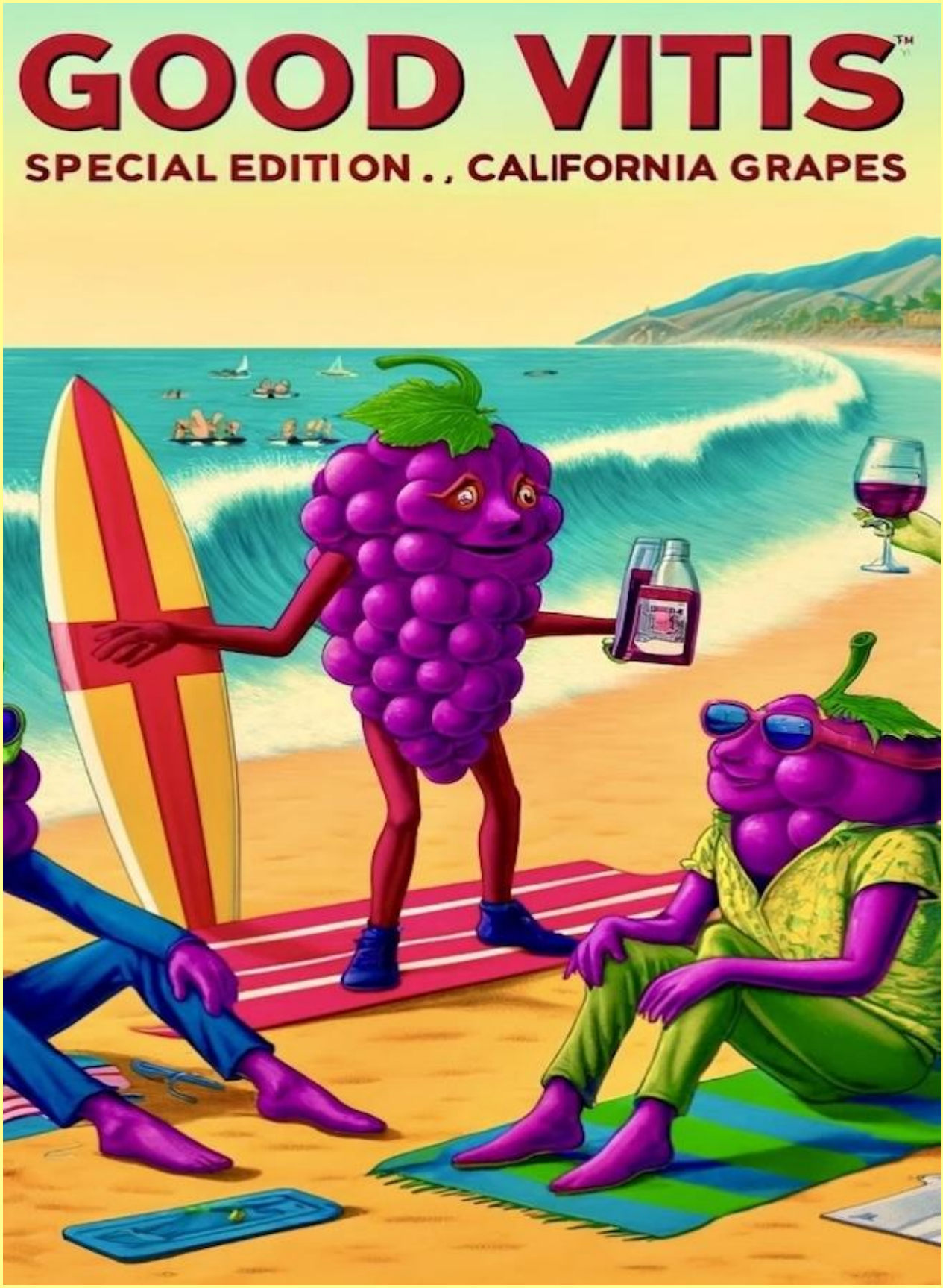

Spring/Summer 2024

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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The Santa Lucia Highlands

“The Santa Lucia [Mountains] stood up against the sky to the west and kept the valley from the open sea, and they were dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous. I always found in myself a dread of west and a love of east. Where I ever got such an idea I cannot say, unless it could be that the morning came over the peaks of the Gabilans and the night drifted back from the ridges of the Santa Lucias. It may be that the birth and death of the day had some part in my feeling about the two ranges of mountains.” - John Steinbeck

This is not the description winemakers in the Santa Lucia Highlands, or the SLH, would be looking for from native son John Steinbeck: Unfriendly and dangerous. My recent experience visiting the SLH inspired sensations quite different from these. If I had to pull anything from Steinbeck's experience, it would be that the SLH's wines are dark beasts in the wine bliss depth sense, that perhaps the sun arriving at the vineyards at the start of the day as it comes over the Gabilan Mountains help to awaken them for the serious work they put in that the sun, eventually setting over them, helps to nurture. One thing is for sure: The wines of the SLH are rich and profoundly of a very specific place.

I have become well acquainted with a few special wines from the SLH American Viticultural Area (AVA) since starting Good Vitis. For almost as long as I've enjoyed these wines, I have tried to organize a visit. It's not the most convenient wine region to attend given its distance from major airports and the absence, more or less, of standard wine region amenities like hotels and restaurants. While a relatively many American wine lovers can speak to the Napa Valley or Sonoma County from personal experience, few can do so of the SLH.

Through occasional remote winemaker interviews

and my many tastings of Clarice Wine Company and Beau Marchais pinot noirs and recent tasting of ROAR pinots and chardonnay (all made from some of the most famed SLH vineyards), I began to get the sense that applying the goal of Good Vitis, to ever expand my own and my readers' wine knowledge, to the SLH necessitated a visit. As the pilgrimage proved, all the interviews and samples and meditations are simply not enough to enable the understanding and fair convenance of the sense of place and people that birth these wines.

Like any wine region, geography matters. I find this to be especially true of the SLH having now experienced it first-hand. All regions have topography, but few are as stark or stunning as the SLH. Most regions have weather eccentricities, but few are as dynamic as the SLH. And most regions have unique combinations of topography and weather, but few are as complicated as the SLH. It's this combination of topography and weather along with the region's relative remoteness that sets the stage for a group of dedicated winemakers and grape growers to offer something special.

The Topography

The SLH is part of the Salinas Valley, which is known

as the salad bowl of the world and is the setting for several Steinbeck stories. For many sections of the drive along Highway 101 that runs north-south through it, lettuce crops cover the valley floor. Eventually, when we got up onto the hillsides and looked down on the lettuce fields, it appeared as if the soil had been needlepointed with leafy greens.

Entering the Valley from the north on the 101, looking up into the mostly bare green hills above the valley floor, a land-before-time sensation entered my mind where it has set up a permanent association with the words "Santa Lucia Highlands."

Between the lettuce valley floor and the emerald-y-shamrock-y upholstered mountains, the whole valley gives off a sense of magical lushness untouched by humans. Granted, we'd arrived during a pause from what had been an very wet period, and that surely had contributed to the Jurassic era vibes. But even still, and despite the agricultural workers in the fields and the pavement on which we drove, I don't think a Spinosaurus drinking from the Salinas River would have surprised me much had it appeared on the other side of an upcoming bend.

Per Steinbeck's description, on the eastern side of the valley is the Gabilan Range and on the western

Previous page: Miner's Lettuce growing on the Pisoni estate.

side the Santa Lucia Mountains, the latter being the site of the SLH appellation. The SLH constitutes a 18-mile long portion of the Santa Lucia Mountains that starts on top of a bench on the western side of River Road, which parallels Highway 101 and follows the Salinas River, and heads up onto the slopes.

There are vineyards nearby that are not part of the SLH AVA. They include Arroyo Secco, Carmel Valley, Chelone, Hames Valley, Monterey, San Antonio Valley, San Bernabe, and San Lucas. Some of these are visible from the SLH, and all are part of the larger Monterey growing region, which cumulatively has over 43,000 acres of vines. The SLH is a small portion contributing 5,750 planted acres.

The Weather

There is significant temperature change from south to north in the SLH, as well as from the lower bench, which sits at around 40 feet above sea level, to the upper reaches of the AVA that push a few hundred feet north of 2,000 feet above sea level. We saw this undulation in the variable bud break development we observed from north to south and from low to high elevation as we worked our through the valley.

With temperature, a popular descriptor among the wine folk that we experienced ourselves is “a degree a mile, from hotter in the south to cooler in the north.” With 18 miles of AVA and an intra-AVA elevation change of as much as 2000 feet, there is a massive range of growing season conditions on vineyard-by-vineyard and block-by-block bases.

The most noticeable climatic aspect of the SLH for me, however, is wind, which enters at the northern end of the Valley as it comes off the Pacific Ocean, and rips southward beyond the edge of the SLH. The wind is notable not just because of its velocity and its routineness (nearly everyone used the same time, noon, in describing when it arrived every single day like clockwork), but also because of its cool temperature. The wind picks up

That said, temperatures in the SLH are not notably hot, and by American wine standards the SLH is considered a cool(ish) climate growing region. It picks over the Monterey Bay, which is one of North America’s deepest underwater canyons rivaling the Grand Canyon in size. This makes the water quite cold, and the wind in turn picks up that coolness before setting off down the Salinas Valley. Average speeds of 15 miles per hour are routine, as are gusts exceeding 25 mph.

In the vineyards, these winds can save young buds during cold spells and help dry vines out before mildew sets in during particularly wet periods. However, if strong gusts are plentiful when buds are young and vulnerable, they can do damage.

Wind can also deliver hot or cold air. If wind moderates temperature, as it often does in the SLH, it slows sugar ripening, giving grapes more time to develop the compounds that turn into aromas and flavors in wines. It also gives the stems, seeds, and skins time to develop complexity so long as there are sufficient temperatures to coax that kind of maturation. And when sufficient ripening does occur, the wines can show up with especially big personalities.

The SLH doesn't experience much rain, which means that while for many an SLH producer the principle standard is dry farming, drip irrigation tubing is hung through most vineyards in case a season is particularly dry; it wasn't uncommon to hear that the irrigation hadn't been turned on in several years, but is occasionally used. Add this to the temperature variance and strong winds, and it becomes a little more clear why SLH wines have their unique climatic character.

The Remoteness

The Salinas Valley has always been a center for agriculture, which is land-intensive and doesn't require much of a population. The largest city is Salinas, which is home to 160,000 mostly local laborers, business owners, and their families. It's not exactly the hub you'd expect for a California wine region, and it isn't one. The closest thing to a hub is the adjacent cities of Carmel and Carmel-By-The-Sea. Located on the coast north of the Salinas Valley, they're about an hour from the top end of the SLH and offer the full range of accommodations, food, and attractions. Most wine-seeking tourists are likely to be more comfortable there than in Salinas, for better or worse.

The SLH's remoteness contributes to that land-before-time feeling I got when visiting. Because population density isn't really a thing in the SLH AVA, and there isn't a lot of infrastructure in or around it, the local wine tourism isn't much to write home about. There are a few wineries with tasting rooms in the SLH, but some don't offer tastings at all while others put their tasting rooms in Carmel or Carmel-By-The-Sea. Visiting the SLH takes homework, planning, and time, but is worth it for

those seeking new wine adventures.

The unique dynamics of the SLH allow wineries to be as insular as they want. It means they can spend less time and resources on visitors and more time and resources on vineyards and winemaking (as well as requiring more marketing to sell their wares). This doesn't guarantee better wine, but it does make it more likely that the wines are based on origin. Our itinerary was a list of wineries that not only focus on reflecting the place, but also recognize the challenge it takes to succeed and have accordingly adopted mindsets that are enabling them to do so.

Readers who want to seek out SLH wines are encouraged to include those covered in this report on their shopping list. Prospective SLH trips benefit from consulting the SLH Wine Artisans, which is the trade association for the AVA and a good information resource. They can be found at santaluciahighlands.com. They helped organize our visit, and I am grateful to them for their assistance.

Now, let's get on with the wine...

First Stop: Morgan & McIntyre at the Double L

Our first destination was the iconic and organic Double L Vineyard owned by Morgan Winery where we met Jackie and Annie Lee, daughters of Morgan proprietors Dan and Donna Lee, and one of the SLH's true OGs, Steve McIntyre. Double L is a hell of a vineyard. It starts at the bench where the AVA begins, and its 65 acres (of which 48 are planted to vine) stretches quite high into the mountains above.

Double L a great introduction to the SLH because within its boundaries you experience all of the aspects I covered in the introduction to this article: The topography, the weather, and the remoteness. The entire thing is planted up the side of a mountain. The wind blows through it, but at different speeds depending on how far up the mountain you are. Ditto with the temperatures. It's anonymously placed along River Road with very little around it other than more vineyards and the lettuce-covered valley floor. Driving up into its midpoint, as we did, and then walking up towards the top, as we also did, gave me a sense of 'wow, they can do a lot here.'

Jackie, Annie, and Steve greeted us with a picnic and some wines from Morgan and McIntyre Family Wines to kick our two-day visit off. Jackie handles communications for Morgan while Annie wears hats

in the vineyard and business operations. They literally grew up in the Double L vineyard, and the pride they have in it is obvious and understandable.

Back in 2019, I did a write up on a full case of samples I received from Morgan and a conversation I had with winemaker Sam Smith. After doing my tasting notes, we served the wines along with Thanksgiving dinner, which went splendidly.

At the time, we tasted 2017s and 2018s. The line up included wines from the SLH as well as the Arroyo Seco AVA. The highlights then were the dry and semi-dry Double L rieslings, the Double L pinot noir, and a SLH syrah called G17. I've included that profile in this California Grapes Special Edition as a From The Archives piece.

This time, given our location, we focused on Double L wines including the chardonnay, pinot noir, and syrah. I'm grateful to the Lee sisters who brought current and old vintages of each. Unsurprisingly, I preferred the older vintages to the newer ones. The 2010 Double L Syrah was especially good, showing tertiary brilliance, and is a wine that I could spend a long night enjoying in pretty much any setting. The 2012 Double L Chardonnay had not only held up well, but was nearly as good as the syrah, while the

Previous page: the Double L Vineyard.

two vintages of pinot came down to more subtle differences.

Steve McIntyre owns McIntyre Family Wines and is one of the founders of Monterey Wine Company, through which Steve has planted more than 20% of the AVA's vineyards. To spend any time in the SLH is to enjoy the sights, sounds, and wines of Steve's hard work. He brought with the 2019 SLH Chardonnay to show what an AVA blend could achieve, and a 2019 Estate Pinot Noir to give us a glimpse of what his own property produces. I found both to be more about the structure and texture in terms of the impressive bits, which is where I naturally focus, and less about the aroma or flavor profiles. These are current releases, which I think is a good demonstration of the power that SLH wines can achieve in the sense that they're built with all the stuff needed to evolve beyond the primary stage.

Second Stop: Caraccioli Cellars

From Double L we drove back down into the valley to the small city of Gonzales where we met Caraccioli Cellars owner and winemaker Scott Caraccioli at his production facility.

Caraccioli is a family affair founded in 2006 based on a single 124 acre estate vineyard called Escolle planted in 2008. It's a winery, frankly, that far more people should know exists. As Josh Reynolds has said, they produce some of America's best sparkling wine. I can now confirm this badge is well-deserved.

When we rolled in, pleasantries were exchanged over a fast-paced tank sample extravaganza. Scott hustles like a dad with a son who plays hyper competitive soccer would. Perpetual motion describes our first fifteen minutes together racing from tank to tank, sipping and spitting, sipping and spitting.

I never say 'no' to tank or barrel samples because they are interesting mostly because you get to see the mannerisms of a winemaker in action, but I don't seek them out because they don't say anything informative about what the finished wine will achieve - and that's what matters to those of us who pay for them. I also don't ever publish scores based on barrel samples, and frankly I judge those who do

because consumers should not make decisions based on unfinished wine notes. A lot can and should change from aging vessel to bottle. So, I was thankful when we turned the final corner and there was a table set up with finished wines. Scott sat down opposite us, and the pace slowed as we got down to proper business over civilized wine.

Scott's mentor was the late famed Michel Salgues, who knew more than a lot about sparkling wine. Salgues spent twenty years with Roederer Estate in the Anderson Valley where he helped establish the winery and, in many ways, the region as a wine-producing one. This means he played a critical role in developing and advancing the sparkling wine category in America. We're not exactly known for our sparklers, and that's for good reason, but it's impossible to talk about American sparkling wine without giving credit to the brilliance that is Roederer Estate's L'Ermitage, which could be argued is the bar-setter for American sparkling wine on a large production scale.

Salgue was not just a winemaker, but a vigneron in the traditional sense that his knowledge of viticulture was, I'm told, quite something. He left Roederer in 2004, and was with the Caracciolis when they started their winery in 2006. He was there to

help with the management of Escolle, and that assuredly paid dividends when it came to building the winemaking program because the two could be integrated along their respective development paths.

The Caraccioli facility is an old asparagus processing plant, and was well suited to be used for wine production: It's large space is filled with tanks of various size and material, and is a good reminder that many in the SLH wine business come from families who had been, or continue to be, involved in other agricultural business in the valley.

Several proprietors we met on the trip grow produce staples like lettuce and asparagus as well as wine grapes. In fact, many of the multi-generational wine producers in the SLH started with other produce and added wine grapes to the mix later on.

This dynamic contributes to the unique feel of the SLH wine industry because it means growers think about their vineyards as part of a larger agricultural pursuit tha further grounds them in the local culture and economy. It also creates a feel for wine-loving visitors that is very different from the more monolithic areas of Napa and Sonoma north of the SLH where wine is the sole focus and

therefore dominates the culture and dictates the amenities.

Getting back to Caraciolli, the partnership with Salgues was secured with Scott's agreement to Michel's three no's (particular to Caraciolli): No non-vintage wines, no pinot meunier, and no 375 milliliter bottles. These could easily come off a snobbish, but there is good reason for them. As an example, with the banning of NV's, "you have to create a house style [for NV], and we can't grow enough grapes to do that consistently from year-to-year," Scott explained. Instead, the focus is on highlighting the vintage variation of "California's sunshine" in "Champagne's structure," the latter a reference to the traditional Champagne method used at Carracioli for its sparkling wines.

That's a hard lift, especially since defining Champagne's structure can be a challenge. I would argue that there are more factors that determine a sparkling wine's structure than any other type of wine because there are more steps and decision points, like tirage, extended lees aging, riddling, discorging, and dosage liquor. There just aren't any *terroirs* outside Champagne that can come out of that process as elegantly. This is why it's important that Scott adds the California flare; it's not just a

marketing line or a winemaking challenge, but also an acknowledgement of reality. This will turn a lot of Champagne purists off, but it should not; I cannot remember an sparkling wine outside of Champagne that reminds me as much of Champagne's structure as Caraccioli does. It does not taste like Champagne, but then that's not the point. It is Scott's best foot forward in *Méthode Champenoise* with SLH fruit.

There's one more thing I should say about Scott that comes through in the glass: If he was born in France, he'd be a grower Champagne producer. Don't get me wrong, there's very little French about him. What I mean is that he's fanatical. Champagne method winemaking is inordinately technical, takes saintly patience, and because of those two things requires incredible precision, granular attention to detail, and the commitment of a lifetime. It's a combination of personality traits that most of us just don't have. Scott does, and it shows in the wines.

The ripping acid we tasted first in the tank samples of future release base wines, or *vin clairs*, prepared us for our tasting of a trio of current releases: The 2018 Brut Cuvée, Blanc de Noirs, and Brut Rosé. Despite the significant bottle aging prior to release,

these wines still ripped in a way that suggests long-term aging could be rewarded.

I found the Brut Rosé the easiest to drink and the Blanc de Noirs more acidic than I prefer, but then I'm a Bérèche style fan that prefers a more modest level of acid and fuller bodied achieved through lees agitation and a *dosage* liquor that supports that profile. This doesn't mean neither were good - they are both very good, but the crème de le crème of the trio was the Brut Cuvée, which showed an elegance I've not found in any American sparkling wine except for L'Ermitage.

The influence of the pinot noir in these three wines is quite evident through the bounty of red fruits they all offer. With Caraccioli's Escolle vineyard sitting towards the cooler northern end of the SLH, a location that Scott noted allows them to "do this style of [sparkling] pinot noir, " adding that "we can make sparkling at 13 brix," which is shorthand for high acid, serious minerality wine that expresses the varietal's delicate red fruit.

The Brut Rosé is ready right now, but for a palate like mine the Blanc de Noirs needs time for the acidic edge to smooth a bit and the palate to fill out. The Brut Cuvée is more approachable now than

the Blanc de Noirs, but it also shows the most potential for upside with aging.

My biggest dose of sparkling wine snobby is reserved for the mousse, which is the collection of bubbles on the surface of the wine, in the glass, that first touch your tongue when you take a sip. You can move the mousse around in your mouth before swallowing to get a sense of its construction and how well it can coat the palate. I find the minerality of the wine can be enjoyed in it as well. There should be a noticeable physical sensation associated with it, something you can't miss, usually delivered through its texture and density, but it shouldn't overwhelm any other element of the wine. The mousse on all three were good, but the Brut Cuvée's mousse was exceptional. I can still taste and feel it.

At some point in our conversation, Scott was passed a bottle of the 2012 Brut Rosé to demonstrate just how good his sparkling wines are. This is supposed to be the most approachable of Caraccioli's sparking wines (there are more than what we tried), in most years, so a 2012 that's doing well would be a statement. Doing well turned out to be an understatement.

It remains a racy wine, but has developed tertiary

traits of pinot noir - think fungly forest floor, etc. - that perform really well on a bigger, rounder, and creamier structure than currently exists in the 2018. The mousse was fine, dense, and had a bit of sweet umami on it. The backend showed some delicious nuttiness, which is something I love on older sparkling wine. If you get a chance to try this one, don't miss it.

We also tried a trio of still red wines: The 2021 pinot noir and syrah and the 2022 gamay. The latter is an interesting compilation of ⅓ carbonically produced wine, ⅓ concrete aged, and ⅓ steel aged with 25% whole cluster production. It's weightier than I expected and Moulin á vent-esque in flavor profile. The pinot was tasty as well, but the syrah was my favorite of the three. It was plush, elegant, and refined, and showed a nice amount of savory elements.

I'd say it's entirely understandable to come to Caraccioli for the red wine, but I'd put money on people staying for the sparklers. That's where Scott's fanaticism shows through the clearest and most profoundly. No line up of American sparkling wine is complete, or as good, without the inclusion of Caraccioli Brut Cuvée.

Third Stop: Pisoni Vineyards

I don't know where to start with our Pisoni visit, I guess other than to say it was amazing. Pisoni is one of *the* most important names in SLH history. We were met there by Mark Pisoni, son of patriarch Gary Pisoni. Mark and his brother Jeff represent the third generation of family farmer on this 235 acre farm.

Although only 35 acres are planted to grape vines, the entire property is a highly cared-for thriving parcel of the planet. It starts a few miles up from the lower bench of the SLH AVA, and sprawls out over various "fingers" of the Santa Lucia Mountains that descend down from the top of the range like lava flows, creating valleys and mesas. There's real beauty in the untouched serenity of much of the SLH.

Mark met us in his car at the entrance to the property, and we followed him up to a area that I can't really explain other than to walk you through it. There's a multi-level gathering area set up under a pergola with tables and bars made of wood; a couple of different types of permanent grills; and a larger serving bar made of stone with a sink and other amenities. Off to one side is a deck overlooking a large pond. To the right of the deck is large waterfall that feeds the pond. You access a stone walking path from the deck that winds its

Previous page: The best picture I could get of "the area."

way to the top of the waterfall. The waterfall's brink emerges from a cavern the family has created inside the hill upon which all of this is built. Inside the cavern is a large dining area, and off one side of the cavern a long cave has been created.

That's the best I can do, which is a shame because the totality of the site is far more than its parts as I've described them. It's an area, along with the entire property, that was created for the enjoyment of the family and the 40 or so employees that help the Pisonis farm the land. There is a strong sense of admiration for the land and obligation to ensure its health that comes through when Mark talks about how they approach being good stewards of it.

The same pride shows up in Mark's description of the Pisoni's employees, who work not just the wine grapes, but several other agricultural products as well. The family provides housing for the staff, many of which have been there for decades. As a sign of respect and appreciation for them, the vineyard blocks are named after team members, "guys that [Mark] grew up with, guys working their butts off."

At this point we had left the lair after starting off

with a wonderful rosé of pinot noir bottled under the Pisoni's Lucy brand and were walking twoards the vineyards. We stopped at several vantage points along the way where Mark had stashed bottles of wine. While there are a lot of vines, most of the property is left to its own devices. "We keep (a lot) of space open for animals and hiking," Mark explained, who added that they bring his sons' boy scouts to the property with some regularity for camping and other adventures.

There are some areas being "worked" for purposes of encouraging natural biodiversity and health. One area is dedicated to curating a selection local plants to create a habitat for the area's insects and critters. There's another area where they beekeep. Nearby the bees is a farm of various fruit trees.

One major viticultural pursuit is preventing erosion in and around the vineyards, which is a very real threat considering the property is essentially a series of mountainside tiered mesas carved up by valleys. They compost on site and add it to the vineyard soil to help feed cover crops. The idea is to "add organic matter, increase everything" to ensure that erosion isn't a regular issue.

The Pisoni vineyards are divided up into small

Previous page: Mark leading us around the vineyards.

blocks, many of which are physically separated from each other. This makes the estate “super hard to farm,” Mark explained, but the upside is that it “helps create a bunch of variety” in terms of grape characteristics that make the wines more interesting.

The wines are sold mostly under two labels: The approachable Lucy and cellar bate Lucia by Pisoni. We tried the Lucy 2023 rosé of pinot noir and 2021 gamay, both of which were quite good and showed impressive texture at the lower price point. Lucy wines are made from estate and non-estate fruit, while Lucia by Pisoni are all estate vines.

Current Lucia releases include the 2022 chardonnay and pinot noir and 2021 syrah, the latter two from the Soberanes Vineyard, which is vineyard partnership with the Franscioni family that both use as estate fruit. It’s a jewel in the crown of SLH grand cru sites, most of which involve these two families.

The chardonnay gets full malolactic treatment, “but not much [lees] stirring,” which shows through in a bit of reduction. It’s entirely native yeast, which Mark says “gives it length and more complexity.” I wrote

down a note about the copious amounts of texture it offers, and I fully endorse this wine as amongst the very most compelling example of SLH chardonnay I've had. The pinot noir delivers great texture as well, based in part on some whole cluster inclusion as well as the very rocky soils of Soberanes that allow the roots to grow deep in search of water and provide good drainage. The 2022 offers lots of red, black, and blue fruit to go with fungal forest floor and very pretty violets. There is a lot going on in this wine, but much if it remains undelineated at this young stage. I'd love to try it in half a decade.

The syrah, however, dominates my memory of Lucia wines. It's meaty, savory, and spicy, and very dense. "It's [just] one cluster per shoot" on the vines, Mark said, which helps explains the density and chewy texture. I love this style of meaty syrah, something with a wild or feral character, and it was my first true wine love. I originally discovered it in the Rocks Garden district that's associated with Washington but located in Oregon. The Northern Rhone, where this style originates, has emerged as one of my favorite geographies, and every once-in-a-while I find it in California (the first time was a 2007 Arns Melanson Vineyard syrah from, surprisingly, Napa).


Lucy
2023
GAMAY NOIR

Lucia syrah is for true lovers of the varietal, but even more so the SLH is a domestic sweet spot for this kind of syrah profile. preferences. Last year I picked the Rosella's Vineyard syrah out of a ROAR lineup as my favorite of their wines. The 2010 Morgan Double L syrah we tried earlier in the day was pretty damn good, and this Lucia Soberanes syrah knocked my socks off. As I try to narrow my future purchasing down to wines that I'm always going to be excited to open, I've made a list of specific bottles I want to focus on and several SLH syrahs are on it.

I've respected the legend of Pisoni from historical and reputational perspectives, but it was never grounded in any reality I'd experienced. After visiting and tasting, I get it now. As humans they're good people. As farmers they're experienced and talented. As winemakers they know their vineyards and their fruit and how to convert them into great wine. The standout density of Lucia wines and the above-category-average textures of Lucy wines are evidence of a place and a family and a team that are seemingly impossible to separate. Pisoni is pure SLH in the most communal and nature-connected sense, which is another way of saying *terroir*. Pisoni is SLH *terroir*.

Forth Stop: The Franscioni Family and ROAR Wines

Note: Last year I profiled the Franscioni family and their winery, ROAR, so I won't go into their story much on this occasion. For those who missed the piece, it's included in this special issue as a From The Archives article towards the end of the report.

After Pisoni, we meet up with Gary Franscioni and his sons, Adam and Nick, who took us for a tour of several vineyards before decamping us at Gary's cellar where we ate lunch and enjoyed a few wines.

Our first stop was the Sierra Mar vineyard. The drive up to it from River Road requires a vehicle with good ground clearance and so we all piled into Gary's Ford F10,0000 truck. A bit like Pisoni's layout, the Franscioni and Franscioni+Pisoni vineyards have some physical separation within themselves as they spread out over the Santa Lucia Mountains.

We started at Sierra Mar Vineyard, which was planted in 2007 in a bit of a constellation layout with the main blocks adjacent to each other in the center with four detached plots orbiting it on the periphery.

Similar to the Pisoni estate, the vines sit atop mesas between the valleys that run from the top of the Santa Lucias down to the Salinas Valley floor.

It's a site that exemplifies the topographical and climatic diversity I explained in the opening section of this SLH profile. The diversity of locations within just one vineyard produces a range of characteristics within the same varietal. It's a big part of what makes the SLH a popular spot for grape sourcing, and the mastery of the Franscionis farming talents makes their grapes the most sought after along with Pisoni.

Sierra Mar is home to perhaps the most iconic SLH plot of vines, what is informally referred to as "the island" vineyard. It's one of the constellation plots of Sierra Mar and the highest in elevation, sitting atop and taking up the entirety of a mesa nearly surrounded by valleys. While it makes for an incredible picture, it's a pain in the ass to farm. Getting there requires driving through the entire main section of Sierra Mar and, upon exiting it, taking a long dirt road around the back side of the island's mesa to reach it.

After working our way through Sierra Mar, we visited Gary's Vineyard and their newest one, WindRock Vineyard, which is a partnership with the Pisonis and was first harvested commercially just last year for use in AVA blends. "It probably won't be a single vineyard until the 2025 vintage, although we're not

Previous page: The island of Sierra Mar Vineyard.

sure yet," Nick told me. From there we drove to Gary's cellar, passing by Rosella's Vineyard, which is named after his wife. Each of these vineyards is very personal to Gary and his family, some of it in partnership with their close friends, the Pisoni family. The vines are not only named after family, but are themselves family and treated as such. Farming is more than a livelihood; it is an expression of the family's passion and hard work.

This ethos comes, at least in part, from the multigenerational nature of the Salinas Valley agricultural sector. One of the benefits this culture bestows upon the wine business, which requires decades of work to max out its potential, is that it means the care with which they grow their grapes and make their wine as much about what the results reflect of the family as it does the commercial viability of the resulting product; wine is how they record their family history.

On the wine front, we enjoyed several ROAR wines, including a chardonnay, two pinots, and a syrah. I was engaged in our conversation too much to take notes, but the experience continued my fondness for the ROAR wines that I first tasted last year for

Previous page: WindRock Vineyard.

the winery's profile. The syrah, a 2009 Gary's Vineyard Syrah, was perhaps the highlight of the SLH visit for me. I know I've already said it, but SLH syrah is really, really good.

It was nice to spend time with the Franscionis in person after doing the remote profile last year, and it was especially nice because I got to experience the familial camaraderie between the current generation and the one that will eventually take the enterprise over. They grow grapes for a lot of clients, each of whom puts their own spin on them. The ROAR spin is one of big personality, reflecting the particular Franscioni family spirit that is the human component of *terroir*. To drink ROAR wine is to experience a big part of the SLH DNA

Final Stop: Odonata and Joyce Wines

The final stop of the trip was a twofer: Denis Hoey's Odonata and Russell Joyce's Joyce Wine Company, which the latter located in Arroyo Seco but making several wines from SLH grapes. We met up at Odonata and hung out in the newly erected library in a back corner of the tasting room.

In fact, this was the only winery we visited with a tasting room in the SLH. Denis explained that the library was created to have a place for people who wanted to spend more time meditating on Odonata wines, and that he would focus on organizing library tastings in the appropriately named library.

We all sat down together and tasted through lineups of Odonata and Joyce. Denis has been making wine for over 15 years. He farms a 2-acre estate vineyard and sources the remaining grapes from a variety of vineyards from inside and outside of the SLH to produce 22,000 cases of wine annually.

If I had to summerize my impression of Odonata in one word, it would be 'fun.' Denis has a hell of a time making wine, and the wines, even the most serious ones, are fun. One of the results of this fun-seeking effort is that it's a challenging portfolio to build a narrative around, and I don't mean that in any normative sense.

There are three lines of wines at Odonata: The signature Odonata wines, the Cotes du Denis line, and the Odonata Reserve wines.

The standard Odonata line, described as “the label that started it all,” is the largest with the website (as of April 2024 when we visited)) listing two sparkling wines, 10 dry still wines, and one sweet wine. The CdD is a label for experimental wines and new varietals. The 2022s on offer are currently a sauvignon blanc and gamay. The Reserve line is essentially for barrel selections. There are two sparkling and four still wines currently on offer, and they are all older vintages.

The selections offer a big range of varietals and, to a lesser extent, style variation. Of all the SLH wineries I’ve experienced, Odonata offers the most diverse range. The tasting room, complete with a large patio, is a lively place. This is where you go for Santa Lucia Mountains-adjacent wine fun.

Denis started us off with two of his sparkling wines, the 2018 Reserve Blanc de Blanc and the 2019 Tondre Vineyard Sparkling Riesling. The BdB showed big bubbles in the glass, but had a lighter mousse and lots of yellow orchard fruit and orange marmalade.

Denis picked the chardonnay for this on the riper size (~19 brix, high relative to what would be an industry standard for blanc to blanc) and gave it 3 grams of dosage. This treatment shows in a ripe, full body with more rounded shoulders and softer acid.

While I enjoyed the BdB, the Tondre Vineyard really stood out to me. I have a soft spot for sekt, the name of sparkling riesling made in Germany, and I was thrilled to take a sip and write down, 'wow, that's riesling' as the variety really shined through. The 6 grams of dosage helps it build a thick, enlightened mousse upon which machine oil, apricot, green apple, mint, and white pepper danced. It was super fresh and I give it the ole Siskel and Ebert two thumbs up.

At this point, Russell stepped in with his 2022 Tondre Vineyard Pinot Noir. Russell and Denis are long-time close friends. Like Denis, Russell produces several different labels so as to capture the various *terroirs* and varietals in a clear way for consumers to track.

The Tondre Vineyard Pinot Noir had the most funky, red-fruited nose of any wine we tried on the trip. Russell didn't use a lot of whole cluster in the 2022 vintage, and put just 25% of it on new French oak.

Previous page: The Santa Lucia Mountains

These decisions produced a lightly extracted, delicate profile that set up the surprisingly sweet fruit flavor profile quite nicely. Structurally it was very shiny and smooth with strawberry flavor for days along with violets and dirty moist soil. It showed a bit of reduction.

We then switched to the 2021 Odonata Escolle Vineyard Pinot Noir sourced from the Caracciolis. This wine was made in puncheons and showed traditional SLH roundness and size. The red fruit was crispy on the palate, and went nicely with spice, pepper, and emerging purple floral flavors. It was quite taught when we tried it, and I think it's going to need a few years to start unwinding.

After that, we found our way into the 2022 Russell Joyce Arroyo Seco Gamay. The nose was unmistakably Panda brand grape-flavored licorice, which somehow made sense to me given its carbonic, ambient yeast, and 100% whole cluster origination. Russell pressed it at 5 brix and finished the ferment in oak. The result is a low alcohol, fresh fruit-forward gamay with a bit of menthol on the finish that's very satisfying to drink.

Up next was the 2019 Odonata Spiketail, a blend of 60% syrah and 40% grenache both from the Hook Vineyard in the SLH. My first note, pardon the French, was "fucking good. Savory salinity, briar patch fruit and spice, orange marmalade." The fruit was dense, spiced with the entire baking pantry, and supported by dense, very finely grained tannin. It was one of the standouts of the trip, and surprise surprise, it is syrah-dominant.

And speaking of syrah, we finished off with the 2021 Odonata Sierra Mar Vineyard Syrah, a fine example of the fist-in-a-velvet-glove profile. Finely grained tannin builds to meet the juicy acidity. Black and blue fruit balances with a bit of gamey salinity and Mission Fig. Quiet good, making the syrahs on the trip a five-for-five experience.

The wines from Odonata and Joyce were both good, but for both men their efforts are more than just what comes out of their respective wineries. Denis views his efforts at Odonata, one of the few wineries with an in-AVA tasting room, as part of building out the "infrastructure" of the SLH. "I want people to feel at home. Be comfortable, come as you are [to the winery] and have a good time." For his part, Russell is "fighting the fight to show the different styles in SLH," not just the region's prototypical big fruited

style.

Both offer wines and stories different from the other wineries we visited on this trip, and both make an unusual range of varieties for the SLH. Odonata's options have previously been listed, while Joyce offers everything from the expected pinot noir and chardonnay to lesser grown varieties like chenin blanc, gamay, merlot, and mourvèdre.

Their respective winemaking approaches however, are different as are the vineyard and AVA sourcing. This is, among several reasons, why both are worth trying.

Summing The SLH Up

Previous page: A Pisoni vineyard block.

The SLH is a challenging region to categorize, package, wrap, affix with a bow and ribbon, and send off for the Instagram influencer unboxing post. The SLH is basically one big hillside farmed by a combination of founding multigenerational families and young experimental start ups. If that sounds simple, it is not; it is a mighty diverse hillside happy to be made in the numerous styles that reflect the big personalities defining what it means to be an SLH wine.

While the SLH is not simple, it is not particularly complicated either: It is a single hillside making mostly pinot noir and chardonnay. This is no knock. Buried within the AVA - and within blocks of single vineyards - are a multitude of microclimates. Burgundy is a bunch of distinct vineyard blocks and makes mostly pinot noir and chardonnay, too. The more accurate and appropriate term for the SLH (and Burgundy) is “complex.”

Like Burgundy, the best way to understand the SLH is to methodically taste location by location and producer by producer, working your way up and down the mountainside as you move from one end of the AVA to other. Where a vine is located within

the AVA says a lot about how it's going to be different from vines in other locations in the same AVA, and of course who makes a wine will determine its final expression. Learning all of that takes logistics, time, and dedication, but if you are paying attention, your return on investment can be high.

Whether you visit the SLH or source its wine remotely, the wineries covered in this report represent a fantastic survey of the SLH. I'd add Clarice Wine Company and Rombauer's SLH pinot noir to the list as well as the latter's forthcoming Gary's Vineyard pinot noir. A nice selection across these wineries would provide the region more than a fair shake.

And if you want to give the SLH the fairest shake, include several syrahs as there may be no more rewarding American wine region for syrah lovers, and that's with keeping Washington State in mind.

Napa

According to the map, we've only gone four inches

Napa Valley became the second American Viticultural Area (AVA) in 1981. At 30 miles long, it's 12 miles more than the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH) AVA, and unlike the SLH, includes both valley floor and mountainsides. Although it can be tempting to think of Napa wines as either valley floor or mountainside styles, it's a bit more diverse than that; there are 17 smaller AVAs nested within it that have been added over the years. Every AVA gets it determination based on the presentation of a unique set of characteristics. This means that in theory each of these 17 AVAs are sufficiently distinct to warrant their own designation.

I've spent a fair amount of time in the Napa Valley and while I understand that there are, indeed, many differentiating characteristics scattered around the Valley, I think it's going too far to say there are 17 distinctively different areas to grow wine grapes from the perspective of the wine they produce. The previous article on the aforementioned SLH discusses a single AVA that is two-thirds as long and runs through a valley along a single hillside with dramatically different temperatures and elevations throughout it. To say the SLH has microclimates is a statement of obvious proportions, but one AVA is enough to cover them all. I am not sure Napa needs 17 because I am not sure it offers 17 areas of

meaningfully different *terroir*.

This is no disrespect to the industry or the wineries I'm about to cover. Ultimately I suspect the fact that there are 17 different AVAs is a reflection of business considerations: Those in the most prime locations want to protect their reputation while those in other locations want a unique brand around which to build their reputation. When the best producers are selling a sense of place, everyone else feels like they need to do the same.

The distinction that matters most to me in Napa is valley floor versus benchland versus mountainside. It's not even that Napa's valley floors, benchlands, or mountainsides are unique among the world's wine growing valley floors, benchlands, and mountainsides, although they have their own set of dynamics. It's that when we refer to "Napa wine," there is a meaningful difference, broadly speaking, in the wines produced from the three different growing environments.

This has much to do with how slope plays into viticulture, although there are differences in soils and climatic aspects as well. Cathy Corison, who makes some of my favorite California cabernet sauvignon off benchland vineyards, has told me

about how critical aspects of grape chemistry like pH are influenced by whether the vine is on a mountainside, bench, or valley floor. Mountain vineyards, she said, in general can produce high, "good" levels of tartaric acid (TA) along with high levels of pH. Conversely, valley floors produce high TA but low pH. These numbers matter because they're part of a relationship with other chemical factors like malic acid and potassium.

Another reason that pH matters is its inverse relationship with the long-chain anthocyanin tannin that develops in the skins and contributes to the smoothness of a wine's profile. This isn't an article about wine chemistry, but it's an interesting illustration of how topography impacts wine.

To illustrate some of these differences in the Napa Valley, let's go a few doors up St. Helena Highway from Corison to HALL Wines where they laid out a nice lineup for us of their appellation designate cabernet sauvignons.

Meaningful Differences: HALL Wines

Previous page: HALL Wine's lawn.

HALL is one of the more interesting characters in the intrigue of Napa Valley. It is run by a family with deep roots in the wine industry as well as in American political life. I am going to go into this intrigue a bit because it is part of its *terroir* and therefore part of what customers get when they buy a HALL wine, and therefore something worth exploring a bit.

HALL was founded in 2003 by Kathryn Hall and her husband Craig. A long-time Democrat, Kathryn has been very active in local and national politics, and served as America's ambassador to Austria during part of the Clinton Administration. Both she and her husband have achieved great success in business, and they are very active philanthropically. They are art lovers as well, which is evidenced even from outside the property by the massive metal *Bunny Foo Foo* rabbit sculpture at the entrance. The big selection of art, much of which is large in individual size, is like everything else you experience at the winery: Statement making.

The Halls swing a big stick in the California wine industry that I've heard some argue is outsized when considering production levels. That argument

usually goes along the lines of they have the reputation and means to run in big wine circles, but they have the production level (approximately 100,000 cases annually) and quality more associated with wineries that do not usually achieve their influence (the latter a thinly veiled compliment that's more of a swipe at the bigger winery groups).

The Hall's personal network adds prestige to their brand and garners envy from some in the industry. As an example, when the winery was closed to the public during the COVID pandemic, they hosted regular virtual events for club members featuring friends and friends of friends like the main cast of *Schitt's Creek*.

Some think that HALL should do more with this influence, others less. Invoking the Hall name in the industry often elicits a response, good or bad, but rarely indifferent. Opinions aside, what cannot be disputed is that the HALL winery produces super premium quality wine with personality and character that more than justifies the winery's existence and efforts.

Add the wine and celebrity to the art collection, philanthropy, and grounds, which are regularly used to host a wide range of events, and you get a sense

of why they're the industry player they are.

It is therefore unsurprising that the HALL experience, whether at the winery or explored by the bottle, is a very thoughtful one befitting the effort engaged. From a purely consumer perspective, the bottles I'll cover shortly start at $225 and go up from there, but it's not hard to find the classic HALL Napa Valley cabernet anywhere in the country for $60 or $70, which these days is where high quality Napa cab mostly starts. There are a handful of nichy HALL cabs available for under $100 as well, which at many other wineries aren't offered below that price point. The affiliated Walt and BACA brands, which focus on pinot and zinfandel, respectively, sell from the $40s up to the $90s. All HALL produce wines are appropriately and competitively priced against their peers, so from a quality-to-price perspective, the family is delivering with no pretense.

Speaking of delivering, Jeff Zappelli, HALL's VP of Sales and GM of Walt Wines, was our guide for most of our visit, and he led our tour off with a big focus on the winery's role in supporting various charity and philanthropic activities along with the visitor experience. In fact, this angle was a determinant factor in how the winery is designed. Our first stop

was a stone building dating to 1885 that for a period of its life was the Bergeld Winery. The Hall's renovated the building in 2013 to make it into a space for club members and others to share special Hall experiences, and they've nailed the design and atmosphere for this purpose.

We made our way over to the main building, which houses the various tasting areas as well as the winery itself. The HALL winery is larger than its production, and purposely so because the investment in the winemaking facilities suggest a thoughtful and best-in-class kind of mindset backed by the commitment to realize the vision. This is a winery - the facility, I mean - that would go toe-to-toe with any other in the world nominated for best-in-class.

We had a long discussion about the Hall's approach to building the winery whilst standing next to a large room full of modestly sized tanks that were chosen for quality control rather than economies of scale. To boil things down, it is basically this: They want to produce the best wine possible and don't want to give any space to the notion that the tools and materials needed to execute are not available.

From there, we met up with the VP of Winemaking,

Megan Gunderson. Megan's resume reads like that of the well-respected winemaker that she is: Robert Mondavi, St. Supery, Dominus, and then HALL, where she started in 2005. She leads winemaking for HALL, Walt, and BACA.

Megan and Jeff had chosen to pour us three mountain appellation designates and two estate vineyard cabernet sauvignons, which within the wide range of wines that Megan makes is the core focus of the Hall operation. All were from the 2019 vintage.

The first was their Mount Veeder designate. The Mount Veeder AVA was my introduction to high end Napa cab two decades ago, and it came by way of Robert Craig's offering. I was told by the shop clerk that sold it to me that Veeder cab has a mint signature, which is something I thought was so cool because, wow, mint in red wine? I'll admit that it's not something I've heard since, and I've definitely not found it frequently enough to agree with the moniker this guy wanted to pin to Veeder's lapel.

I didn't find mint in HALL's Veeder cab, but I did find a lot to like. It incorporates grapes grown between 1,400 and 1,600 feet above sea level. The vineyards yield about 1.5-2 tons of fruit per acre depending on

the year, which is a relatively small amount - certainly small enough to take the point that quality over quantity is the priority. Megan explained that the nature of the vineyards meant picking has to be done by hand.

The 2019 has the kind of grip you'd expect from mountainside fruit - dense, a little texturally rough in its youth, mouth coating, close-knit, and magically not heavy. The acid is what you'd want when paired with this kind of tannin profile.

The aromas are quite beautiful with olive, raspberry, graphite, wet soil, and a little saline. This is a quaffer for those who like earthy cabernet. Flavor-wise we're talking black fruit, a little licorice, a bit brambly and savory (at this young stage; with more bottle age I would expect more fruit and the sweetness that can naturally come from a wine as concentrated as this one). The Veeder cab shows promise for those with patience.

Next we tried the Stags Leap bottle, which I found to be the most open and accessible out of the glass. Megan has been making this bottle since 2012 from a vineyard off Silverado Trail adjacent to Shafer Vineyards. She emphasized an "extreme" diurnal shift in the area as context for the AVA producing

Previous Page: HALL's Bergeld vineyard

some of Napa's higher acid cabernets. This one is big and bold, and in its youth is dominated by cherry and pepper with plum and tobacco leading to a bit of a minty finish. I like Stags Leap cabs in general and the HALL offering is no exception, though this was perhaps the least standout-ish of the wines we tried.

From there we went to the first of two estate cabs, the Bergfeld, which is very special and easily my favorite HALL wine as well as one of my favorite wines of the trip. The Bergfeld Vineyard is located behind the winery (adjacent to the old Bergfeld Winery). It is a 13-acre plot of organically farmed 10-year-old and 20-year-old vines. Well before Napa was a wine region, the Napa River used to flow through the same piece of land. This means the vineyard is full of rocks and the soil is well-draining, which helps give the fruit a lot of concentration.

The wine itself has a unique personality. It has some florals, really pretty ones, especially on the front of the palate. The back palate is dark, a bit dirty, and a little funky. It gives off a tempered ripe expression as the grapes don't usually reach full maturity by the time they're ready to be harvested. This dynamic

occurs because sugar development outpaces phenolic ripening. It has a bit of grip and in its youth is quite purple aromatically and flavor-wise with lovely soil and menthol notes. I could see this being a divisive wine, but I could also sign up for a few of these each year, especially as it promises to age well.

We then finished the mountain AVA tour with Diamond Mountain. This appellation doesn't get as much commercial shine as Veeder and Stags Leap, but many top Napa cabs come from its slopes. This is in part because there are only 550 acres of vines currently adorning its slopes. These vineyards are commonly 10 to 15 degrees cooler than the valley floor spread out beneath them, which makes it one of Napa's better examples of the influence of *terroir*.

The HALL Diamond Creek was the richest of the three mountain AVA designates we tried. The grapes are predominantly from the Rainin vineyard, which is situated about halfway up the mountain. The soils are volcanic, making them well drained. This, like the Bergfeld vineyard, produces small berries, which increases skin-to-juice ratio, boosting concentration and leading to the development of significant tannin. It's a darker cab, the darkest of the bunch, with blackberry, blackcurrant, chocolate,

a bit of fungal-ness, and a slightly bitter roasted coffee bean finish. Generally speaking I'm a fan of Diamond Creek, and this one fits the bill quite nicely.

We finished with HALL's *meilleur de la cave*, the Exzellenz. It comes from an estate vineyard called Sacrashe, which is perched at 700 feet above sea level atop the eastern ridge of the Vaca Mountains in Rutherford. The vineyard's topsoil layer is a light white-colored decomposed volcanic ash that Megan says sit atop an otherwise rocky site. She's been working it for 20 years, and feels like she's finally figured out how to develop good fruit character from its grapes. It produces a naturally and characteristically powerful wine.

This was the most stubborn of the five wines in terms of opening up, and to be frank there wasn't much personality showing through what is obviously a powerful and dense beast of a wine. There are clearly loads of cherry, pepper, chocolate, and Christmas spice layered in it somewhere to be fully enjoyed in ten or twenty years when the rich tannin releases them. Until then, it's best to lay this on its side and enjoy some other HALL wines.

This was an exceptional lineup of 2019 cabs. The

three mountain AVA wines, along with the mountain top Excellenz, showed some of the range of characteristics one can find across a selection of Napa's most famous mountain sites. However, as someone who's Napa preference tends to go mountain, bench, and then floor, it was a great reminder that the degree of slope is only one of several critical factors that determine a final wine because it was the Bergfeld Vineyard that appealed most to my palate. There must be something to this little section of St. Helena bench for me, because just a few doors down is Corison's Kronos Vineyard, which produces one of my very favorite American red wines.

I can now add Bergfeld to that short list for two reasons. First, like the reputation of HALL and the Hall family, it is memorable for its personality, and the best wines have the most interesting personalities. And second, because it is really, really good wine.

The Legend Continues: Diamond Creek

We store our wine in a locker at one of the Uovo (formerly Domaine Storage) locations. One of the upsides to doing so is that they organize a range of events throughout the year, including a quarterly social bring-your-own evening during which people grab a bottle from their locker, pull the cork, and pop them on the table for people to try. I've enjoyed a massive range of wines this way, everything from a 12 year-old Bernard Faurie Hermitage to a younger Roumier Clos de la Bussière to a generous amount of great Champagne from producers like Moussé Fils and Cedric Bouchard.

These events have offered grand cru sangiovese from Il Marroneto and Soldera. We're collectors and lovers of old Mosel riesling, and the 1985 Prüm someone shared one evening was really satisfying. I had a mind-bending 25 year-old Thunder Mountain cabernet sauvignon from Santa Cruz that I'll never get out of my head, which is especially memorable because the winery no longer exists and as such I'll always have unquenchable desire for a wine I'll only try once in my life.

One of the more revelatory BYO options was a 2013 Diamond Creek Three Vineyard Blend cabernet sauvignon. Amongst the many offerings that night, the old school label helped the bottle recede into


diamond creek
Three Vineyard Blend
Napa 2013 Valley
Cabernet Sauvignon
grown, produced and bottled on diamond mountain by
DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS CALISTOGA, CA
ALCOHOL 14.5 % BY VOLUME

the background of the glitzier and glamorier labels for almost the entire night.

By the time I got to it, I was just looking for something I hadn't tried yet. It was heavy as I picked it up, the bottle having held on to most of its contents. I thought this might be a sign that it wasn't very good, so I poured just enough into the glass for a single sip. That sip led to an immediate full glass pour. And when that glass was gone in short order, my wife had to remind that the wines were for sharing. I limited myself to half the remaining contents.

The next day I looked Diamond Creek up on the Internet, and texted a few friends about it. I came to an interim conclusion that Diamond Creek was a cult wine that serious wine people south of 50 were unlikely to have real familiarity with. I have since come to find out that many know about it, some have tried it, and many less have visited. I have also come to learn that it is beloved and admired, especially by those in the Napa wine industry.

There seems to be two relatively obvious reasons for why Diamond Creek may not hit the radar of my generation (Millennials). The first is cost. Diamond Creek is quite expensive. The vast majority of

Diamond Creek is purchased through its mailing list where the wines are around $400 per bottle for the current release. And because they're aging wines, there's the additional cost of storage measured in money and patience. Customers themselves literally have to age into the Diamond Creek price point, and for most of us, that takes a while.

The second reason is highly limited supply. Before the winery was acquired in 2020 by the Rouzaud family, owners of Maison Louis Roederer, some of its estate vineyards (which are the entire source for Diamond Creek wines) were producing at historically low levels, which is saying something because yields have always been kept quite low.

Low yields were just one of a myriad of characteristics that defined the path setting of Al and Adele "Boots" Brounstein, who founded Diamond Creek in 1964. Al was a pharmaceutical wholesaler and the two, both winelovers, moved from Los Angeles to Napa after deciding to get out of the (legal) drug trade and into the wine game.

Al had taken a wine seminar in college, which sparked his initial interest in wine and led to an intermittent job with Ridge Vineyards. Credited as being early visionaries of *terroir* in Napa, they set

out looking for a piece of land to plant a vineyard. From the back of a realtor's pick up truck, he spotted what was to become Diamond Creek and famously said, "I love this spot. I'm going to buy it."

Upon closer inspection of the land, Al noticed several distinct types of soil throughout the property, and he planted the vineyards accordingly, bottling each separately from the very first vintage. While this approach is now common practice, it was new then. *Wine Spectator* credits the Brounsteins with setting "an influential example for vineyard-designated wines [that] ultimately led to the birth of the cult Cabernet category in the 1990s." Al's approach to vineyard designates were, *Wine Spectator said,* "recognized as templates of *terroir*."

This reputation had become well established by 1997 when Al and Boots were invited to the thirtieth anniversary celebration of Jean-Claude Rouzaud's helming of Champagne Louis Roederer in Paris. Neither family had met before, but Diamond Creek was one of what Jean-Claude considered to be the thirty best wineries in the world, and he wanted them all to celebrate with him.

I spoke with Nicole Carter, President of US Wineries at Roederer Collection, about the history, and her

Previous page: Jean-Claude Rouzaud opens a bottle of Cristal for Boots Brounstein.

telling of the story is better than mine is going to be. Picture Al and Boots Brounstein, of esteemed and quirky reputation, in a private room at the famous Tour D'Argent restaurant with the Rouzauds and twenty nine other winemakers from First Growth estates, Chateau Y'quem, DRC, and others; Ridge Vineyards was also there. The two families hit it off and remained in touch, growing closer as the years went on.

Al died, as previously mentioned, in 2006. Boots held on for longer, passing away in 2019 at the age of 92. Boots was herself widely admired within the wine industry. When Al died, she took over management of the estate with the help of their son, Phil Ross, who called Boots "the heart of Diamond Creek" in a statement after her passing. To put the influence of Diamond Creek into perspective, Napa's representative in Congress, Mike Thompson, saw fit to eulogize Boots, having been close friends with the Brousteins.

Phil Steinschriber deserves some of the credit for Jean-Claude Rouzaud's love of Diamond Creek wines as well. Phil became Diamond Creek's

winemaker in 1991, and he remained at the post until Roederer's purchase of Diamond Creek.

As time went on, the estate's production started to fall off. The vineyards were nearly half a century old at that point. There had never been expansion, and reinvestment lagged. The timing and nature of Boots' death aligned with the desire of then (and now) head of Roederer, Frédéric Rouzaud, to add a flagship Napa cabernet producer to the Roederer Collection. The families both felt like the moment and fit were right for the sale of Diamond Creek to Roederer. The deal was completed in 2020, thus closing out the Brounstein chapter of Diamond Creek and setting in motion its next chapter under Roeder custodianship.

Enter Nicole Carter. Nicole, as mentioned, oversees Roederer's US portfolio of wineries, which includes Roederer Estate, Scharffenberger Cellars, Domaine Anderson, and Merry Edwards as well as Diamond Creek. Nicole came to the Diamond Creek acquisition eyes wide open. She wanted to protect the estate while also bring it into full force again.

Part of the evolution involved replacing retiring Phil Steinschriber. In his place they hired Graham Wehmeier, who was selected for the same reasons

that drew him to the opportunity: Viticulture and winemaking had always fallen under one person's purview at Diamond Creek, and Roederer wanted to keep it that way. Graham was only interested in opportunities where winemaking and vineyard management "went hand-in-hand."

"Everything has been in-house with Roederer," Graham told me when we visited. "Even though now, with Roederer, Diamond Creek can afford a vineyard manager and a winemaker, the same person oversees the vines and the wines." Graham has always done both. "It's much harder to do things right like water [the vines] when a vineyard manager makes that call and the winemaker has to deal with it." Graham's employment is evidence that Roederer "doubles down on behaving like a grower versus contracting stuff out."

I asked Nicole why Graham was the guy among what I was sure was a list of top talent seeking the job, and her response was "Graham could do both the vineyards and the winemaking really well." Graham's name was suggested by several Nicole consulted, including Roederer Group's head winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, Tony Soter of Etude and Soter fame, and winemaker Françoise Peschon of Heimark, Araujo, Accendo, and other fame.

It is critical that Graham do both well. At full capacity, Diamond Creek is a 2,000-2,500 case-per-year estate. Right now, though, it is at around 1,500 and everyone wants to get production back to that larger number. In Graham's way are some diseased vines. Because the vines are quite old and still producing incredibly good grapes, his preference is to treat the disease and heal the vines in the hopes that they can be brought back to full health. In parts of the vineyards he thinks this approach can work. In others they've replanted and are nurturing young vines into early production. It will be a long, thoughtful, and diligent process.

Working with Graham is a small but dedicated and experienced vineyard team led by Diamond Creek's longest tenured employee, Isidro Guzman, who has been working at the estate since 1981. Guzman leads a team including his half brother and two others. Their institutional knowledge is vital to Roederer's plans for Diamond Creek and Graham's ability to lead execution.

The pursuit of full vineyard health has to be driven by the vineyard itself, Graham told us. "You can say X or Y, but the vineyard dictates a lot." Part of the plan has been to switch over to organic farming and introduce cover crops. Climate change, he

Previous page: The view of Red Rocks Terrace Vineyard (in the foreground) and Volcanic Hill Vineyard from the tasting room deck.

noted, "will have its imprint as well." It is a work in progress, but one based on a 10-year plan that was created up by the team when Graham joined. As Graham drove us around the vineyards and we walked certain portions, the importance to him of respecting the property and its history is evident, and a recognition that the right touch is a relatively light one when it comes to vines with a history of producing such high standards of wine.

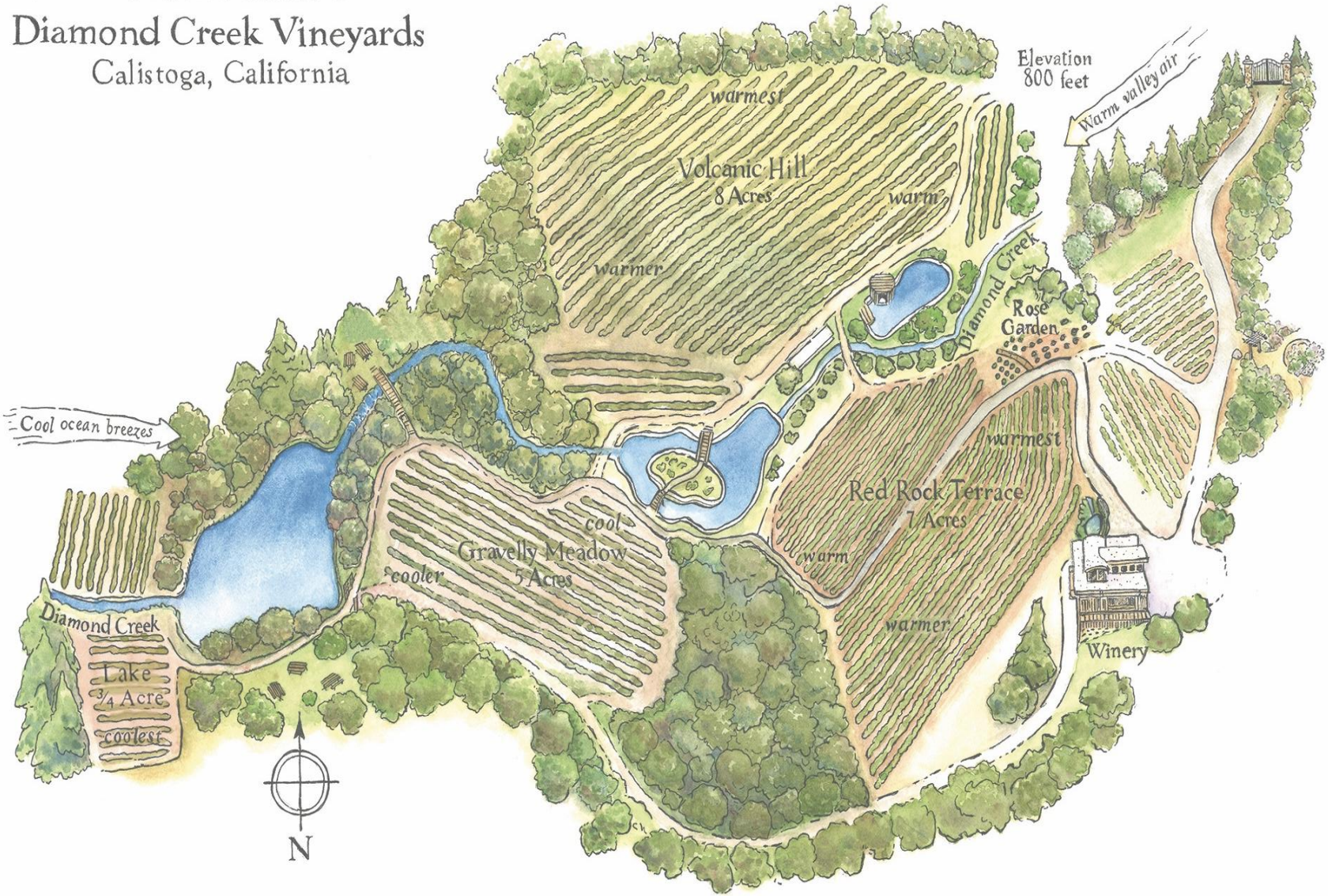
Of the 80 acres within the estate's boundaries, there are 21 acres of vines. Most are producing grapes going into finished wine but a meaningful amount are not yet yielding either enough grapes and/or grapes of sufficient quality to make production. The goal is that in time, they all will.

Diamond Creek's vineyards are truly microsites, something you can learn from reading about the winery but really only understand by visiting. It's a very small property as far as Napa wineries go.

Three of the four vineyards come within 60 feet of each other at one point, but the wines they produce

The Microclimates of Diamond Creek Vineyards

Calistoga, California



Previous page: Map provided by Diamond Creek

are distinctively different. The concept of *terroir* can be a bit controversial, and, I think, overblown at times. But if you want to experience *terroir* in an indisputable way, visit Diamond Creek. It is hard, after touring the property, to taste the wines in the tasting room with a view of those vineyards and believe they come from the same single view because there are many differences.

The smallest and somewhat removed Lake Vineyard, only three-quarters of an acre, is the flattest and coolest of the four vineyards and situated adjacent to a small lake. Its rocky soil is dry farmed. As a finicky site, it is the least common of the four vineyard designates in terms of annual production and is only produced as a stand-alone in the best years. Unfortunately Diamond Creek didn't produce one in 2019, so we weren't able to taste it as part of our 2019 vintage flight, which was the current release when we were there.

The 8-acre southern-oriented Volcanic Hill Vineyard coats an undulating hillside facing the winery. Its soils are a light, fluffy grey ash that settled in the area quite a long time ago after a volcanic eruption. This is the warmest of the four vineyards.

Red Rock Terrace Vineyard is the first you see as you drive in, and is the most immediately available looking out to the vineyards from the winery. These 7 acres are planted on a rocky soil died, you guessed it, red by its high iron content. Opposite the valley from Volcanic Hill, it is northern facing and receives considerably less direct sunlight.

Rounding the portfolio out is Gravelly Meadow Vineyard. This 5-acre plot is planted in a brown pebbly soil. Flat relative to Volcanic Hill and Red Rock Terrace, it sits in a tiny microclimate that is just a tad bit warmer than that of Lake Vineyard, making it the second coolest.

The vineyards sit at various elevations, from 530 feet above sea level to 610 feet. While this difference might not seem like a meaningful amount, it matters because of how the property is laid out. Tom Brady could stand on the winery deck overlooking the top of Red Rock Terrace and throw a football well into Volcanic Hill. Lake Vineyard is completely out of sight from Brady at this point, but as the crow flies it's probably a fifth of a mile at most.

These differences determine a sequential ripening pattern that Graham walked us through. First, ripening kicks off at the top Volcanic Hill, and starts

to work its way down the hill towards the lowest vines. Second, as ripening reaches the middle third of Volcanic Hill, Red Rock Terrace kicks off. Third, as it hits the top of the final (lower) third of Volcanic Hill, Gravelly Meadow and Lake start their respective ripening. Harvest, in a "typical year," Graham told us, goes into November.

At this point I hope I'm starting to paint a clear(ish) picture of why these little 21 acres have four distinctive vineyards with their own unique microclimates and characteristics.

To highlight these differences, the wines are all made in the same way in that they all go through the same process using the same inputs, e.g. they all get oak and none get concrete. But Graham is still getting to know each vineyard's eccentricities, as well as the particularities of sections of each vineyard, and he's learning that while "what you taste [in the wines] isn't something I put in, like oak, if I can accentuate the vineyard by doing for example, Volcanic Hill in barrel for an extra few months, I should consider that." To the extent he does anything differently, it is quite minor. He's also learning to be "less afraid to let the green notes in because of how well they age."

Production, as I mentioned earlier, is miniscule even when every vine is yielding production-worthy grapes. There is usually a bit more Volcanic Hill, but not always. “Efficiency and economies of scale don’t work in our favor,” Graham said, which is purposeful in the design of the vineyards. It really is about producing the best wine possible regardless of how much of it there is, and exploring the wine reality of each vineyard and its microclimate.

We tasted the three 2019s in the order of Gravelly Meadow, Red Rock Terrace, and Volcanic Hill. Graham had already poured them when we arrived and placed them in this order, but he was debating the order with himself throughout the tasting. As I traded back and forth through the line up over the next hour, my opinion changed a few times as well. What didn’t change, though, was my love of all three.

The 2019 Red Rock Terrace was my favorite. The tannin is remarkably fine, and I do not say “remarkable” lightly. These tannins are matched by a bright, juicy acid that accentuates red fruit (raspberry and plum dominate), florals, and a graphite-mint-pepper minerality that is easy to get lost in. It has a drying, fine finish.

The 2019 Volcanic Hill has what Graham calls “classic

Napa appeal" that he "[understands] the most right away" compared to the other vineyard designates. The roots aren't as deep in Volcanic Hill as the other vineyards, and unlike the others can be irrigated. I found it super juicy and grippy with a fine black tea and dark plum tannin. It had the darkest nose and reminded me of a briar patch of aromas and flavors. It is the most power of the three.

Finally, we tasted the 2019 Gravelly Meadow, which struck a balance for me between the other two. The tannins are more relaxed than Red Rock Terrace but not as big as Volcanic Hill. The nose is darker than Red Rock Terrace, but not as dark as Volcanic Hill. It had the sweetest nose, the most saturated flavors, the widest range of fruit notes, and the most significant florals.

All three were exceptional, but not at the heights they will achieve with significant aging. We discussed aging with Graham, who told us that Red Rock Terrace generally ages the longest, that Volcanic Hill sometimes doesn't age as long as some project, and that Gravelly Meadow's structure eases more quickly in the glass than the other two. Regardless, I think I'd give each of these until 2029 before checking in.

Our time at Diamond Creek was superb. We really enjoyed touring the vineyards, hearing stories about the Brounsteins and the property, getting to know Graham, learning about Roederer's approach, and tasting the wines. There are a lot of wineries worth visiting in Napa, but this is one that should be on everyone's "must visit" list if for no other reason than the wines are a proof-of-concept of *terroir* and the property is right there for you to fully appreciate why. There is every reason to think the Diamond Creek legend will not only live on under Roederer ownership, but flourish.

Howelling at the Moone: Moone-Tsai

For those reading this article in isolation, in the table of contents of this California Grapes Special Edition of *Good Vitis*, it directly follows an article on Diamond Creek Winery, which could be credited as *the* winery to push the idea of *terroir* in Napa in that a special piece of land can produce special wine. I wholeheartedly agree.

However, wine is not just made in the vineyard, a concept often associated with *terroir*-driven wines. It's made by people. And as far as people making wine go, I like Larry Tsai who, along with his wife MaryAnn, co-owns and runs Moone-Tsai.

Moone-Tsai's flagship wine is the 100% cabernet sauvignon Cor Leonis, which is the name of the brightest star in our sky and Latin for "heart of the lion." Wine names with significance, this one born from the family's amateur astronomy passion, is neither unusual nor frivolous. As we tasted the 2019, Larry compared it to Joan Jett: Deep, dark, and intriguing, and who "during her heyday as frontwoman for The Black Hearts, captured all of our hearts in sweet surrender." It all felt personal.

As we continued through the flight, there were more music comparisons, as well as sporting ones and, in the case of the 2014 Cor Leonis, an acting one:

Morgan Freeman as "the wise Ellis "Red" Redding" from Shawshank Redemption "whose grace and substance are conveyed at the close of this remarkable film's rooftop scene."

I appreciate the comparison in terms of soul, but my experience of enjoyment of Shawshank and the 2014 Cor Leonis are respectively very different and I would not naturally associate them. Offering a range of cultural references and comparisons is not how most people in the wine industry go about pitching their wine, let alone thinking about it. Describing 2014 as "the vintage that rocks," a reference to the San Francisco Bay area 6.0 earthquake that year that was felt in the Napa Valley, hit a little closer to industry norm, but still leveraged Larry's unique quippy thoughtfulness.

On a purely human level, Larry is an engaging winery proprietor in an industry that can be overly buttoned up. I love talking wine with people who make it serious *and* seriously fun. That's Larry.

He's also an experienced and successful business person, as is MaryAnn, who herself brings a wealth of wine experience to the ownership. The Moone-Tsai twinkle started as a "for fun project" between the Tsais and close friends Mike and Val

Moone. The first vintage, 2006, went well enough to put them in a real predicament: It was too big to be a hobby, but not big enough to be commercially viable. A decision had to be made, either spend more and make a business, or spend less and keep it for family and friends.

In 2009, the decision was made to get real. They hired one of Napa's most respected consulting winemakers, Philippe Melka, to take over winemaking. Getting involved early into Melka's Napa career, Moone-Tsai is "one of the few [of his clients] where he is the principle winemaker." Nevertheless, Larry and MarryAnn are "highly involved in every part of the winemaking and business operations, the vineyard sourcing, everything." Annual case production has grown from 180 to between 3,000 and 4,000, and the Tsais have bought out the Moones' ownership stake.

But winery projects like these - expensive fruit, expensive winemakers, small production, low margins, etc., - can turn negative cash flow pretty easily, and the Tsais know this. "We're [both] MBAs," Larry said, adding that "we won't put resources down the drain to build an ego. We only do this so long as there's positive cash flow and we can pay the bills on time."

Previous page: MarryAnn and Larry Tsai.

Part of getting the model right is selling the merchandise, and they're going through a re-think of their model right now. About 75% of sales are direct-to-consumer with the remainder divided between their exclusive retailer, Total Wines, and on-premise. They're looking at reconfiguring the wholesale business region by region. "Two to three years from now will be very different," Larry said, noting that "distribution is equivalent to marketing."

Within this context, we briefly discussed one of the hot topics in the wine industry right now: Youths and their attitudes towards wine and alcohol. If you've not heard, the coming-of-age generation of prospective wine consumers are drinking less alcohol than previous generations largely out of a purposeful decision to not consume alcohol driven by health and financial considerations. The statistics have understandably scared those in the alcohol business, although the wine segment seems to be getting the worst of it.

Larry's view is that "young people are finding their way through wine" but that it's a process: Moone-Tsai's consumer base is mostly people older than their 20s, and by the time those in their 20s

today grow into wine, Moone-Tsai will be there to offer them something special at prices they've matured into affording.

The Tsais have children in this demographic, and Larry told me about an event they poured at that gave him serenity on this issue. "It's generational. It takes time. Young tasters were seeking out stories, and that's how they get hooked." He pointed out that he started with white zinfandel in his youth, so he's not necessarily concerned about the barriers to entry for premium wine as people mature into it.

The decision to evolve the business model is getting serious contemplation, which parallels the wines they're producing. We tried four of them together: The 2020 Napa Chardonnay ("smart, persistent, quirky, and simply remarkable, we are reminded of Anya Taylor-Joy's winning portrayal of an aspiring chess master in the award-winning series, Queen's Gambit"), 2019 Howell Mountain Hillside Blend ("focused, feisty, and fascinating, one cannot help but be reminded of the formidable and brilliant Rita Moreno from West Side Story whose transcendent talents on the screen and stage affirm her as one of the most talented performers to have earned the elusive EGOT quartet: Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony awards", and 2019 and 2014 Cor Leonis.

When Larry poured the 2020 Napa Chardonnay, my eyes narrowed a bit. 2020 was a life-altering year for Napa because of the incredible fires the area experienced. Many producers dumped their entire production, and several who decided to produce have been lambasted for the grotesque smoke taint they allowed customers to purchase (I'm looking at you, Ridge Vineyards). Larry caught my look, I think, and wasn't surprised when I asked about their 2020 decision-making. Turns out this is the only 2020 wine they'll be releasing, and I can understand why having tasted it.

It comes from a bowl-shaped vineyard on Bald Mountain, which sits on the border with Sonoma, that traps a bit of extra heat. It's the first chardonnay that Philippe Melka made, and he barrel ferments it. I found it be quite crisp and bright in the nose and on the palate where there is a fantastic youthful tension and chalky minerality with great citrus notes.

Turns out, I'm not the only one to like Moone-Tsai's Napa chardonnay. Larry informed us that it has replaced Peter Michael chardonnay on Emirates Airlines flights, which is where now fan Gordon Ramsay (and Theresa May) first had it. In most years production is between 300 and 350 cases, but in

2020 just 175 were made. It's one of the few 2020 Napa wines I've had that I won't pass over if I come across it in the wild, and I recommend others try it.

The Howell Mountain Hillside Blend is the Moone-Tsai collector's "go-to label," Larry informed us. It's a classic cabernet sauvignon and merlot blend, roughly two-thirds cabernet and one-third merlot depending on the vintage (2019 is 62% cab and 38% merlot), and is comprised of fruit from four vineyards around Howell Mountain, all, as the name would imply, planted on hillsides. "We try to give Philippe a lot to work with" when making this wine, Larry noted, adding that "the consumer expects a lot of consistency" in this wine compared to the other Moone-Tsai reds.

It has a very boisterous, almost hedonistic sensibility. The nose is strikingly forceful, exuding dark fruit and graphite minerality. It's full bodied and plush with a modest amount of densely grained tannin. The smooth acid rounds the edges and creates a seamless mouthfeel that evidences the 18 months of barrel aging this gets, 60% of which is new. Flavors include the black-blue-red range of fruit, savory dried herb, and orange rind. It is a stylishly styled wine for a particular kind of palate, and I can understand why it has a loyal following

among the kind of crowd that loves this profile given the quality it offers.

Going back to the Cor Leonis, we tried the 2019 first. Youthful on the nose, it wafts beautifully pure and primary fruit with barrel influence floating in the background. The plush, round, and juicy mouthfeel grows significantly in presence the longer one spends with it, allowing flavors of dark berries, plum, currant, baking spice, pipe tobacco, tar, and a little pepper and florals to emerge. As this happens, a tannic mouth-coating grip builds. It's a classy Napa cabernet that leans heavy on fruit qualities in it's youth.

Comparatively, the 2014 offers a more dynamic fruit and earth combination. It's the same vineyard sourcing as the 2019, but in different proportions, and of course with almost ten years since the grapes were harvest, is more structurally advanced.

What hasn't mellowed, however, is the expression the nose gives off. High octane, it has aromas of black fruit, spices, and a little violet. It's developed a bit of a menthol flavor note that I really dug. The big, smooth palate is showing signs of acid-propelled elevation that should continue to improve the wine over the next few years, though I'd error on the side

of drinking sooner rather than later on evidence of a number of 2014 Napa cabs I've had recently that seem to be aging out of balance due to the higher alcohol that the vintage showed a penchant for developing.

It is clear that Moone-Tsai has long outgrown its passion project phase. The employ of Philippe Melka aligns the owners' preferred house style with their demand for consistency, both of which are core values of the business model. The Tsais and Melka are a demonstrably good pairing in this regard.

The wines are New World Californian, but offer more complexity than most in that category. My travel companion is an example of a palate that loves these richly fruited cabs that deliver luscious waves of gobsmacking structure and flavor. Conversely, I am an example of the palate that prefers the style reminiscent of Napa in the 1980s and 90s.

However, when the two of us want a cab we can enjoy together, Moone-Tsai strikes a good balance of being a bold, bordering on hedonistic (red) wine that pays homage to things like site selection by, in part, not homogenizing the fruit with new oak. While the 60% new oak on the Hillside and the 70% new oak on the 2019 Cor Leonis might be too much

for some, as reference points it's not the 92% that 2021 Caymus saw or the 100% that endows the 2019 Opus One. It's also not the 50% of the 2019 Corison.

There are also factors like grape chemistry at pick and the amount and type of extraction done in the winery. Moone-Tsai might be too ripe and too extracted for some, and perhaps not enough for others. But on balance, it is one of the few New World Californian-styled cabs I've had that demonstrates skilled trade-offs are made to retain a sense of place and achieve uniqueness while pursuing an unabashedly Napa statement.

Moone-Tsai's approach has spoken to enough people to carve out a well-earned and respectable spot in the highly competitive marketplace of premium Napa wine. To put a colon on it: Even though my friend could go bigger and I could go smaller, we both talk about the Cor Leonis with mutual appreciation and desire. The cherry on top is Moone-Tsai's pursuit of a white wine that improves their portfolio quality; the chardonnay is not to be missed.

Sonoma

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

Figuring Out Stonestreet

I'll admit to knowing little about Stonestreet going into our visit other than it was a winery started by Jess Stonestreet Jackson of the Jackson Family (along with his wife, Barbara Banke). That was it. I had to look up its location, and was unaware it was in Alexander Valley. I'd never had any of its wines.

When a visit became a possibility, I went to the webpage, saw the picture of a beautiful mountain covered with vineyards, and confirmed my interest. Now, this is a Jackson Family Wines estate, and that right there goes a long way with me because I tend to like the wineries they own and appreciate how they empower each winery's team to do their best work in a unique way. But the website picture's caption, "high elevation wines," is a trigger phrase for me. It triggered a "yes."

Stonestreet's winemaker, Kristina Shideler, was our host. She met us out front of the winery, walking up to us as we approached the entrance, directing us straight to the car for the drive up to the vineyards. Straight to the mountain we went.

On the drive up, which took a considerable amount of time despite the close proximity, we got to know each other a bit. As we climbed higher and higher, turning onto smaller and smaller roads,

transitioning from pavement to dirt, the Alexander Valley floor below became something we couldn't see much anymore. The slopes we were climbing were draped mostly in a lush green blanket of grass, spotted with vineyards starting at 400 feet above sea level and topping out at 2,400 feet. The entire estate, located in the Mayacamas Mountains, is 5,500 acres and it is a stunner.

The scope of Stonestreet's vineyards offers not just a dramatic setting on a mountain exposed to powerful winds, but also a diverse range of what Kristina describes as mesoclimates in which to site vines. A mesoclimate is viticultural term meaning the climate specific to a particular vineyard, and in the case of the Stonestreet estate vineyards this means some vineyards are in valleys, others on peaks, and some perched on ledges. With each mesoclimate vine offering a unique assortment of spices for Kristina and her team, Stonestreet aims to spotlight each through vineyard-designate wines.

Kristina's past experiences make her a natural to lead the winery's efforts. She got her winemaking start in Missouri and has international experience in New Zealand, Portugal, and Argentina. She joined the Stonestreet team in 2012, but left for a stint at Vérité and then nearby Arrowood Winery where she

took over winemaking duties after Richard Arrowood retired. She returned to Stonestreet in 2020 to lead winemaking, and is the first to admit that mastering Stonestreet's estate vineyards will be a forever challenge give the dynamism of the property and its vineyard diversity.

We made a few stops on our way to the highest vineyard, checking out different vineyards and other spots, like Jess Jackson's burial site, along the route. With the views and conversation, the experience was not only good for the soul, but very informative when it came to tasting the wine upon our return to the winery.

Stonestreet's vineyards are certified sustainable, and located in the proposed Pocket Peak American Viticultural Area, or AVA (the application was filed in 2022). If approved it would be an AVA within an AVA (Alexander Valley), which falls within Sonoma County. The AVA would cover about 30,000 acres of which nearly 3,000 are currently planted to wine grapes.

Pocket Peak would be quite a hilly AVA, which according to its website features slopes that "consistently exceed 10 percent grade and are more commonly above 20 percent." The petition is supported by Stonestreet as well as Aperture

Previous page: An estate Stonestreet vineyard.

Cellars, Foley Family Wines, Reynoso Family Vineyards, Rodney Strong Vineyards, Skipstone, and Wilson Artisan Wineries.

AVAs are pursued because of real distinctions and, increasingly, for marketing purposes. However, based on the tour of Stonestreet I can understand why Pocket Peak deserves its own recognition. Most of the slopes in Alexander Valley are not nearly as steep as those in what would be Pocket Peak, nor are the elevations nearly as high. These two characteristics alone, slope and elevation, can have dramatic effects on the wine outcomes; think radiant energy, water drainage, acids, and weather. Add to that any differences in soil types that likely exist, and discerning Pocket Peak wines from those in the broader Alexander Valley should be relatively easy.

Back at the winery, we sat down to try six wines divided equally between chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. The selection was thoughtful in two ways: Vineyard and vintage comparisons, beginning with the chardonnay, with which Kristina is trying different winemaking techniques (think amphora, tank finishes, etc.) to “push the vineyards in the

winery," meaning accentuate their characteristics in the finished wine. We tasted the current 2021 releases of the Broken Road and Upper Barn single vineyard bottlings as well as the 2014 Upper Barn.

The 2021 Broken Road chardonnay offers a boisterous nose and a full body showing sweet stone fruit, Opal apple, pear, and caramel. Showing a higher barrel toast level than the Upper Barn, it is creamy and mostly smooth on the palate, though it gets a little gritty on the finish to provide some add texture to a great mouthfeel.

The 2021 Upper Barn is similarly full bodied, offering more butter notes on the nose than the Broken Road as well as more dynamic acid on the palate, where it's lighter in weight and driven more by citrus and mineral flavors (although there are stone fruits showing through as well).

The decade of age on the 2014 Upper Barn has had a mellowing effect that's deepened the wine's complexity. The citrus has settled into a limey profile and the stone fruit has turned more yellow than orange. There's a wonderful white pepper note along with orchid and some orange blossom.

While both 2021s are quite enjoyable in their youth,

the additional bottle age on the 2014 has made it a more dynamic wine and helped it develop a more Burgundian texture and level of complexity. This library vintage was not a special pull for us, but rather part of a standard library program that releases a decade-old vintage along with the new release of select chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons.

Moving to the cabernet, we started with the current release Monolith and Rockfall single vineyards, both from the 2019 vintage. The Monolith vineyard, which the winery calls its "wildest and most powerful" cabernet offering, is fermented in oak upright tanks of which 30-40% are new depending on the year. On the nose it has a strong savory quality consisting of iron and crushed rock, which pairs nicely with black fruit and fig. Dense, finely grained tannin is balanced nicely by the acid, delivering a somewhat sweet palate of black fruit, olive, and pink peppercorns.

The Rockfall Vineyard sits above the fog line, and the 2019 cabernet sauvignon coming exclusively from this vineyard, which is aged half in new oak, shows a reticent nose of blue and black fruit, violet, menthol, and a bit of greenness. The seamless mouthfeel is very elegant with superfine tannin and

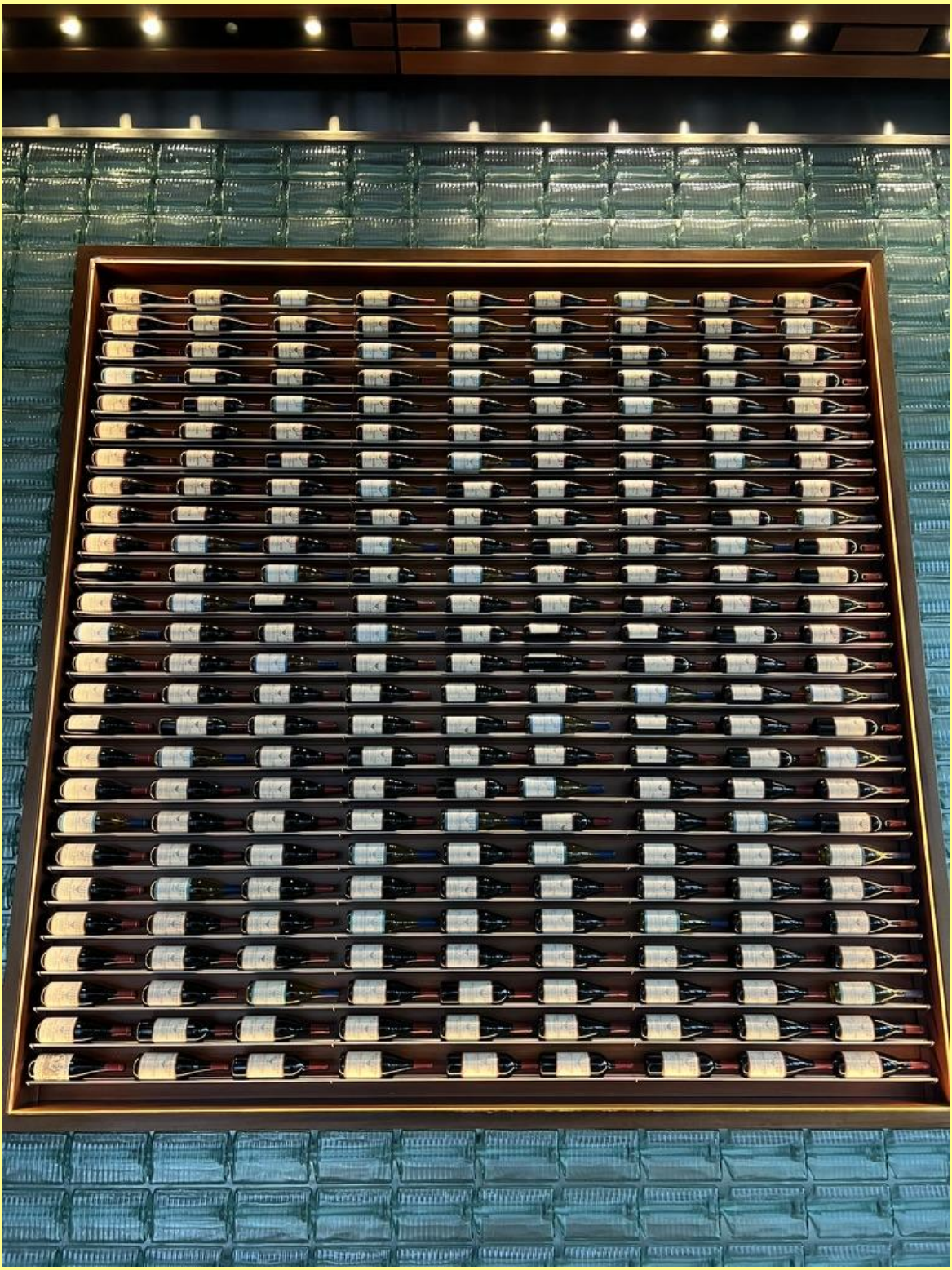
Previous page: Another Stonestreet estate vineyard.

a very pretty lift. It's less tannic at this stage than the monolith, and more savory.

The 2014 vintage of Rockfall, the last wine we tasted, was one of my favorite wines of this entire trip. It offers dried blueberry and violet, baking spicy, deeply saturated cherry, and some black tea that emerges from the smooth, fine tannin. A nice juicy acid sweetness the fruit and spice notes. It's ten years young structurally, and is one I think will continue to evolve positively for at least another half decade.

These six wines were af fantastic introduction to Stonestreet and its estate program, and just that, an introduction. Given the acreage of vines and diversity among them, it is the kind of portfolio that requires a good deal of exploration and study to wrap one's head around. I'm not there yet, but my interest is piqued and I hope I'll have opportunity and cause to dig deeper in the future. It is a must-visit for anyone venturing to Alexander Valley.

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*


HACIENDA DEL RIO WINE
Lot 2
1981 Sonoma County Pinot Noi
A Table Wine Vinted and Bottled by
Hacienda 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 key 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 tradition 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

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 curant 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 gravely 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.

Not Your Grandfather's California Bordeaux: Hamel

“We have zero tradition, and the most exciting thing is what’s ahead of us,“ John Hamel, Director of Winemaking at Hamel Family Wines, told me in the winery’s library room towards the end of his narrative of the winery’s journey thus far.

When considering a visit to Hamel ahead of the trip, I had been pitched on the unusualness of this Sonoma winery’s focus on high end cabernet sauvignon. While there is almost as much cabernet planted in Sonoma County (12.7k acres) as there is pinot (13k acres), the latter is more associated as a premium Sonoma wine than the former. (For the record, chardonnay is the most planted with 15.5k acres). In fact, I had to do some quick research to remind myself of Sonoma’s premium cabernets, which include the previously covered Stonestreet as well as places like Silver Oak, Jordan, and Arrowwood. There are also a handful of extra-Sonoma wineries that produce high end cab from Sonoma vineyards like Anakota and Lancaster Estate. Despite these respected wineries making cabernet, when one thinks of Californian cabernet, their minds don’t really go to Sonoma, do they?

So when John told me that he has no tradition to uphold, I understand what he meant - as you will soon - but I also thought to myself, ‘that means he’s

got to create one.' And that makes what he and the Hamel team are doing even more exciting, especially because of the approach they are taking.

When John talked about tradition, it came at the culmination of a recitation of the winery's history, which was started by John's parents, George and Pam Hamel, in 2006 on a parcel behind their home that produced an inaugural 290 cases of cabernet. The first commercial vintage didn't come until 2014, four years after John got involved.

John brought with him a love of organic farming and a soft spot for the Slow Food movement that promotes local food and cooking traditions, as well as some insecurities about how to help make Hamel a premier winery. "I'm afraid of missing classic California reference points and European benchmarks" in terms of quality, John explained. "We had been making technically good wine, but were missing that salinity, that minerality, on the level of great wines," he admitted. His family had set higher targets than that when they decided to fully invest in the project.

And what an investment it's been. The area for visitors at what they call the Hamel Family Ranch could be a modern museum in New York or London.

Previous page: Hamel's cave.

Hospitality is the responsibility of a full time director who is a Court of Masters Sommeliers' Advanced Exam graduate and oversees a sizeable staff. There is an executive chef as well who is responsible for the meal portion of a $200 per person wine and food experience. The winemaking facilities are fully stocked, and the cave that's been built into the adjacent hillside is not only first class, but sizable as well.

Then there are the vineyards, which are spread across three sites: The Hamel Family Ranch and a property called Tres Palmas, both at the lower elevation foot of the Mayacamas mountain range, and the third in Nuns Canyon, which offers higher elevations ranging from 1,200 to 1,600 feet. Any amount of time spent with John reveals just how central the vineyards are to the vision for Hamel, which is, to paraphrase, to make expressions of these vineyards that rival the greatest expressions of Bordeaux by identifying, nurturing, and demonstrating the best of Sonoma's *terroir*. Getting there has been an diligent and purposeful evolution.

"We started in a place where we were very much, 'we

make Bordeaux varieties, how are things done in Bordeaux?' [because] that's the reference point," John explained. But following the techniques of the reference point was not producing wine that the Hamels felt were the best expression of the vineyards they had.

"At a certain point," John said, "you have to think about how you adapt to the expression to your place, and don't just borrow what others are doing in other places." As he explained:

> "You spend time in California, it's evident we're not in Bordeaux climatically. They're more humid, they're maritime, they have more cloud cover. Us, we have lots of light, a dry heat, and we have end of season heat spikes with low relative humidity. Then look at soils, ours are young, volcanic, lower quality clay, very stony, whereas they have much older soils, limestone with granite deposits; climatically and soil-wise we're very different, but we're dealing with the same set of varieties."

John and his team set out to understand both parts of the expression: The *terroir* and the appropriate winemaking techniques to express it.

In 2016, Hamel hired Chilean consultant Pedro Parra who, no joke, has a doctorate in *terroir* from the Paris Center of Agriculture. "His speciality is understanding the connections between soil and wine in a meaningful way," John said, explaining that he felt identifying and understanding those connections in Hamel vineyards was the only way to achieve the vision.

"It seems abstract [to have] a specialty in *terroir*," John said, referencing Parra's doctorate, "but when I took over the vineyards and winemaking, it's just something I felt that we in California, it being a younger growing region [than Bordeaux], need to expedite our understanding of what we have."

Parra helped Hamel classify the character of their various soils and where they change from block to block for the purpose of understanding how the changes affect the wine. They knew the vines are planted in volcanic soils "at the beginning," John said, "but the work with Pedro showed soil diversity [was] much more scattered [within the vineyards] than we had understood."

Identifying the different soils is just one part of expressing their respective uniqueness. To learn more, they began vinifying vineyard blocks

separately based on the information they were learning from the work with Parra. “With 80 acres [of vines], we did 93 [individual] ferments,” each representing a unique block of vines based on soil diversity.

John described their work with Parra as a classification project. “Now we know what we’re looking for, where to look for it among our three properties. What we’re really doing is looking for specific things that show the best example of volcanic soil.”

Showing that soil requires a process, and a visit to Champagne grower-producer Jacques Selosse in 2017 sold John on the concept of dry farming (meaning a preference for no irrigation of the vines). “Selosse is big on ‘irrigation drowns out and erases *terroir*,” John told me of the revelation. “They said irrigated vines are like growing potted plants in a field. I agreed, and you can’t agree and [then] not resolve it.”

Luckily, Hamel’s soils are fractured just enough for the vines to penetrate the volcanic material in search of water. This allowed Hamel to test drying farming on 20% of their vines in 2017. In 2018 they increased it to 70%. “Now, we’re at about 80%,” John

said.

John explained that "dry farmed vines start the reproductive cycle earlier, stress more, and develop more mature phenolics with higher acidity and lower sugar," all desirable things for many high end winemakers. He added that "we pick earlier [so] we don't have to adjust for acidity or sugar [in the winemaking] because they come into ripeness [on the vine] along with [good] phenolic [development]."

As Hamel's *terroir* and viticulture approach came into focus, they began taking a look at winemaking technique. "Once you understand your *terroir* and have confidence in its character, you want to start dialing back the [winemaking] that gets in in the way of that expression," John noted. While Bordeaux's techniques had been the original blueprint for Hamel, John came to fully appreciate that Bordeaux and Sonoma are very different places from grape growing and winemaking perspectives.

As one example, John explained that "it's harder to ripen grapes in Bordeaux [than in Sonoma]. They deal with more astringency and greenness [in the grapes, stems, and seeds], and so it makes sense to use small oak barrels and a higher percentage of

new oak because that helps to sweeten the wine." But standard oak barrels and lots of new oak were not expressing Hamel's *terroir* to the family's satisfaction.

Instead, John looked to places with more similar growing conditions to get insights. "In central Italy and France where [like Sonoma] you have riper phenolics, less acid, more potential for higher alcohols, traditionally it's a lot of concrete and larger oak [aging vessels]." Hamel embarked on the trialing of a variety of concrete and oak vessels, and does most of its red wine in larger vessels for both fermentation and aging. While John believes they are heading in the right direction, the cave is full of a wide variety of vessels being tested in the hope of finding the best expression of Hamel *terroir*.

Hamel is up to an annual production of around 10,000 cases comprising one white wine and six red wines. I asked John about growth, and he said some will naturally come from some new vines planted in the Nuns Canyon vineyard last year, "but it's not aggressive [growth]; it's more organic to the vineyards coming into maturity."

After spending time at the winery and tasting several of its wines, I asked John about evidence I

saw of a reductive winemaking approach. “We end up with wines built for aging. If that feels like a reductive tendency, then that’s right. But we don’t do reductive things for the sake of doing reductive things.” It’s much more about what’s going to express their unique *terroir*, and techniques that happen to be reductive are, John says, part of how Hamel is achieving the big goal.

As an example, Hamel *terroir* is naturally high in iron, which is found in significant amounts in the vineyards’ soils. Iron “has a tendency to give a very mineral character to the wine,” John explained, and showcasing that in the wine is helped by putting the wine through a reductive approach.

Further, “when you have a Mediterranean climate [like Sonoma], that is you have riper phenolics, less acid, more potential for higher alcohol, in that context it makes sense to take a more reductive philosophy because that’ll make the wine more open when it reaches a place where [then] you want to preserve it [for bottle evolution through reductive methods] rather than evolve it [at that time by introducing more oxygen],” John explained.

As he opened Hamel’s only white wine, John made sure to point out that “white and red wine are two

different things and concepts." For white, and in Hamel's case that's sauvignon blanc, "the way we approach it is to expose it to oxygen during and after fermentation because that's actually a natural way of mitigating oxidation later in its life [when exposure usually causes more damage]." This approach creates a more reductive bottled wine that goes through a larger evolution in bottle and in glass. It also displays more of what Hamel feels is the best expression of its particular *terroir*.

For red wines, recognizing that they have more natural tannins and ripeness than Bordeaux, they "take a reductive aging philosophy using larger casks [along with barrique] and some concrete for the first year." In the second year all the cabernet gets moved to less aerobic concrete for last 6-8 months. The goal is for "the wine [to] age as it would in bottle where the tannins are maturing in the absence of micro oxygenation" so that, like the sauvignon blanc, it is more protected in the bottle and less susceptible to oxidation. This, in turn, allows the wines to age gracefully and safely.

There is great reverence for the classic Bordeaux style of wine at Hamel, one that ages gracefully over many years. The use of these various reductive techniques is to produce wine that "evolves in the

glass [and bottle]," which is a precursor and sign that they are on track of producing a Bordeaux structure with Bordeaux-level minerality in the Sonoma and Hamel style.

The 2024 vintage will bring Hamel's 10th commercial vintage, and already during that very short time John has led it through a significant evolution. Many winemakers will tell you that it takes several decades to learn a vineyard, and John and his team are a mere ten years into working with vineyards that are in puberty. This will be quite the process, but the diligence, thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and patience that the Hamels display give me decent confidence that they'll figure things out. Only time will tell.

At the end of the tour, we tasted four wines. I have put my tasting notes below. With the exception of one, they are quite impressive given the relative youth of the vines and the learning process the team has gone through to get here this quickly. I agree with John, however, that what's most exciting is what's to come. This strikes me as a wine club to join now because, once they get there, availability is going to become quite limited.

2022 Hamel Family Wines Sauvignon Blanc - A blend

of fruit from the Tres Palmas and Nuns Canyon vineyards that went through only primary fermentation. It starts out reductive, especially on the nose where it is perfumed, and has a nice balance of weight and brightness. It shows a flinty mineral texture and flavors of yellow grapefruit, apricot, and banana peel. There's no rush to drink this wine, which has more personality than most Californian sauvignon blanc.

2020 Hamel Family Wines Stratum Red - A blend of two-thirds cabernet sauvignon and one-third merlot, it was aged in mostly neutral oak and mostly in larger casks before being blended and put into concrete for the final five months. It pours reductive in aroma and structure, the latter defined by finely grained tannin and a plump juicy acidity. The mouthfeel is velvety. ~~While it's not as obviously influenced by the 2020 fires as many wines I've had from that vintage, it does show potential smoke influence.~~ I appreciate that making this wine was probably a very helpful educational exercise, but because other vintages of Hamel wines are better than this one, I would recommend customers skip it for other Hamel vintages. NOTE (8/27/2024): The 2020 vintage presented significant challenges including drought and heak spikes as well as fires. After reviewing Hamel's 2020 vintage processes

related specifically to potential smoke taint, it appears unlikely that smoke taint is chemically present in the wine and that my perceptual bias has likely gotten the best of me.

2019 Hamel Family Wines Isthmus Red - This blend features four Bordeaux varietals: Cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, and petit verdot in order of largest to smallest percentage. Less reductive than the prior two wines, it is plush and velvety with a grippy mineral core. It is early in its flavor development, but nicely delineated already featuring savory qualities of dried herb and pipe tobacco or leather. The merlot delivers dark red fruit flavors. This stands to be a very good wine around its 7th or 8th birthday.

2018 Hamel Family Wines Nuns Canyon Red - The star of the line up for me. It is 74% cabernet sauvignon - and thus a red wine versus a varietally labeled cab sauv - and 26% cabernet franc. It is dense, complex, and weightless on the palate where it shows a youthful reductive vigor. It hits the tongue with a bit of sweetness, after which follows a variety of purple-themed aromas and flavors plus notes of dried herb, leather, cedar, and saline. It's still a baby in 2024, and I think best to hold until its 10th birthday (at least).

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


ESTATE BOTTLED
1988
SMITH·MADRONE
NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON
ESTATE BOTTLED
1983
NAPA VALLEY

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

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' lifes' 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


Vintage 2022
ROMBAUER
VINEYARDS
Santa Lucia Highlands
PINOT NOIR
Family Owned & Operated
Est. 1980

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 Franscioni. 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.
PISONI · ROSELLA'S · GARYS'
2019
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 Franscionis.

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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MORET
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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 Franscioni 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

Petit Verdot
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon

Cabernet Franc
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Merlot
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus

Fiano
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)

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.


Chimney Rock
Elevage
Stags Leap District
Napa Valley
Appellation
2021
ESTATE GROWN
Chimney Rock
Elevage Blanc
Napa Valley
Appellation
2021
ESTATE GROWN

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.


IPE

Hiking in Napa

You gotta approach every day as if it's Open That Bottle Night.

Previous page: One of my prouder moments as a horrible camera phone photographer. Taken from one of the over 50 peaks of Bald Mountain outside Calistoga.

I've been to the Napa Valley more than a few times, and until this visit I had no idea a view like the previous page existed in the area. That's 100% ignorance; it's not like the mountains in the area are hidden. I only discovered it this time because Jesse and I decided to mitigate the health impacts of all the eating and drinking we did on the trip with several hikes.

The pleasures of hiking are relatively new to me as well. Not as new as Bald Mountain, but only within the last year or so have I become a quasi-regular hiker. My exercise history is mostly tied up in the many years of competitive cycling I did and the post-cycling-retirement routine of running (for which I am now too old), gym workouts, and Peloton riding. However, once we left Chicago last summer to move around the western United States, I and especially my wife have taken to the hiking trails of Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. I've really enjoyed it, and my wife about 100 times more so.

So rather than try to find a gym in Santa Rosa, where we stayed, or bring exercise bands with me

Previous page: Jesse reaching the summit of Bald Mountain hike in a much more representative example of my photography skills.

for in-Airbnb workouts, I suggested and Jesse agreed to hiking. As a secondary factor, I thought that maybe getting above the vineyard line might give me a new perspective on the Valley. And boy, did it ever.

I don't know how many wine tourists like myself spend time in the upper heights of Napa Valley, but I'd wager it's a small percentage. The few people we saw on the trails gave off local vibes. