

■ THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

JANUARY/FEBRUARY • 2021

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# THE SOMM JOURNAL

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THE MEMBERS OF THE **PASO  
ROBLES CAB COLLECTIVE**  
STAY TRUE TO THEIR ROOTS

# Family *Matters*

by Randy Caparoso

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

One of Pomar Junction's vineyards in the El Pomar District sub-AVA of Paso Robles.



**T**he Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC) is a grassroots nonprofit organization that's all about promoting the region's Cabernets and Bordeaux blends (hence "CAB"). As evidenced by the makeup of its 23 winery and grower members, it is also about family ownership. "It is one of our pillars," says PRCC executive director Linda Parker Sanpei. The stories of these families, coupled with their distinctive wines and genuine hospitality, truly encapsulate what Paso Robles is all about.

To get to the nitty-gritty of this concept, I connected with three key PRCC members: Eberle Winery's Gary Eberle, father-and-son team Dana and Matt Merrill of Pomar Junction Vineyard & Winery, and Opolo Vineyards national sales manager Jeff Faber, speaking for owners Rick Quinn and David Nichols.



*Gary Eberle greets guests at the entrance to his namesake estate.*







*The Merrill family of Pomar Junction Vineyard & Winery: Keith, Eli, Irene, Dana, Marsha, Ethan, Nicole, Eleanor, and Matt.*

## New World Vignerons

To begin with, these three Paso Robles producers grow their own grapes according to the long and noble tradition of Europe's vignerons. As Eberle explains, "We grow 80% of the fruit going into our wines, between myself and my partners who have been with me since the inception [in 1979]. The rest is grown by Paso Robles growers with whom we have had long-term relationships." Eberle owns 83% of his eponymous winery; the other 17% is owned by Patricia Diane Vineyards proprietors Dick and Claudia Woodland, Howie and Bev Steinbeck of Steinbeck Vineyards, and restaurateurs Marvin and Judy Zeidler. "I came to Paso Robles in 1973 to be the winemaker of Estrella River Winery & Vineyards," Eberle says. "When it was sold in 1979, the winery was up to 150,000 cases, which I thought was too much. [So] when I founded Eberle that same year, it was like a dream come true to be able to control the size and direction of my own winery."

Referencing the old adage that good fences make good neighbors, Faber says that it was rather "a love of wine and winemaking that was the connection between . . . Quinn and Nichols. Their two families lived side by side in Camarillo [in Ventura County], but knew each other

only enough to say hello. Then one day Rick said, 'Hey, Dave, I just planted 10,000 grapevines!'" Inspired, Nichols bought the vineyard property next to Quinn's, and "that was the beginning of Opolo. They named the winery after a rosé-style wine discovered on the Dalmatian Coast as a nod to Rick's Serbian heritage. Opolo also means 'fun,' living life to the fullest, kind of like the Greeks when they shout 'Opa!'"

The Quinn and Nichols families now farm nearly 300 acres of vineyard on both the east and west sides of Paso Robles, according to Faber; bottling their first vintage in 1999 and selling it as of 2001 out of what he describes as "a tasting room furnished only by a wood plank laid over a couple of barrels. Our hospitality and winery facilities are a lot bigger now, but we had humble beginnings, which all grew out of our original tractor barn."

Pomar Junction manages a staggering 12,250 vineyard acres in the Central Coast, selling the vast majority of its fruit to other wineries. The Merrill family's roots in California farmland are now nine generations strong, if you count the young children of minority owners Matt and Nicole Merrill. In the 1980s, majority owner Dana Merrill managed Monterey County's San Bernabe Vineyard—which then encompassed 9,000 acres of grapes, making

it the largest contiguous vineyard in the world—as well as Robert Mondavi's vineyards in Santa Barbara. Matt recalls that "when I was close to graduating from Cal Poly [State University in San Luis Obispo] in 2002, my father asked my opinion on a 125-acre property in Paso Robles coming up for sale. Since my degree was in fruit science with a minor in wine and viticulture, I told him it was the perfect place for me, because it would give me a job!" The Merrills began grafting Chardonnay and Merlot even before closing escrow on the property. With the addition of Creston Ridge Vineyard, their acreage in the El Pomar District AVA now totals 400, 250 of which are planted to grapes.

## Making a Home in Paso Robles

The rolling hills and oak trees on their estate in the El Pomar District reminded Dana and his wife, Marsha, of the Santa Ynez Valley, where they both grew up. Says Dana, "We want [our] wines to speak to the unique terroir of Paso Robles . . . which produces soft yet supple tannins in red wines yet [also] very delicate Rhône-style whites."

Eberle's links to the land go back to the early 1970s, when he was a student at the University of California, Davis. "I helped my professors survey the soils in





*Opolo Vineyards owners Rick Quinn and David Nichols.*

Paso Robles," he says, one of them being the renowned Dr. Harold Olmo. "They thought Paso Robles would be the next great red-winegrowing region, and it was also affordable. Even back then, I would not have been able to afford to get into the game in Napa. Once I came down to Paso, though, I never looked back." For him, the advantage of operating an independent, family-owned winery is the ability to create tangible experiences, especially for visitors. "It's the guy at the top who really sets the tone," says Eberle. "I often sit by the front door just to greet people. Being family-owned allows you to be more personal with your customers, your growers, your winemaking style, your employees, and the way your winery is run. Otherwise, you're just another winery."

### **Relevance for Sommeliers**

Keeping the business in the family is a matter of controlling one's own destiny, Matt Merrill points out: "We can let passion, not revenues, lead the way. We make 28 different wines, which wouldn't make any sense for a corporate winery, but we are proud of the vineyards we manage and want to see the results in the end product. It is more of a labor of love than anything else." Adds Dana, "We can maintain a variety of selections, whereas major brands are

compelled to concentrate on just a few familiar, standard varieties. Standardized large blends, while generally free of major flaws, are never quite as unique as those of a family winery."

"When you think about it," says Eberle, "small family wineries have goals that are similar to that of restaurants. If you are a family producer, you're guided by the love of it, similar to the food cooked in the finest restaurants. You don't want to be cookie cutter; you want your wines to be unique, like dishes. We are intimately involved in every step of the process from the vineyard to selling it out the door. I think the hallmark of family-owned wineries is having small teams of people working diligently behind the scenes, wearing many hats, making sure things are done correctly. These people are usually passionate about what they are doing. You don't stay in business too long if you cut corners and are unable to offer a quality product. I think most sommeliers appreciate this, even though they may have many other things to consider when creating their wine lists."

Faber echoes his colleagues' emphasis on the importance of sourcing from family-owned

vineyards, where stewardship is sure to be a point of pride. "Opolo's vineyard team carefully monitors each vineyard, every vine, and every grape cluster throughout the season, from taking leaf, petiole, and soil samples to monitoring water uptake in the vines," he points out. "It is not possible to produce high-quality wine without highest-quality fruit—preferably fruit you've grown yourself."

Like Pomar Junction, Opolo Vineyards is 100% SIP (Sustainability in Practice) Certified. "We farm sustainably," says Faber, "meaning [that] we want to be great stewards of our own land, our environment, our water resources, and local wildlife." A winery that adheres to the three basic tenets of sustainable farming is environmentally sound, socially equitable, and economically viable, reflecting the ultimate goal: ensuring that the property to be handed down to future generations is in better shape than ever before.

"It's all about family," says Faber. "That's why, when we host our annual Harvest Grape Stomp, you hear 700 people shout 'Opolo!'—not 'Opal'—while couples are kissing and everyone makes a big noise. After 13 years with the vineyard, it's still my absolute favorite thing to see." ❧



# Giving 2021 a SHOT

PHOTO: MARY LAGIER



Meredith May



**TOO SOON?** Well, we're thinking positive at a time when the meaning of the word *positive* has come to be perceived as *negative*. But our ongoing mantra is that all bad things must come to an end—and this issue offers plenty of reason for hope in that regard.


For starters, there's Stef Schwalb's interview with some of the new board members of the Court of Master Sommeliers: It's a vision board of rebuilding (page 55). And the opening of a luxury hotel in wine country is also a good sign for the future, as you'll see in our sneak peek at the Montage Healdsburg and its "terroir-to-table" restaurant Hazel Hill (page 73).

Then there's Geographical Digest, our webinar series with *National Geographic* and SommCon; you'll find a recap of "Pure Expressions," which explored the "sacred bond" between vineyard and winery, on page 60. The next installments are scheduled for January 21, when we'll undertake "An Exploration of Renowned Single Vineyards" around the world, and February 18, when our panelists will discuss "Technique or Terroir: Is It Production or Nature that Makes These Wines Great?" You can register at [sommjournal.com](http://sommjournal.com) to join us for these free educational sessions.

And speaking of shots, we are also presenting a series of spirits webinars called Concours d'Spirits. Our premiere broadcast on February 4 will feature some wonderful whisk(e)ys, while the March 4 segment will dive into tequila and mezcal. Find out how to sign up on page 17.

SOMM CON & THE SCENES  
Concours d'Spirits

Finally, we are always interviewing somms, wine directors, retail buyers, and distributors in these pages, so let us know how you are coping—and what you are hoping—and we just may include you in our coverage this year.

On that note, here's hoping we'll see each other soon: Keep safe, stay healthy, and bottoms up! 



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IMAGE COURTESY OF MONTAGE HEALDSBURG





**LOUIS ROEDERER**  
HAND IN HAND WITH NATURE



# THE SOMM JOURNAL

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

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# Winesplaining

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY:

ONE OF THE more miraculous aspects of wine is the fact that we're ever able to talk to each other about it: Even the briefest of dialogues reveals that wine language is messy, inexact, and wildly open to interpretation.

With this in mind, I decided to ask several people in the industry what they mean when they use certain terms. Here's what they said. See if you agree!

## TENSION

*David Yoshida, MS, consultant, and newly elected board member for the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas*

A wine with tension will always be on the early side of its drinking window and have an elevated acid profile. However, tension also evokes potential energy and contradiction. A tense wine gives us the sense that with time, it will unfold, release its "energy," and express itself with greater clarity, building to greater pleasure. A wine with tension may also have what seem like contradicting forces at work. In a 2010 Barolo, dense fruit might be juxtaposed with bracing, gum-drying tannins. In a 2012 Blanc de Blancs Champagne, tart green-apple notes and the weight of dry extract might be parried by the wine's effervescence. Ultimately, a wine with tension seems alive and exciting; it's a wine that promises a dynamic relationship.

## LIFTED

*Greg Brewer, founder and winemaker, Brewer-Clifton*

For me, the term "lifted" refers to a sensation when the wine seems to carry

itself upward. "Bright" or "energetic" may possibly be synonymous. There are some winemaking [techniques] that can potentially enhance the "lift," such as stem inclusion or carbonic maceration—almost "accelerating" the wine in a figurative way.

## ELEGANT

*Kimberly Charles, owner, Charles Communications*

To me, elegance in wine is both abstract and concrete. I love subtlety, which elegant wines always have. They are like a great perfume: You don't smell it 20 feet away, only up close and personal. Then there is the texture, which to me is always like slipping on a fine, cashmere-lined leather glove that fits perfectly.

## SEXY

*Terry Theise, semi-retired importer and author of Reading Between the Wines and What Makes a Wine Worth Drinking: In Praise of the Sublime*

I think others use the word "sexy" to depict a wine that's alluring in an especially

sensual way. It would need to be delicious and have a silky or satiny texture. I myself would never use the word to describe, say, a big, sweet, juicy Argentinian Malbec with "oodles of hedonistic fruit" and 16% ABV. I'd be more likely to use it for a certain kind of Blaufränkisch. Or maybe a sexy wine is one that would invite thoughts of sex. I've had that experience with certain Scheurebes, as those wines can be very uninhibited.

## BITTER

*Raj Parr, owner of Sandhi Wines and co-author of The Sommelier's Atlas of Taste: A Field Guide to the Great Wines of Europe*

I love bitter flavors in wine, although they can be too aggressive if there's too much. Bitterness is usually present in red wines; I've never tasted it in young whites, but it often shows up in aged whites [from the] Northern and Southern Rhône and in white Bordeaux. ■

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





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*M. Viani*

MAGDALENA VIANI  
GOLDEN WINEMAKER



# Revisiting Rules of Thumb for Restaurant Service

IN A PREVIOUS COLUMN, I covered the six rules upon which I managed to build a successful 28-year career as an on-premise wine professional:

1. There is no point in price gouging.
2. Increased volume of sales never makes up for higher costs.
3. It is never good to “upsell” guests.
4. Don’t be a snob by forcing guests to like “somm wines.”
5. A great wine list does not make a restaurant great.
6. Wine is always a condiment, never the main ingredient.

Times are different now. Countless restaurants have shut down, many sommeliers are out of work, and to top it all off, one of our institutions—the Court of Master Sommeliers—is in complete shambles. Surely this won’t be forever. But if you’ve been laid off or are currently working for a fraction of what you should be earning, now is as good a time as any to think about how to improve your game once you’re back in it. So here are a few more tried-and-true guidelines:

**1. Show up—and respect your colleagues.** It’s an industry joke that sommeliers are prima donnas. Half the time they don’t show up to trade events, even after they’ve sent an RSVP. Some, I’m ashamed to say, are well-known luses, takers, harassers, and/or abusers. You know who you are. If you can’t help yourself, I am sorry, but you need to get out of the business. To be respected, you need to be respectful.

**2. Respect your profession.** Just because much of the on-premise industry has operated on nasty old traditions like quid pro quo—be it relinquishing control




*A portrait of the author as a young sommelier.*

of the list to distributors who agree to assume the cost of printing or carrying products in exchange for sports tickets—doesn’t mean it has ever been right. The only things that matter are the quality of the wines you serve, the guest experiences you provide, and your integrity as a wine professional. Period.

**3. Tell your suppliers exactly what you need—ideally before you meet with them.** Encounters with your reps—especially suppliers who travel thousands of miles to make appointments—should never be guessing games. If you are devoting hours each week to tasting wines that you’d never buy because they’re wrong for your program, it’s a sign that you’ve failed to communicate. Stop wasting their time and your own by explaining your needs via email in the most specific terms possible.

**4. Relatedly, communicate directly with producers and importers.** There has never been a rule that says you must work only with distributors. Wineries and importers always have far more to offer than what distributors choose to carry. At the same time, most distributors will bring on new wines when they see that there is a buyer for them. If you want to make a difference, you must aggressively cultivate direct relationships with producers and importers, who by and large love to deal directly with sommeliers, even in three-tier systems.

**5. Never underestimate guests.** By now you should know that they’re not stupid; even if they don’t know the latest or coolest wines, they obviously have the capacity to appreciate them as easily as you ever have. So don’t insult them with a dumbed-down selection. Assume the best in them, give them lots of choices, and you’ll be rewarded by their appreciation of the work you’ve put into it.

**6. Break out of your own little world.** The usual way to do this is still the best—by visiting wine regions and getting to know the people who grow and craft their wines so as to understand them from the ground up. Negotiate a set number of weeks per year with your employer to do exactly that, and never allow your itinerary to be handled by a distributor or anyone with ulterior motives. Go your own way, and it will show in the wine program you create to distinguish your restaurant. 





SOMMICON & THE SOMM JOURNAL

# Concours d'Spirits



## WEBINAR SCHEDULE 2021

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SommCon's **Concours d'Spirits, presented by The SOMM Journal**, introduces a new webinar series devoted to the world of spirits through monthly educational discussions featuring today's leading producers and distillers. By joining us in exploring the world of whiskey and traversing the globe in pursuit of new apéritifs, among other opportunities, you have a chance to share your story with the industry's most influential buying audiences. Join SommCon, *The SOMM Journal*, and passionate viewers in live sessions with discussions and Q&As featuring **beverage buyers, media, influencers, bartenders, mixologists, and more.**

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**All sessions are scheduled for 11 a.m. Pacific Time.**

**February 4: Whiskey**

**March 4: Tequila and Mezcal**

**April 8: Vodka and Vodka-Based Drinks**  
(e.g. hard seltzers, RTD cocktails, etc.)

**May 6: Global Liqueurs and Mixers**

**June 3: Rum**

**July 8: Gin**

**August 5: Brandy, Cognac, and Dessert-Based Spirits**

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THE **SOMM** JOURNAL

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# Furloughed but Not Defeated

REFUSING TO REMAIN STAGNANT, RESILIENT SOMMELIERS  
CREATE THEIR OWN OPPORTUNITIES

**ONE OF THE** many cruelties inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic is how it stripped away the solace we often find in gathering together at the table. Wining and dining in restaurants, once a source of comfort, suddenly became a dangerous and forbidden activity. The diminished dining landscape has wreaked unprecedented emotional and financial hardships on the industry. From owners to servers, chefs to dishwashers, the pain is real.

And let's not forget the impact on sommeliers. A.J. Ojeda-Pons, the furloughed beverage director of Mercado Little Spain in Manhattan, says, "Unfortunately . . . the industry has been hit pretty hard, and for someone in an executive-level [position] like myself, opportunities are very scarce. I continue to be furloughed, which I don't see as a negative thing. I patiently await the ease of restrictions and the return to the Hudson Yards. I have been following closely what chef José Andrés is doing with the World Central Kitchen and all the efforts to feed the essential workers and feeding from his energy and drive. I am longing to return to work with my Mercado team and the ThinkFoodGroup team."

Wine remains an integral part of Ojeda-Pons' life: He not only stays connected with his peers by participating in virtual tasting events but is also working toward earning his WSET Diploma. "I am on the last unit, and if I was working full time, it would be very hard to dedicate the time to all the reading, studying, and tasting it requires," he says. "It doesn't feel like the classroom yet, but I like having the time to really dedicate to taste and hone my skills."

For Tonya Pitts, wine director and sommelier at One Market Restaurant in San Francisco, it took some time to adjust to life away from the career that had been at the center of her life. "In March, my restaurant laid me off," she says. "It took me a

month to slow down and get reacquainted with myself and my goals. My role at the restaurant and my career always took precedence over everything else"—a situation she likened to "treadmill syndrome." That said, she adds, "I loved my job and the career I have cultivated for myself. My silver lining is the time and opportunity to put more of my energy into myself," in part



**A.J. Ojeda-Pons is the beverage director at Mercado Little Spain in Manhattan.**

by starting her own consultancy company, Tonya Pitts Wine Consulting.


In offering advice to other sommeliers, Pitts says, "We have spent our careers in hospitality, but it is not the sum of all our parts. I encourage people to take the opportunity to think about what else interests them. That hobby or interest could spark a side hustle or new career. We are living in a time where all things are possible. Once things open up again, I will return to my position at One Market Restaurant and continue with my consul-



PHOTO: HARDY WILSON

**Tonya Pitts is the wine director and sommelier at One Market Restaurant in San Francisco, CA, as well as the founder of Tonya Pitts Wine Consulting.**

tancy company. I see myself as a tree with many branches. . . . I think this is true for most people."

Ojeda-Pons also encourages sommeliers to stay positive and take proactive steps to continue advancing their careers. "There are opportunities in the online world such as teaching, seminars, Zoom classes, virtual wine tastings, [and] collaborations with importers/distributors [as well as] other opportunities in the retail sector; those are some hopes," he says. "My advice is, don't despair [and] be patient; we are dealing with monumental conditions, so if you have other skills you can use to get some revenue, use them. And reach out to everyone you know! You never know who might need a hand, even though it may be part time or a one-time gig." 

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





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# Boom or Bust

HOPE AMID HARD TIMES IN DENVER'S LODO NEIGHBORHOOD

**WHEN I MOVED** to Denver in 2007, the district known as LoDo (Lower Downtown) had only recently entered a period of revitalization, following years of the kind of decline that only such a bard of dereliction as Tom Waits could capture—and did. “Maybe you’re standing on the corner of 17th and Wazee Streets / Out in front of the Terminal Bar, there’s a Thunderbird moon in a Muscatel sky / You’ve been drinking cleaning products all night,” he growled in 1975’s “Nighthawk Postcards.”

Following the completion of a multi-million-dollar renovation in 2014, Union Station became the sparkling axle on which the wheel of LoDo turned, not least due to the caliber of the restaurateurs it attracted; it currently boasts no fewer than five venues run by three James Beard Award winners. Seafood spot Stoic & Genuine and tapas bar Ultrera are both owned by chef Jennifer Jasinski, named Best Chef: Southwest in 2013, and her partners, while Italian restaurant Tavernetta and wine bar Sunday Vinyl are operated by Frasca Hospitality Group—whose co-founder, Master Sommelier Bobby Stuckey, needs no introduction in these pages. And then there’s the contemporary farm-to-table destination Mercantile Dining & Provision, run by the 2018 recipient of the Best Chef: Southwest title, Alex Seidel.

Rest assured, then, that no one these days is guzzling bleach a mere block from the intersection to which Waits referred: They’re sipping wines, beers, and cocktails selected by some of the best in the business. How the pandemic will ultimately reshape the downtown landscape remains to be seen, of course, but I’m taking it as a hopeful sign that, in December, Seidel brought yet another industry star onboard: Master Sommelier Jim Bube.

Joining new executive chef Alex As-tranti (most recently of Hai Hospitality, the Texas-based company of James Beard Award winner Tyson Cole), Bube is serving



*Having spent “my whole life at sea level,” Master Sommelier Jim Bube jokes, “I plan to beat myself up on the slopes” as a novice snowboarder off the clock.*

as Mercantile’s general manager—a move that he wouldn’t exactly have seen coming back in March, when the lifelong Chicagoan was furloughed from his job as the wine director of the Hogsalt group, whose concepts include Au Cheval and Bavette’s Steakhouse & Bar. As spring became summer and the pandemic continued, he and his girlfriend, who also works in the industry, decided to go work a harvest at Oregon’s acclaimed Argyle Winery and “wait for this thing to blow over,” Bube says. But the day before he was due back in Chicago, the city’s restaurants were shut down anew—and in the meantime, Seidel had invited him out to Colorado for a visit.

Over the course of three days, the sommelier hung out with the chef-owner, spending a shift on the floor at his flagship Denver restaurant, Fruition, as well as touring his creamery in Larkspur, Frui-

*Though its operations are currently limited by the pandemic, Mercantile Dining & Provision typically operates as a market and café by day, a full-service restaurant by night.*



tion Farms. “We were kind of fast friends and thought it would be a great fit,” Bube says. So now he’s hard at work, “wrapping my head around the inventory” and devising a plan for the future.

“I inherited a really great program,” he notes, singling out Piedmont, Burgundy, and the Northern Rhône as “super-close to my heart.” But given that “times

are tough for everyone, my focus right now is on selling wine, pricing it to sell for takeout.” And though he intends to “keep all the blue-chip producers on our list, our Domaines Leflaives and Roulots,” his eventual aim is to “democratize the program [in ways] that are going to resonate with people who are going to the ballgame or just stopping on their way through the station for a glass of wine at the bar.” For instance, he muses, “There’s a lot of opportunity in the Loire Valley; Muscadet . . . scratches that itch of Chablis at a lower price point. Australia is another region that offers pretty amazing value. . . . And I’m looking at running leaner margins on sparkling wine, incentivizing guests to look closely at that category.” Here’s hoping the dark days under Waits’ Muscatel sky remain behind downtown Denver, with only Champagne bubbling on the horizon. **SJ**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MERCANTILE DINING & PROVISION



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# When Your “Rose” Is My “Fermented Shark”

## LESSONS FROM A RECENT STUDY ON GENETIC DIVERSITY IN HUMAN OLFACTION

**THE SEQUENCE OF 400** or so genes that control human olfaction is considered by geneticists to be unusually diverse among animal species. Until recently, researchers thought that any deviations resulting from that diversity led to a reduction in perception, but the results of a new sensory study have revealed otherwise.

Researchers from biopharmaceutical company deCODE Genetics conducted a two-year study on the olfactory genes of almost 12,000 people in Iceland—the largest of its kind. Based on the Sniffin’ Sticks test they administered, which involves identifying everyday smells, they found that genetic diversity does allow for enhanced olfactory ability—specifically increased odor perception and identification.

Participants in the study smelled six odors, five of which are commonly associated with wine: licorice, cinnamon, fish, lemon, peppermint, and banana. They were asked to name what they smelled and to rate the intensity and pleasantness of the odors; overall, peppermint was the odorant most often correctly identified, indicating that it was the strongest odor with the lowest threshold. Crucially, the study found gene variations in participants associated with the perception of licorice, cinnamon, and fish.

People with an increased sensitivity to trans-anethole—a compound found in black-licorice products as well as botanicals such as anise seed, star anise, and fennel—carry a gene that makes licorice odors more intense, more pleasant, and easier to name accurately. (Other studies have found this predisposition to be much more common in East Asians than it is in Europeans.) The genetic variation for cin-



namon, meanwhile, influences the perception of trans-cinnamaldehyde, the major ingredient in both Chinese and Ceylon cinnamon. Tasters with that predisposition find cinnamon more intense and have lower identification thresholds, meaning they can name the odor more accurately.

The compounds responsible for salty or shellfish aromas and flavors in wine—umami, salinity, minerality, and oyster shell—can hardly be described as fishy. For many people, however, the smell of fish can be powerful and unpleasant. Iceland’s national dish of fermented shark, known as *kæstur hákar*, is considered to be one of the most offensive-smelling foods consumed by humans; its fishy, blue cheese-like flavor has an ammonia-rich aftertaste that can only be described as that of urine. This pungency is largely due to the presence of trimethylamine, a bacterial metabolite also found in animal and human secretions. The synthetic version used in the study was a

molecular compound of trimethylamine with the addition of small amounts of two volatile sulfur compounds. Participants who could not recognize or accurately identify it as *kæstur hákar* have a gene variant that results in a neutral or pleasing perception of what they may describe as rose, potato, ketchup, or caramel. It’s safe to say that these individuals would not be able to detect high levels of volatile acidity in wine.

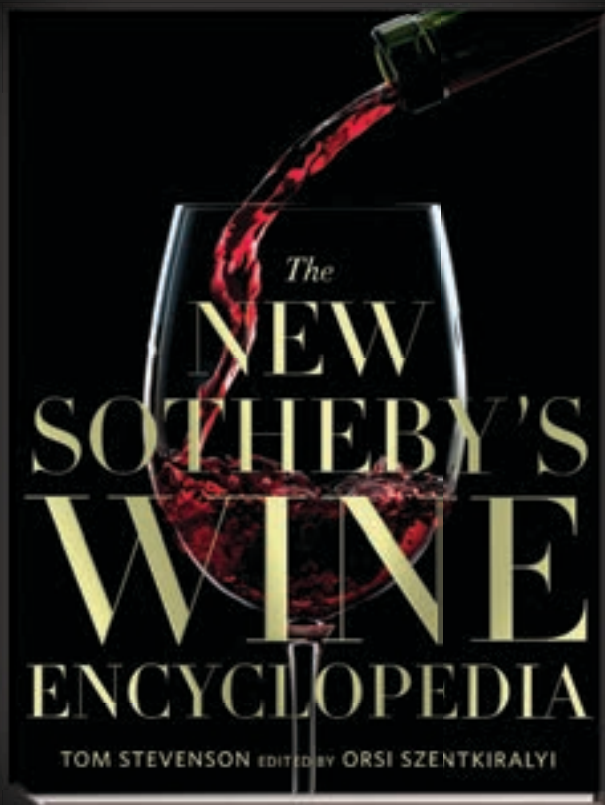
Researchers noted that the inability to detect trimethylamine varies by population, occurring in 2.2% of Icelanders, 1.7% of Swedes, 0.8% of Southern Europeans, and 0.2% of Africans. This sheds light on one of the reasons why fermented shark is well tolerated by many Icelanders. The enhanced perception of cinnamon and licorice also varies by population, leading researchers to believe that the human sense of smell may still be undergoing natural selection. *SP*





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# Back on the Central Coast Beat

IN PART TWO, WE EXPLORE **PASO ROBLES**


**LAST TIME ON WES' SIDE**, we visited Santa Barbara County and southern San Luis Obispo County, a diverse pair of wine-production areas on California's Central Coast. From the cold winds of the Sta. Rita Hills and Santa Maria AVAs to the moderate heat of Ballard Canyon, the Los Olivos District, and the brand-new Alisos Canyon AVA, we learned about the nuances in grapes, soil, and climate that give these wines their character.

Now we attempt a nearly impossible challenge: defining and celebrating the 11 subregions of the greater Paso Robles AVA in 500 words or less. Let's start with the region as a whole, as it was contained within a single AVA until 2014, when a massive petition submitted by local winegrowers seven years earlier prompted the creation of the sub-AVAs. Its history extends back to the 1790s, however; when Franciscan friars first planted wine grapes in the area; by the late 19th century, Zinfandel plantings were already well established and the city of Paso Robles (then called El Paso de Robles, or "the pass of the oaks") was born.

Modern-day Paso Robles is planted to 60 different varietals across over 40,000 vineyard acres, with the most important being Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Merlot, Petite Sirah, and Rhône grapes like Syrah, Grenache, Viognier, and Roussanne. With long growing seasons and the largest average diurnal shifts of any U.S. winegrowing region, the 11 sub-AVAs have viticultural commonality, but their differences are ample enough to make their wines distinct and expressive.

The Paso Robles Highlands District is located in the southeast corner of the region, whose enormous diurnal shifts are well represented here: 50 degrees on average between April and October. On the Winkler Index, the cooler western areas of Paso Robles around the Templeton Gap, which receive 30 inches of rain annually, are categorized as Zone II, while the eastern AVAs are Zone IV; the warmest areas in which fine wine can be grown, they receive a paltry 10 inches of average annual rainfall.

Soils across Paso Robles are diverse but tend to be bedrock-derived, with high pH levels and desirable calcareous (marine-based) deposits; these factors combine to produce vines with restricted vigor; small- to medium-sized berries with low pH, and lower yields—resulting in wines of great color, bright acidity, and flavor intensity. Elevation ranges from 700 to 2,400 feet from the riverbeds of the Salinas River Valley to the plantings in the hills and mountains between the Santa Lucia Range and the Templeton Gap.

In short, it is difficult to describe such a large and diverse wine region concisely. But fortunately, Paso Robles can be easily studied and visited even at a distance with the help of the excellent work of the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance, which has great maps and data available at [pasowine.com](http://pasowine.com). 

*Wes Hagen is consulting winemaker and brand ambassador for Miller Family Wine Company. Follow him on Instagram @wes\_hagen.*



## Paso Robles' Top Hits

In lieu of defining all of the region's sub-AVAs, here are a few special places in Paso Robles that I find extraordinary:

- **French Camp Vineyard:** Using a specialized, award-winning farming system, this 1,400-acre vineyard in the Paso Robles Highlands District is owned and managed by the Miller family of Santa Barbara, who have been farming in California since 1871; the site produces some of the best Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Petite Sirah in the state.
- **Tablas Creek Vineyard:** Located in the Adelaida District, the westernmost sub-AVA of Paso Robles, this winery represents the peerless combination of the Haas and Perrin families of California and the Rhône Valley, respectively. Their Rhône-style wines show the region's more refined and elegant side.
- **James Berry Vineyard and Saxum Vineyards:** Good luck finding a bottle or getting access to a tour or tasting, as winemaker Justin Smith's wines are highly allocated; Robert Parker gave the 2007 Saxum Vineyards James Berry Vineyard Proprietary Red 100 points.
- **Eberle Winery:** While his easy smile symbolizes his ever-present hospitality, Gary Eberle also makes some of the most expressive wines in Paso Robles, especially for the price point. His first Cabernet Sauvignon was the 1979 vintage, and the wines seem to get better every decade.





*The charred baby bok choy at Silkie's in Jacksonville, FL, is meant to accompany a variety of chicken dishes.*

# Spotlight on Silkie's

**TOP CHEF ALUM KENNY GILBERT INFUSES BOLD FLAVORS INTO THE MENU OF HIS NEW FLORIDA RESTAURANT** by Michelle M. Metter



**Chef Kenny Gilbert of Silkie's Chicken & Champagne Bar in Jacksonville, FL.**

**LAST OCTOBER**, *Top Chef* alumnus Kenny Gilbert launched Silkie's Chicken & Champagne Bar in Jacksonville, Florida—a move that some might call audacious in the middle of a pandemic. But for a chef whose nickname is “Beast in the Kitchen,” such boldness is as much a part of his entrepreneurial spirit as it is a defining element of his food.

Silkie's serves up internationally inspired chicken dishes both creative and comforting as well as four types of fresh-baked drop biscuits and a drool-worthy assortment of sides. One of the most popular is baby bok choy that Gilbert chars on cast iron and deglazes with rice vinegar and water until tender; it's then drizzled with sesame oil, salt,

and pepper and garnished with fermented black beans, gochujang honey, toasted sesame seeds, and scallions.

Pairing wine with umami-rich vegetable dishes like this one can be a challenge, but Gilbert has a ready answer. He suggests the Matanzas Creek 2018 Journey Sauvignon Blanc from Sonoma County, which features notes of white peach, fresh pineapple, honeydew melon, citrus blossom, and jasmine as well as minerality on the finish that cuts through the spicy sweetness of the honey. Read on for pairing recommendations from two more wine experts.



## Wendy Shoemaker

*Ruinart Champagne U.S. Brand Ambassador*

“The strong mix of sweet and sour [and] spicy and nutty flavors in this dish needs a wine that stands up . . . yet is demure enough [to allow] the dish to shine. My perfect pairing would be an aged, off-dry Spätlese Mosel German

Riesling. My preference would be a 20-year-old [wine], as aging Riesling develops a hint of nuttiness that would complement the toasty notes of the sesame. The brightness of the Riesling with a hint of sweetness will highlight the sweet honey notes of the dish yet tame the fiery aspects, creating a perfect balance of flavors in each bite.”



PHOTO: JANELLE DOTSON

## Philippe André

*Charles Heidsieck U.S. Brand Ambassador*

“The multivintage Rosé Réserve by Charles Heidsieck in Reims, the heart of Champagne, is a next-level pairing wine. Eighty percent of the [expression comprises] wines blended from a base vintage of 2012. [The remaining 20%] are wines that have aged in stainless-steel tanks for up to 20 years, waiting for their time to shine. There is a touch of still Pinot Noir that is blended in to create a shimmering rose-gold hue.

