you get a beautiful bouquet of tea, and when you taste it, it's pure Sauvignon Blanc."

The bottling that followed took us to Australia's Barossa Valley, as Peter Kelly, chief winemaker at **Thorn-Clarke Wines**, presented the producer's **2022 Single Vineyard Selection Grenache**, sourced from a sustainably farmed 80-year-old vineyard that produces just 200–400 cases annually. "Everyone knows Barossa for Shiraz, but we have other fantastic varieties as well," he pointed out. "We love to make this great expression of Grenache, which has been around for 150-plus years

in the Barossa. This vineyard is low elevation—we're talking 100 meters above sea level—with 5-plus meters of deep sand." The result, he explained, is "a midweighted wine with plenty of upfront berry fruit but more savory spice on the palate. It has a lovely, long textural expression and is very versatile."

To close the flight, Strohl brought us back to local soil with the **B Cellars 2023 Hudson Vineyard Syrah**. "We make a lot of big, bold Cabernets," he admitted, "but tonight we're showing you the least 'Napa' red we make, a 100% Syrah" that benefits from its namesake site's coastal influence. The innovative technique behind it came from France, where Venge once spotted barrels resting on a 15-degree tilt. "Once the wines are clean and through malo, we take those barrels, give them a quick shot of sulfur, turn them 15 degrees, ram those bungs in tight, and let them ride for eight to 12 months," said Strohl. "What we get is this incredible intensity of flavor and mouthfeel. It's a great example of going outside the box, stretching ourselves, and learning something new."

Earlier in the night, Cristaldi had fittingly introduced a surprise guest—Andy Beckstoffer—as "Napa royalty;" and before the next course, he invited the legendary grower to recount a little-known encounter from the early 1970s, when California's farm labor tensions threatened to spill into a full-scale crisis. At the time, Beckstoffer was working for Heublein, and farmworkers led by Cesar Chavez, frustrated



▲ *B Cellars master winemaker Kirk Venge (center) with Brian Couey, beverage director at Palmetto Dunes Oceanfront Resort in Hilton Head, SC, and Vila Jarrell, director of food and beverage at Splendido at Rancho Vistoso in Tucson, AZ.*

◀ *SOMM Journal chief wine critic Jonathan Cristaldi (standing) regaled campers with stories about legendary winegrower Andy Beckstoffer (seated right).*

by the conditions, began boycotting the company and its labels. Defying instructions not to meet with any members of the United Farm Workers, Beckstoffer secretly invited a union lawyer to his home, determined to show him the Allied Grape Growers supply contract, which required Heublein to buy the growers' grapes but said nothing about union status. "I was 28 years old," he recalled, "and didn't tell anyone what I was doing, but I knew I had to do something." The lawyer arrived with renowned labor leader Dolores Huerta, and eventually Beckstoffer met Chavez at a hotel to finalize the settlement. "We wrote the agreement out by hand on top of an old TV set, and he signed it," Beckstoffer recalled. "And the boycott was over within weeks." Looking back on the weight of that night, he said, "If Chavez hadn't signed and the farmworkers had revolted, I'm not sure what would have happened to California agriculture."

Moving from Napa history to that of France, Lisa N. Brown, director of communications for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA, kicked off the second course with the **Delas Frères 2023 Hermitage Les Bessards**, accompanied by blackened flat-iron steak with romesco. "We're going back to 1870, when the Delas and Audibert families arrived in Tain-l'Hermitage in Northern Rhône," she said, adding that Delas is "going through a renaissance" as "two young helpers, cellar master Marco Beckmann in the winery and vineyard director Clément Panigai in the vineyard,"



join longtime winemaker and technical director Jacques Venge. Their fresh perspective is welcome, as Brown noted that “Northern Rhône doesn’t get as much attention as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, so it’s really nice to introduce this to people who are interested in something a little bit different.”

The flight continued back in Napa with an expression from Venge’s own label, the **Venge Vineyards 2023 Bone Ash Cabernet Sauvignon**. “My grandfather was an importer, and I’m a winemaker, as is my father,” Venge said as he poured the wine. His family farms three estate properties, including the 12-acre Bone Ash Vineyard in Calistoga, where Cabernet Sauvignon was planted in 1990. (“It’s called Bone Ash for the phosphorous content of the soil,” Venge explained.) The 2023 vintage benefited from a long, unusually cool growing season and a late harvest,



*Marsha Wright, wine director at DineAmic Hospitality in Chicago, with Shelby Walshaw Patton, Northern California sales manager for Terlato, and Mirna Franjul, wine category manager for NC-based company Ahold Delhaize USA.*



*B Cellars general manager Curtis Strohl.*

resulting in extended maturation. “It was a fantastic vintage,” Venge reflected. “It gave us a long hang time with lower Brix—so lower alcohol—and we didn’t have to rush anything. I love this vintage because it has more energy, a little more fruit and tension, and more phenolic ripeness, but also a little Old World nod.”

Venge then turned north to Lake County, pouring the **Crimson Veil 2023 Beckstoffer Crimson Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** produced by B Cellars. The only Lake County site he works with, “this is a very unique property,” he said. “It’s incredibly volcanic and has huge pieces of obsidian.” Also notable is its altitude: “As you climb the steep elevation up to 2,000 feet, it gets much cooler for a warm appellation, and you’re above the fog line with a nice west-facing exposure, making it perfect for a Lake County 100% Cabernet,” Venge continued. Bor-



*Lisa N. Brown is director of communications for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA.*

sack acknowledged the significance of the collaboration, noting that Crimson Veil is the first wine produced outside of Napa Valley to bear the Beckstoffer name.

For the finale, Dennis Kreps, proprietor of importing, distributing, and marketing firm Quintessential, brought something extraordinary to the table from Portugal’s Douro Valley. Addressing our campers, Kreps noted, “You get to take [trips] like this, meet legends in the wine business—growers, winemakers—and taste world-class wines throughout the week. So how do I end an event like this? Let’s pour a wine that nobody’s probably ever tasted before.” With that, he unveiled the **Quinta do Vallado Very Very Old Port** alongside the cheese course—a wine so rare it has never before been offered for sale. Very Very Old is a new classification established in 2025 for

Port averaging at least 80 years old, and Vallado’s blend went well beyond that baseline to reach “at least 100 years old on average,” Kreps explained, noting that the full duration of the maturation occurred in 600-liter barrels in the winery’s cellars. Retailing for \$2,500 a bottle, it’s a wine only a select few will taste: “Maybe 214 bottles were produced,” Kreps said, “and we opened three of them tonight.”

The rare opportunity was not lost on the room. “It was an unforgettable experience,” Maya Konings, wine category management team buyer for Total Wine & More, later shared. “It reminded me that the winemaking tradition has existed for thousands of years and will exist for thousands more.”

For Vila Jarrell, director of food and beverage at Splendido at Rancho Vistoso in Tucson, Arizona, some of the most memorable moments came from the people behind the wines. “The highlights were stories from Andy Beckstoffer and

Kirk Venge,” she said of Beckstoffer’s role in building Napa’s reputation and Venge’s place in its next chapter. “It was like watching the OG pass the torch to the new kid on the block, though we know that Kirk’s father was also a big influence. It was truly a night to remember.”







The Rutherford Atrium, which serves as the Beaulieu Vineyard hospitality center's main tasting room, boasts stone walls dating to 1885 and a ceiling that incorporates redwood from old fermenters.

# *toasting to a* **New Era**

OUR DINNER AT **BEAULIEU VINEYARD** HELPED TO  
CHRISTEN ITS NEWLY RESTORED HOSPITALITY CENTER

*story by* LARS LEICHT / *photos by* ALEXANDER RUBIN





*SOMM campers gathered on the Madame de Latour Terrace.*

*Following extensive renovations*, the long-awaited opening of Beaulieu Vineyard's (BV) hospitality center in Rutherford this summer was the talk of Napa Valley. It had also generated buzz among our SOMM campers, whose excitement about visiting the property reached a crescendo when, upon our arrival, BV senior winemaker/general manager Nate Weis told us that we were the first group to be hosted there for dinner.

"We are very proud of this," said Weis. "It is two years in the making; in fact, counting planning time, it's been more like six or seven years." Added hospitality director Luke Magnini, "We've come a long way. For the first time in BV's 126-year history, we believe we finally have a place and a home that matches the legacy of our wines."

We gathered in a courtyard in front of the center where BV's administration offices once stood. Built in the 1920s, "[they] played a key point in our history, [but] it paled in comparison to the original 1885 winery that stands behind us," Magnini said. "Our architects like to say that these buildings were trying to tell their story, but they were being hidden. So one of the first things we did was to peel that back so they could [speak]."

As we took in the view of the old stone buildings, we were welcomed with glasses of BV's **2020 Sparkling Blanc de Blancs**. The traditional-method Napa Valley Chardonnay, which spent 30 months en tirage, was created specifically for the hospitality center's inauguration on July 13, just two weeks before our visit; Amin Alavi, corporate wine director at The Guest House in Austin, Texas, called it "the surprise of the trip. It was outstanding, showing real tension and concentration [as well as] this lovely, toasty depth."

After pointing out the bronze statue of the legendary André Tchelistcheff, BV's longtime winemaker, and its founder Georges de Latour's iconic 1925 Cadillac, now fully restored, Magnini showed us another relic: a sign painted on the original masonry reading "Beaulieu Vineyard Winery, Bonded Winery No. 71." Sealed by a cement block wall in 1940, it was uncovered during the renovation, and it now graces an exterior wall along the highway for all to see. "We didn't want to try and shine this up," said Magnini of their decision not to repaint the worn lettering. "We love the authenticity of it. You'll see that kind of thing woven throughout: 'Authentically, uniquely BV' is the common thread." Agreed Weis, "We never wanted to make this into a museum, but we are proud of this history and wanted to preserve it as much as we could."



They succeeded, according to Marsha Wright, wine director at DineAmic Hospitality in Chicago: “You can’t help but get a sense of legacy when you are there—it’s everywhere.” Indeed, upon entering the facility—which Alavi called “stunning, with tons of natural light” beneath ceilings made from the repurposed staves of old redwood fermenters—we were immediately captivated by a wall-mounted display providing a timeline of BV’s history, including artifacts such as technical documents handwritten by Tchelistcheff. The old fermentation room has been converted into a tasting room with a large rectangular bar and multiple tables; a glass wall reveals a view of a patio with additional tables overlooking the vineyards. Shannon Saulsbury, beverage director for the Omaha, Nebraska-based Flagship Restaurant Group, observed its balance of “elegance and comfort with a swanky midcentury minimalism that I’m obsessed with”—just as BV’s wines “are part of American winemaking history while maintaining an effortless timelessness,” she added.

The ground floor also houses a library named for Georges de Latour, where a five-course tasting is offered that incorporates his family’s heirloom china. The second level includes the Maestro Lounge, reserved for club members; the Madame de Latour Terrace with café seating; and the André Tchelistcheff Hall, which can be used for events—as it was for ours.

As we continued our tour, we were offered crab tostadas, strawberry-goat cheese mini tarts, and forest mushroom crostini among other bites from BV’s first-ever winery chef, Sam McKenzie, arranged on tiered stands to evoke the tea parties hosted by de Latour’s wife, Fernande. “We have gone into great detail to preserve their vision of hospitality,” said Magnini. Accompanying the hors d’oeuvres was BV’s **2022 Tapestry Reserve**, a blend of separately fermented 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Malbec, 10% Petit Verdot, 6% Merlot, and 5% Cabernet Franc from various Napa Valley vineyards that aged in (60% new) French oak for 20 months. Weis called it “a red blend before red blends were a thing”—and Wright deemed it a standout. “This is the wine I want to come home to every night,” she said. “I [felt] hugged by the dark, rich fruit and velvety finish—you can tell it was made with intention.”

As we moved to two long tables for dinner, Gillian Ballance, MS—who serves as national education manager for BV’s parent company, Treasury Wine Estates—offered up what she called “sommertary” on the wine pairings, starting with the newly released **2025 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc**. Comprising fruit from two vineyards, including the 90-acre BV10 site surrounding the winery, it was served with an heirloom tomato and burrata salad accented by cucumber, peach, and fresh basil and dressed in a strawberry vinaigrette incorporating 20-year-aged balsamic. BV had long produced a Sauvignon Blanc from North Coast vineyards, she explained, but relaunched it as an estate-driven wine with the 2023 vintage. Offering more tropi-

spices plus silky tannins and a long, rich finish. As a surprise, BV also treated us to a side-by-side tasting of two of the wine’s components, Cabernet Sauvignon clones 4 and 6, to help us understand how they balance each other in the final blend.

Dessert, to the delight of many (including me), was a cheese course featuring three different Goudas—Midnight Moon, Beemster XO, and a truffle-infused variant—alongside the **2015** vintage of Georges de Latour Private Reserve. The wine was still fresh and young, but its red berry fruit and toasted oak spices were balanced by mature notes of rose petal and violet.

“Both [Private Reserves] were everything you dream of in a premium Napa



*As national education manager for BV’s parent company, Treasury Wine Estates, Gillian Ballance, MS, joined senior winemaker/general manager Nate Weis in presenting the wines served at our dinner, held in the André Tchelistcheff Hall.*

cal fruit flavors due to its sources in the warmer Rutherford and Oakville AVAs, it also shows more oak influence.

Describing it as “a textural wine,” which he fermented in stainless steel before aging it for two months in (15% new) French barrels, Weis noted that the relatively cool 2025 vintage was “great for whites.” This one showed flavors of Meyer lemon, white peach, orange blossom, and brioche toast.

Our main course of pan-roasted prime beef tenderloin with ratatouille was paired with the **2021** vintage of BV’s flagship, the **Georges de Latour Napa Valley Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**. Weis enhanced it with 6% Petit Verdot before fermenting the wine in a mix of new French oak, cement, and stainless steel. It showed black cherry, ripe plum, and baking

Cabernet: plush, deep, and ripe but balanced, with gorgeous tannin structure and wonderful acidity,” said Alavi. “Getting to taste the two vintages side by side was such a treat.” Added Joseph Barton, director of beverage at Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, Florida, “Comparing the youthful energy of the 2021 with the more integrated and expressive 2015 reinforced how much a great Napa Cabernet evolves with age and why bottle maturity is such an important part of understanding these wines.”

Shaun Adams, director of food and beverage at Scottsdale National Golf Club in Arizona, called the evening “a perfect night with great wines and great food.” Indeed, it was an extraordinary way to toast a new era for Beaulieu Vineyard. 





# terroir *TETRIS*

DURING OUR SEMINAR AT **DOMAINE CARNEROS**, EIGHT WINES ASSEMBLED A GLOBAL SENSE OF PLACE

STORY BY **DEBORAH PARKER WONG** / PHOTOS BY **ALEXANDER RUBIN**



Our panelists included Chloe vice president of winemaking Jessica Tomei; Domaine Carneros CEO Remi Cohen; The Ned proprietor/winemaker Brent Marris; Klipsun director of winemaking Doug Fletcher; The Calling winemaker James MacPhail; Heirloom Vineyards founder/winemaker Elena Brooks; X NOVO founder/winemaker Craig Williams; Gillian Ballance, MS, representing Stags' Leap Winery; and SOMM Journal VP of education Lars Leicht.



*The seminar was preceded by a “deconstructed tasting” of Domaine Carneros’ Brut, from unfermented juice through to the finished wine.*

**H**arvest was in full swing at Domaine Carneros on the third day of SOMM Camp: Beatific morning sunshine and glistening clusters of Pinot Noir on their way to the crusher greeted campers en route to the “Terroir Tetris” seminar. (So, of course, did glasses of the winery’s 2022 Brut, thanks to a “deconstructed tasting” led by CEO Remi Cohen, during which we also sampled unfermented Pinot juice, the still base wine, and the final blend pre-dosage.)

Defining terroir requires more than a convenient shorthand of factors, so moderator Lars Leicht, as *The SOMM Journal*’s VP of education, took a more introspective view. He framed our tasting as a global conversation that began with a practical question rooted in place: “What does terroir mean when a cork is pulled and a glass is smelled?” He then asked each presenter to discuss which elements of terroir they aim to elevate through winemaking and whether there are any they downplay for being too dominant. As the tasting unfolded, their answers, informed by eight wines, made the case that terroir is both nuanced and transparent.



### *The Dream of Precision*

#### **Domaine Carneros 2018 Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs, Carneros**

In her introduction, Cohen observed that the raw materials of wine are always transformed by the production process, but that process is more complicated and layered for sparkling wine. She traced the history of Domaine Carneros back to Claude Taittinger’s long search for a California site that was ideally suited to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. In Carneros, he found rolling terrain, alluvial soils, dense clay, and the established capacity to produce the varieties so revered in Champagne. “It was the culmination of so many dreams,” she said.

By Cohen’s account, land ownership and complete control of farming constitute part of terroir. She cited clonal material, row orientation, trellising, and sustainable practices as determiners of quality even before fruit reaches the press: “We believe that the complexity of this wine comes [in a large part] from the vineyard.” As the 2018 Le Rêve Blanc de Blancs whispered in the glass, she explained that the label was created as a Carneros counterpart to the Grand Cru ideal: estate-grown Chardonnay that’s gently pressed, held in stainless steel, and given seven years on the lees. Without denying the transformative potential of the traditional method, she added that her aim is to make the technique part of the wine’s architecture, which is built around tension, mineral expression, and scintillating acidity.

In tribute to Domaine Carneros’ founding winemaker, Eileen Crane, who for decades was the heart and soul of the winery, Cohen imbued the wine with her vision. The dream to which the name alludes isn’t about mimicking a house style of Champagne but about expressing both place and craft in California.



### *Bubbles Through a Different Lens*

#### **Chloe Prosecco DOC, Italy**

“Prosecco and Champagne share bubbles and legally defined places but little else in approach,” Leicht said as he introduced Jessica Tomei, vice president of winemaking for Chloe. Tomei elaborated on that analogy by providing a portrait of northeastern Italy as it’s shaped by the Dolomites and its close proximity to the Adriatic: While the former block frigid air from the north, the latter pushes warm maritime breezes over the plains that moderate the climate and extend the growing season. The vineyard sources for Chloe Prosecco DOC are located in Grave del Friuli, where limestone and gravel are strewn across the alluvial plain. As the relatively cool conditions

here preserve the brisk acidity of the region’s signature grape, Glera, these free-drain soils retain heat that helps ripen it.

Because Glera is relatively neutral, decisions concerning fermentation and lees aging are important when it comes to amplifying its qualities, Tomei explained. Chloe Prosecco spends two months on the lees after secondary fermentation in stainless steel—a short interval compared to that of Le Rêve, but long enough to give the wine a round, silky texture, even as the acidity and signature melon notes of Glera grown on this specific terroir shimmer through the wine. “[It’s] a very elegant representation of the variety, without any influence from oak,” Tomei observed.

Her final point extended terroir beyond the vineyard: A site-specific wine can also acquire a place in people’s lives as an accessible bottle carried to casual celebrations or even as a cocktail base. “[Chloe] is a great way to bring wine into everyday activities,” she said.





### **Color as Site Signature**

#### **The Ned 2025 Pinot Gris, Marlborough, New Zealand**

Despite his unmistakable New Zealand cadence, The Ned proprietor/winemaker Brent Marris' Pinot Gris spoke louder than his words in proving that Marlborough's story extends beyond Sauvignon Blanc. Marris described his Waihopai Valley estate, being 30 kilometers inland, as warmer by day and cooler by night than many sites on the Wairau Valley floor; with a daily temperature swing of roughly 20 degrees Celsius during the growing season. Glacial activity there left a complex soil matrix of schist, greywacke, silt, sand, and topsoil on the estate, so Marris dug more than 100 soil pits to aid his family's decisions about clonal selection and vineyard architecture. "If you take temperature and you take soil, and then you take your time, you can make amazing wines," he said—"but only if you get that first bit right."

Marris pointed to the estate's long, slow growing season and relatively small Pinot Gris berries—the result of planting different clones to different soil types—as key contributors to the wine's concentration. Its now-signature copper tint, meanwhile, was initially seen as a disaster: Marris' crusher once broke down during harvest, which meant he had to leave the fruit on the skins overnight. He went ahead and made the wine with trepidation, but buyers were quick to see the appeal of its glorious hue and its aromas of rose petal and honeysuckle, even as it retained its identity as a white wine. The "disaster" led to a disciplined 12-hour skin-contact regimen.

Leicht admired the color, referencing the *ramato* style of Italian Pinot Grigio, and pointed out that it provides an opportunity for sommeliers to tell the story of the grape and the vineyard that made it possible.



### **A Noble Grape on the Edge**

#### **The Calling 2023 Charles Heintz Vineyard Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County**

Moving to the western reaches of Sonoma County, Leicht introduced The Calling winemaker James MacPhail and his Charles Heintz Vineyard Chardonnay. MacPhail described what makes the namesake site, which sits in Green Valley at the edge of Russian River Valley, so extraordinary: It lies right at the inversion layer, 800–900 feet above sea level. Here, the fog burns off early enough for the necessary sunshine, but the

influence of the Pacific Ocean is always present; according to MacPhail, on a July day that hits 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Healdsburg 105 feet above sea level, the vineyard may not top 70 degrees.

Sitting on Goldridge sandy loam that overlays uplifted ocean floor, whose fossilized shells lurk several feet beneath the surface, it was planted to the Wente clone in 1982 by the eponymous grower. MacPhail reminisced about Heintz once arriving in an old flatbed, bleary-eyed because he'd been picking fruit since 2 a.m., thereby zeroing in on an often overlooked element in terroir: long stewardship. "If we were to classify some of our vineyards as such, I would absolutely put Charles Heintz as a Grand Cru site," said MacPhail. For him, its combination of maritime influence, mature vines, and a grower's intimate understanding "checks every single box."

So did the wine. Its crystalline acidity and layered aromatics spoke to its terroir at the edge of the ocean, where cool air and unfiltered light meet on ancient seabed.



### **Capture, Don't Copy**

#### **Heirloom Vineyards 2024 Velvet Fog Pinot Noir, Adelaide Hills, South Australia**

Presenting her 2024 Velvet Fog Pinot Noir, Elena Brooks of Heirloom Vineyards in Adelaide Hills, South Australia, pointed out that "distinct sites are not interchangeable sources but opportunities to make wine that captures a place's particular shape." The Adelaide Hills region sits at around 400 meters above sea level, where it experiences the warmest of what are considered to be Australia's cool climates. This gives

Pinot Noir a nuanced perfume and generous red fruit: "Our common markers for [the variety] are cherries and roses, although without care the wines can become one-dimensional" in hotter vintages, said Brooks.

In this landscape, she added, "Clonal selection is stupidly important, and it also depends on the exposition that you choose": Some clones fare better on north-facing sites, others on south-facing ones. Whole-cluster fermentation and restrained oak are used to build layers in the wine, while early bottling prevents any excessive summer heat from speeding its evolution.

Brooks doesn't seek to imitate wines from classic regions like Bourgogne but rather to define Adelaide Hills Pinot Noir: "I am not trying to replicate [them]," she says. "I am trying to make as good a wine as I can for where I am at the time."



### *Vineyard as Community*

#### **X NOVO 2023 Pinot Noir, Eola-Amity Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon**

We then turned to the Pacific Northwest, as Craig Williams introduced his X NOVO 2023 Pinot Noir from Eola-Amity Hills in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Williams recounted how his years of experience in Napa and Sonoma had taught him that some vineyards "float above the rest," regardless of cellar handling. That realization redirected him north of the California border, where he and his wife found an ideal Eola-Amity Hills parcel for growing distinctive fruit. "I selected a site

on the eastern flank [of] a volcanic hillside that's just electric in terms of [its] aspect, solar radiation, and low humidity due to the cool winds from the Van Duzer Corridor," he explained.

Williams treats a 4.5-acre block planted to more than 18 clones of Pinot Noir as a "community" of vines: They are harvested and fermented together rather than as separate lots to be assembled later. While different clones with different ripening windows require berry sampling and carefully timed picks, for Williams they result in a blend whose complexity is a true reflection of the vineyard. He described the wine as "perfumed with black cherry, wild strawberry, sandalwood, and seed spice notes." At X NOVO, terroir is not expressed as a monologue by one clone but as a chorus whose harmony is derived from the site.



### *The Advantage of Aridity*

#### **Klipsun 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Mountain, Washington**

Klipsun director of winemaking Doug Fletcher, whom Leicht hailed as "legendary," provided the bridge from Oregon Pinot Noir to Washington Cabernet Sauvignon. Fletcher's long and storied career changed his view of winemaking, leading to the realization that cellar technique alone was no match for the idiosyncrasies of terroir.

The rain shadow cast by the Cascade mountain range leaves the Klipsun Vineyard in the Red Mountain AVA with only about 4

inches of annual rainfall. Ironically, water flows all around the Yakima Valley sub-region in the form of the Yakima, Snake, and Columbia rivers, but the estate's deep, sandy-gravelly soils, deposited by reoccurring ice-age floods, drain freely and retain very little water.

Rather than viewing their dryness as a deficit, Fletcher relies on precision irrigation to work with it. After all, "vigor that is too high or too low is a management problem," he said. Meanwhile, the air in this desert climate is actually beneficial, he added: "A lot of people think of desert as hot; in this case, it is just dry," contributing to large diurnal swings that slow the growing cycle and preserve aromatic lift in balance with ripeness.

That explains why Klipsun's Cabernet Sauvignon combines Napa Valley's fruit intensity with Bordeaux's florality. Expressing terroir, Fletcher made clear, involves knowing the physical limits of a site well enough to turn them into an advantage. "Eighty percent of wine quality comes from the vineyard, but what you do with the remaining 20% determines the final quality of the wine," he asserted.



### *A Valley Within a Valley*

#### **Stags' Leap Winery 2021**

#### **The Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley**

The last word went to Gillian Ballance, MS, who was representing Stags' Leap Winery. Ballance began by returning to the panel's title: "In Tetris, mastery lies in recognizing how pieces fit; in wine, technology can produce competent results almost anywhere, but greatness depends on the arrangement of a specific place." The Stags Leap District, she attested, earns its distinction as a Napa sub-AVA.

It sits on the eastern side of the parent appellation, where rolling hills meet the Napa River and form what she called a "valley within the Valley." Cool air drawn from San Pablo Bay and the Pacific Ocean is channeled between those hills and the Vaca Mountains, essentially creating a wind tunnel. "What makes the wines of Stags Leap District very unique is their texture," said Ballance. "It's almost like velvet"—the tactile expression of a pocket of Napa Valley that's cooled by a phenomenon the landscape itself creates. (That, she added, is an example of orographic effect, which involves how mountains shape wind patterns.)

Old vines, which are known to contribute greater aromatic and flavor complexity, have lent another layer to the 2021 The Leap Cabernet Sauvignon she presented, which also contained small amounts of supporting Bordeaux varieties, including Petite Sirah.

As it took us across the globe and back again, our panel demonstrated that the concept of terroir is far greater than the sum of its parts. We raise a glass to Domaine Carneros for hosting this insightful conversation and to Leicht for guiding it with clarity and humor. 





Rodney Strong Vineyards chief winemaking and operations officer Justin Seidenfeld at Bounty Hunter in Napa, CA.

# Low *and* Slow

**RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS** PROVED THAT THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GREAT BARBECUE APPLY TO WINEMAKING AS WELL

story by **LARS LEICHT** / photos by **ALEXANDER RUBIN**

**I MAY BE THE SOMM JOURNAL'S** VP of education, but our SOMM Camps can hold surprises even for me. Take, for example, our luncheon held at renowned wine and spirits retailer and bar Bounty Hunter—which, unbeknownst to me, has been rated the city's best barbecue joint for five years running.

Appropriately, the lunch was hosted by Sonoma County producer Rodney Strong Vineyards, whose chief winemaking and operations officer, Justin Seidenfeld, often likes to discuss his philosophy of "surprise and delight." This tasting offered both for our campers: "Serving great barbecue alongside wines of this caliber was

refreshing," said camper Joseph Barton, director of beverage at Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, Florida. "It reinforced that a great pairing is about balance and intention, not how formal the meal is."

To accompany a salad of mixed greens with fresh apricots, goat cheese, and candied pecans in balsamic vinaigrette, we started with the **Rodney Strong 2025 Alexander Valley Sauvignon Blanc**, which Seidenfeld considers one of the brand's most successful launches in recent years. "This is my interpretation of a white Bordeaux," he said, noting that he used a singular clone of Sauvignon Musqué to add peachy flavors and harvests it later than usual. He also added about 10% Sémillon for texture as well as "a bit of Viognier to add more floral character; stone fruit flavors, and textural complexity."

About 60% of the wine fermented in 400-liter French oak barrels that were toasted to accentuate their vanilla character (their heads were replaced with acacia wood), while the Sémillon spent about six months on the lees in 400-liter tanks of Italian ceramic. "I will never use [concrete] for our wines," Seidenfeld declared. "However, I do love the thermodynamic component of what concrete does to wine. By using ceramic, which is a nonporous material, I get the thermodynamics without changing the pH and texture of the wine."

Next up was the **2024 Chalk Hill Chardonnay**, released in June. It hails from a vineyard planted in 1962 on soils composed mainly of a well-draining, chalky-white volcanic ash called silicon dioxide. "There is no nutrient concentration whatsoever in this soil," Seidenfeld explained. "We get our only nutrients from the alluvial washout [that occurred] over millions of years, coming mainly from the surrounding hillsides to the east."

When Rodney Strong's eponymous founder first saw the site, Seidenfeld noted, it reminded him of the terroir of Meursault in Burgundy, "so he said, 'I think this looks like Chardonnay ground.'" He thus planted the first 100 acres of Chardonnay in the future Chalk Hill AVA at a time when California was home to fewer than 300 acres of the variety. Today there are 110,000 acres, making the grape the state's most widely planted. "He really foresaw what Chardonnay would

become in California and chose what I consider to be one of the best locations in the state to grow a minerally, rich, more inviting flavor profile of Chardonnay, with pear and tangerine flavors as opposed to the quintessential green apple and lemon-lime,” said Seidenfeld.

The wine fermented and aged for a year in French oak barrels—35% new, the rest two and three years old—with monthly bâtonnage. It then rested an additional four to six months per a technique that Seidenfeld learned at Domaine Leflaive in Puligny-Montrachet. “We let it homogenize and harmonize in the tank

50% of the fruit was sourced from three Green Valley sites farmed by the Dutton family; 45% came from Rodney Strong’s 335-acre River West Ranch, planted in the late 1970s, and the remainder from River East Ranch, located behind Rodney Strong’s winery in Healdsburg. “The goal is balance, highlighting beautiful ripeness with some nuances of umami and earthiness coming from our heritage clones, while the Dijon clones are much more fruit-forward and acid-focused,” Seidenfeld said.

We then tasted the **2021** vintage of the **Symmetry Red Blend**, which combines

hot water rather than an open flame. This method removes much of the oak flavor and emphasizes the fruit character:

Marsha Wright, wine director at Chicago’s DineAmic Hospitality, called the meal a “match made in heaven [particularly] with the silky, structured Zinfandel. I always emphasize to my staff the importance of food and wine harmonizing together and how a perfectly matched pairing can turn into an unforgettable dining experience. This was a perfect example of that.”

Seidenfeld introduced the last wine in the lineup, the **2021 Alexander’s Crown**



*Rodney Strong’s wines were paired with dry-rubbed St. Louis-style pork ribs and Cajun-spiced, beer can-roasted free-range chicken as well as classic sides.*



before bottling and then let it rest for another year in bottle before release—we’re not in a rush to stay up with vintage transition,” he explained. “We want to make the right wine for the right reasons.”

Shaun Adams, director of food and beverage at Scottsdale National Golf Club in Arizona, was impressed with both wines: “The Sauvignon Blanc was so refreshing, with notes of peach, kiwi, and passion fruit,” he said. “The Chardonnay had tension and structure on the palate, with lime, lemon and pear really shining through but [also] with restraint and beautiful acidity.”

The next course—dry-rubbed St. Louis-style pork ribs; Cajun-spiced, beer can-roasted free-range chicken; and 12-hour-smoked beef brisket—was paired with four reds. The first was a **2024 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir** from sister brand **Davis Bynum**, whose winemaker, Greg Morthole, is “every bit of a Burgundian winemaker,” in Seidenfeld’s words. About

“Cabernet for structure, Merlot for sensuality, Malbec for fleshiness and juiciness, Petit Verdot for intensity, and Cabernet Franc for complexity,” said Seidenfeld. The majority (75%) aged in new French oak, the balance in one- and two-year-old barrels, resulting in “a wine that is structurally sound and sensuous, with layers of spice and fruit with an oak complement,” he added.

The **Sonoma County Old Vine Zinfandel** is a limited production of about 1,500 cases per year; half of it sourced from three vineyards: a 10-acre block planted in River West Ranch in the early 1930s; Shiloh Ranch in the Russian River Valley, planted to the Teldeschi clone in 1972; and an own-rooted block in Hubbard Ranch in the Alexander Valley, planted in 1976. Presenting the **2021** vintage, Seidenfeld explained, “I like to make it in a Claret style, meaning I am using all French oak—very elegant barrels” with staves bent using

**Cabernet Sauvignon**, fermented in 820-liter French oak barrels, as the pinnacle of Rodney Strong’s portfolio. (The inaugural vintage, 1974, was one of the first single-vineyard Cabernets to be made in California.) Because he selects only from the western portion of the vineyard, production is limited to about 300 cases a year. He described the wine’s profile as “very velvety, very soft, very floral, [with] . . . more of a satiny texture than your big, bold, structured Cabernets out there—almost Bordeaux-esque.”

All of Rodney Strong’s wines are fermented with native yeast and unfiltered, Seidenfeld pointed out, adding that if they included ingredients on the label, “it would say ‘grapes’—that’s all.” Starting with good raw materials from select sites and using the “low and slow” technique to build layers of flavor: That’s a winning recipe for wine as well as for barbecue. **SJ**





Our “Terroir Diversity & Common Threads” panelists: Black Stallion Estate Winery winemaker Ralf Holdenreid, Unico Zelo co-founder/winemaker Brendan Carter, First Drop founder/winemaker John Retsas, HERITA USA director of fine wines and education Jacob Gragg, SOMM Journal VP of education Lars Leicht, Louis M. Martini winemaker Zach Watkins, Massican founder/winemaker Dan Petroski, Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits senior training manager Justin Cardwell, Brassfield Estate vice president of winery and vineyard operations Jonathan Walters, and Copper Cane Wines & Spirits founder/winemaker Joe Wagner.

# A True Trialogue

STORY BY **Ruth Tobias** / PHOTOS BY **Alexander Rubin**

OUR “TERROIR  
DIVERSITY & COMMON  
THREADS” SEMINAR  
EXPLORED THE THREE-  
WAY CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN LAND, VINES,  
AND PEOPLE

***In the New World as well as the Old***, the Southern Hemisphere as well as the Northern, emerging as well as established growing regions, the axiom that wine is made in the vineyard rings loud and clear. So, asked *SOMM Journal* VP of education Lars Leicht as he pointed to the panelists for our “Terroir Diversity & Common Threads” seminar, held at Louis M. Martini in St. Helena, “What the hell are these guys doing here? How do you justify your salary and fancy equipment?”

Our trusty moderator was not, of course, insulting our esteemed presenters; he was making the point that the potential of high-quality fruit can only be realized by winemakers who treat it with respect—that terroir is to some extent inextricable from the techniques used to showcase it and, by extension, from the people who employ them. The nine wines before us served to illustrate as much.



## Cave de Lugny 2022 Cœur de Charmes Chardonnay, Mâcon-Lugny, Burgundy, France

Celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, Cave de Lugny is a cooperative in the Mâconnais region of Burgundy comprising 200-plus multigenerational members who oversee more than 3,000 acres of Chardonnay; together, they produce “over one-third of all the Chardonnay in Burgundy,” according to Justin Cardwell, senior training manager for Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits. Acknowledging that the co-op model tends to get short shrift in industry circles for prioritizing quantity over quality, he explained why it deserves greater consideration: “These growers are guaranteed that their best fruit is going to

be purchased every single year. In uncertain times, they have the certainty that they can continue to do what they do best”—namely focus on farming rather than finances.

Cave de Lugny winemaker Sophie Obszynski, meanwhile, focuses on vinifying that fruit in keeping with the house style, which is notably unoaked. Take, for example, the Cœur de Charmes Cardwell presented, named for its origins in a 5-acre plot “in the heart of the Les Charmes vineyard in the village of Lugny,” as he noted. “These are 92-year-old vines producing very little fruit”—but what they do yield is “really concentrated,” a decided advantage given that Obszynski and her team “forgo all barrel aging. They [focus instead on] maloactic and lees . . . in this case 18 months of lees aging and another 18 months in bottle, [enough] time to really let the lees do their work” of balancing the wine’s high acidity with creaminess. Indeed, its texture couched notes of lemon, almond, and stony minerality in a certain flower-petal softness.



## Massican 2025 Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay, Carneros, Napa Valley

“I feel so very fortunate to be making wine from this vineyard,” said Massican founder/winemaker Dan Petroski. “Hyde is considered one of the Grand Cru sites of California.” Planted in 1979 on the Napa side of the Carneros appellation, “it’s influenced by the San Pablo Bay, so it has a lot of morning fog that burns off in the early afternoon,” he explained before admitting that how climate change might alter that pattern in the future remains to be seen. But at least for the time being, he asserted, “It will continue to be a fog-ridden place for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.”

Petroski crafts the latter using three clones grown in three different sections of the vineyard: Old Wente dating back to the site’s origins, Musqué planted in 1992, and Robert Young planted in 1989. In his view, “Old Wente’s going to give you a little bit of that minerality of Carneros, the Musqué gives you the floral tones . . . and Robert Young gives you that texture. This is a style that actually leans into the freshness of Carneros: very low alcohol, high acid. But it’s dressed in 100% new French oak to give it more familiarity up front—and then it kind of walks away from all that, into this saline-salty character.”

For camper Jill Gubesch, wine director for chef Rick Bayless’ four Chicago restaurants (Frontera Grill, Topolobampo, Bar Sótano, and Xoco), the wine “was a standout in the lineup. I loved the fresh, floral aromatics; vibrant acidity on the midpalate, loaded with Meyer lemon and fresh pineapple; and well-integrated oak followed by a lingering mineral finish.”



## Giovanni Rosso 2025 Etna Bianco DOP, Italy

Based in Serralunga d’Alba in the Northern Italian region of Piedmont, the Rosso family has been cultivating vines for four generations and making wine there for nearly 40 years. So why was Jacob Gragg, director of fine wines and education for importer HERITA USA, presenting their Etna Bianco?

“In 2016, they invested in Sicily—which makes sense, because in Barolo, you’re working with a single grape, right?” Gragg explained. “What they saw in how both [white grape] Carricante and [red grape] Nerello Mascalese work in Etna is that there’s a very similar [parallel to producing Nebbiolo], and if they were going to expand

into some other part of Italy, they wanted to do what they’re used to doing in Piedmont. The only difference is going to be where the grapes come from, the microterroir.”

The 14-hectare site that Giovanni Rosso purchased in the contrada of Montedolce in the northeastern part of Etna sits at about 2,450 feet in elevation on what Gragg called the “very intense, very kind of smoky” volcano soils for which the appellation is famed. To the Carricante they yield, the winemaking team “takes a pretty hands-off approach,” he added, vinifying it in stainless steel with about five months of lees contact “to showcase the grape [as it] comes from this volcanic soil.”

Smoky minerality was in fact a marker of the wine, along with notes of lily, nectarine, and mixed citrus highlighted by a persistent stream of acidity; as Leicht himself noted, “It drinks like a white Burgundy, one that rivals red wine for complexity and flavor.” In short, it was a stellar example of a region that has, in recent years, become a darling among sommeliers—whose praise is going straight from their lips to consumers’ ears.





## Unico Zelo 2022 Esoterico, Riverland, Clare Valley, Australia

A burst of applause followed Unico Zelo co-founder/wine-maker Brendan Carter's presentation, which ended with exactly two sentences about the orange blend he'd brought all the way from Down Under to

showcase. But those two sentences perfectly summarized the context for its existence that he'd just provided in stirring fashion: "This wine comes from 600-million-year-old [soils], made from 80-year-old Zibibbo planted by Italian and Greek immigrants . . . by an overtly Irish guy to go with the heavily Asiatic food of modern Australia. It's a style that reflects our culture."

Due to its location in the middle of a tectonic plate with no volcanic activity, the country is in fact home to some of the world's oldest soils—300 million years on average, Carter said by way of elucidating its physical terroir: Fractured to the point of fragility, they're easily degraded by intensive viticultural practices, "so the grape varieties we're starting to focus on are inherently . . . very water-use efficient," he added. Zibibbo is one such isohydric variety, which Carter blends with Gewürztraminer, Moscato Giallo, and Greco to make Esoterico, whose appealingly musky floral nose gave way to a bone-dry, light, lemony palate.

But the farmers of that fruit represent the human element of Australian terroir, which Carter called "much more interesting." When the British arrived to establish a penal colony in the late 18th century, they brought with them not only Irish prisoners but grapes suitable for making their beloved fortified wines. They also, frankly, brought the kind of racism that led to a 1901 immigration policy dubbed "White Australia" (never mind the indigenous inhabitants who had preceded them by tens of thousands of years).

In the war-torn decades that followed, however, "our best and brightest [left to] fight [for the Allies], and they didn't come home [to] pay taxes and keep the country going," explained Carter. As restrictions gradually loosened out of economic necessity, Greek and Italian immigrants began transporting their own viticultural traditions—"and that really kicked off the shift from fortified to dry table wine," he said, followed by Asians who transformed local foodways. Australia now has "the third-highest immigration rate on the planet," he added proudly. Hence his above-quoted description of the Esoterico: "Wine for me is such a cultural barometer."



## First Drop 2022 Mother's Milk Shiraz, Barossa Valley, Australia

Among those midcentury transplants to Australia from Greece was John Retsas' family. The First Drop founder/winemaker learned his craft as a youth from his grandfather and father, whose Old World sensibilities had perhaps rubbed off on him by the time he moved to the Barossa Valley in 2001, when "Barossa Shiraz was bigger, bolder, richer. . . I decided that we had to make Shiraz that

broke the over-the-top, jammy [stereotype] and that was complementary to our [international] food: Asian, Indian, European, what have you."

Today he produces several expressions of the variety, including the Mother's Milk we tasted, 100% of which was sourced from the Eden Valley. "The Barossa floor is warmer, so you get more opulent, rounder, richer fruit characteristics," Retsas explained, "whereas Eden Valley is cooler, with a lot more minerality in its soils, so you get more structure and more mineral expression."

Highlighting those terroir-derived assets requires a "no-hands-on" methodology, he added. The night-harvested grapes are crushed, cooled, and fermented for about two weeks with regular pumpovers to soften tannins; the wine is then aged in three- to five-year-old French oak for ten months "just to give it that maturation without too much oak flavor," as he put it. Though heady with notes of blackberry, plum liqueur, licorice, and five-spice, the 2022 vintage didn't lack for earthy freshness.

Asked about the name, Retsas responded jovially, "I just wanted to make a Shiraz that was wholesome—and what better analogy than mother's milk?"



*The seminar was held in Louis M. Martini's Wine Study.*



### **Belle Glos 2023 25th Anniversary Pinot Noir, California**

Ever the charismatic maverick, Copper Cane Wines & Spirits founder and fifth-generation winemaker Joe Wagner declared that he intended to take “a very different approach to talking about terroir” by presenting a wine crafted to represent not a singular site but “an entire coastline” as a blend of Belle Glos’ three best-known vineyard-designate Pinot Noirs.

From Clark & Telephone in Santa Barbara County’s Santa Maria Valley AVA, Wagner sources the Martini clone, which he described as “a little more vegetative—but when you get it ripe enough, it [has] these notes of sweet brown spice . . . driven by the region itself.” About 150 miles north in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA of Monterey County, the Los Altos Vineyard produces Pinot with “much more weight, much more structure—almost verging on Syrah, [with a] huge mouth-feel, dark fruit, earthy tones, and even cured meats.” And yet another 150 miles north in Sonoma County’s Russian River Valley, the Dairyman Vineyard yields what Wagner called “more quintessentially elegant Pinot Noir, [with] really nice, bright cherry” plus herbal and cola notes.

But Wagner made no bones about his belief that “what Mother Nature gives us is intended to be maximized,” singling out three practices to illustrate his approach as an unapologetically “interventionist winemaker.” First, he bases pick decisions less on Brix than on “physiological maturity: We want to see the lignification of the stems; we want to see the pips brown and lignified. We even want a little bit of dimpling on the berry itself, just a touch, [to ensure] more intensity in our wines.” Second, the grapes undergo “cryoextraction, [a] freezing method . . . that gives us a little more access to color compounds and phenolic compounds,” he explained. And third, he does a cold fermentation involving two inoculations “to really build up the midpalate, [where] Pinot Noir can often be a bit thin. We want this to be weighty and in your face.”

Abounding in red and blue fruit accented by salty licorice, violet, and mocha, the result is a “style [that’s] anything but the Old World,” he proclaimed. “[It’s] really Californian by nature.”



### **Louis M. Martini 2023 Monte Rosso Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County**

At the tender age of 11, the eponymous founder of what is now one of Napa Valley’s most venerable estates “went from Italy to New York by himself and then traveled across the United States [to California with] no English and a sign around his neck: ‘This is my name, this is where I’m going,’” recounted Louis M. Martini winemaker Zach Watkins. Such gumption obviously served him well as an adult, establishing his winery in 1933 to become a pioneer in the region.

Though the wine Watkins was presenting didn’t hail from Napa, it was certainly apropos as an avatar of California’s viticultural history. Originating in the late 19th century, the Monte Rosso Vineyard in Sonoma Valley was already decades old when Martini purchased it in 1938 and planted Cabernet Sauvignon there in 1940; over the years, his family “did massal selections in these Cab blocks—so we have, effectively, a heritage clone selection of parcels,” Watkins explained.

From the fruit those parcels yield, he continued, “Our intention is to capture the prettiest version of Monte Rosso relative to our more robust Napa versions of Cabernet.” Supplemented by a small portion of Cabernet Franc and aged in (32% new) French oak, “it tends to be the most acidic by far, so it has this kind of rustic Old World vibe that helps us tell the story of Monte Rosso [and] the history of the Martini family as we think about the future.” Attendee Mirna Franjul, wine category manager for North Carolina-based grocery corporation Ahold Delhaize USA, praised the 2023 vintage for its “freshness, balance, and powerful translation of the soil.”





### **Brassfield Estate 2022 Eruption, High Valley, Lake County**

What's in a name? If Shakespeare had ever tasted the red blend presented by Brassfield Estate vice president of winery and vineyard operations Jonathan Walters, he might not have given such short shrift to the power of an evocative label.

"Eruption" resonates on a couple of levels, Walters noted. On the one hand, it's designed to shake up consumers' preconceptions of Rhône-style wines from California insofar as it contains not only Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre but also Malbec and a bit of Petite Sirah. On the other, perhaps more important hand, it's sourced from the slopes of the Round Mountain volcano, located on Brassfield's 5,000-acre estate on the north shore of Clear Lake in the High Valley AVA of Lake County.

In addition to its high elevation and steep grades of up to 30 degrees that necessitate hand-harvesting, the 80-acre vineyard is of course notable for its soils: "Potassium is high in volcanic soils, and potassium is a salt," Walters pointed out, "so the wines tend to be a little bit more savory than fruity. [As a result,] they go great with anything off the grill—brisket, burgers, or anything that has that smoky char characteristic."

Eruption in particular, he added, represents "about 40 different lots that get blended together. This wine is made with a lot of intention, and this is its 18th vintage, so over time, we have figured out what goes together and how to blend it—a lot of co-fermenting is happening [here]." As advertised, it boasted hints of earthy spice such as cumin and barbecue smoke in complement to the notes of raspberry compote, red and black plum, and violet that sweetened its dusty tannins.

Lest pictures speak louder than names, however, Walters helpfully directed the audience's attention to the orange triangle on the label: "It's a volcano—an easy thing for [servers and salespeople] to recognize and be able to talk about."



### **Black Stallion 2021 Transcendent Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley**

Speaking of colorful monikers, Black Stallion Estate Winery was so christened in honor of the equestrian center that formerly graced its property on the Silverado Trail, according to winemaker Ralf Holdenreid—on whom the fact that horses symbolize the synthesis of grace and power is surely not lost, especially when it comes to the production of Transcendent Cabernet Sauvignon. After all, he explained, "I'm trying to find elegance and concentration at the same time" in the brand's top-tier label.

The monovarietal expression is sourced from six different vineyards to encapsulate Napa Valley as a whole, though the exact composition of course depends on the vintage. As 2021 was relatively cool, Holdenreid said, "About 50% of this wine is from Atlas Peak. [It's] a mountaintop AVA that's very exposed, and it brings a lot of body and beef to the blend, [with] very big tannins that really build the backbone." While Mount Veeder, another key source, is also fairly high in elevation, "it's not as exposed, a little more forested," he observed, so "the wines are a little more elegant." And finally, fruit from Calistoga—which he described as "a little bit warmer; [being] on the valley floor—usually brings a little more juiciness, more fruit, more dark cherry aromatics. So I'm using these different terroirs to craft what we think is our best Cab, period."

Showing classic style to be sure, swirling with black cherry, black pepper, and dark chocolate, it exemplified Franjul's theory that while "terroir illustrates the conversation between the vine and the land, it is the winemaker's role to translate that conversation in the glass." 



SOMM campers congregated in Sequoia Grove Winery's tasting room.

# Pairing Prowess



As we walked into the tasting room of Sequoia Grove Winery, winemaker Jesse Fox and director of vineyards Jake Terrell greeted us with glasses of the producer's lean and crisp **2025 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc**, showing flavors of citrus and passion fruit and a flinty mineral finish. Fox called the wine "something special and new" for Sequoia Grove. Though white wines have "always been something we do here," starting with the 1979 vintage of their Chardonnay, they had previously only ever sold a small amount of Sauvignon Blanc direct to consumer. The 2025, which also contains 8% Sauvignon Blanc Musqué and 7% Sémillon, is the first to be released to the market.

A DINNER AT **SEQUOIA GROVE** SHOWCASED THE GASTRONOMIC VERSATILITY OF A WIDE RANGE OF WINES **STORY BY LARS LEICHT / PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER RUBIN**





*Sequoia Grove winemaker Jesse Fox and director of vineyards Jake Terrell.*

The grapes are whole cluster-pressed, and 80% of the juice undergoes fermentation in French oak barrels. Additionally, "we age about 85% of it on the lees, giving it tropical notes but not too much. I think the structure of the barrels gives it character without oakiness," said Fox, adding, "I've been making white wine for a while, and what I love about white wine, what I love about wines in general ... is complexity and balance. I was a chef in a previous life, and for me it's all about having that balance [between] acidity, weight, and texture, so that is kind of the truth of everything I do ... and strive for."

SOMM camper Shannon Saulsbury, beverage director for Flagship Restaurant Group, observed that Fox's background "becomes apparent as soon as you hear how he speaks about wine. Jesse thinks about crafting wines the way that a chef thinks about crafting a perfect bite: Acidity, tannin, structure, and sweetness must work in tandem to create a memorable and lasting impression."

About two-thirds of production, according to Fox, is devoted to Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, including as many

as nine single-vineyard wines, depending on the vintage, from historic sites that Sequoia Grove either owns or sources from through long-term relationships. Terrell said that estate-grown fruit represents about 50% of the total used, but "we've been inching more and more toward estate vineyards for all of our production." They own four, namely the home vineyard, Tonella Ranch, Mount Veeder, and State Lane.

Fox guided our group to the barrel room for a preview of the 2023 vintage from the latter property in Yountville. Though he acknowledged that it's "not much to look at" because of its flatness, he praised its "beautiful soils," marked by a prevalence of river rocks ranging from "fist-sized to boulder-sized," starting at 18 inches deep. After acquiring and replanting State Lane, Sequoia Grove began using its fruit for its Napa Valley Cabernet in 2021, but the harvest in 2023 was deemed worthy of a single-vineyard bottling.

All of its reds are unfiltered to give them more complexity. "I think you can make brilliant wines that are filtered—[but] I [also] think you get a little more



*Sequoia Grove chef Bryce Palmer.*

when they aren't," Fox explained.

Dinner started with an appetizer of ahi tuna crudo. Sequoia Grove chef Bryce Palmer noted that the fish was cured overnight and wrapped in dried kombu to add flavor and salinity before

he served it with a macadamia-nut salsa verde to “bring up the fat in the dish” as well as local melon and pickled vegetables dressed in lemon juice for a note of freshness. It was paired with two wines that together reflected the theme of this year’s camp, “Napa Meets the World.”

The **Sequoia Grove 2023 Napa Valley Chardonnay** presented white peach on the nose, clean and round melon flavors on the palate, and good acid on the finish. Fox said it was whole cluster-pressed and aged in 100% French oak (one-third new) for 11 months: “I do full fermentation and allow it to go through natural malolactic, with minimal sulfites added to keep it a healthy, stable wine, which is important to me—I think it’s the chef in me.”

The **Watkins 2021 Heritage Series Macclesfield Chardonnay** from the Adelaide Hills of Australia, meanwhile, showed earthy aromas; ripe fruit on the palate, including golden apple and pear; and a round finish. “I was going more full-bodied Australian style with a couple of extra years on it,” said proprietor and winemaker Sam Watkins. He noted that while Adelaide Hills is generally cooler than Napa, his vineyards are in the warmer southern part. Both winemakers noted similarities in the two wines.

The next course daringly paired fish with red wine, specifically halibut au poivre alongside Sequoia Grove’s **2023 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon**. “I know we have some doubters on this, but we’re here to change your stance,” said Palmer. He normally uses monkfish, but the halibut still provided the desired fat, umami, and salt to complement the acid, fruit, and tannin in the wine, which showed aromas of pine and rosemary as well as flavors of black cherry, blackberry, and blueberry before a long finish that was at once flinty, gravelly, and jammy. Along with estate fruit, Fox said, he and Terrell source grapes from diverse parts of the region to balance the acid structure and remain “true to the nature of Napa Valley.”

For Saulsbury, the pairing was “a combination that I never knew I needed, and yet here I am with a whole new worldview,” in her words. “Sequoia Grove proves that a mindfully crafted Cabernet Sauvignon can go with just about anything.”

Described by Palmer as “not your grandmother’s and mom’s PB&J,” the fol-



*Winemaker Jeremy Ligon of Virginia's Barrel Oak.*

lowing course featured Hudson Valley foie gras that was pan seared with rosemary, then served on brioche with local peach jam, pine nuts, and spices. It was paired with two more wines: the **Barrel Oak 2023 Cabernet Franc** from Middleburg, Virginia, and the **Sequoia Grove 2022 Tonella Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**.

The former offered salinity and crushed seashells on the nose, flavors of dried oregano and freshly cut grass, and a finish of citric acid and limestone. Winemaker Jeremy Ligon said that the earthy, minerally house style reflects the granite and gneiss soils of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where vineyards are located at 800–1,000 feet in elevation. Cabernet Franc is one of Barrel Oak’s most consistently performing varieties.

The latter wine comes from what Fox described as one of the Valley’s most historic plots, a Sequoia Grove “monopole” set on volcanic soils in eastern Rutherford adjacent to the renowned Georges III Vineyard (both were primary sources for Beaulieu Vineyard’s famed Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet). Made with 2% Petit Verdot and aged in 100% new oak, the 2022 was rich and full with notes of dark cherry and plum, finishing with hints of anise and sweet tobacco.

Joseph Barton, director of beverage at the Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, Florida, called the pairing a standout. “It made me



*Sam Watkins is proprietor and winemaker of Watkins winery in Australia's Adelaide Hills.*

rethink my first instinct,” he said. “Foie gras and Cabernet aren’t an obvious match, but every component of the dish brought the wines into balance. It was a great example of how one thoughtfully composed dish can complement both the structure of Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon and the freshness of Virginia Cabernet Franc.”

The final course was a grilled New York strip steak from Snake River Farms, served medium-rare with local heirloom tomato, wild arugula, and 24 month-aged Parmigiano Reggiano. It was paired with Sequoia Grove’s **2021 Cambium**, a blend of 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot from the Stagecoach, Healy, and Roth Estate vineyards that spent 20 months in 100% new oak. Named for the living layer of the tree that comprises the rings, it showed deep, dark fruit, including round flavors of berry and cherry tart, that led to a jammy finish. Fox described it as the winery’s icon bottling and noted that the sources and techniques employed to make it can change depending on vintage conditions.

Marsha Wright, wine director at Chicago’s DineAmic Hospitality, summed up the feast by saying, “It was great to see a winery focus on food and wine pairings. The team at Sequoia Grove did an amazing job of thoughtfully pairing each dish with their wines.” Apparently it helps when the winemaker is a former chef! **SJ**





# Styles, Sites, Range, and Grange

IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE NINTH EDITION OF *REWARDS OF PATIENCE*, CHIEF WINEMAKER PETER GAGO INTRODUCES **PENFOLDS'** IMPRESSIVE 2026 COLLECTION

by Meredith May

**THE PRIVILEGE OF TASTING** Penfolds' 2022 Grange—the wine's 75th vintage—was certainly a highlight of being introduced to the iconic Australian producer's 2026 Collection. But sampling 14 new releases with chief winemaker Peter Gago in Napa Valley was nothing short of an experience.

Released alongside the new collection, the latest *Rewards of Patience* serves as a reference guide for the Penfolds wines noted here; each has its own terroir-derived character as well as its own tale to tell, whether sourced from South Australia or Napa Valley. Read on for my notes on some of the eye-opening selections from Penfolds' global portfolio.



**Penfolds 2025 Bin 311 Chardonnay, South Australia (\$45)**

Sourced from Adelaide Hills, Tasmania, and Tumbarumba and aged eight months in (23% new) French oak barriques, this steely, Chablis-esque expression offers notes of lemon verbena, vanilla, and tropical fruit. **94**

**Penfolds 2025 Reserve Bin A Chardonnay, Adelaide Hills, South Australia (\$100)** This exquisite single-vineyard white possesses a lush body, with notes of crème fraîche, lemon cookie, and flint appearing on the back of the palate. **96**

**Penfolds 2024 Yattarna Chardonnay, South Australia (\$190)**

Undergoing 144 trials before it was launched, this esteemed

PHOTO: HILARY WALKER



*Penfolds chief winemaker Peter Gago.*



Chardonnay upholds Penfolds' house style of luxury with fruit sourced from Adelaide Hills, Tasmania, and Tumbarumba. Notes of seashell cool the palate, which is further soothed by honeyed pear, fresh linen, and clean herbal flavors. It's a culmination of time and effort that's worthy of Yattarna's reputation for ageability. **98**

**Penfolds 2024 Bin 28 Shiraz, South Australia (\$40)** Maturation in American oak gave this wine quite an opening statement: spicy, rich, and ripe with notes of plum. Savory, meaty tones ensue alongside tobacco and coffee. Chief winemaker Peter Gago notes that the use of American oak imparted a tsunami of generosity and spirit. **93**

**Penfolds 2024 Bin 407 Cabernet Sauvignon, South Australia (\$90)** Showing focus and tension, this expression opens with spiced floral notes, cassis, new leather, black raspberry, and dark chocolate. Chalky tannins mingle with a plum-skin effect on the tongue. Gago surmises that if the wine could talk, it would simply declare, "I am a Cabernet Sauvignon." **95**

**Penfolds 2024 Bin 389 Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz, South Australia (\$80)** Exuding expressive aromas led by Christmas spices, black olive, and intense red berries, this wine spent 13 months in American oak hogheads (34% new). The mouthfeel is juicy and plush, augmenting seamless tannins and notes of bergamot, grilled meats in *pan jus*, mocha, and Worcestershire. Possessing a density you

don't feel from Bin 407, it's generous and, while referred to as "Baby Grange," blessed by the potential for longevity. **96**

**Penfolds 2023 St. Henri Shiraz, South Australia (\$150)** Gago describes this contemporary style of Shiraz as "an intriguing counterpoint to Grange." No new oak was utilized; instead, the wine matured in large old vats. Black raspberry and black tea emerge through teeth-grabbing, tightly woven tannins as fresh acidity reminiscent of the Old World accents notes of fennel; oolong tea; and salty, iron-clad minerality. **96**

**Penfolds 2024 RWT Bin 798 Shiraz, Barossa Valley, South Australia (\$150)** RWT ("Red Winemaking Trial") launched in 2000 with the 1997 vintage. After you're prompted to deeply inhale scents of lavender and mocha, the palate introduces an alluringly round, plush texture, along with demonstrative notes of blueberry and creamy plum ganache. Sweet violets rise from the soil, fleshy and velvety. **97**

**Penfolds 2024 Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, South Australia (\$550)** Notably referred to as the "Grange of Cabernet Sauvignon," this elegant, statuesque edifice of a wine aged ten months in 100% new American oak gathers itself with broad shoulders and lean athleticism. Black fruit sings in soprano, harmonizing with roasted coffee and violets as suede-lined tannins are welcomed on the palate. **99**

**Penfolds 2022 Grange Shiraz, South Australia (\$850)** Aged 18 months in 100% American oak, this iconic blend of multiple vineyards and districts shines with youthful bliss. Inky flavors of musky animale; meaty, bruised black fruit; and cherry-kissed dark chocolate awaken within its confident frame. **99** *ST*



## A ComBINation of Style and Terroir: Penfolds Meets the Americas

**Penfolds 2023 Bin 704 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$70)** Bearing the numbers 704, which mirror Bin 407 as a nod to its origins in the opposite hemisphere, this wine boasts Penfolds' signature character: Its perfume is defined by an herbal lift and sweetened by purple fruit. Matured 16 months in (45% new) French oak, the liquid floats above the palate, emitting responsive tension that's elevated by notes of black tea, soy sauce, new leather, and dark chocolate. **95**

**Penfolds 2023 Bin 149 Wine of the World Cabernet Sauvignon (\$200)** This rendezvous between Napa Valley and South Australia debuted with the 2018 vintage. Its feral presence is tamed by paradigmatic notes of bright red fruit and ripe lushness, and the combination of vivid lift and energy within its silky body is measurable. Palate-lengthening tannins and a fine backbone ignite the senses. **100**

**Penfolds 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$450)** This single-vineyard wine aged 16 months in American oak is confident, precise, and luxurious. Notes of black coffee; dark chocolate; and creamy, spiced oak are framed by disciplined, drying tannins. **98**





*As One Cru founder Chris Radomski, Darius Rucker, and Viceroy Snowmass culinary director Matt Zubrod on the set of the wine brand's new YouTube series, Cru Uncorked.*

# Masters of Flavor

WITH ITS NEW YOUTUBE SERIES, CRU UNCORKED, **AS ONE CRU** AIMS TO CHANGE PRECONCEPTIONS AND PALATES *by Ruth Tobias*

**WANT TO SEE** Darius Rucker (yes, *that* Darius Rucker, Hootie & the Blowfish frontman turned country music superstar) stuff his face with a smashburger? Or learn how Keith Theodore, executive chef at prestigious Aspen, Colorado, resort The Little Nell, makes ramen for the jet set—with wagyu beef, foie gras, fresh truffles, and all? Or get a virtual taste of Osetra caviar-topped bluefin tuna tacos accompanied by a Sonoma Coast brut bubbly?

Well, you're in luck: Cru Uncorked, a YouTube series about wine and food pairing developed by California-based brand As One Cru (@onecruwine), offers all that and more. And according to founder Chris Radomski, it's just getting started.

"The driving force is to have a platform that makes people want to cook and obviously to drink wine," Radomski explains. "Given the nature of the industry right now, I just think that you

have to do something to bring in younger generations and create excitement. As we build this out, our website will have all the recipes, and once we have enough content, we want to come out with a Cru cookbook."

"We" in this case is not only himself and Rucker but the other gentlemen who form what they call "the crew"—including Matt Zubrod, culinary director at yet another Aspen-area resort, Viceroy

Snowmass. As Zubrod recounts the tale, "It all started during COVID. There was a pretty epic text chain with a writer, a hockey player, a marketing guy, Chris, and myself—like five random guys who became really good friends. We talked about cooking, recipes, drinking wine; I sent them all wagyu steaks, and Chris sent us all wine and tequila and whiskey. The group changed a little bit over the course of the year . . . but at some point, Chris asked us, 'Hey, would you guys like to be a part of my new wine project?' We did a [naming] exercise and came up with As One Cru after several different ideas."

Though they naturally leave the production decisions up to Radomski as an industry vet—their current portfolio includes the aforementioned traditional-method sparkler *Chez Gran Cru*, a Chardonnay, a Cabernet Franc, and various Pinot Noirs and Cabernet Sauvignons from Sonoma County, Napa Valley, and the emerging Paicines AVA as well as Oregon's Willamette Valley—Zubrod clearly relishes serving as a sort of culinary ambassador for the brand. In addition to appearing in some of the *Cru Uncorked* videos, he has for the past two years organized the *Cru Cup*, a fundraiser for the Aspen Valley Ski Club to which he invites chefs from all over the country to participate; As One Cru is of course a sponsor and the featured wine supplier.

The inaugural event was a ski race, but Colorado didn't receive quite enough snow this year for that, so Zubrod turned it into a cooking competition instead. Over the course of two nights in April, 12 chefs prepared all sorts of goodies to accompany the wines: For instance, the winning dish, a hamachi crudo number from Josh Sutcliffe of 55 Seventy in Dallas, Texas, was paired with the *Chez Gran Cru*, while Zubrod himself came in sec-

ond with the "tuna fish sandwich"—tuna sashimi layered with a foie gras torchon on brioche—that he served alongside As One Cru Pinot Noir from Carneros.

He's not the only chef to appreciate the Pinot with raw seafood. At Aspen restaurant *Catch Steak*, says chef de cuisine Daniel Beltran, "We have a successful sushi program, so for mixed tables" laden with both salmon rolls and filets, "having a bottle of Pinot Noir on the

Beltran points out, "People drink Pinot Noir easier—they can order more than one bottle.")

Naturally, Beltran also recommends pouring As One Cru's Napa Cabernet Sauvignon with steak, like the wagyu strip he prepared with wild mushrooms and chili butter for one *Cru Uncorked* episode. In keeping with the "very deep flavors of the dry-aged beef," he explains, "the Cab is so flavorful and mouth-filling."

"Going the beef route is really easy for us," agrees Radomski—but ultimately, his goal for the video series as well as for the planned cookbook is to collaborate with chefs from across the U.S. on a wide range of pairings. "In my opinion, to be a good chef, your palate has to be such that you could be a great sommelier if you wanted to," he argues. "Chefs are such masters of flavor. And that's why it's really important to me to get their perspective."

By extension, he's interested in capturing their back-of-house attitude: Though the *Cru Uncorked* series to date has been professionally produced, he envisions a grittier aesthetic for future videos. "Some might be a little bit more ramble-style or *MacGyver*," he muses. "I think sometimes just being raw and getting the chef talking in the kitchen . . . is so cool. You can sit in the front of a restaurant, it's nice and fancy, but to actually see the nuts and bolts of how things are done back there, to have this



table always makes everyone happy." That same bottle, in his view, is an equally fine accompaniment to *Catch*'s wedge salad with blue cheese, maple-glazed bacon, crispy shallots, and creamy sesame dressing—and even to its Caramelized Apple Baked Alaska with cider caramel, spiced crème fraîche ice cream, and cinnamon meringue, which "complements the wine's fruity flavors," in his words. (To be clear, it may not be the exact same bottle: As

chef drinking a glass of wine and asking them, "Why would you pair this?" flips the script a little bit."

After all, Radomski adds, "What As One Cru is all about is to take exquisite wines and make them less formal, less stuffy, [and] more approachable for younger people. It could take six or nine or 18 months to get a following—but we want to engage them to explore and have fun." **SJ**





# *A Mantle for* REDISCOVERY

WHILE THE LIVERMORE VALLEY EXPERIENCES UPWARD MOMENTUM,  
CABERNET FRANC IS HELPING IT MAINTAIN A HIGH STANDARD

by Meridith May

*“All great wine regions are circumscribed to a particular grape or two, and now it’s up to us, here in the Livermore Valley, to prove our point with Cabernet Franc.”* So said Steven Kent Mirassou, a sixth-generation vintner from America’s oldest winemaking family, whose history in the industry dates back to 1854, during my recent tour of some of the region’s most exceptional producers of the variety. “Cab Franc is an ideal vehicle for us to explore,” he added.

On this journey, I wanted to discover the expressive nature of Cabernet Franc and its most identifiable characteristics in this region. But other varieties crafted by these producers were eye-opening as

well, serving as a telltale sign that the region is experiencing upward momentum.

The Livermore Valley is located less than an hour from Silicon Valley and San Francisco and less than two hours from the Napa and Sonoma valleys. Established as an AVA in 1982, it was specifically known for its Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Cabernet Sauvignon thanks to gravel-based soils and a temperate climate influenced by marine breezes off San Francisco Bay. But its diurnal shifts impart fresh acidity and balance that also benefit Cabernet Franc, which lands in a sweet spot of structure, aromatics, and drinkable elegance.

Meanwhile, other varieties are also

evolving in Livermore thanks to creative, forward-thinking winemakers whose emphasis is more on terroir than branding. The best wines allow the Valley to do the talking, and there’s no doubt the region has been coming into its own, especially in the past five years.

A shared effort between producers to raise standards across the board was also brought up repeatedly during my visits. While the atmosphere of hospitality here remains approachable, the results are rewarding, yielding wines with rich stories that are paving the way toward a new era. Here’s a closer look at some of the producers leading the charge.



*Rhonda Wood and her son Harrison.*

## Wood Family Vineyards

A former commercial airline pilot, Rhonda Wood is winemaker and proprietor of Wood Family Vineyards, and her son Harrison is executive vice president, overseeing sales and promotion. The winery, whose home vineyard spans 14 acres, opened its doors in 2000, and its tasting room is open every day.

**Wood Family Vineyards 2023 The Takeoff Red Blend, Livermore Valley (\$50)** This blend of 51% Cabernet Franc, 34% Malbec, and 15% Merlot glides across the palate, with plum and lavender taking a wide, sweeping flightpath. Mocha and pencil lead come into view as smooth and steady tannins drift in beneath the wings. A faint herbal lift and atmospheric notes of cedar lengthen the finish as it achieves cruising height. **95**



**Wood Family Vineyards 2023 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$45)** Reminiscent of Chinon, with lavender and silky tannins arising alongside a stretch of blue fruit, this wine offers the signature finesse of winemaker/proprietor Rhonda Wood. **95**



*Steven Kent Mirassou.*



*Beth Mirassou.*

## Steven Kent Winery

As Steven Kent Mirassou informed me, his is an easy story to tell. His children are now forging the seventh generation of his family's wine-making legacy, and *their* children are readying to represent generation eight. Of Cab Franc, he explained, "We are making sure the variety is on everyone's radar."

Kent Mirassou and his wife and winemaking partner, Beth Mirassou, take an aesthetic approach to their craft, speaking of the process as "something mysterious, sexy, and delicious," in his words. They use no new oak when it comes to Cab Franc, employing a variety of vessels so there's "nothing to hide behind."

**Steven Kent 2025 Cab Franc Blanc, Morgensen Family Vineyard, Livermore Valley (\$25)** Coming across as an Albariño crossed with Grenache Blanc, this wine has its own persona. White tea flowers, jasmine rice, wet stone, and roasted herbal notes such as tarragon form a partnership with crisp acidity. **94**

**Steven Kent 2023 ELEMENTS Cab Franc, Ghielmetti Vineyard, Livermore Valley (\$55)** Hailing from a vineyard in the eastern foothills of the Livermore Valley, where cold winds have helped yield a maelstrom of cranberry, cherry, and sage, this wine aged ten months in concrete, stainless steel, and neutral French oak barrels. **94**



**Steven Kent 2024 ROCK Cab Franc, Morgensen Family Vineyard, Livermore Valley (\$30)** Fruit and heather shine with subtly chalky tannins in this pretty Chinon-style wine. Thanks to its lithe frame and purity, it feels light as a feather on the palate. **97**

**L'Autre Côte by Steven Kent 2023, Livermore Valley (\$125)** The winery's flagship Cabernet Franc-dominant wine also contains 10% Merlot and 5% Cabernet Sauvignon from the Santa Cruz Mountains. "This is an ode to Saint-Émilion," winemaker Steven Kent Mirassou attests. A world-class offering, it depicts the variety through reined-in richness along with plum-skin tannins, graphite, cardamom, and exotic sandalwood nuances. **98**



## Cuda Ridge Wines

PHOTO: RON ESSEX PHOTOGRAPHY



**Larry Dino.**

Larry Dino has news to share: His winery, Cuda Ridge—named for Dino's sleek, fully restored, "plumb-crazy" 1970 Plymouth Barracuda muscle car—was recently acquired by Lemmons Family Vineyards, owners of Concannon Vineyard. Signed on to continue to run the business, he now has access to additional resources, space, and equipment to further augment the quality of his wines.

That said, the former software engineer's wines are distinguished and sophisticated already. We were impressed

with their expressiveness and precision.

**Cuda Ridge 2023 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$46)** This is reminiscent of Bordeaux, with earth and spice as lead characters. It offers a sleek, soft, and lilting mouthfeel, enhanced by notes of wild plum, mint chocolate, and a field of sweet lavender. The finish of black tea, white pepper, and anise completes the luxurious experience. **95**

**Cuda Ridge 2023 Melange d'Amis, Livermore Valley (\$60)** Proprietor Larry Dino refers to this blend of 50% Cabernet Franc; 35% Merlot; and 5% each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, and Petit Verdot as his Saint-Émilion style. Jasmine, black cherry, and sweet violets are framed by white pepper and a fine acid structure. The wine is weightier than some other Livermore Valley Cab Francs and possesses a sturdy backbone. **94**

## Fenestra Winery

During my visit, the wind was whipping at Fenestra Winery on the cooler southwestern end of the Livermore Valley. "It stops abruptly at 6:45 p.m.," co-proprietor Robin Replogle noted. Due to its proximity to the San Francisco Bay, this area is about 10–20 degrees cooler than most of the appellation.

Noting that the winery—celebrating its 50th anniversary as Livermore Valley's second-oldest continuous operator—is armed with its own bottling line, Replogle said that his team is looking to ramp up production. Fenestra welcomes visitors with open arms, per its fitting tagline: "Friends, Family, Fenestra."

**Fenestra 2022 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$42)** This French oak-aged red offers up a fruity and floral perfume. High-toned, with lilting notes of sage, rose, and white pepper; the palate is surrounded by fresh blueberry and mocha. **93**

**Fenestra 2020 Conjunction, Livermore Valley (\$45)** Aged in (28% new) oak for 21 months, this is a Cabernet Sauvignon–dominant union of all five Bordeaux varieties (Cab Franc makes up 15%). Spicy oak melds with black pepper, blackberry, rose, and dark chocolate. **93**



PHOTO COURTESY OF FENESTRA WINERY



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JMC CELLARS

## JMC Cellars

A former civil engineer, Jessica Carroll was rerouting highways and engaging in environmental system planning when she decided that "it wasn't for me, despite all the schooling and studying to get my degree," as she recalled. "I ended up deciding to stay until I had a plan for a new career path."



**Jessica Carroll.**

One day, she walked into a tasting room in Livermore. "The woman behind the bar was my age, and I thought, 'That looks like fun.' I began . . . pouring wine on the weekends, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to become a winemaker," she said.

Driven by her background and some self-reflection, her new art-meets-science career came into being. She opened her own tasting room in Livermore Valley in 2023 and designs her own labels using cyanotype, a printing process developed in the 1800s. Her lithe, whimsical style is as unique as her journey, and while her emphasis extends well beyond Cabernet Franc, we adored her penchant for finesse and clarity that's apparent in her wines.

**JMC Cellars 2023 Nebbiolo, Livermore Valley (\$35)** Winemaker Jessica Carroll shows her admiration for Old World varieties through this wine, which spent 26 months in neutral oak; she tamed the tannins and acidity to create a light-bodied red with cherry tartness. A touch of balsamic and rose petal augments its flavor. **95**

**JMC Cellars 2021 Reserve Syrah, Livermore Valley (\$52)** Aged 30 months in neutral French oak, this wine boasts dynamic notes of spice and iodine within a field of lavender and tobacco leaf. Melt-in-your-mouth blackberry ganache adds to its meaty profile, complemented by satin-lined tannins. **95**

## Wente Family Vineyards

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WENTE FAMILY VINEYARDS



**Aly Wente is chief revenue officer for Wente Family Vineyards.**

It was the fourth generation of Wente family grape growers who invested in establishing a wine destination in the Livermore Valley in the late 1980s, but their history dates back to 1883, when German immigrant Carl H. Wente purchased 48 acres in the region. His son, Ernest, persuaded him to import cuttings from France and then propagate the budwood in 1912; the resulting clonal material rose to ubiquitous fame as the Wente

clone, which now makes up over 75% of all Chardonnay planted in California.

Overseeing what is known as the country's oldest continuously operated family-owned winery, the fifth generation is continuing the Wente legacy, with the sixth already waiting in the wings.

**Wente Family Vineyards 2024 Wente Clone Chardonnay, Livermore Valley (\$50)** Well, it's about time that the family took advantage of their namesake clone. This wine aged in (30% new) French oak for six months represents the first time it has officially appeared on their label. "This is our greatest expression of this clone," notes chief revenue officer Aly Wente. Aromas of jasmine and vanilla bean lead to mouth-filling notes of honeysuckle, mango, and lime blossom, and the texture is featherlight and powdery. **96**

**Wente Family Vineyards 2023 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$55)** Aged 20 months in (40% new) French oak, this expression achieves the art of balance at 14.5% ABV, showing a plush mouthfeel and a bevy of flowers, ranging from violets freshly picked from sweet soil to dried heather. Milk chocolate, oregano, and bay leaf glide seamlessly across the palate. **96**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MCGRAIL VINEYARDS

**A bird's-eye view of McGrail Vineyards.**

## McGrail Vineyards

The entryway to McGrail Vineyards is breathtaking, its charming edifice set against a scenic view of the Valley. We were greeted by Heather McGrail, president of the winery, whose parents planted grapes in 1999; in 2007, McGrail officially opened its doors, releasing the 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon. "We just had one wine at the time with our estate vineyard exclusively planted to Cabernet Sauvignon," she says. "Now we have the Lucky 8 Vineyard, with many varieties to offer."



**Heather McGrail.**

While we adored the Cab Franc, we saw fit to include some other reviews.

**McGrail 2024 Family Chardonnay, Livermore Valley (\$32)** This expression went through 50% malolactic and aged in French and Hungarian oak. It tastes of banana nut bread, lemon curd, minerals, spiced sandalwood, and mango zest. **94**

**McGrail 2022 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$65)** In its third vintage, this wine is elegant and exotic, with notes of incense and umami plus balanced, drying tannins. Joining standout flavors of violets and graphite, spiced boysenberry melds with coffee bitters. **96**

**McGrail 2022 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Livermore Valley (\$49)** Winner of the Best of Class award at the Sunset Wine Competition, this showstopper represents an evolution of McGrail's earliest efforts with respect to its variety. Aged in French, American, and Hungarian oak, it's dense and chewy, with a deep well of crushed blackberry, cassis, and espresso. Soy sauce and black plum align with sleek tannins that lend so much texture. **95**





Alex Wolfe.

## 3 Steves Winery

Alex Wolfe is head winemaker and general manager for 3 Steves Winery, founded by three guys named, yes, Steve. Wolfe started as an intern at age 21 in 2013, and now, at 33, he's pursuing his goal to make the wines "exceptional." He believes Livermore Valley is "entering its Renaissance period," in his words, "and the impetus to push for better wine is clear."

**3 Steves Winery 2024 Cabernet Pfeffer, Livermore Valley (\$48)** This successful wine provides teeth-grabbing tannins and a spiced palate of black cherry, tomato leaf, hibiscus tea, and green and black pepper. **92**

**3 Steves 2024 Three Cabs Rosé, Livermore Valley (\$34)** Aromas of peach, rose, and tangerine are mirrored on the palate of this blend of 75% Cabernet Franc with Cabernet Pfeffer and Cabernet Sauvignon. White pepper meets melon and papaya with a zip of orange zest. **93**

**Townsend Ranch by 3 Steves 2024 Reserve Sangiovese, Livermore Valley (\$65)** Balanced acidity, cherry-skin tannins, balsamic, and orange zest combine with a heavenly, billowy mouthfeel in this wine from Cracker Box Vineyard. **94**



Winemakers Tim Sauer and John Chiprich at Arroyo Cellars.

## Arroyo Cellars

Tim Sauer is one of two winemakers at Arroyo Cellars, a winery born out of a chance encounter in the late 1990s, when a group of eight strangers met at a Pinot Noir tasting. They became friends and eventually brought this label to life with their first vintage in 2017. "The wines in the Livermore Valley keep improving," noted Sauer, "and a new alliance between producers has helped that commitment to excellence, starting about seven years ago. Our aim here is to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to our winemaking techniques. Quality and consistency are key."

**Arroyo Cellars 2024 Livermore, Livermore Valley (\$28)**

The mouthfeel of this blend of 60% Sauvignon Blanc and 40% Sémillon, which fermented for three weeks in used American oak before finishing in stainless steel, is rich and round to the point of luxurious. Following notes of pear and honeyed white flowers, a hint of candied ginger peeks through on the finish. "Sémillon is the adult in the room," notes winemaker Tim Sauer. "It tames the Sauv Blanc's wild nature." **93**

**Arroyo Cellars 2023 Cabernet Franc, Livermore Valley (\$42)**

This wine includes some clone 30 Cabernet Sauvignon. Despite its 14.75% ABV, it shows soft notes of mocha and lavender, along with keen acidity and juicy plum. Coffee and soy sauce take a savory turn, and the extended maceration creates a generous spread of satin-lined tannins. **94**

## Meet Matt Brain, Livermore's Newest Consultant



"It's a dynamic time to be in the Valley," attested Matt Brain. Although he has traveled to remote areas to make wine, such as Bhutan in the Himalayas, most of his career has unfolded in California, where he taught at California Polytechnic State University and California State University, Fresno. The consultant was recently hired by the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association on the grounds that he could make an important contribution to the region as it gains recognition for quality. "Livermore Valley wines are in a good position, poised to come out of this soft period to show its diversity and style of wines, varietals, and producers," he said. "In a good way, the pressure is on me to put myself out there."

Already immersed in dozens of projects, Brain is addressing community suggestions for equipment changes, waste streams, and lees collectives. "The bottom line is for winemakers to stay connected, learn from one another, and even take on some new challenges," he said. "I am honored to be that outside person chosen to use my palate and perspective to better the community." **81**

# Reframing an Underdog

AT **FLX RIESLING CAMP**, QUESTIONS—AND ANSWERS—AROSE ABOUT HOW THE TRADE SHOULD TALK ABOUT THE FINGER LAKES *by Ivo Cooper*

**IT WAS JOSH WIG**, co-owner of Lamoreaux Landing Wine Cellars on the eastern shore of Seneca Lake in New York, who asked the question on every somm's mind. Having just poured an electric 2020 Méthode Champenoise Riesling that spent four years on its lees before being hand-disgorged, he pointed out that Riesling checks every box for today's wine drinker: bright acid, moderate alcohol, a stylistic range from bone-dry to dessert, and a near-perfect ability to pair with food. So why have we managed to turn so few of our guests onto the grape?

That query echoed throughout the four-day FLX Riesling Camp in Geneva. Exploring wines from 19 producers, we engaged in more conversations about soil, weather, and how these vines survive brutal Finger Lakes winters than I've had in 22 years running the wine program at M Grill in Los Angeles. The region's cool-climate reputation is well earned, but what the trade still gets wrong is the story behind it.

The Finger Lakes region is not defined by one style but by the variability of its glacial soils—which can shift from gravel to loam to shale within the same estate—and mesoclimates that producers have spent decades learning to read, informed in part by Seneca Lake's 600-plus feet of depth, providing thermal moderation that rarely lets the water freeze. Three producers made the case for that variability better than any written overview of the region could.

Dr. Konstantin Frank is where viticulture in the Finger Lakes began. When the winery's namesake planted grapes on Keuka Lake in 1962, conventional wisdom said the climate was too cold; that was wrong, and the region's wine industry was born of his instincts. Poured from magnum, the layered, precise 2020 Eugenia—sourced from old estate vines in a warm vintage—made the case in the glass 60 years later,

with the kind of structural tension that needs time and rewards patience. You don't pour that wine and talk about potential: You talk about what's already there.

Lamoreaux Landing farms more than 130 acres across 50-plus blocks on Seneca's eastern shore and bottles three single-vineyard Rieslings that encapsu-

Somms are increasingly concerned about which grapes actually perform best on a given site rather than focusing on name recognition and prestige, and Delaware's resistance to disease and harsh weather means it needs less intervention to thrive, making it an attractive option in the realm of sustainably produced wines.



PHOTO: FLWA, MARY COOKE, AND BEN GONYO PHOTOGRAPHY/VIDEO

*A panel during this year's FLX Riesling Camp in the Finger Lakes region of New York focused on what makes the grape so special.*

late site expression. Yellow Dog is lifted and high-toned, Red Oak citrus-driven and flinty, and Round Rock floral and peachy—same estate, same vintage, same winemaking team, three clearly different wines. Winemakers across the region conduct an annual blind tasting comparing wines from multiple lakes, and they'll tell you the differences are reliably detectable. They're not being romantic—they're reading their own data. For a buyer trying to explain why place matters in American Riesling, presenting those three bottles in sequence is the most efficient argument for the influence of terroir that I've encountered in any domestic region.

Of course, the Finger Lakes produces more than just Riesling. Idol Ridge, approaching its 50th anniversary of farming on Seneca's east side, poured a Sparkling Delaware—a hybrid of native American and European *vinifera* grapes bred for cold-hardiness—at the closing session. The wine was serious, but the case for buying it was even more interesting:

The most direct statement I heard all week came from the same session: The Finger Lakes region doesn't need to be seen as an underdog anymore. The hidden-gem framing used in its marketing initiatives has started to do harm, suggesting it's a mere curiosity when in fact it deserves recognition alongside Alsace and the Mosel as a serious, Riesling-focused cool-climate region. A \$30 single-vineyard Riesling with 20 years of aging potential isn't just a great value. It's proof the region belongs among that esteemed company—and now it's up to buyers and sommeliers to communicate as much to their customers through by-the-glass placements and hand-selling. The wines are ready. The producers are ready. The next move is ours. 

*Ivo Cooper is general manager and beverage director at award-winning Brazilian steakhouse M Grill in Los Angeles. He is also the founder of Cooper Private Cellars, a luxury wine-cellar design firm.*



# Pride and Promise

AT MARTIN BROTHERS WINE & SPIRITS IN NEW YORK CITY, **ELIZABETH MARTIN** TIRELESSLY PRESERVES HER FAMILY'S LEGACY *by Ruth Tobias*

**LONGTIME RESIDENTS** of Manhattan's Upper West Side are no doubt familiar with Martin Brothers Wine & Spirits—after all, it's been a neighborhood fixture since 1985. But what they may not comprehend is the combination of heart and hustle with which its owner and CEO, Elizabeth Martin, operates it day in and day out.

Apparently, that's an inherited trait. According to Martin, her father, Orlirio, "arrived in this country as a stowaway on a ship from Cuba back in 1962 after Castro took over." As he promptly set about helping his whole extended family immigrate to New York City, he also got to work in order to support them, opening a gourmet Latin market in the very space that he and his brother, Roberto, would eventually convert into the liquor shop it is today.

"They weren't big drinkers, but they grew to love wine, and they taught us about wine at Sunday dinners," recalls Martin—whose brother Michael took the lessons to heart, ultimately moving to Napa to work in the industry as a sales director. She herself took a different path, getting a master's degree in health management and a job at a pharmaceutical company. "Whenever I took clients out, I would call Michael and tell him, 'I have a meeting at Nobu' [or] 'I have a meeting at Daniel,' and he would look at the wine list and tell me, 'OK, order this, order that,'" she adds.

In 2001, Orlirio fell ill, and "on his deathbed, he asked me not to let the business go," remembers Martin, not least because "my mother depended on it. He was like, 'Look, you're not gonna be rich, but you'll be able to live.' And I made that promise to him. To be very honest, though, I didn't know what that promise entailed."

She'd soon find out: a whole lot of hard work. With the death of her uncle in

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH MARTIN



2003, the single mother of three suddenly found that "I had to go to school, I had to educate myself, [because] I had to make it happen. I started training my palate and, slowly but surely, I developed a team of people that I could trust" as much as she trusted her brother and his tastes.

That's important, she explains, because she and her six employees have a rather more demanding job when it comes to customer service than perhaps Orlirio had, given how times have changed. "You know how my father sold wine? He would look at the bottle, and he knew if it was red or white, and he knew if it was sweet or dry. And he would tell the customer, 'Oh, very good—sweet. Oh, very

good—dry,'" Martin notes wryly. "Nowadays, you have to be able to tell them, 'Oh, this wine is from such and such region. This is a small producer. This is a woman winemaker. This family goes back five generations, ten generations.' They want the story behind it."

One of her favorite ways to tell those stories is through tastings: A few times a year, she throws parties at the store, inviting one and all to come sample her wares while socializing, snacking, and soaking up the music. Usually, they're free. But for the Summer Soirée II she hosted in September, Martin charged \$20 a head. Why? Because she also happens to run a nonprofit foundation, Illuminated Angels Haven, to benefit underprivileged girls in the Dominican Republic. As she sees it, "\$20 may be

nothing for us—you get an education, you get the opportunity to try the finer things in life—but for these girls, \$20 is a plate of food [or] a visit to the psychologist because they've been abandoned or physically abused."

The American dream may be an illusion (if not a nightmare) for far too many, but Martin's achievements make her the exception that proves the rule. "I walk through those doors, and I'm very proud," she says. "It's my father's legacy, but it's my determination to keep it alive"—along with the memory of her uncle as well as her brother, who died in 2024.

No doubt they would all be bursting with pride in her too. *ST*

*A vineyard in the Venezia DOC.*

# Don't Be *Venetian-* *Blinded*

ITALY'S **DELLE VENEZIE** AND **VENEZIA** DOCS  
MAY SOUND SIMILAR, BUT THEIR PINOT GRIGIOS  
OFFER VERY DIFFERENT SENSES OF PLACE

*by Lars Leicht*

At *The SOMM Journal*, we pride ourselves on our study guides, which aim to break down complex vinous subjects into understandable terms and concepts that help wine professionals communicate them to customers and guests. Having read the title of this edition, you might be justifiably dubious: How much explaining could Pinot Grigio from northeastern Italy need? But if you're familiar with the country's geography and wines to any extent, you know there's always complexity lying beneath the surface.





*Harvesting Pinot Grigio in the Veneto.*



## A Grape Goes Global

**Let's start with the grape itself**, which got its start in France as Pinot Gris before making its way in the late 19th century to Northern Italy. Pinot Grigio is a crowd-pleaser because it generally offers balanced fruit flavors with refreshing acidity, clean mineral notes, and a delicate bouquet. Normally a pinkish-gray hue that accounts for its name, it's a genetic mutation of Pinot Noir: Not only do the two have near-identical DNA, but their leaves, vines, and pinecone-shaped bunches are so

similar that the color of the grapes is often the only thing that differentiates them.

With styles ranging from crisp and light to rich and aromatic, it's known as Grauburgunder, Grauer Mönch, or Ruländer in Germany and Austria; Malvoisie in Switzerland, where it arrived around 1300; and Szürkebarát in Hungary, where legend has it that Emperor Charles IV had cuttings exported from France by Cistercian monks in the late 14th century. New Zealand

produces vibrant Pinot Gris, while Australian versions tend to be more fruit-forward, with tropical notes. The grape is also grown in Argentina, Chile, Greece, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey, Moldova, South Africa, Romania, and Canada. Even Luxembourg and Belgium get in on the action; so do Russia and China.

American Pinot Grigio is also diverse: California typically produces riper, fruit-driven versions, while Oregon comes closer to the Alsatian style thanks to its cool, damp climate. Washington State has emerged as an excellent source for Pinot Grigio with bright





acidity and expressive fruit character. The grape also grows in New Mexico, Idaho, Michigan, Ohio, Arizona, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania as well as in Virginia and New York, which produce many noteworthy examples.

In Italy, Pinot Grigio is a principal variety in the northeastern regions of Trentino–Alto Adige, Friuli–Venezia Giulia, and Veneto but also a major component of denominations in 15 of the country's 20 regions, including Tuscany, Umbria, Abruzzo, Emilia–Romagna, Marche, Piedmont, Sicily, Molise, Lombardy, Valle d'Aosta, Apulia, and Lazio.



## Delle Venezie Versus Venezia

**The Delle Venezie DOC** was created in 2017 to elevate Pinot Grigio from the IGT now known as Trevenezie while safeguarding established standards of production. It covers three contiguous regions—Veneto, Friuli–Venezia Giulia, and the Trentino half of Trentino–Alto Adige—amounting to roughly 67,000 acres and nearly 19 million cases of wine.

The similar-sounding Venezia DOC is significantly smaller, encompassing fewer than 7,500 acres in just four villages in the provinces of Venice and Treviso, which produce just over 800,000 cases of nine white and eight red varieties. Situated in the easternmost part of the Po Valley, this generally flat and temperate area is bordered by the Dolomite Mountains to the north and the Adriatic Sea and Venetian Lagoon to the south. Agriculture there was shaped by noble landholding families of the Venetian Republic (697–1797 C.E.), who sharecropped with peasant farmers. The soils are predominantly alluvial, deriving from the melting Alpine glaciers and the movement of the Piave and Livenza rivers through the region. To the north, the soils have greater amounts of gravelly sediments, while to the south they become finer with silt and clay, yielding to sand at the southern limits.

The rules of both DOCs call for their Pinot Grigios to be a minimum of 85% of the grape, with up to 15% of non-aromatic white varieties such as Chardonnay, Friulano, Garganega, Müller-Thurgau, Pinot Bianco, and Verduzzo. The Delle Venezie DOC can be used for non-Pinot Grigio–dominant white blends as well, but they represent less than 0.1% of production.

The styles of Pinot Grigio produced in the Delle Venezie DOC are as wide-ranging as the terrain of the three regions it stretches across. Veneto is the largest in terms of size and volume, producing mostly crisp, light, easy-drinking wines. In the Alpine vineyards of Trentino–Alto Adige and Friuli's hilly Collio area, the wines are elegant and structured, with distinct mineral character and finesse.

Pinot Grigio Venezia DOC can be declassified to the Delle Venezie denomination, but few producers are so inclined. After all, these expressions are more distinctive, growing in a smaller area between the Dolomites and the Adriatic Sea that has clay soils and a temperate climate. Known for their freshness, structure, and elegant acidity, they are considered to be the superior examples of the variety from the Veneto due to their easily identifiable sense of place.





**Tenuta Polvaro is located in the Venezia DOC near the town of Annone.**

## A Poster Child for the Venezia DOC

**The Venetian Republic**, which ruled vast expanses from the islands of Venice and the *terraferma* (dry land) surrounding them to conquered holdings around the Adriatic and Aegean seas, was nearing the end of its thousand-year run in the late 17th century. It still needed trees to build ships for vital commerce and to battle its fierce enemy, the Ottoman Empire. The last of the doges, rulers elected for life, sold plots north of the Venetian Lagoon to aristocratic families who would clear the forest to provide lumber and begin cultivating the land.

In 1681, the noble Polvaro family of Venice built a large manor near the town of Annone, establishing it as their summer home and agricultural center, principally growing winegrapes and corn. The Candoni De Zan family bought the estate in 2010 and has lovingly restored the villa and adjacent farmhouse where the sharecropping families lived. The latter is typical of 17th-century Venetian farmhouses and is in fact the oldest surviving example thereof.

“We had a vision of bringing [the estate] back to its antique splendor but also keeping it sustainable and tying it into the history of wine,” said Caterina Candoni De Zan, proprietor of Tenuta Polvaro, the winery her family established on the property. Today the manor houses not only the production facility for their Polvaro and Candoni wines but also a venue for local cultural events as part of the series “Polvaro and Friends.” In addition to being in the Venezia DOC zone, under which the family produces a Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot, the estate is also within the boundaries of the Prosecco DOC and the Lison Classico DOCG.

Pinot Grigio is among Tenuta Polvaro’s most prized wines, sourced from a vineyard on the estate’s well-drained soils comprising clay, limestone, and silt—whose slightly high alkalinity imparts freshness to the wines—and nestled in a climate constantly kissed by mild air from the Adriatic and cool breezes from the Dolomites. “We call [those breezes] the air conditioner of

Polvaro. It provides a healthy environment for the vines, just a perfect climate for Pinot Grigio,” says Candoni De Zan. Discussing their certified-sustainable farming methods, which eschew the use of chemical herbicides, insecticides, and fertilizers, she adds, “Everything we do in the vineyards respects nature.” (Indeed, the woods surrounding the estate are teeming with wildlife, including hawks, herons and ducks.) They also keep yields low to build character, and wines under the Polvaro label are made only with free-run juice. “We believe that a great wine has to achieve 99% of its potential in the vineyards,” she says.

The Polvaro Pinot Grigio is fermented in stainless-steel tanks at low temperatures and matures over four months with frequent *bâtonnage*, a technique rarely used for the variety. Fresh and well balanced, it exudes a bouquet of acacia flowers, honeysuckle, jasmine, pear, and white peach, and flavors of pink grapefruit and Meyer lemon zest arise on the palate before the long, custardy finish.





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