

# GOOD VITIS™

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

# Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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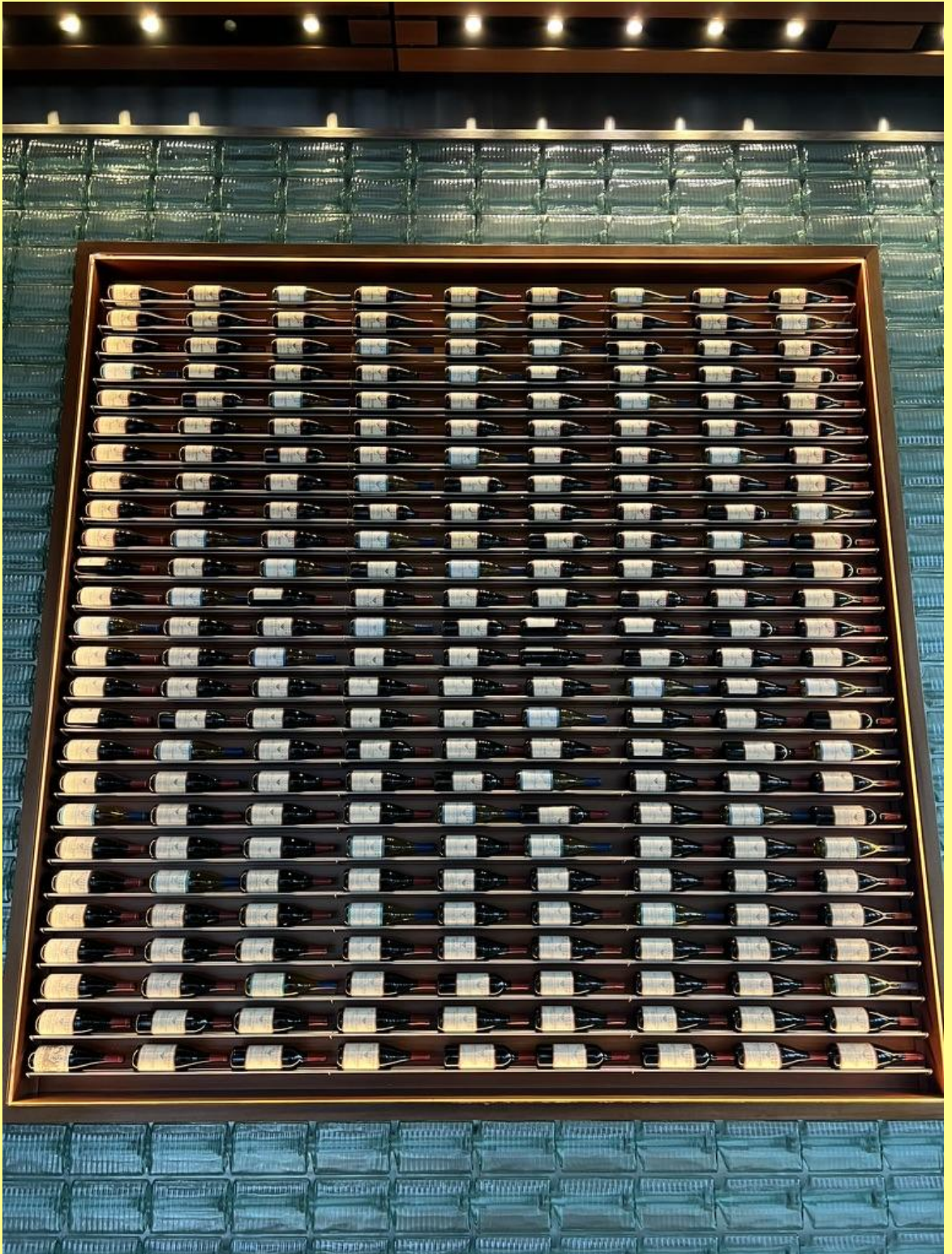


# Sonoma

The sun goes up, the sun goes down. Ripening occurs, just like you said.



# Panoply Pinot: Williams-Selyem



If I've very come across a perfect wine, I haven't known it, and I'm not sure I ever will. *Wine Enthusiast*, on the either hand, is more comfortable declaring perfection, and did so with the 2007 Williams-Selyem Litton Estate pinot noir, making it the first North American pinot to receive a perfect 100 point score by any major wine publication.

By that point, Williams-Selyem had established itself as a premier source for pinot noir. It began in the late 1970s as the garage project of Burt Williams and Ed Selyem. Their first commercial release came in 1981 under the name Hacienda Del Rio Winery, but a cease-and-desist letter in 1983 forced the friends to change the name, landing on the combination of their last names resulting in a new label beginning with the 1984 vintage. The following vintage, 1985, announced Williams-Selyem first vineyard designate pinot noir release, setting in motion the legend of one of America's premier producers of *terroir*-focused wines.

Like perfect wine, I don't have much experience with Williams-Selyem, and am thrilled that my first proper experience was a visit to the winery guided by winemaker Jeff Mangahas, who has been with the winery since 2013. Jeff joined two years after predecessor Bob Cabral was named *Wine*

ACIENDA DEL RIO WINERY  
Lot 2



1981 Sonoma County Pinot Noir

A Table Wine Vinted and Bottled by  
Acienda Del Rio Winery • P.O. Box 1080 • Healdsburg, CA

Previous page: The first Hacienda Del Rio Winery release.

*Enthusiast's* Winemaker Of The Year. We had a wide-ranging discussion, but the initial focus was the winery's use of the old school open top stainless steel dairy troughs for fermentation that began day one. The trough's uniqueness helps define what is a very purposeful and consistent winemaking approach centered around gentle extraction and reduction. As we talked and tasted, it became clear that these troughs are the core of what defines a house style that is elegant, reserved, and slow developing.

As far as he knows, Jeff believes Williams-Selyem is the only winery in the world to use these troughs for winemaking. Williams and Selyem did not originally seek them out, but rather found them when establishing their garage winemaking setup. "[The troughs] were available and affordable and seemed like they might work," Jeff said. As the years went on, the two friends and their fans liked the wines that were made in these tanks, and so they kept using them.

Once challenge with the troughs is that they are no longer made, and haven't been for a little while. Jeff and his team keep an eye on classifieds and auctions

around the country, buying them whenever they become available because they are uniquely responsible for a core part of the winery's history and wine's DNA that the winery and its ownership wants to maintain.

"They're double walled," Jeff explained as he showed us one. "This makes them great for controlling the temperature of the fermentation. Plus, because the dairy industry is so closely regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), [the troughs] have very high sanitation standards." These standards, which were last in place in the 1980s before the troughs were replaced by the dairy industry for equipment, "were higher than today's FDA wine sanitation standards."

You can see the FDA standards, for example, in the quality and smoothness of the tank's welds, which were regulated so that the beading does not provide a safe environment for bacteria to hide out. This kind of beading takes great skill and time, and when compared to standard stainless steel wine fermentation vessels puts the latter to shame. While it's not essential that beading be this smooth in a stainless steel wine tank, it does mean that cleaning the standard tank is more challenging, takes more time, and is more likely to harbor bacteria.





Previous two pages: Winemaker Jeff Mangahas shows us a trough, and a look inside one.

Fermentation vessels are a key part of any wine's final presentation. Open versus closed is one decision-point. Another is material type - wood, steel, amphora, concrete, etc. At Williams-Seylem, dairy troughs are non-negotiable.

"[The type of tank] changes the ratio of skins to juice," Jeff explained, adding that compared to traditional open top fermenters the dairy trough's unique shape - square sides with a semicircular bottom - allows for more natural movement between the skins and juice during fermentation than traditional vessels. The circular bottom creates a natural movement in the trough, creating a unique extraction process while also reducing the amount of human jostling required to achieve the desired interaction between the liquid and solids.