You will find a decadent nose of freshly cut roses, candied stone fruit, and black cherries along with freshly baked croissant [and] a hint of yogurt and roasted almonds. On the palate, the velvety texture from five years of lees aging is pronounced, and the reserve wines kick in on the long finish, leaving you excited for your next sip. This total package has the decadence and power to cut through the richness in chef Kenny's ultra-complex dish, yet both the soul and love in the [food] and the wine are on full display—a true masterpiece of a pairing.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOMMCON



**MINUTES WITH ...**

# Sarah Fernandez

SALES ASSOCIATE, DÉPANNEUR WINES, BROOKLYN, NY **by Michelle M. Metter**

PHOTO: JASON O'BRYAN



**WE CAUGHT UP WITH** retail sales associate Sarah Fernandez to talk shop about customer service, the pandemic, and personal growth.

**Q: Tell me a bit about your current role.**  
[Given the current environment,] I am fortunate to continue conversations around wine in my role as sales associate at Dépanneur Wines in the Boerum Hill area of Brooklyn. I work with a good friend who manages the shop and help him in selecting wines. We sell what we like to drink!

**Q: Prior to working for Dépanneur, you were with Niche Niche Special Club. How was the transition from floor service to working in retail?**  
It's a whole new muscle! [In] my first foray into retail, I get to dive into building a holistic relationship with my customers and explore how wine interacts with their lives. It is a bit different than curating for just the evening, but just as

fulfilling. I get to explore the context [in which they're] enjoying wine and what their expectations are for that enjoyment. It's so much fun to learn about a person's life and their palate over time and help spark joy by guiding them to the right bottle for their experience. The best feeling is when they come back and are excited and inspired by a new wine.

**Q: What new skills would you say you have acquired as a result of your position at Dépanneur?**

It's important for me to create an environment where wine is accessible and approachable for everyone, regardless of where they are in their experience of wine or life in general. We pride ourselves in our \$25-and-under section, all small-production [wines made through] healthy farming and [by] good people we want to support. It's important to meet people where they are; we have to be soft and understanding. These are weird times and taking care of each other must come first. Never judgment, just love!

**Q: New York City is among the communities most impacted by the pandemic. How are you staying connected with your peers and with local tasting groups during the shutdown?**

NYC is going through a particularly dark time; restaurants need government action through subsidies. Given the stress all my colleagues are under, we are reaching out now more than ever, checking in and spreading knowledge and awareness. We all have our strengths and our part to play in taking care of each other. Now is the time to heal ourselves and our community. With the decentralization of the industry, there is space to elevate diverse opinions, and really creative, inclusive, and progressive programs have evolved. I get a group of amazing ladies from all over the industry together and go hiking on the weekends. It's restorative to support this community through activities of wellness. Laughter is healing!

**Q: You have ten minutes and one bottle of wine. Who are you with and what are you drinking?**

Josephine Baker and Marie-Noëlle Ledru Champagne Brut, because I am only going to drink "the Queen" with a queen. Josephine Baker is an inspiration: She broke artistic barriers by dancing in a way that was true to herself; she broke racial barriers by refusing to perform for segregated audiences; and she broke human rights barriers as a key spy for the Allies in World War II. This wine is a lot like her: powerful and full of finesse and supple texture, with a complex aroma. These two women did it their way and changed the world in the process. **SJ**

*San Diego-based wine journalist Michelle Metter is the co-founder and director of SommCon USA. The SOMM Journal and The Tasting Panel are proud supporters of SommCon and its mission of continuing education and training for the global wine industry. Follow Metter on Instagram @michellemettersd.*





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Treasury Wine Estates and  
**Lars Leicht**, VP/Education  
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# A Deep Dive Into

# Stags Leap

by Liz Thach, MW

WE DEVOTED THE  
FIRST WEBINAR IN  
OUR **SOMM SESSIONS**  
SERIES TO NAPA  
VALLEY PETITE SIRAH

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEAPING DEER** and the concept of “rock-soft” wines were just two of many interesting topics introduced last fall in the first installment of Somm Sessions, our five-part educational webinar series and scholarship program in partnership with SommFoundation and Treasury Wine Estates. Focused on Petite Sirah grown in the Stags Leap District AVA of Napa Valley, the “California’s Heritage Grape” webinar was attended by hospitality professionals from North and South America, who were also invited to compete for three \$500 scholarships and the chance to attend Crush Camp in Napa Valley in 2021. “We are excited to be one of the sponsors for this program,” announced Treasury Wine Estates education manager Gillian Ballance, MS, who joined Lars Leicht, VP of education for *The SOMM Journal* and *The Tasting Panel*, in moderating the session.

*In the 1930s, Stags' Leap's Ne Cede  
Malis block was planted to a field  
blend that included Petite Sirah.*



## About That Apostrophe:

### An Introduction to the Stags Leap District AVA

Leicht began with an excellent overview of the AVA—and a reminder that its name is not spelled with an apostrophe. Two of its most famous wineries, however, have similar names that do include the punctuation mark: Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, established in 1970, is the estate whose Cabernet Sauvignon beat Bordeaux at the 1976 Judgment of Paris competition, while Stags' Leap Winery, established in 1893 and now owned by Treasury, is the historic producer of the Petite Sirah featured in the webinar.

Located 6 miles north of the city of Napa, the Stags Leap District AVA was designated in 1989 as the first appellation to be approved based on its distinctive soils. "It contains many different soils," explained Leicht, "but the two major types are volcanic and old river sediments with gravel, loam, and clay." The climate here is also distinctive, thanks partly to the towering cliffs of the Palisades—part of the Vaca Range on the eastern side of Napa Valley, they reflect the sun to heat up

the vineyards during the day—and partly to the cooling breeze that flows in from San Pablo Bay each afternoon, helping to lower the temperature. This combination of soil and climate may account for the fact that many Stags Leap wines have an excellent balance of natural acid and sugar and are often said to possess both grace and power. "Another way to describe [them]," said Leicht, "is 'rock-soft wines.'"

Stags Leap District is one of the smallest AVAs in Napa Valley, with only 20 or so wineries in operation. It is a beautiful region to drive through, passing those rugged mountains with their famous outcroppings of sheer rock. Legend has it that a male deer evaded hunters by leaping safely across the jagged peaks—thus the name.

### California's Heritage Grape

Ballance introduced Petite Sirah as one of California's heritage grapes. "Most people think of Cabernet Sauvignon as Napa Valley's heritage grape, but in reality, many other types of grapes were planted here first," she pointed out, adding that when Stags' Leap Winery was founded, it had 80 acres of vineyard in production that mainly contained field blends, including Petite Sirah. "By the 1920s," she continued, "there were 750 acres of Petite Sirah in Napa Valley, but most people have pulled it out since then." In fact, Stags' Leap Winery is one of the few wineries in the region that continues to cultivate the grape, with a third of its now 90 vineyard acres planted to it.

"In France," Ballance explained, "Petite Sirah is called Durif after the scientist who created it. The daddy is Syrah and the mom is Peloursin. It wasn't called Petite Sirah until it came to California." It is thought that the small size of the berries was the reason for the new name. According to French native Christopher Paubert, Stags' Leap's winemaker and general manager, "No one wanted [Petite Sirah] in Europe, so it immigrated to California, and it does quite well in our warm, dry weather. It is resistant to powdery mildew but not botrytis, so Napa Valley is a great place for it to grow."




*Stags' Leap winemaker and general manager Christopher Paubert.*

### Crafting the Stags' Leap 2017 Petite Sirah

In discussing the Stags' Leap 2017 Petite Sirah, Paubert noted his preference for a quick fermentation and a short maceration period of eight to ten days. "Tannin management is important with Petite Sirah," he said. "It is so full, so exuberant; the risk is that the wine will become too rustic. I try to keep it elegant—full and big but not overbearing."

The vintage blend is 85% Petite Sirah, 6% Syrah, and 6% Grenache with 3% other Rhône varieties. It is aged in (25% new) American oak for 14 months. "We use American oak because French oak would be lost in the strength of Petite Sirah," said Paubert. "American oak gives a nice spiciness; the resulting wine is deep and rich, with [notes of] mocha and coffee and rounded, velvety tannins. I would pair [it] with rack of lamb with Mediterranean herbs."

Paubert concluded the webinar by describing the experience he had upon arriving in Napa from France and living at the Stags' Leap estate for a few months. "I was entranced with the beauty of the place," he said. "I wandered around with my camera to take photos and it was like a treasure hunt." 





# Balancing Act

WHY STRUCTURE IS JUST AS IMPORTANT ON YOUR LIST AS IN YOUR GLASS

**ASK ANY SOMMELIER** to name the most important elements in a wine and they'll invariably respond: acid and balance. It makes sense that we love high-acid wines given how important elevated acidity is to a wine's ability to pair with food and, of course, to age well in the cellar. But high acid can't appeal without other structural elements working together to bring the wine to equilibrium. An imbalanced wine will feel clumsy, disjointed, flat, searing, or just plain wrong. When a wine is imbalanced, it's palpable.

When a wine list is imbalanced, by contrast, it may be less obvious to the average diner—but it can devastate a wine program's profitability. So how does one balance a wine list? There is no single rubric for this, but there are a few hard and fast rules to ensure that any list, large or small, achieves appropriate balance.

## Beware of Price Cannibalism

This is arguably the most common and egregious mistake. I recently surveyed the list of a wine bar that shall remain nameless and was taken aback to see that virtually every wine by the glass, including two rosés, was the same price, between \$13–\$15; a total of 17 red wines by the bottle were all within a \$15 range of difference. It was immediately clear that this program lacked balance. While all of the wines may have been selected because they spoke to the sommelier, the sommelier apparently didn't speak the language of business, as the selection offered no reason or opportunity for guests to increase their spend.

Certainly, a wine program can and should have multiple expressions in the same category. But when they're all clustered around one price point, its ability to generate revenue is severely diminished. Rosé sections are typically the most poignant illustration of this point: Think about



*So how does one balance a wine list? There is no single rubric for this, but there are a few hard and fast rules to ensure that any list, large or small, achieves appropriate balance.*

how many wine lists have a half-dozen or dozen rosés all within \$10 of one another per bottle.

## One Wine Does Not a Category Make

If you are going to feature a grape, region, or style, then lean into it. It doesn't matter how your wine list is designed so long as its sections and subsections have substance; if you find that you only have one wine to fill a section, it's time to either redesign your list or add a few more placements. For instance, a geographically organized list shouldn't display its one can't-miss Greek wine under the heading "Greece," lest the consumer subconsciously infer that the region must not be very

good because otherwise there would be more selections. Instead, you could create a "Mediterranean" section that includes wines from, say, Israel and Corsica.

## Avoid Catchalls

Lists that lump disparate wines into lazily described categories are the epitome of imbalance. You should avoid at all cost any and all of the following words in a section head: "Interesting," "Other," "Assorted," and "Unusual." They scream, "Here's a bunch of stuff I didn't know what to do with." Guests who are not knowledgeable about wine aren't going to feel comfortable perusing a section consisting of a hodgepodge of different varietals, regions, and styles, so they'll skip right over it in favor of something they know. The miscellaneous category becomes a purgatory where delicious wines get stuck as perpetual financial burdens to a wine program.

Like great wines, great wine lists achieve excellence through balance. Ensuring that all elements are in harmony is the essence not only of life but of profitability. **SJ**



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SHOWCASES THE EVOLUTION OF LA  
PLACE DE BORDEAUX

**“BEYOND BORDEAUX,”** the sole wine tasting I have attended since mid-March last year, was organised over two socially distanced days in late September by Mathieu Chadronnier, managing director of partially family-owned super-négociant CVBG, to showcase an international range of four whites and 27 reds. These wines hail from the portfolio that CVBG represents within what is known as La Place de Bordeaux, a centuries-old collective of négociants through whose merchant houses the wines of Bordeaux have historically—and virtually exclusively—been marketed.

In his essay “Bordeaux Goes International” in the Académie du Vin Library’s recently published book *On Bordeaux*, Chadronnier states simply that “Bordeaux is the leading region within the broader fine wine category. The role of a leader is to consolidate and stimulate, not to exclude ... [La] Place de Bordeaux has always demonstrated an ability to see where opportunities lie. Here, what is at stake is an understanding of what the future of fine wine holds[, and] the future of fine wine is all about evolution.”

Chadronnier traces the beginnings of La

Place opening up to wines from outside the region to the 1998 launch of Almayra, Philippine de Rothschild’s joint venture with Chile’s Concha y Toro, which used Château Mouton Rothschild’s best négociants to handle distribution with great success. Encouraged by this, the Baroness consulted with her partners in Opus One, the Mondavi family, and in 2004 La Place launched the Napa winery’s 2001 vintage. In just ten years, exports expanded from 17% of Opus One’s production to 50%. The reputation was there, of course, but sales accelerated in a way that could not have been achieved by the producer’s traditional network of international importers. It also, as Chadronnier points out in *On Bordeaux*, provided Bordeaux with something very precious: a new horizon, though it would take another five years before La Place’s new role in marketing 100-point icon wines to markets around the world would become a tangible point of focus.

In 2007, Masseto—the 100% Merlot from Tuscan estate Ornellaia whose first vintage, 1985, was created by Michel Rolland—was the next producer to look for



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CVBG

**CVBG managing director  
Mathieu Chadronnier.**

extra exposure via La Place. Its acceptance seems now to have been a no-brainer; but it took two years for Masseto to be accepted after its original approach to five négociants. The launch of the 2006 vintage in September 2009 surpassed the expectations of both the supplier and the seller. The next successful applicants were also European: Solaia from Antinori and Hommage à Jacques Perrin from Châteauneuf-du-Pape’s Château de Beaucastel.

In 2011, I introduced Eduardo Chadwick



of Viña Errázuriz to La Place via Joanne, an equally important merchant as CVBG. The company found itself under pressure from certain châteaux owners to not go forward with the partnership, so it was with CVBG that Chadwick launched the 2008 and 2009 vintages of Chilean blend *Seña* in 2011 with an initial focus on developing the Asian markets. "It has been a very successful journey," says Chadwick, "and today both *Seña* and [the] *Viñedo Chadwick* [label] enjoy a tremendous success via La Place. Both wines have gained wonderful international exposure via now a wider range of merchants (including Joanne) [that] provide a fine-grained distribution network to the fine wine merchants and collectors of the world. Except for our U.K. agents Hatch Mansfield, all exports of our Icon Brands go via La Place."

It was plain to me at the "Beyond Bordeaux" tasting that many of the wines were 100-pointers. My view of the 100-point scale is that it encourages high rankings and that a perfect score adds as much to the reputation of the wine as it does to that of the international critic. In the U.K. there are a few of us (Jancis Robinson and her team, in particular, as well as members of the Southwold on Thames group) who still use the 20-point scale, and we tend to hold back a bit, very rarely giving a 20/20 ranking. This said, many of the wines were well deserving of 19 points and above—and here they are.

## ITALY

**Masseto 2017:** 100% Merlot. A dense red with a superb nose of concentrated fruit and spice and a great future; richness shows on the palate with both warmth and elegance. The ABV of 15.5% doesn't get in the way at all. **19**

**Solaia 2017:** 72% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Sangiovese, and 8% Cabernet Franc. New oak adds richness to a beautifully textured wine with lovely, deep colour. It has all the class of Solaia's Tuscan Cabernets plus the bitter cherry notes characteristic of the region's Sangiovese. **19**

## FRANCE

**Château de Beaucastel 2018 Hommage à Jacques Perrin:** 75% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah, 10% Grenache, and 5% Counoise. A truly great wine with a dense black-red colour. The lean, muscular Mourvèdre

dominates to absorb the richness of the Grenache and Syrah; Counoise adds a little spice. **19.5**

## CHILE

**Seña 2018:** 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Malbec, 15% Carménère, 7% Cabernet Franc, and 5% Petit Verdot. Deep red, with a really classy nose and palate; quite understated at the moment, it will need time to open up to show the finest expression from the Aconcagua Valley over many years. **19.5**

**Clos Apalta 2017:** 48% Carménère, 26% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, and 1% Petit Verdot. The winery's 20th vintage positions Carménère as the flagship variety from the Apalta Valley; densely spicy and still a little green, it's a totally individual wine of polish and class. **19**

**Almaviva 2018:** 72% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Carménère, 6% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Petit Verdot. Opaque black-red colour; robust, warm, and richly seductive, with lots of oak and dark chocolate. **19**

**Viñedo Chadwick 2018:** This dense and youthful red is a superbly lifted expression of 97% Cabernet Sauvignon and 3% Petit Verdot; classy and fine grained, it has a great future. **19**

## ARGENTINA

No 19s, but two very different wines showed why La Place had confidence in adding Argentine wines to its portfolio.

**Catena Zapata 2017:** 59% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Malbec, and 8% Cabernet Franc. A fine blend and great expression of restrained Mendoza fruit. **18.5**

**Cheval des Andes 2017:** 62% Malbec and 38% Cabernet Sauvignon. Black-red colour and a spicy blackberry nose; the palate is firmed up by Cabernet's structure. **18.5**

## CALIFORNIA, USA

**Vérité 2017 Le Desir:** 80% Cabernet Franc, 17% Merlot, and 3% Malbec. Since I love Cab Franc, this was to me the best of three Vérité wines, the others being the 2017 La Muse (100% Merlot) and the


2017 La Joie (with 16% Cab Franc). A very good expression of both grape and vineyard. **19**

**Inglénook 2017 Rubicon:** 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, and 4% Cabernet Franc. Dense with lots of spice and very Rutherford Bench—a fine classic. **19**

**Beaulieu Vineyard 2017 Georges de Latour:** 97% Cabernet Sauvignon and 3% Petit Verdot. A pure and direct Napa Cabernet of great class from a classic name. **19**

**Joseph Phelps Vineyards 2017 Insignia:** 94% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Malbec, and 2% Cabernet Franc. Deep red colour, with blackberry spice; its old-vine character is clear in its long, rich finish. **19**

**Quintessa 2017:** 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Merlot, 3% Carménère, and 1% Petit Verdot. This dense, rich red is more Médoc to me than Napa; classy and sophisticated, it's a lovely wine with a feminine touch. **19**

Chadronnier sums up his essay in *On Bordeaux* with comments on "the power of the open market": "A great fine wine brand is a blend of many components: great terroir; history, skillful and inspired winemaking, identity of style, status, critical acclaim, distribution and visibility. Of these, 'visibility' is probably the hardest to gain, as it can only come once the others have been achieved . . . [The open market offers] the ability to address a larger spectrum of distribution . . . [and] thus an international presence." This is precisely what La Place achieved for the Bordeaux classed growths over the centuries whose doors were historically closed to the public and the reason why Bordeaux's ambition to go international has seen such success—with surely more to come. 





{ italy }

# A *TEST* *of* CHARACTER

Sangiovese on  
the sorting line at  
Castello Banfi.

LIVESTREAMING  
THE 2020  
HARVEST AT  
CASTELLO BANFI

PHOTO: LUCA GELSI





*Harvesttime in Castello Banfi's Poggio alle Mura vineyard.*

*by Wanda Mann*

**Last fall, Castello Banfi proprietor Cristina Mariani-May**

found her travel plans to Montalcino thwarted by the global pandemic. "I'm sad not to be at harvest and stuck stateside," she lamented on a webinar in late September; but all was not lost: As part of the broadcast, Castello Banfi invited members of the trade to experience the harvest virtually, starting in its iconic Poggio alle Mura vineyards and continuing through the production process, from the sorting table to the fermentation tanks to the barrel room.

Lars Leicht, vice president of education for *The SOMM Journal*, led the lively 90-minute excursion through the estate. Few people can rival the former Montalcino resident's encyclopedic knowledge of Castello Banfi, where he worked for more than 30 years in various capacities, including sales, marketing, and education. He kicked off the virtual trip to his old stomping grounds with two integral members of the Castello Banfi team: general manager Enrico Viglierchio and vineyard manager Gianni Savelli.

Surrounding the medieval Castello Banfi in the southern part of Montalcino, Poggio alle Mura (whose name means "the walled hilltop") spans 50 hectares at an elevation of 250–260 meters. With the castle serving as a poignant backdrop, Viglierchio grabbed a handful of soil—a mix of nutrient-rich clay with visible stones—to show viewers, noting that because it's highly absorbent, it's able to serve



*Castello Banfi proprietor Cristina Mariani-May.*

*Between the sorting table and optical selector, roughly 10% of the yield is discarded—mostly green material, underripe berries, and dried skins—to result in a tenfold improvement in quality.*



as a reservoir during the driest part of the growing season for the Sangiovese planted here. The 23-year-old vines are clonal selections determined by the Banfi team to be best suited for the site after an extensive study. In fact, Banfi is notable for being the first producer in Montalcino to undertake clonal selection with more than 600 different clones—a process Viglierchio described as a “never-ending learning curve”—as well as the first to register clones with the EU.

Viglierchio and Savelli then reached into the cordon-trained Sangiovese vines and picked a few grapes to show on camera, pointing out that the fruit was well distributed and protected by the leaves. Describing the week of September 28 as the most crucial of the season, Viglierchio said with a laugh that they had been eating grapes every day for breakfast to determine when to begin the harvest—reinforcing the fact that while the decision is based on multiple factors, including analysis and technical evaluations that aim to determine the overall psychological ripeness of the grape, the final call is made in the vineyard. Savelli noted that signs of grape maturity include “thick skin, a red umbilical

attached to the stem, and seeds that are completely brown and crunchy.”

Harvest had begun August 20, and by the time of the broadcast, about a week remained. When asked by Leicht to describe the current conditions, Viglierchio and Savelli expressed their delight, saying that the mild weather had afforded them the leisure of flexibility. As for the year leading up to harvest, they’d been pleased with the fairly mild and dry winter, and while there had been a bit of frost in the spring, there was no damage as the vines had yet to bud. April and May were a little warmer than usual; there was no rainfall, and budding started early. During the first half of June, significant rain built up water reserves for the vines to draw from during the hot summer to come before a few more millimeters of rain arrived at the end of August.

Describing September as “the crucial month to make Sangiovese of great quality,” Viglierchio acknowledged that the temperatures were “a little higher than usual this year.” Although there was zero rainfall, cool breezes from the north kept the vines dry and aerated, and some cold winds came through to dry the grapes

and concentrate their flavor. Viglierchio also emphasized the important role that Mount Amiata, an extinct volcano, plays in moderating the microclimate of Montalcino by protecting the vineyards from the torrid Sirocco winds blowing north from Africa; coastal breezes from the Tyrrhenian Sea, meanwhile, help mitigate issues like botrytis.

All things considered, the Castello Banfi team was confident that the fruit harvested possessed the attributes needed to produce Brunello di Montalcino of exceptional quality. When Leicht asked about consistency, Viglierchio suggested that any attempt to make Brunello di Montalcino taste the same from one year to the next would be misguided, defining consistency rather as loyalty to the idea of vintage variation as a coveted mark of authenticity and “to showcase[ing] the positive qualities of each vintage.”

As the stream moved from the vineyards to an area of the winery named Horizon (an allusion to the forward-looking work being done there with different fermentation vessels), Leicht checked in with Castello di Banfi winemaker Gabriele Pezzaglia. At the sorting line, Sangiovese



from the 15-year-old Fontaccia vineyard was being transported in 250-kiloliter bins; eagle-eyed workers tossed aside dried grapes as they cruised by on the conveyor, and the remaining fruit traveled up the destemmer and through an optical sorter that selects individual berries based on size and form. Grapes that don't meet the standard, we learned, are pushed out by a puff of air as they pass a certain mechanism; the rest continue their journey to the crusher, where gentle pressing without damaging the seed is crucial to avoid the extraction of bitter flavors.

The extracted must from each cru is then moved into one of 24 hybrid fermentation tanks of stainless steel and wood that facilitate micro-oxygenation, resulting in highly aromatic wines with no reduction and more stable tannins and anthocyanins. Replaced every six years, the tanks are built with French oak that Castello Banfi purchases at auction in France; it then contracts a specialist to split the trunks into staves and season them on the estate before they're sent to the Piedmont cooperage Gamba for custom construction and toasting. During the fermentation process, which lasts 15–20 days,

the must is pumped over to extract color and maintain a consistent temperature. Viglierchio tasted a batch that had been fermenting for six days and described its vibrancy, intensity, and lack of bitterness to the viewers.

After leaving the fermentation tank, the wine is moved into stainless-steel tanks for three to four days and inoculated with yeasts. The Banfi team has an array of yeasts to choose from, among them *saccharomyces cerevisiae* and non-saccharomyces *cerevisiae*, the latter of which allows them to reduce the use of sulfur. After inoculation, the wine is racked into French oak barrels or large tanks, depending on the intended style.

Finally, Viglierchio sampled Sangiovese from Poggio alle Mura that was about 15–20 days along in the winemaking process. While he described tasting at this stage as “a test of character,” he spoke favorably of the acidity and its balance with the alcohol as well as the quality of the tannins and the clean aromas. His verdict: “2020 will be an exceptional vintage—less quantity but reminiscent of 2010 and 2016. We have to wait five years to know for sure!”

The harvest certainly wasn't lacking in



PHOTO: PAOLO BAVA

*The 2020 harvest at Banfi began in late August and continued through October.*

difficulties, but as the livestream showed, Castello Banfi rose to the occasion with creativity, passion, and precision, maintaining its commitment to crafting Brunello di Montalcino at the highest level: As Mariani-May said, “A challenging year it was, but a blessing of a year for the grapes.” The 2020 Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino will certainly be an elegant testament to an unforgettable year. *SJ*

PHOTO: LUCIO GELSI

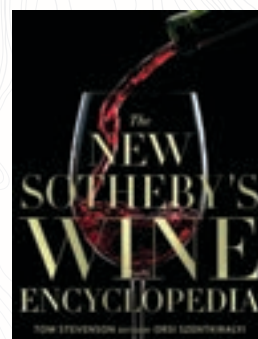


*Fermentation underway at Banfi.*

# THE SOMM JOURNAL

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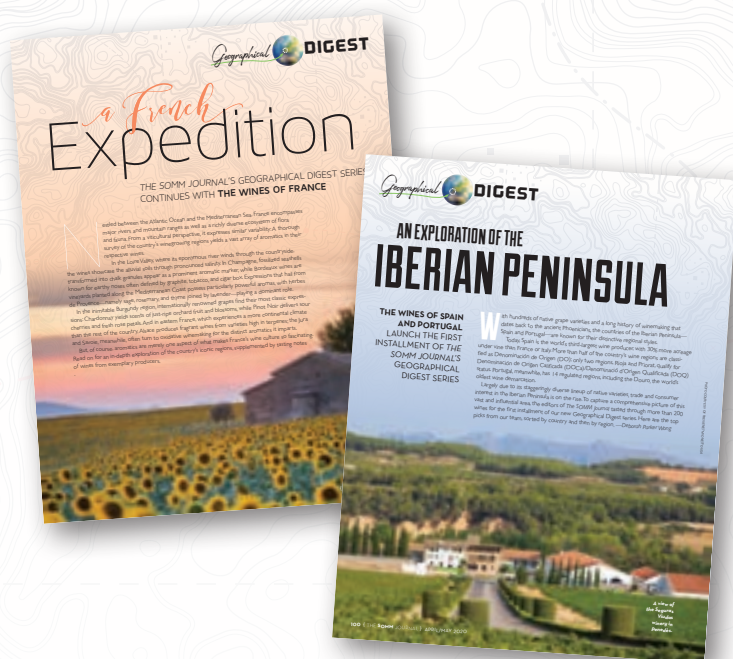
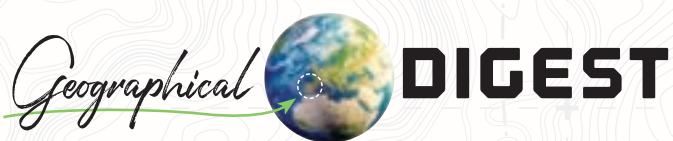
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**An Exploration of  
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(recap in April/May issue)

**February 18:**

**Technique or Terroir:  
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**April 22:**

**Luxury from Remarkable Sites**  
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**May 20:**

**A World of Bordeaux Blends**  
(recap in August/September issue)

**June 24:**

**Western Europe**  
(recap in October/November issue)



**Dear Good Somm/Bad Somm,**

I am nearing the last stages of interviewing for a new job as a wine director, a role I've never been in before. Is it OK to ask my friends what their salaries are so I can be prepared for negotiations?

Best,  
*Show Me the Money*

**Good Somm**

*Dear Show Me the Money,*

I strongly recommend not doing this, as many people have long found it rude and inappropriate to be asked how much money they make. If your friends are among their ranks, it's not worth potentially jeopardizing your relationship or causing unwanted tension.

Thankfully, there are plenty of other ways to satisfy your curiosity through a little online research. Resources like BinWise, Salary.com, GuildSomm, PayScale, and Indeed have useful data that you can use to get a ballpark figure. All the tools you need to take the next step and close the deal with your prospective new employer can be found within your own skill set and experience—that's why you've made it this far. Money talks, but in this case, sharing is not caring. Good luck!

Sincerely,  
 Good Somm

**BAD SOMM**

*Dear Show Me the Money,*

In this digital age, social media reveals all—so why are we still so scared to talk about how much we earn? Call up some close buddies on Zoom, have a few glasses of wine to loosen up, and rip off the Band-Aid: It's time to talk about the Benjamins, baby! After all, can you even call someone a friend if you can't be open and honest with them?

I'm calling it now: Times are changing in 2021, and everything is on the table, not just on the 'Gram. Talking about how much you make (or want to make) shouldn't be weird unless you make it weird—and a super-successful soon-to-be wine director like you should be able to pull it off, right?

Signed,  
 Bad Somm

**Dear Good Somm/Bad Somm,**

I'm trying to keep dating during the pandemic, but I'm not sure if it's safe. I would stick with my restaurant coworkers since we're already working in close quarters, but it's slim pickings. That said, I want to be cautious. Do you have any advice?

Sincerely,  
 Restless and Single



**Good Somm**

*Dear Restless and Single,*

Your health is your greatest asset, and at this late stage of the pandemic, it's important to continue doing everything that you can to stay safe. For now, try to keep things strictly virtual, but if you do decide to meet in person, exercise extreme caution and get creative by coming up with ideas for socially distanced outdoor dates. Hanging out indoors with someone outside your household is not worth jeopardizing your job or your health, no matter how interested you are in them. Also keep in mind that if the other person is not taking suggested protocols such as mask wearing seriously, it's a clear sign to move on.

At the end of the day, it's all about exercising boundaries, staying in your comfort zone, and ensuring that you don't potentially infect others. It's important to follow your heart, but right now it's even more important to follow the guidance of health experts—that's the only way we'll get through this and back into a safe dating (and dining) scene anytime soon.

Best wishes,  
 Good Somm

**BAD SOMM**

*Dear Restless and Single,*

The story of dating during the pandemic is that fear of rejection has been replaced by fear of infection. I'd be ready to take a vow of abstinence if I'd been trying to date via Zoom all of this time, but to be fair, it sounds a hell of a lot better than standing in a park 12 feet away from someone with half of their face obscured (talk about the ultimate catfish scenario). Just stick it out and let the vision of your first glorious post-vaccine date—sitting at the bar of your favorite spot with the person you've been Insta-stalking for months—carry you through the dark days. You'll start to see the light soon if you look hard enough. SJ

Regards,  
 Bad Somm

*This column is a parody and does not reflect the views of The SOMM Journal. Follow the columnists at @goodsommbadsomm on social media and visit their website at goodsommbadsomm.com.*





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# The Many Personalities

# of Port

THE FORTIFIED WINES IN **THE FLADGATE PARTNERSHIP** PORTFOLIO ARE MORE THAN JUST DIGESTIFS

by Richard Carleton Hacker

**LET'S FACE IT**—Port is not an easy sell to those who aren't in the know about the fortified wine and its various styles. Even among more experienced consumers, there is a preconceived notion that Port should only be poured at the end of a meal, not before or during it. But seeing as how we are currently in a moment of reevaluating so many things in life, this might be the perfect time to do the same for Port, exploring its largely unacknowledged versatility and its place within the culinary landscape.

One of the largest Port portfolios,

encompassing the full range of styles, is that of The Fladgate Partnership. So let's examine some of its most popular labels. Starting with Ports suitable for apéritifs and cocktails, the following tasting notes then segue into labels that pair well with food—Ruby Ports are, after all, essentially hearty red wines, usually clocking in at around 20% ABV—and end with Vintage Ports as digestifs that offer far less alcoholic potency than the likes of Cognac and Scotch. In short, there is a Port for every palate and every occasion.

## Leisure-Time Ports

### Croft Purple Velvet (\$25)

Although Croft, which was founded in 1588, is the world's oldest Port house, this is one of its newest labels. Aged in large wooden vats for up to three years, it's an easy-drinking, dark-purple Ruby Port with delicate notes of black currants, plums, and cherries. It's ready to enjoy now and perfect for afternoon sipping, whether chilled and served neat or mixed with sparkling wine.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KOBRAND

*Quinta da Roêda has been owned by Croft since 1875.*







Quinta do Panascal is Fonseca's flagship estate.



Wines from Quinta Vargellas are key to Taylor Fladgate's Vintage Port.

**Croft Pink (\$20)** This rosé Port is another modern, light-tasting expression created specifically to appeal to newcomers to the category as well as to creative mixologists who might opt to serve it with a splash of soda or use it in cocktails. It gets its unique pink color and crisp, fresh berry flavors from brief contact with the skins, followed by cold fermentation for seven days.



**Cocktail-Hour Ports**  
**Taylor Fladgate 10 Year Old Tawny (\$32)** For decades—back when indoor dining was a thing—this was the Port you were most likely to see on restaurant menus. It's still appropriate now, as its relatively light, sweet flavors of cinnamon and almond make it the ideal pour for leisurely sipping while people watching on patios. Serve it at room temperature or, better yet, slightly chilled.



**Fonseca 20 Year Old Tawny (\$56)** Like all Tawnies, this is a multivintage blend of Ports that have been aged together—in this case, for two decades or longer, with “20” denoting their average ages. Twenty-year-old Tawnies have noticeably more depth of flavor than ten-year-olds and a slightly darker amber color due to the lengthier period they spend in oak. Once opened, this Fonseca classic can be kept for up to three weeks, making it ideal for use in cocktails (a 20 Year Old Rob Roy? Why not?) as well as on its own in order to savor it in full measure.



**Taylor Fladgate Select Reserve (\$30)** A fairly recent addition to the portfolio of this iconic Port house, this nonvintage Ruby does not have the intensity of its vintage counterparts; its subdued flavors of dark fruits make it a perfect pour for those who prefer something lighter. Once opened, it can be kept in the fridge for up to two months; serve it with a farmhouse cheddar and crackers at your next socially distanced get-together.

**Dinnertime Ports**  
**Taylor Fladgate 2015 LBV (\$25)** Instead of the same old Cabernet Sauvignon, why not serve this Late Bottled Vintage Port? The LBV style was created in 1970 by Taylor Fladgate but remains one of the category's greatest secrets. Aged for four to six years, it's ready to drink upon release, with no further aging or decanting required. It has all the characteristics of Vintage Port—plums, black cherries, and perceptible tannins—but slightly less depth. Once opened, LBV can be kept for up to three weeks as long as the air is pumped out. Served in a red wine glass, it's a great accompaniment for roast beef or even mac and cheese.



**Croft Quinta da Roêda 2018 Vintage Port (\$50)** Think of this as a single-site wine, as it is made with grapes harvested from just one quinta rather than multiple quintas like most other vintage Ruby Ports. As such, it possesses the ripe fruit and scented herbal characteristics found in Roêda table wines, along with a subtle silkiness, spice notes, and a hint of walnuts. This is a great Port to pair with any beef dish or pasta in a heavy cream or marinara sauce.

**Digestif Ports**  
**Fonseca Guimaraens 2018 Vintage Port (\$58)** And now we come to the traditional end of a perfect evening. This Vintage Port—the first bottling under the Guimaraens label since 2015—pays tribute to The Fladgate Partnership's head winemaker, David Guimaraens. A rather gentle example of the category, it was blended to be enjoyed sooner than most Vintages, while it is still quite young. “It displays the rich, dense woodland fruit [that] is the keynote of the Fonseca house style,” says Guimaraens, “but it also has the fresh acidity; sturdy, well-integrated tannins; and depth of flavor [that] are typical of the year.” Notes of dried prune, maraschino cherry, and soft oak invite pairings with a variety of fruits and cheeses.



**Taylor Fladgate 2018 Vintage Port (\$120)** For the first time in its 329-year history, Taylor Fladgate has declared three vintages in a row—declarations typically occur about once every four years—which makes this a most historic bottling that should be reserved for special moments. Bursting with marinated cherries, walnuts, cedar, and oak, it only promises to get better in the decades to come—but why wait? Sip and savor it now, whether with a thick slice of chocolate cake or on its own. Once it would have been heresy to open a classic Vintage Port before it had attained at least a decade of aging. But thanks to the improved viticultural techniques and technology that are leading to more frequent declarations, Taylor Fladgate is proving that—like many other things in our industry—the Port category is changing. 





# Let the GOLDEN AGE Begin

Silverado  
Vineyards  
president  
Russ Weis.



# SILVERADO VINEYARDS BUILDS UPON 40 YEARS OF SUCCESS WITH A NEW CHAPTER AND A NEW LEASE ON VITICULTURE

STORY BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI  
PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER RUBIN



**T**he year 2020 marked the end of an illustrious chapter for Napa Valley's Silverado Vineyards. In 2019, the estate's beloved CEO and founder, Ron Miller, passed away. (His wife and co-founder, Diane Disney Miller, died in 2013.) Meanwhile, the start of the new decade has ushered in the uncertainty of changing consumer tastes, tariffs, and a pandemic to boot. In the vineyard, the availability of labor continued to decrease while the price for it increased; in the market, competition from spirits and the booming RTD category threatened by-the-glass placement for wine on-premise and shelf space off-premise. And even as the winery—along with the rest of the industry—strove to adapt to, pivot through, and navigate the new normal, wildfires wreaked havoc on the California harvest.

Yet amid all the doom and gloom, a bright and exciting new chapter is beginning to unfold at 6121 Silverado Trail. In Silverado's cellars, 11 new microfermenters were installed so that the winemaking team could continue their focus on single-vineyard expressions. Meanwhile, its sales team kicked off the year with a blitz in the Southeast U.S. market, followed by events in Charleston, North Carolina, and New York, that resulted in record months. And its marketing team completed a new website with built-in tools for the trade, including a digital asset-management system, and launched advertising campaigns to support its impressive portfolio.

In short, as Silverado embarks on a new year—which happens to mark its 40th anniversary—president Russ Weis is optimistic.

*The winery recently installed 11 new microfermenters to aid in the production of its single-vineyard program.*





"We are so fortunate to own our own estate . . . and [to have] the luxury of looking ahead [through the] generations," he says. "Ron and Diane's children are carrying on their legacy as the owners of the winery, and their grandchildren are becoming increasingly involved." This matters, he adds, because "trusted, storied brands are becoming increasingly important to the trade and to consumers. New wineries will come and go, but you can't buy history or authenticity. Consistency in ownership, winemaking, and terroir—paired with the size and agility to change direction—is what has made Silverado successful for 40 years."

### **THE LEGACY OF THE SILVERADO-DISNEY HERITAGE CLONE**

Key to that success, of course, is the winemaking team. For the past three decades, Silverado Vineyards winemaker Jon Emmerich has turned out wines with a remarkably consistent house style. Regardless of vintage variation, they're always dark and brooding, built like skyscrapers, and bolstered by the kind of acid backbone you'd expect from a Grand Cru Bordeaux estate. Not that that's any surprise: After all, Silverado Vineyards sits smack in the heart of the Stags Leap District AVA, arguably Napa's original "first growth" region. Emmerich avoids overripeness, picking rather to preserve the scintillating natural acidity of the grapes from these world-class estate vineyards as well as to balance his oak regimen between new and used wood.

*The Silverado team toasts to four decades behind them—and many more to come.*



*Silverado Vineyards' iconic Napa estate.*





## SILVERADO VINEYARDS STANDS ON SOLID GROUND,

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS IN THE BUSINESS BY PLANTING NEW AND EXCITING VARIETIES ALONG THE PATH IT'S PAVING TO THE NEXT 40 YEARS.



*Silverado Vineyards winemaker Jon Emmerich.*





*While Silverado is built on the foundation of Cabernets like GEO and SOLO, it's branching out in new directions with the recent replanting of Miller Ranch.*

In the cellar, Emmerich is joined by associate winemaker Elena Franceschi, another Silverado veteran who just completed her 26th harvest. Today, Emmerich and Franceschi, along with Weis and the Miller family, are carrying the torch lit by Ron and Diane to prove that their California estate could build a legacy as enduring as that of France's top châteaux and Italy's winemaking dynasties. The team currently in place is steering Silverado Vineyards toward such monumental status.

Experts at the University of California, Davis, have also been instrumental in that mission. In the late 1980s, famous viticulturist Phil Freese and Deborah Golino, the director of the Foundation Plant Services department in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, worked with budwood from Silverado's estate vineyards to cultivate UCD 30; otherwise known as the Disney-Silverado Heritage selection clone, it's the only heritage clone from the Stags Leap District AVA and one of only three in California. Their starting point was originally referred to as the See clone in

honor of Harry See of See's Candies fame, who sold the land that would eventually become Silverado Vineyards to Diane, Ron, and Diane's mother, Lillian Disney; it had been cultivated in an on-site nursery by a former vineyard manager at the estate, John Brock. The virus-treated UCD 30 clone is now cultivated at world-famous UC Davis vineyard Russell Ranch, which "contains just about every grape and clone you can think of," says Weis.

What's so special about UCD 30 is that "in a high-pressure drought year, it resists viral attack," Weis explains. "The problem with drought years is [that] it's not just an issue of less water in the vineyards—[it's also] the fact that the immune system of the vine is compromised, and it becomes susceptible to virus attacks. In drought years, UCD 30 maintains its integrity."

#### **BEYOND CABERNET**

"It's not just chocolate and vanilla anymore," jokes Weis as he reflects on Silverado's heritage as a house of Cabernet and its future as a house of many varieties. Just

before Ron Miller died, he was enthusiastic about the replant of Miller Ranch, the winery's 81-acre estate in the Yountville AVA. Weis remembers asking Ron which grape he would plant if he could plant absolutely anything in the world, and "[he] mentioned that he loved Pinot Blanc from the early '70s from Napa. I said, 'We could do that!'" When Silverado called Golino at UC Davis to ask about Pinot Blanc, however, she set the record straight. "She said, 'He doesn't actually want Pinot Blanc,'" Weis recalls. "'He wants Melon de Bourgogne,' which is what it was." So instead, Silverado secured some Melon de Bourgogne from Russell Ranch. After grafting at a nursery, it will soon make its way to Miller Ranch.

"It's fun for Jon and Elena and me," says Weis, who adds that "we just finished a series of tastings of the Loire, Collio, and wines from Alto Adige, which the Millers really liked. We are looking at grapes like Sauvignon Vert as well as Chenin Blanc, and we're excited about opening the door a little wider." Seizing such opportunities to venture into new territory "is a function of



*Golden hues, golden future at Silverado.*



the next generation of Millers. This is what they are interested in. It's great for [them] and it's great for us, energizing us in our fifth decade."


#### **PIVOTING ON- AND OFF-PREMISE**

The recent innovation in Silverado's vineyards is being matched by resolve at the distribution level that's worth taking note of in the pandemic era. As the market increasingly moves online, producers working with third-party platforms are often required to offer discounts to entice customers. But not Silverado. "We're not responding to the retail environment by dropping prices," says Weis, who asserts that doing so would negatively impact the brand's extremely strong presence. Given recent stats, he appears to be right: As of June 2020, Nielsen ranked the winery number one for estate-produced, luxury-tier domestic Cabernet Sauvignon nationwide "and number seven overall for dollar ranking," with same-store growth rising a whopping 7%.

Silverado has historically relied heavily on on-premise sales, so to support restaurants

that support it, the winery will start offering six-packs of its Cabernet as of the 2018 vintage, thereby mitigating the greater risk and expense buyers face with cases. "We had already [been] doing that with our Chardonnay and Merlot, but we hadn't done Cabernet, and so it was a continuation for us," says Weis. "It eliminates breakage charges from wholesalers. All those fees add up—breakages, delivery, et cetera."

Weis also points out that wholesalers are "absorbing a lot of the on-premise fallout," and he doesn't shy away from straight talk about needing those wholesalers after the pandemic more than ever. "We're all going to be a little bruised, but we're not going to want to come back just the way it was before," he says. "We're doing our part now to help mitigate that—for wholesalers but also for retail and restaurants."

Despite the uncertainty in the market today, one thing is sure: Silverado Vineyards stands on solid ground, celebrating 40 years in the business by planting new and exciting varieties along the path it's paving to the next 40 years. 

### *Tasting Note*

**Silverado Vineyards  
2017 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon,  
Coombsville, Napa  
Valley (\$75)** Black,

inky earthiness defines the nose and palate, along with a round, silky mouthfeel. Cocoa and dried violets appear against a slightly dusty backdrop, while notes of leather, black olive, and slate are soul-stirring. This vintage is GEO's most elegant to date, but its robust, statuesque character remains intact.

**96** —Meridith May



# C'est la Vie at

# Sei Querce

## ECOLOGY AND ENOLOGY INTERSECT IN THE ALEXANDER VALLEY

by Kate Nowell-Smith

**I FIRST CAME** to know Sei Querce Vineyards in 2017, while working as the assistant winemaker at Lambert Bridge Winery. Visiting the property was the highlight of the morning rounds I'd make through the vineyards that we sourced from in the Alexander Valley AVA. It sat on land that had historically produced great wines, so the fruit held magnificent long-term promise—especially because it was being farmed impeccably, making my job that much happier. Most importantly, I loved visiting Sei Querce because it meant being immersed in nature. No matter the season, life was always all around me: I could hear it in the birdsong and the buzzing of the insects; I could smell it coming from the hedgerows and the surrounding 600 acres of oaks and chaparral; and I could feel it underfoot—the soil rich with activity. Sei Querce stood in stark contrast to many of the overfarmed, oversprayed vineyards I was familiar with.

As my career progressed, I began to ask myself what it was that I was most passionate about. What did I truly believe in and want to do as a winemaker? The answer I kept coming back to was: work with amazing fruit that is farmed beautifully, with a deep respect for the earth. The answer, in other words, was Sei Querce, and the timing was in my favor.

*Sei Querce proprietor Hal Hinkle and winemaker/GM Kate Nowell-Smith with viticulturist Tyler Klick, co-owner of Redwood Empire Vineyard Management, which is responsible for farming the estate.*

PHOTOS: LENKA DAVIS






*Nowell-Smith walks the vineyards with Klick, who co-owns the first vineyard management company in California to become certified sustainable on behalf of its clients. Most third-party companies won't take the risk or costs.*

Little did I know then that the owner of Sei Querce, Hal Hinkle, works tirelessly across many platforms to combat global warming. He is reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by practicing regenerative viticulture and restoring ranch lands; his vineyards are certified Fish Friendly and Bee Friendly as well as organic and sustainable—all that good stuff. But Hal is going far beyond the usual measures to practice what he calls “soft organics,” a philosophy that places carbon footprint reduction above all. He is also a pilot member and donor to the California Land Stewardship’s Climate Adaptation Certificate program. The goal of this project is to quantify the carbon dioxide inputs and outputs that arise from our work in the vineyards so as to better understand where to focus our efforts toward sequestration.

Early on, Hal tasked me with reducing the carbon footprint of every bottle of wine we produce while ensuring they could still stand next to the best of Alexander Valley. I am a low-intervention winemaker, which dovetails very nicely with Hal’s environmental goals; my aim is to pick when there is balance in the berry, so as to keep additives and manipulations to a minimum (read: small doses of SO<sub>2</sub> and nutrients as needed). This minimizes the need for external, carbon-heavy inputs—a clear win-win. But the very first thing I did at Sei Querce was switch to lighter glass bottles. It was a risky move for a high-end winery, but glass bottles represent the single biggest contributor to a wine’s carbon footprint, so it had to be done!

As a winemaker, I am thrilled to be working with such phenomenal fruit—all the Bordeaux varieties plus some Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. But most of all, I’m delighted to work for someone who is taking concrete steps to do something for the planet we care so much about. 

*Kate Nowell-Smith is a Canadian expat who has been living in Healdsburg, California, for the past 20 years and making wine for the past 13. She has her own small label—learn more at [nowell-smithwines.com](http://nowell-smithwines.com)—and became the GM/winemaker of Sei Querce Vineyards in July 2019.*



## Meridith May’s Tasting Notes

### **Sei Querce 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Alexander Valley (\$32)**

Cut-glass edginess, with sprightly accents of salted pear, pine nut, pineapple, and lemon verbena.

**93**

### **Sei Querce 2015 Six Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley (\$75)**

Simply luxurious, with the perfume and texture of dried violets and plum—that Alexander Valley coat of silkiness achieved only by the best of the best in this AVA. Vivid acidity and mild tannins, with an emphasis on structure and pure pleasure. **96**

### **Sei Querce 2016 Ranch House Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley (\$79)**

Black-purple inkiness and chewy tannins are clues to this wine’s depth of character. White pepper perches on black raspberry and blueberry, while a variety of blue flowers and a taste of terroir are accompanied by Worcestershire sauce and tobacco leaf. A lush layer of creamy anise creates staying power on the finish. **95**

{ meet the buyer }

*Kate Edgecombe is corporate wine buyer and vice president of wine operations for Southern California retail chain Keg N Bottle.*

# Preparation Begets Opportunity

## TRACKING THE SUCCESS OF CORPORATE WINE BUYER **KATE EDGECOMBE**

story by Michelle M. Metter / photo by Rafael Peterson

**AS THE NEW** corporate wine buyer and vice president of wine operations for family-owned, Southern California-based retail chain Keg N Bottle, Kate Edgecombe has proved that she's long been comfortable with being uncomfortable. What she does not know, she teaches herself, whether about wine, restaurant operations, or beverage retail management. No wonder, then, that the trajectory of her career—which began at the age of 15, a year before she became one of the youngest employees hired by the Four Seasons in Carlsbad—has been rooted in the fundamental belief by those around her that she could take on any given challenge and lead a team to success.

Led by the Konja family, Keg N Bottle has ten stores with an inventory of nearly 20,000 SKUs of wine and liquor, including a nationally recognized bourbon collection and even beers brewed in house; it also operates KnB Bistro in Del Cerro. Each location has its own identity and approach to customer service, which means that “in the same hour, I could be asking for

another allocation of Salon Champagne for Rancho Santa Fe and negotiating a pallet deal on Stella Rosa for National City,” she explains; in addition, “I am in charge of educating all staff on wine. I have the final say on pricing of all wine inventory. I am in charge of curating and setting prices for all of our third-party apps, [and] I manage the website for wine sales.”

But true to fashion, she does not let the scope of her new role—which was created especially for her—daunt her. On the contrary, she's taking the initiative to develop a wine club, a loyalty program, a personalized sommelier service, and new social media and marketing campaigns, among other things. “I have so many ideas and I'm excited to be at Keg N Bottle right now,” she says. “It is wonderful to be part of a company that is giving me room to do the things I want to accomplish. Retail is so different from restaurants, but it is the best of both worlds.”

Edgecombe ended her long tenure as wine director at fine-dining establishment Paon in Carlsbad to join the team

at Keg N Bottle—a decision that was not made easily but that was supported by her former employer and colleagues. “I think every little step of the way, sliding-door moments happen and you don't know what the outcome will be—I was not looking for a job,” she admits. “I had several people mention my name to my current employer before I even knew they existed. I was happy and comfortable in my role at Paon. I was the first employee hired back after [the restaurant reopened following the March lockdown] and wrestled over loyalty for my Paon family versus the opportunity to face a new challenge. Paon offered me a weird, beautiful, graceful exit. I felt appreciated and they were excited for me. It was indescribable.”

In addition to her new role, she recently launched her own wine label, Strawberry Wine Company, inspired by her love of country music. The debut vintage of Kate's Cowgirl Cabernet is now available at select Keg N Bottle locations (and soon at [kegnbottle.com](http://kegnbottle.com)). 



# Where Do We Go from *Here?*

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE COURT OF MASTER SOMMELIERS, AMERICAS

by Stefanie Schwalb

**IT'S HARD TO READ** the words "Court of Master Sommeliers" these days without a flurry of thoughts running through your head. For all the excellent experiences many people have had with the organization, there are no words to justly describe the harm inflicted on many others by some of its members. This article won't address the merits, or lack thereof, for the Court to continue to exist; after all, its membership has already voted to carry on while expressing a collective commitment to evolve into something more worthy of the reputation it previously had.

Nothing can dispel the pain and suffering of the women who have come forward to share their truth regarding sexual misconduct. Knowing this, members of the newly elected board of directors—including its chair, Emily Wines, and vice-chair Kathy Morgan—have signed on not only to carry the weight of the Court's past but to redefine expectations for its future. We spoke with Master Sommeliers Mia Van de Water, David Yoshida, and Michael Meagher as well as Morgan shortly after their appointments to hear about their experiences and their plans for change. All of them intend to hold themselves—and one another—accountable for initiating that change in the days, months, and years to come.



PHOTO: MELISSA MONOSOFF

## Mia Van de Water, MS

Assistant general manager at Cote Korean Steakhouse

### THE JOURNEY

"I personally had an amazingly positive experience [in the program]. It has been really sad, tragic, and shocking to be confronted by the fact that that's not the way many people's experiences have been. It seems clear that we as an organization haven't successfully made sure that all of our members are walking the talk. We haven't been as active and engaged with our wider constituency of candidates as we should have been. I have been comforted by the fact that pre-election, during the election process, and now post-election, it feels like the membership is on the same page. We want to ask ourselves the hard questions and look at how we can become a more transparent space that's inclusive but still focused on objective excellence."

### NEW GOALS

"As a woman—and someone who doesn't identify as white—I would like to be a part of making the organization a place that feels safer to more people. We want to make the necessary changes so our candidates feel like they have their own agency and understanding of how to be successful that's not beholden to this 'kiss-the-ring' kind of idea that seems to have been perpetuated. I think more effective communication is one of the best ways to get people feeling OK, even if times are difficult. On the new board, we feel pressure to communicate better than our predecessors. I think it's helpful to have some younger members on board. Several of us are much closer to having passed the exam than anyone on the previous board, so we're more connected to the communities of current candidates. I am hopeful we'll be able to make effective decisions that are better for everyone."



## David Yoshida, MS

MDiv; wine director at Threadfin Bistro and partner at SommPomms; co-chair of the CMS-A Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee

### THE JOURNEY

"My background is unusual in its hybridity. I passed the Master Sommelier exam while I was in graduate school studying religion with a heavy emphasis in ethics. A professor that I worked closely with specialized in sexual ethics, so there is a lot of overlap with my non-wine background and the Court's current needs. I also have experience working in a restorative justice program embedded in the California prison system, so the necessity for careful attention to due process—and also the failings of a purely retributive punishment system—are not lost on me. I'd like to facilitate a discussion in our membership about implementing a model that seeks to repair the harm done to the relationships among the entire community. On a personal note, as a queer person of color, I also ran for a position on the board because I am well aware how my career has benefited from the Court's validation. I believe wholeheartedly that CMS-A continues to have relevance and value in improving the career opportunities of other minorities. I refuse to let the misdeeds of a few mar the accomplishments of people like me."

### NEW GOALS

"This is a time to pause and reflect on our growth and hold ourselves accountable to the privileged position our work has created for our organization. The reality is we have assumed a position of leadership in the larger wine-professional community, so we are responsible to all of those affected by our training and examination standards. I know it will be a task to review and revise the Court's standards for ethical behavior and the process by which it holds its members to account for their actions. This dovetails well with the Court's ongoing work to redefine whom we are responsible to—and what we are responsible for."





PHOTO: KATHRYN COSTELLO

## Michael Meagher, MS

Principal at Sommelier On-Demand Hospitality Services; co-chair of the CMS-A Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee

### THE JOURNEY

"We were elected by our membership for a reason: They believe the 11 of us are positioned well enough to make changes. As an organization, every single one of us wants change. It's going to take months and years to really repair some of the damage that's been done. We're committed to that. Some of these changes can't be made overnight because investigations that are happening are going to take time. The process has to be followed, not just for the victims who have come forward but for anyone who comes forward down the road. We want everyone to be heard and make sure all of these allegations are being investigated properly and thoroughly. People want it to happen quickly, and trust me, we on the board want that too—but we also want it to happen judiciously, thoughtfully, and respectfully. We're going to engage in a lot of mindful listening as we move forward—that's something all of us have committed to do."

### NEW GOALS

"Our board is more diverse than the last, but it's still not where we want to be. We need to be more active in bringing people into our organization, but diversity will happen if we are more inclusive. It's inspiring right now because so many people have spoken up and want us to change. I know there are people who walked away from us. I respect that decision. I hate to lose anyone talented who has seen our organization as a path forward in their career. I hope we can earn back some of their trust over time. Even if they don't come back to our organization and put their faith in us, hopefully they can look at us and say, 'Yes, they made changes. They responded.' Sunlight is the best disinfectant . . . and we are having sunlight shine on some of our darkest corners. There's a lot to discuss, but this is our opportunity to be better, to do better, to transform into the organization we believe we can and should be. I understand that so many of these women have experienced something I cannot begin to fathom. I know they're hurting. Their careers have suffered. I hope that through the process we can provide some form of justice, relief, and closure that is fair. We can try our best to do our best, and that's what we're focused on right now."



## Kathy Morgan, MS

Director of wine education, Lauber Imports and Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits; vice-chair of the CMS-A Board of Directors and chair of the Education Committee

### THE JOURNEY

"My experience coming through this program was very positive. I understand now from reading the newspaper that I was lucky. Everybody I reached out to for mentorship was kind, generous, and fair. That's always the way I've seen the organization, so in a way I am grateful to the women who came forward to *The New York Times* for showing our shortcomings—our major, horrible shortcomings in that department—and I'm also grateful to have an opportunity to help be part of the solution. I have experienced sexism and harassment in the hospitality industry. That's why all of these stories resonate so much. They sound exactly like things I've experienced."

### NEW GOALS

"Since the Court of Master Sommeliers is a smaller organization than other hospitality sectors, I think we can affect change faster. We can't become diverse overnight, but we can change the culture relatively quickly because we have a lot of members who are wanting to help. I think our biggest challenge is to figure out exactly how to delegate and to whom. We absolutely want to involve our membership because we're just 11 people—we're not going to do this ourselves. We are driving inclusivity because that's something we can start doing right away. With the inclusivity, diversity will happen. That will be the natural, organic progression. By inclusivity we mean to welcome all of our community—the beverage community, all of our candidates—to have a voice. We are planning to do more to bring the membership together. I think that bad behavior thrives in the shadows. The more we get to know each other and the more we're part of this community, the less likely that will happen." SJ



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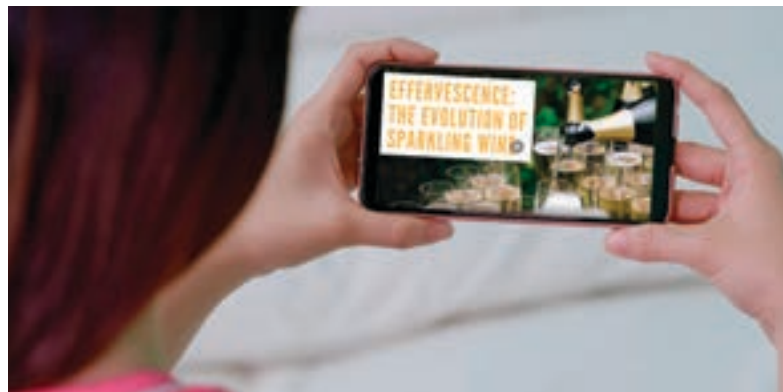
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# A Sacred BOND

OUR “PURE EXPRESSIONS” **GEOGRAPHICAL DIGEST**  
WEBINAR EXPLORED THE SYNERGIC RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN VINEYARD AND WINERY



story by Jessie Birschbach / introduction by **Orsi Szentiralyi**,  
editor, *The New Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia*



PHOTO: LUCIO GELSI

*Castello Banfi in the  
famous Tuscan town of  
Montalcino.*



## "Great wines are made in the vineyard":

Who hasn't heard this nugget of age-old wisdom at least once while visiting a cellar? It's a statement of humility that does not, however, reflect the fact that grapes do not want to become wine; they want to be vinegar, and without human intervention they surely would succeed. It's the wine-makers' skill and experience in making countless decisions that create the delicious liquid we call wine.

In the latest installment of our Geographical Digest webinar series, "Pure Expressions," we looked at how the vineyard and the winery work in tandem to make the best wine a particular site can yield. It was a privilege to hear industry veterans speak about their enormous love and respect for their land as well as discuss how they use their expertise in the cellar to successfully express their philosophy.

Be it the seventh generation of leadership in winemaking perfection at Champagne Louis Roederer or a "newbie" like first-time owner Doug Frost, MS, MW, of Echolands Winery—whose achievements in other areas of the industry make most of us look like sorry beginners—everybody began their story by describing the environment they work in and how their vineyards dictate what happens not only before and during but after the harvest.

Barboursville Vineyards' Luca Paschina has over three decades of experience with Virginia's capricious weather; but, he told us, his formative years in Northern Italy also taught him a thing or two about handling difficult vintages. Molly Hill, winemaker (or "chief energy transmitter," as she refers to herself) at Sequoia Grove Winery, talked about the complex system of choices she faces in achieving the best, most balanced expression of Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon—with the help of freshly upgraded winery equipment. The inspiring David Coventry of Talbott Vineyards spoke about the partnership between land and man, sharing his thoughts on serving as the custodian of the fruit from the Santa Lucia Highlands estate. And Enrico Viglierchio of Castello Banfi explained how Tuscany's mosaic of microterroirs—and the introduction of nontraditional grape varieties to them—gave him some excellent materials to work with as he shared his philosophy on blending and staying true to the region's identity.

Finally, as an exciting off-piste addition to the already amazing lineup, Bozal Mezcal proprietor August Sebastiani talked about the importance of terroir in single-agave mezcal production; how cutting his teeth in the wine industry helped him build a spirit brand; and why crafting premium mezcal sometimes calls for putting a leg of lamb in the still.

*The New Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia—The SOMM Journal's* partner in the Geographical Digest webinar series along with its publisher, *National Geographic*—aims to bring every wine region in the world to its readers. But its freshly updated sections on top wineries around the globe also introduce them to the people whose decisions create the wines we enjoy so much; their stories, philosophies, and legacies are just as exciting as the lore of the land.

Happy reading!



PHOTO: DARIA MARCHENKO LEGRAND

### WINE: Echolands Winery 2018 Les Collines Vineyard Syrah, Walla Walla Valley

**PRESENTER:** Doug Frost, MS, MW,  
owner of Echolands Winery

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** "In the case of Walla Walla, so much of what you have is what the Austrians call 'loess,' which is just basically dust. So now imagine, 15,000 years ago, walls of water plowing through the area, throwing all this dust in the air; which is still settling [in trace amounts]; This is Les Collines Vineyard."



Doug Frost, MS, MW, noted at the beginning of his presentation that "Echolands is an apt metaphor for the winemaking process: You can only say what the grapes already are saying." While he was calling in from his Kansas City home, he's spent much of his time in Walla Walla, Washington, since his winery's inaugural vintage in 2018.

Despite his Master Sommelier and Master of Wine titles, Frost feels he still has much to learn when it comes to being a winemaker. But one thing he has a firm grasp on is how to best express the Walla Walla Valley region. In fact, the Echolands Syrah that Frost presented is sourced from the well-established Les Collines Vineyard, located in the foothills of the Blue Mountains.

Frost offered a brief lesson in Washington's geological history, including the Missoula floods that occurred around 15,000 years ago, resulting in the windblown silt loess that features prominently in vineyards like Les Collines today. "It's basically just dust," said Frost. Combined with winemaking practices like hand-pressed, native-yeast fermentations; hand-pressed punchdowns; and aging in 100% French 500-liter puncheons, this well-draining soil defines the character of Frost's moderate-climate Syrah, to which he and winemaker Taylor Oswald add 2% Viognier from a neighboring block in Les Collines as a nod to one of Frost's favorite regions, Côte-Rôtie in the Northern Rhône.



## WINE: Louis Roederer Brut Premier Champagne

**PRESENTER:** Xavier Barlier, senior VP of marketing and communications at Maisons Marques & Domaines

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** "Our wine-making is nothing but the continuation of our viticulture, so it's very precise."



As the webinar began, Xavier Barlier, senior VP of marketing and communications for Maisons Marques & Domaines, adjusted his black Champagne riddler's cap as if to signal the sincerity of his thoughts on the integrity of sabrage. While he acknowledged the tradition's great history, he cautioned against performing it unless it's absolutely safe. "I was at a very big event and just about to saber a bottle when it exploded," recalled Barlier, adding that he witnessed a shard of glass barely miss a famous actor's head.

Considering that Barlier is a chevalier in the Ordre des Coteaux de Champagne, an organization representing major Champagne brands, it seems natural that he would have a strong opinion on the perhaps clichéd technique—and on Champagne in general, for that matter. In fact, the first half of his presentation served as an overview of three of its five main regions; its often calcareous, chalky soils; and, in Barlier's words, "its beautiful summers and very cold winters."

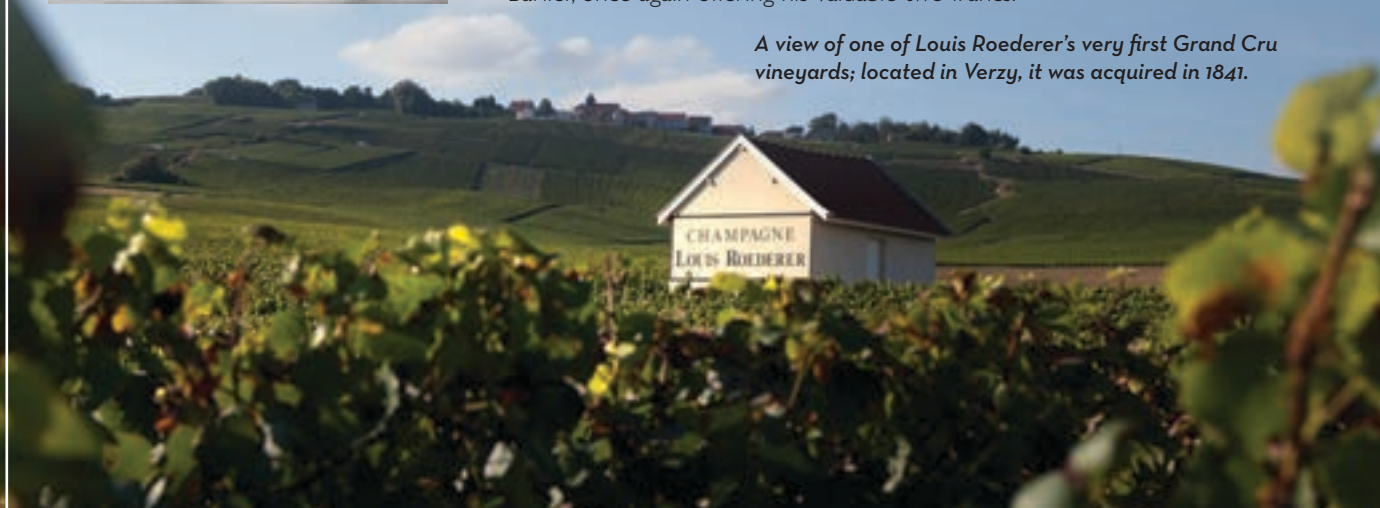
But upon turning his focus to Louis Roederer, Barlier truly came alive. "In 1776, two major events occurred [that] would change the world forever. The first is the founding of the house of Louis Roederer. The second I don't remember," said Barlier. Of course, he was joking—rest assured that the founding of the United States, Roederer's most commercially important overseas market, is no laughing matter to him.

Barlier then dove into the history behind the estate, which was inherited by Louis Roederer himself in 1833, touching on anecdotes like its close relationship with Russia and the creation of Cristal at the request of Russian tsar Alexander II in 1876. He also discussed the accomplishments of each subsequent caretaker up until the current president and CEO, Frédéric Rouzaud, who represents the seventh generation.

But the main takeaway was ultimately the producer's strong connection to the land, a major tenet of its winemaking philosophy. Louis Roederer owns 600 certified-organic vineyard acres across the region, all of which are at least Grand Cru or Premier Cru; one-third are certified Biodynamic. Its approach in the winery, according to Barlier, is just as rigorous as its farming. "[Within] our 600 acres, we have 410 plots. We have 450 tanks in order for us to do parcel vinification. We use only the first pressing of the grapes—the *vin de cuvée*—and sell the rest of the juice to the local négociants," he explained.

Louis Roederer's Brut Premier Champagne is a blend of 40% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay, and 20% Pinot Meunier aged in large oak tuns. Up to 30% of the blend comprises reserve wines, each of which includes up to seven different vintages. "The Brut Premier is our [interpretation] of the terroir of Champagne," said Barlier, once again offering his valuable two francs.

*A view of one of Louis Roederer's very first Grand Cru vineyards; located in Verzy, it was acquired in 1841.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LOUIS ROEDERER





## WINE: Talbott Vineyards 2017 Estate-Grown Chardonnay, Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands

**PRESENTER:** David Coventry, winemaker at Talbott Vineyards

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** “In the true French definition of terroir, a winemaker brings out the best in a vineyard, and I truly think that’s what we do at Talbott.”



**Talbott Vineyards 2017 Estate-Grown Chardonnay, Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County (\$45)** Expressive notes of toasty oak, apple tart, and lemon verbena emerge from this richly textured, mouth-filling white. Mango drenched in Italian herbs makes an appearance midway alongside focused acidity. **94** —*Meridith May*

E. & J. GALLO



**Talbott Vineyards 2018 Estate-Grown Pinot Noir, Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County (\$50)** A stark, bright nose of violets and plum leads to an earthy palate of sweet tobacco, cocoa, and red beets. Floral tones lavish the firm acid structure. White pepper dotted on bountiful red cherry rounds out the finish. **94** —*M.M.*

E. & J. GALLO

After 23 vintages in the Santa Lucia Highlands, winemaker David Coventry has learned a meaningful lesson: “To really express terroir takes a partnership between winemaker and vineyard, and it takes some time to establish that relationship,” he told the webinar audience.

The Monterey native used Talbott’s Sleepy Hollow estate vineyard as a successful example of such collaboration, lingering on an image of the northern section of the vineyard—specifically a south-facing block of Chardonnay overlooking the Salinas Valley. “My enologist says the better the view, the better the wine,” Coventry joked.

Just 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean, the roughly 550-acre property is protected by the Santa Lucia Highlands, which create a rain shadow for storms coming off of the sea. “We’re sub-Region I,” said Coventry, meaning that the vineyard is below the coolest classification on the Winkler Index. These conditions are a direct contributor to the long hang time of the vineyard’s Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

“If you look at the nature of vineyards almost the world over,” Coventry continued, “the great vineyards are somewhat planted on hillsides.” But not just anywhere: It’s the middle section, not the upper section with sparse soils or the fertile flatlands where vegetables are typically grown, that’s considered prime positioning, as it “almost always produces the best-quality vines. They still struggle a little bit. The crop is moderated naturally but they’re not overly stressed. And it just so happens that Sleepy Hollow is made up almost entirely of that beautiful heart of the slope area,” he explained.

Coventry also made sure to credit Talbott vineyard manager and “vine whisperer” Kevin Ryan, noting that he feels as if he’s a “custodian of all those flavors and the character that Kevin has so well nurtured.”

Ultimately, the result of these crucial relationships both with the land and with colleagues is “a hybrid of the best of the Old World winemaking traditions—silky tannins, bright acidity, and structure—[and] obviously New World flavors and opulence,” Coventry concluded. “We bind these two traditions together as yet another facet of terroir.”





PHOTO COURTESY OF 3 BADGE BEVERAGE CORPORATION



## SPIRIT: Bozal Cenizo Single Maguey Mezcal

**PRESENTER:** August Sebastiani, president of 3 Badge Beverage Corporation

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** “Having cut my teeth in wine, [I believe] Bozal is an opportunity to educate the world about varietal maguey.”

As a member of a family that’s been making wine in California for four generations, August Sebastiani understands all facets of the industry, especially the notion of expressing the character of a particular site or grape variety. In fact, 3 Badge Beverage Corporation has taken its cue from a classic wine-biz archetype. “What we’ve done here at 3 Badge is taken our *négociant* model for wine and imported it into the spirits world,” he said of portfolio members like Bozal Mezcal. Sebastiani’s passion for the agave-based spirit was clear as he continuously drew parallels to the world of wine, particularly in terms of varietal expression, throughout his presentation.

Bozal—which means “wild” or “untamed” in Spanish—centers itself around the concept of varietal maguey to offer 18 different mezcal in four different tiers to date, with more to come. Sebastiani presented the Cenizo, a wild maguey sourced at elevations of 6,000–8,500 feet in the Mexican state of Durango. Much like a natural wine, the mezcal ferments in an open-air wooden tank with ambient yeast and undergoes a handful of punchdowns. Unlike wine, however, the hearts (*piñas*) of the agave are roasted in an earthen pit, crushed by a horse-drawn wheel (*tahona*), and double distilled in a wooden container called a *chino*.

Yet in true winemaker fashion, Sebastiani noted Cenizo’s propensity for showing more minerality—the result of which, in his opinion, is a versatile mezcal that pairs particularly well with meat.







*Sequoia Grove winemaker Molly Hill in the winery's Tonella Vineyard.*

*In addition to its estate sites, Sequoia Grove sources fruit from properties like the Haire Vineyard.*

## WINE: Sequoia Grove Winery 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

**PRESENTER:** Molly Hill, winemaker at Sequoia Grove Winery

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** "Although there's a Rutherford focus for this wine, it's all of Napa Valley in the glass. You still get that black cherry [and] that cassis from Rutherford, but with a bit more complexity."

Molly Hill has been making wine at Sequoia Grove for 18 vintages, an honor she believes gives her the advantage of intimately understanding the intrinsic character of the Rutherford-based estate. The self-proclaimed "chief energy transmitter" said her job as winemaker is to "take what is really beautiful in Napa, with a focus on Rutherford, and coax out those flavors so they end up in the glass."

The coveted flavors found in the best examples of Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon revolve around a core of black cherry, cocoa powder, and Rutherford dust, a profile that Hill attributes to Napa's significant diurnal swings. "What's important for our site here is the Mayacamas Mountains on one side and the Vaca Mountains on the other side," she explained, noting that cool air from the San Pablo Bay settles in the valley overnight and brings temperatures down into the 50s, "which [is] crucial to preserve color, acidity, and flavor profile." Then "when the sun heats up," the valley funnels the cool air back out to sea and temperatures rise up to the 90s, working "to ripen the Cabernet Sauvignon and [giving] us that lush, full-body, complete tannin that we look for in the greatest Cabs in the world."

Founded in 1979, Sequoia Grove's family-owned, certified-sustainable slice of Napa comprises two estate vineyards: the 24-acre Sequoia Grove estate and the 50-acre Tonella Vineyard, the latter of which is located about a mile west at the foot of the Vaca Mountains. Despite their close proximity, the properties vary in both temperature and soil profile: Tonella is drier and slightly warmer, and while Sequoia Grove consists of alluvial soils, mainly Bale clay loam, Tonella features rocky volcanic soil. Considering this difference, Hill notes that selecting the right clone and rootstock in combination with the site is essential to capturing the coveted Rutherford character of black cherry and cocoa powder.

This thoughtful approach continues in the winery, which recently underwent an almost \$15 million renovation that included upgrading equipment. Hill also spoke of their experiments in pairing the French oak of various coopers with different varieties and vineyards, using the results from years-long trials to determine the best match. To produce Sequoia Grove's flagship Cabernet Sauvignon, which ages in 50% new French oak, Hill blends fruit from both estate sites with grapes from other "highly sought-after vineyards" after conducting a series of blind tastings, resulting in a chocolaty, dusty, cherry-rich wine through which one can taste the energy of Rutherford.



**Sequoia Grove Winery 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$50)** Cocoa and cedar are saturated in notes of plum skin, black pepper, anise, and cocoa. There's a well of depth marked by black cherry; firm tannins; and a velvet-coated, elegant mouthfeel. **94** —M.M.

KOBRAND



**Sequoia Grove Winery 2018 Chardonnay, Napa Valley (\$28)** Barrel fermented with no malolactic, this sumptuous white features notes of just-squeezed lemon, oatmeal, and salted taffy. The mouthfeel continues to glide along the palate with a toasty finish of coconut and cashew. **94** —M.M.

KOBRAND





## **WINE: Barboursville Vineyards 2016 Octagon Bordeaux Blend**

**PRESENTER:** Luca Paschina, general manager/winemaker at Barboursville Vineyards

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** "I really believe we have to explore [and] observe to establish a great vineyard."

Born in Turin, the capital of Piedmont, Luca Paschina has noticed parallels between the northern Italian region and his current home of Virginia. "After 32 years, what I've done is to explore and observe how different varieties [grow here]," he told the webinar audience. "I've also been learning how to adapt to the variable Virginian weather. We can quickly go from a very dry season to a wet one because of the shifting jet stream. In Italy where I grew up in Piemonte, you can [also] go from a dry, hot season to a wet one, and then you have to learn in those conditions how to best adapt."

Since 1990, Paschina has been planting and replanting different varieties on various plots within Barboursville Vineyards' 186 acres of vines. The nearly 900-acre property faces west and is located in the foothills of the Southwest Mountains, which run parallel to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Much of the vineyards consist of oxidized red clay, originating from a type of green serpentinite.

One of the most important of Paschina's innumerable observations over the past three decades was made early on. "At the beginning, I discovered here that on clay, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are incredibly reliable. Cabernet Sauvignon is not. We can only produce a great Cabernet twice each decade. But Merlot and Cabernet Franc thrive on clay and they need a little bit more water," said Paschina, adding that although Barboursville dry farms, it waters the vines manually on occasion.

Another vital realization that solidified over the years concerned Virginia's great aging potential. Paschina held up a bottle of Barboursville Octagon, a Bordeaux blend, as an example, noting that the label became one of the first Virginian wines to receive critical acclaim in the late 1990s.

Paschina has also dedicated 20 acres of the estate to growing Nebbiolo, expanding upon the original half-acre he planted years ago for perhaps sentimental reasons. But according to the winemaker, it's proved to be a worthwhile experiment, as the '98 he opened for the seminar was in perfect shape. "I have to say it was not as well received at the beginning because it's an obscure wine ... but I stuck with it and I'm glad I did," he said.

To all those naysayers, he's proven one thing beyond dispute: Good wine is years in the making.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARBOURSVILLE VINEYARDS

*A view of the Blue Ridge Mountains from Barboursville Vineyards.*



Castello Banfi in Montalcino.



PHOTO: PAOLO BIANCHI

## WINE: Castello Banfi 2016 Magna Cum Laude Toscana IGT

**PRESENTER:** Enrico Viglierchio,  
general manager at Castello Banfi

**PUREST EXPRESSION:** "We spend a lot of time in zonation and soil study because we are sitting on a constellation of microterroirs."

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASTELLO BANFI




The audience might have mistaken Enrico Viglierchio's Zoom background for a stock image of a beautiful and spacious barrel room, but Castello Banfi's general manager was in fact addressing us live from the winery's *actual* barrel room—indeed both beautiful and spacious—in Montalcino.

In broadly addressing the seminar's question of how to best express the vineyard, Viglierchio likened winemaking to disassembling grapes and reassembling them in the glass. The process has, however, been complicated by climate change, which he named as one of the main challenges Castello Banfi is currently facing. "More than ever, because of climate change, every single year is different," he explained, "so we have to reset every year and still be able to interpret the vineyard." (For details on the most recent harvest, see page 36.)

The Mariani family established the nearly 7,000-acre property in 1978; since then, they've not only helped to put Brunello di Montalcino on the map but contributed immensely to the Italian wine industry, dedicating decades to clonal and zonation studies focused on Sangiovese and the soils that are most optimal for

growing the fickle grape. The soil types within the estate vary from sandy clay sediment strewn with pebbles to calcareous clay soils, representing both sides of the spectrum in terms of water retention.

However, Viglierchio was quick to note that Castello Banfi's studies weren't limited to Sangiovese. "We worked a lot with Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot, introducing these varieties to study the combination between territory and winery," he explained. Enter Magna Cum Laude, a Super Tuscan blend of 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 25% Sangiovese, and 15% Syrah; each variety is vinified separately in Banfi's patented, temperature-controlled hybrid tanks of French oak and stainless steel and then aged for up to 14 months in French oak barriques, depending on the variety. The result is a full-bodied wine of Tuscan, and particularly Banfi-esque, character, thanks to its dark red fruits and spice.

"Sangiovese is not easy to blend with others," said Viglierchio with a bit of a smirk, "but in the end it's about the marriage of variety and terroir, and we wanted to create a wine that represents the terroir of our estate." 



In each issue, the editorial team at *The SOMM Journal* will deliberate through wine submissions and release final judgment on select wines that garnered scores of at least 90 points. The “jury” will also occasionally feature an esteemed guest sommelier.

# Empowering Vineyard Workers

## ARGYLE'S OJO BRILLOSO PROGRAM PROMOTES DIVERSITY, HEALTH, AND EDUCATION

**WHEN GEOFF HALL** assumed the role of Argyle Winery's vineyard manager in 2017, he would often hear members of his team use the phrase “*ojo brillante*” in reference to the winery's 400-acre estate vineyard program. He soon understood that these encouraging words—literally translating to “shiny eye” in Spanish but used idiomatically to say “nice observations”—demonstrated their deep knowledge of the land and the vineyards.

The pride the viticulturalists take in their work has now inspired a program named for this oft-used expression: Ojo Brilloso features three limited-production, single-vineyard estate Pinot Noirs from Knudsen, Spirit Hill, and Lone Star vineyards.



*Ojo Brilloso vineyard supervisors Francisco Ponce, Jose Sanchez, and Hector Cabrera with viticulturist Geoff Hall (third from left). Argyle Winery has been producing wines in the Willamette Valley since 1987.*

Hall points out, “I've learned so much from my vineyard coworkers. The idea behind Ojo Brilloso is to recognize their contributions by showcasing the work that they do and putting it in a bottle. I know how proud Francisco, Hector, and Jose are of these wines and what it means to them to be able to go home and say, ‘I helped to make this wine.’ I also know that they take pride in the fact that we have dedicated Ojo Brilloso to being a positive force for change in our industry.”

Building on the philosophy behind the Ojo Brilloso program, Argyle is joining with three nonprofits that work in collaboration with the wine industry and will make a significant commitment in terms of time, resources, and charitable contributions to the important mission of each organization. OHSU Health Hillsboro Medical Center's ¡Salud! Services program aims to address the health care needs of Oregon vineyard workers, while AHIVYO's mission is to provide education and professional development to Latinx and Hispanic vineyard workers in the Willamette Valley. Finally, The Roots Fund is committed to providing scholarships, wine education, and job placement to Black, Indigenous, and Latinx members of the wine community.

For the debut 2018 vintage, the winery highlighted the talents of its three vineyard supervisors; Francisco Ponce of Spirit Hill, Jose Sanchez of Knudsen, and Hector Cabrera of Lone Star were each asked to select a small Pinot Noir block that they would personally steward throughout the growing season. They then worked closely with Argyle winemaker Nate Klostermann to create a wine embodying their connection to the vineyard.

“There are no great wines without a great vineyard team,”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARGYLE WINERY

*Sold in a three-bottle box for \$135 at [argylewinery.com](http://argylewinery.com), just over 800 collectible Ojo Brilloso sets were produced for the 2018 vintage. Cut-out picture windows display labels that artist Eduardo Soto designed to depict Argyle's estate vineyards in winter and spring and during harvest.*

**Argyle 2018 Pinot Noir, Lone Star Vineyard, Eola-Amity Hills** Hector Cabrera, who has been with Argyle since 2012, selected a parcel of Clone 2A Pinot Noir from well-spaced, south-facing vines that drink up lots of sun for this wine, which shows wild strawberry spiced with cinnamon and vanilla. Beetroot and red licorice add to the savory profile with great acid structure.

**Argyle 2018 Pinot Noir, Knudsen Vineyard, Dundee Hills** Jose Sanchez, who joined Argyle in 2008, chose a block planted to Clone 115 at an elevation of 675 feet, where the grapes ripen faster and develop more sugar. Notes of red tea and pomegranate take shape. Complementing a good deal of minerality, floral tones of rose, peony, and plumaria are vibrant.

**Argyle 2018 Pinot Noir, Spirit Hill Vineyard, Eola-Amity Hills** Growing at an elevation of 840 feet, the Clone 115 Pinot Noir in this extroverted wine requires extra work due to the rocky soils, according to Francisco Ponce, with Argyle since 2004: “The rocks retain heat and hinder the growth of the plant.” Sweet cherries, cocoa, and rose petals are glorious; the palate is luscious and silky while maintaining dynamic acidity.



# Wine and Pott

## AARON POTT'S INFLUENCE ON BLACKBIRD VINEYARDS ENHANCES ITS STUNNING WINES

**WINEMAKER AARON POTT** landed his first gigs at Château Troplong Mondot, a Premier Grand Cru Classé estate, and then at Grand Cru Classé Château La Tour Figeac, all while earning a master's degree in viticulture from the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon. After six years in Bordeaux, he became Beringer's winemaker in 1998, working in France, Italy, and Chile. Fast-forwarding a bit past other stops, including Napa Valley's St. Clement Vineyards and Quintessa, Pott and his wife, Claire, now make wine for their own label from the vineyard they purchased on Mt. Veeder in 2004; he also serves as the head winemaker for Blackbird Vineyards, where he's been since 2007.

Pott believes that winemaking should be considered an art. "I make wine because I need the intellectual challenge and the satisfaction of crafting something beautiful for those who will appreciate it," he says. "I look forward to those foggy pre-harvest mornings when you taste the grapes and begin to imagine what they will do in the glass." In that light, the vine is both muse and mentor: "The vine is the ultimate teacher; no matter how long you have been at it. Vines respond to the slightest interaction, a leaf removal here, a shoot positioning there. In every case they show you, often with humor, how wrong or right you were!" **SJ**

*With his extensive training in France, Aaron Pott brings a Bordeaux slant to Blackbird Vineyards.*

### **Blackbird Vineyards 2016 Contrarian, Napa Valley (\$135)**

The use of 100% French oak gives this blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot its gentle mouthfeel and adds to its ageability. Following aromas of licorice and blackberry preserves, deep notes of dried heather and pressed violets are almost tarry in their density. Dusty cocoa tannins and a soy-sauce savoriness intensify the wine's boldness and opulence as it opens up, but it remains within an elegant frame. **97**



### **Blackbird Vineyards 2016 Paramour, Napa Valley (\$135)**

This Cab Franc–dominant blend (with 15% Merlot and 3% Cabernet Sauvignon) shows beauty and grace. Dried brush and violets form an exquisite floral bouquet with an echo of earthy blackberry. Satiny, round, and voluptuous, with dusty dark-chocolate and roasted-coffee tannins, it fills the mouth with flavor while keeping the nose attracted to its perfume. **98**

# Dispensary Shopping 101

HOW NOVICES CAN  
MAKE THE MOST OUT  
OF THEIR VISIT

by Rachel Burkons

AS CANNABIS LEGALIZATION steam-rolls across the country, chances are good there's a dispensary coming to a town near you. But the recreational marketplace can be daunting to a newbie, so here's a quick guide to getting in the door and knowing what to look for:

## Before You Go

Licensed adult-use retailers—also known as dispensaries—are legal operators that partner exclusively with likewise compliant, licensed brands and distributors. Retail is king in cannabis, as the on-premise side of the industry is still in its infancy. Shopping at licensed dispensaries is the only way to ensure that you're purchasing quality lab-tested products. Keep in mind that you will pay a variety of local, state, and excise taxes on top of your purchase—welcome to the new world of legal weed!

Learning a little lingo in advance of your first trip can't hurt either. A *budtender* is a retail associate who will assist you behind the counter. *Flower* refers to dried cannabis buds. *Concentrates* are cannabis oils and extracts. *Edibles* include all infused foods and beverages, from candies to colas. And *topicals* are cannabis products designed to be applied directly to the skin.

Finally, you should be aware that due to state licensing requirements, many products and brands are available only in a handful of markets. Take the time to

compare dispensary menus online before making the trip so you can identify the products you're most interested in.

## OK, I'm Here—What Should I Buy?

Ask your budtender for recommendations. If you're interested in buying cannabis flower, your budtender will likely ask if you're looking for indica or sativa. While I've covered the limitations of these terms as guideposts in past columns, what your budtender is really asking is, "How do you want to feel?" Don't get bogged down in the jargon and let your budtender guide you toward a product that delivers the desired effect.

If you're given the opportunity to smell your cannabis flower, take it! The nose knows: It will give you an idea about flavor and potency while alerting you to any

improper cultivation or curing techniques. Avoid flower that smells "wet," has a barnyard-funky quality, or doesn't smell like anything at all.

Meanwhile, the market for quality edibles varies hugely by state—but in developed recreational markets like California, the selection of gourmet food and beverage products keeps getting bigger and better.

## What Now?

Well, as we say in the wine industry, taste, taste, taste! The more you experiment with cannabis products, the more you'll know about what works for you and what doesn't. Keep notes in a journal to track and maximize your cannabis experience, and eventually you'll be working closely with qualified budtenders to find the products that suit you best. [SJ](#)

.....

*The more you  
experiment with  
cannabis products,  
the more you'll  
know about what  
works for you and  
what doesn't.*

For more on why "indica" and "sativa" are meaningless terms, visit [rachelburkons.com](http://rachelburkons.com) or follow the author on Instagram at @smokesipsavor.



**Beer(d) Science** isn't just an excuse for an '80s movie pun: Each column covers a different style of beer and related terminology to help somms expand their beer knowledge.

**BEER(D)  
SCIENCE**

PHOTO: FOTOLESNIK VIA ADOBE STOCK

# Food's First Love

## A FEW BASIC RULES FOR BEER PAIRINGS

by Jessie Birschbach

**JANET FLETCHER'S COLUMN ON** beer and cheese pairings in our December 2020 issue got my ol' brain to wonderin': Do sommeliers really understand how to pair beer with food? Theoretically, they should; thanks to their training and experience, they already know to match the intensity of the food with that of the beverage, whether it's beer or wine, and they also know how to use complementary (or contrasting) flavors to create a sense of harmony between the paired items.

That said, I still believe that because cicerones have a better grasp on beer, they are in turn better versed in the art of pairing it with food—or they at least have a few more tricks up their flannelled sleeves. What's more, there's one thing I have to get off my chest, though I feel a bit guilty saying it given my deep love of wine: Beer is a superior pairing partner, especially when it comes to those tricky foods that wine has a tendency to struggle with, like soups, spicy food, certain green veggies, and desserts. Have you ever washed down some carrot cake with a cold, hoppy beer? The bitter herbal components of the style help to cut the rich sweetness of both the cream cheese frosting and the cake, whose spices might align with those in the beer's profile.

Meanwhile, I recently drank a hazy IPA with a refreshing yet rich ricotta cake featuring passion fruit and other tropical fruits, and I can't think of a wine in the world—dry or sweet—that could have outperformed that particular match.

Beer has a much wider spectrum of flavor, color, texture/body, and aroma to experiment with, not to mention varying levels of carbonation, and together these factors harbor vast potential when it comes to balancing a given dish—as evidenced by the suggestions listed below.

### (A FEW) TRICKS OF THE BEER TRADE

- **Do** pair hoppy beers with complementary flavors like bitter greens, asparagus, or olives. This may sound obvious, but there aren't many wines that can pair well with these ingredients.
- **Don't** pair hoppy beer with spicy flavors, as the bitter hops will intensify rather than neutralize them. Instead, choose a beer that balances to the malt side, like a British mild, which will have a cooling effect. The same rule applies to highly carbonated beer—bubbles will only accentuate the spice.
- **Don't** pair a hoppy beer with dishes like tuna or salmon; the oily fish will end up tasting metallic.

- Given their slightly malty profile, substantial body, and medium-to-high carbonation, Belgian-style Abbey dubbel or tripel beers will stand up to almost any food.
- If you really want to learn how to optimize your beer-pairing ability, read Randy Mosher's *Tasting Beer: An Insider's Guide to the World's Greatest Drink* and Garrett Oliver's *The Brewmaster's Table*. (In fact, the “when in doubt, choose Belgian” rule comes directly from Mosher!)

### MY TOP THREE BEER PAIRINGS (THAT AREN'T AS WEIRD AS THEY SOUND)

- **Irish Stout and oysters.** It sounds odd, I know, but the bitterness of the beer elevates the sweetness of the oysters.
- **Soft, ripened cheese (e.g. Camembert) and brown ale:** Flavorwise, they come together to create a pairing reminiscent of grilled cheese.
- **Saison and steak.** The peppery and earthy notes of the former complement the umami flavors of the meat while the high carbonation helps to cut the fat. *SB*

*Jessie Birschbach is a Certified Cicerone and mediocre homebrewer.*

# The Lure of the Loire

CENTURIES-OLD CASTLES SYMBOLIZE THE TERROIR OF THIS STORIED FRENCH REGION by Rachel Macalisang

*The Château de Chenonceau in Touraine-Chenonceaux.*

PHOTO: WLADISLAW

## ENCHANTING CASTLES NOT ONLY

inspire our imagination but serve as portals to the rich history of châteaux in the Loire Valley. Prior to the 15th century, they were built as fortresses for defense against enemies, either upon hilltops that provided vantage points for imminent attacks or on flat ground protected by moats. From the 16th century onward, the purpose of castles was less strategic and more a matter of pomp and circumstance.

Overlooking the Loire River, Château de Sancerre was built with bricks over natural molds in the 14th century as a solid fortress in its namesake appellation. Its vineyards are planted in soils of primarily limestone with some flint, which adds delicacy and elegance to its wines, including the 2018 Sancerre we tried.



Château de Saumur was built as early as the tenth century as a royal domaine; it then became a military storage facility, a state prison, and finally the museum it is today. Over 90 million years ago, troglodyte caves spanning more than 1,000 miles across the region were carved out of the pale white tufa limestone that was found to be the perfect soil for grape growing, gracefully softening the tannins of a Cabernet Franc like the Domaine des Coutures Saumur-Champigny L'Épanouie. This fuller-bodied, structured, and elegant expression of silky violets and dark red fruits is made from 28- to 35-year-old vines.



Next, we looked at one of the most visited of all castles in France, Château de Chenonceau; built over the Cher River in the AOC of Touraine-Chenonceaux, it is nicknamed the Ladies' Château, as women not only had a strong influence on its design but also assisted in its maintenance. Clay-limestone slopes with underlying flint create an unctuous Sauvignon Blanc; Domaine des Mazelles makes a fine example, with notes of opulent tropical fruit.



Finally, we were introduced to the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany in Nantes, the interior of which is also constructed of tufa. Its exterior, by contrast, is made from the granite that defines the soils of Muscadet, which yield austere and delicate Melon de Bourgogne like that in the Domaine Bedouet 2019 Clos des Grands Primos Sur Lie we tried.



*The Château de Tracy in Pouilly-Fumé.*

Last fall, Loire Valley Wines hosted a webinar titled "A Taste of Royalty: Loire Valley Wines Castle Pairing," selecting six out of the more than 300 châteaux in the region to represent its appellations from east to west. We started in Pouilly-Fumé, where Château de Tracy was established in the 14th century and today still belongs to the descendants of its founders. A 1396 manuscript attests to the existence of vineyards around the property of these pioneers in the region, whose Sauvignon Blanc is among the appellation's finest—as the 2019 Pouilly-Fumé that webinar attendees sampled proved.



The Fortress of Chinon is where 17-year-old Joan of Arc came to liberate the future King Charles VII and oust the British from France. French humanist writer François Rabelais, who was born in the commune, was a champion of Cabernet Franc, which accounts for 90% of the appellation's wines (including the 2018 Marc Brédif Chinon we tasted).



These iconic castles are symbols of the Loire Valley and its wines in all their thrilling acidity and minerality, crispness and freshness, and versatility in the heart of France. SJ



*Below left: More than 15 acres of vines are planted on the grounds of Montage Healdsburg. Below right: Hazel Hill serves French-inflected Northern California cuisine.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONTAGE HEALDSBURG

# Sneaking a Peek at the Montage Healdsburg

AT THIS STUNNING NEW DESTINATION IN SONOMA COUNTY, AN ALL-STAR TEAM IS RUNNING SIGNATURE RESTAURANT **HAZEL HILL** by Jonathan Cristaldi

**JUST WAIT UNTIL** you see it. From the road that makes its leisurely, twisting way past a field of just-planted hazelnut trees and vineyards, your first glimpse of the Montage Healdsburg—a 258-acre resort, spa, and soon-to-be world-class culinary destination—is truly something to behold. The roots of the young trees are expected to provide the conditions necessary for truffles to grow—which means that within a decade, a lucky few resort guests will get to go truffle hunting on the grounds of the utterly mesmerizing new property, which opened in December, each season.

No wonder expectations are high for Hazel Hill, Montage's "terroir-to-table" fine-dining establishment; serving Northern California cuisine with French influences, it's being led by an all-star team. Working under the auspices of resort executive chef Jason Dubinsky, chef de cuisine Jason Pringle is a veteran of Café Boulud in New York City and Aqua in San Francisco, among other places. He's joined in the front of the house by restaurant manager Alexander Cornu and resort beverage manager Petra Polakovicova. Cornu previously worked at Luce in the Intercontinental San Francisco and served as an event manager for Jean-Charles Boisset. Polakovicova's resume includes stints at Napa win-

ery Darioush as well as The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco; The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay; and EPIC Steak.


According to Polakovicova, both the restaurant's menu and its expansive yet cozy and chic dining room aim "to highlight the beauty and diversity of Sonoma County. We'll [offer] Cabernet from Alexander Valley and Zinfandel from Dry Creek and Rockpile as well as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from the Russian River and Sonoma Coast." Along with other West Coast bottlings, the list will be supplemented by "Old World and international [selections], because we want to find a little bit of something for everyone," Polakovicova says.

The center of Polakovicova's universe at Hazel Hill is a beautiful eight-seat bar where she'll offer special tasting experiences and highlight rarer bottles from the cellar, including older vintages from iconic local producers. To run the "garden-to-glass" cocktail programs for both Hazel Hill and the lobby lounge, Polakovicova tapped the supremely talented Scott Beattie, making his triumphant return to Healdsburg since leaving the Michelin-starred Cyrus and defecting to St. Helena, where he worked at Meadowood and Goose & Gander.

Asserting that "the guest experience is

first and foremost" for Montage's food-and-beverage team, Cornu points out such amenities as a chef's counter in full view of two custom-made Molteni ranges and the luxurious chairs surrounding the outdoor fireplace. "They're so comfy you could spend eight hours of the day just overlooking the vineyards," he says.

The overall ambience of the resort is serene, favoring darker hues over bright colors to "blend into the canopy of the oak trees and vines," Cornu says. Covering 15.5 acres, those vines were planted with the help of partner and winemaker Jesse Katz of Devil Proof Vineyards and Aperture Cellars; at the latter, about 6 miles down the road, he'll produce wines exclusively for Montage from the mostly Bordeaux varieties they yield. "We look forward to sharing a nice glass of wine in this beautiful setting with members of the trade," Cornu says. "It's good food and good wine that will bring people together here."

"The idea of this property is that every person who will visit us will know that they are in wine country," adds Polakovicova. "People rarely get the chance to talk about what the vine is going through during the growing season. It will be amazing to be here year-round, connecting people with that aspect of wine." 



# Hard Truths

by Cheron Cowan

**IT WAS THE END OF** a very long week in New York City. Another lockdown loomed, and I was on the precipice of exhaustion and anxiety. Luckily, my weekend agenda consisted of nothing but chores and relaxation over a bottle of wine. Certainly I was craving a drink, though I couldn't determine whether I was craving the taste or the effects. In any case, two hours later, I found myself dozing off on the couch, peering sluggishly through half-closed eyes at two and a half empty wine bottles.

I awoke in the middle of the night, foggy yet panic-stricken. Blankets I didn't remember moving were disheveled across from me on a chair, and I could not find my phone. I began to look frantically around the apartment. I checked my front door: It was unlocked. Had someone come in? Still deeply buzzed, I found my laptop under one of the blankets. I logged on, trembling, and began messaging my sister-in-law.

I was frightened. I told her I couldn't find my phone and my place was a mess. An hour later, two policemen were knocking on my door, stating that my brother called and had asked that a wellness check

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*Throughout the pandemic, in a city of millions, I have found myself lonely, fearful of any minor symptom that vaguely suggested COVID-19, and stressed about future job prospects.*

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PHOTO COURTESY OF CHERON COWAN

be executed. One of them noticed me stumble and asked if I had been drinking. Ashamed and confused, I nodded. One gestured for permission to come in. I said yes and quickly pieced together an incoherent sentence about my missing phone, which he located in all of 30 seconds. There was a long, awkward moment of silence. The policemen looked at one another. Then one of them said, "We are going to step outside and call your brother to let him know that you are alright." How had I come to this? I was a fuse of anxiety that the alcohol had lit.

Throughout the pandemic, in a city of millions, I have found myself lonely, fearful of any minor symptom that vaguely suggested COVID-19, and stressed about future job prospects. Alcohol was becoming a daily instant remedy for it all. But the side effect was an overwhelming sense of

shame—because when I looked at pictures of my cohorts and acquaintances on Instagram, they all seemed to be holding it together, posing perfectly with bottles and the caption: "What I drank last night."

Reflecting on the incident, I know that I need to take full responsibility for my mental well-being in order to move forward in these challenging times. For the first time in my wine career, I have to ask myself why I am drinking in any given moment. Do I really just want to enjoy the taste of this beverage? Or am I drinking to relieve stress—am I hoping to numb my feelings?

In this industry, investigating why we drink may seem like an odd thing to do. But as someone committed to the hospitality business, I wonder how we can truly take care of others if we aren't doing the work of introspection that allows us to take care of ourselves. **SJ**





## *The Man Behind the Brands*



CERTIFIED  
*Organic*





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BRUT DE LOIRE



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OF QUALITY CRAFTED,  
MÉTHODE TRADITIONNELLE  
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