This more gentle extraction during the fermentation is one of several techniques aimed at creating "the house texture that Williams-Selyem is famous for." The other techniques include foot treading and a slatless basket press that preserves protein content in the grapes and prevents oxygen from escaping during pressing. This approach "builds additional

texture because” because it avoids “allowing the protein to escape, [which means] you allow the potential of that texture to escape,” Jeff explained.

Additionally, the winery is all gravity fed, which eliminates the need to force pump the wine around the winery. This means that “there is no oxidation potential” associated with pumping “because [the wine] goes straight to barrel by gravity from tank.”

While the winery has a signature house style, another key component of the brand is its numerous vineyard sources, most of which are in the north central part of Russian River Valley (RRV) where the minimal fog influence “means a longer growing season” than other parts of the RRV. Jeff pointed out that while [a longer growing season is] helpful for refining tannin, it also results in lower acid, which is less desirable. “We [therefore] pick on the earlier side” when acid levels are higher “to get redder fruit,” he said.

Jeff’s two decades of experience in the Russian River Valley, which also includes stints at Hartford Family Winery and Dutton Estate Winery, has helped him navigate vintage and climate variation among the vineyards they use in the AVA. Leveraging this experience, Jeff “[hedges his] bets” by picking from

different parts of the vineyards. For example, he “makes sure to include some hillside [vine rows to get] natural vigor regulation [of the vines during the growing season], which develops better lignification of stems, which enables whole cluster use during fermentation.”

Conversely, flatland in the Russian River Valley “has heavy clay soils [that] provide a ton more nutrients, too much sometimes.” But in lean years, these grapes can sometimes deliver components missing in hillside fruit. The goal each vintage is to find the right balance.

While vineyard row selections in the final wines vary from year-to-year, one point of consistency is the barrel regime as every pinot is aged in the same Francois Freres French barrel with the same toast level. “All our wines taste different because they’re expressions of site, not barrel type, [and because] of [our preservation] of our unique winemaking process.” The barrels are also pressurized with argon prior to filling to remove oxygen, a step that protects the wine as it barrel ages and contributes to the reductive style Williams-Selyem seeks.

Another Williams-Selyem first, at least according to the winery, is that the founders invented the

concept of the waitlist. When the winery won the 1987 California State Fair Sweepstakes Prize for top red wine, demand shot up “to where [Williams and Selyem] needed to waitlist [customers] and allocate,” Jeff told us. To this day, Williams-Selyem wines are challenging to find outside of the waitlist. This has driven prices up on the secondary market to well above the prices offered to allocation list members.

Despite producing 25 different pinot noirs in most years as well as some chardonnay, chenin blanc, zinfandel, and late harvest gewurztraminer, production is small. To mitigate the risk of not being able to meet their list members’ demands, the winery is only open to active list members.

We tasted five different pinot noirs and one chardonnay with Jeff, beginning with the 2021 Russian River Valley AVA blend; this is the most widely available Williams-Selyem wine and meant to be its entry point to the broader portfolio. It struck me as a very classic RRV pinot noir, smooth and a little plush with crispy acid, finely grained tannin, and a cola finish. The 2021 is quite primary now, but has a brilliant freshness that’s enjoyable at the

Next page: The 1987 California Sweepstakes Prize for top red wine ribbon bestowed to Williams-Selyem.



1987  
California  
State Fair

Best  
of Show

Wine  
Competition



moment. Nevertheless, evidence suggests a smart 10-year evolution ahead.

From there we tasted the 2021 Block 10 Mass Selection Estate pinot noir. The concept behind this wine is to take 18 estate different clones planted all to the same rootstock, and harvest and vinify them together. This was quite closed down when we tasted it, offering a very serious nose with deeply concentrated cherry. It is full bodied with dense finely grained tannin, bright acid, and a plush mouthfeel that delivers a juicy sensation and residual chewy tannin. The flavor profile is black in nature, with dark fruit, black pepper, tobacco, and forest floor fungus. Jeff describes it as a wine “built on differences, not similarities.” Despite its density and darkness, it has a very fresh finish and amazing acid performance that provides a palate lift. I would love to try this in 7 or 8 years.

Our final 2021 pinot noir was the high elevation and rocky Hirsch Vineyard. Jeff explained that at this site “the vines really struggle. This leads to small berries, thick skins, and lots of seeds; it’s a less fruit-driven wine.” This description passed the taste test. It starts with a very elegant mouthfeel that’s fairly rounded...and then the grip comes on big, bringing with it saline and savory qualities. There is

loads of dried herbs and black currant at this early stage. Like the Block 10 it has great acid lift on the mid palate, and like the RRV blend, has cola on the finish as well as a lot of pepper and some olive tapenade. This was aged in 60% new oak, although it doesn't come across as that oaky, at least in flavor, because Jeff uses barrels with an extra year of stave aging on them (4 years for this versus his standard 3 years for the other wines). This will be long-lived wine as well and worth setting aside for at least five years.

We then jumped back in time to taste the 2011 Terra de Promissio Vineyard pinot noir that proves not all wines made in that often disparaged vintage are worth ignoring. It has beautiful tertiary qualities and has smoothed out and balanced beautifully, showing what appropriate aging of Williams-Selyem wines can achieve. It has a bit of a Northern Rhone savory character that pairs well with sour cherry, rhubarb, and white and pink peppercorns. These flavors sit nicely atop a very polished mouthfeel. It's the first vintage of this Petaluma Gap vineyard for Williams-Selyem, and was aged in 60% new oak.

Our last pinot came by way of Olivet Lane and the 2012 vintage. This is a vineyard I'm well acquainted with through Merry Edwards' Olivet Lane pinot noir

(and chardonnay), having tasted every vintage since 2017. I mentioned this to Jeff, and he noted that he has his rows in this vineyard picked earlier than Merry Edwards does. This shows, perhaps a bit, in the surprising degree of freshness of the 2012 Williams-Selyem. It has lots of earthy notes like dried herbs and pepper, as well as baking spice. The fruit has a warmth about it that is inviting and comforting. It has nice harmonization among its structure components, which are aging symmetrically. It's likely to keep evolving in a positive direction for at least a few more years.

We finished with the 2021 Allen Vineyard chardonnay, which turned out to be my favorite wine of the lineup. Allen Vineyard develops a thick chardonnay skin, which means that under Jeff's winemaking it produces a very real tannin structure despite being aged in only 20% new oak. The nose is quite tropical with little oak awareness. The structure is gorgeous and gratifying, establishing a real presence without being heavy or overbearing. The mouthfeel - smooth, seamless, and lifted - is the selling point, although its gravelly minerality, beautiful citrus zest variety, and lovely daffodil only add to its appeal. I am sure this could age, but I am not sure I would have the patience.

These wines demonstrated a few consistent characteristics, namely lift, structural completeness, and density of flavor. While they're not all wines I would crave to have, I'm sold on the house style that has made the winery so well respected and attracted so many long-term loyalists.

I have heard rumblings from some of these loyalists in the past few years that new releases are showing differently, a little more extracted and less personality-driven. Given my lack of prior experience, I cannot comment on this. What the tasting did instill, more than anything, is a desire to see how the wide variety of vineyards sourced are expressed through the Williams-Selyem process. I have no doubt that, among the full lineup, there are wines I would want to add to my personal collection. It's not hard to suggest that readers make a point of pursuing their own Williams-Selyem adventure.



# *Terroir*

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir's* particular characteristics in each wine.

*Terroir* is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on 32

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

**THE COUNCIL**  
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

*Pinot Noir*

VINTAGE 2019

*Rosella's Vineyard 34%*  
*Garys' Vineyard 34%*  
*Pisoni Vineyard 32%*

# THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



*124 cases produced*

**ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME**

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



024

MORET  
PN 114

Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stags Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

# Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT  
NAPA VALLEY



**CABERNET SAUVIGNON**  
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Midas, Ganymede, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



**MERLOT**  
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



**PETT VERDOT**  
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



**FIANO**  
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



**CABERNET FRANC**  
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.



It was an awakening. That 83' Smith-Madrone reminded me that I was alive, that I was a man full of energy, love, and passion. It was like being young again.



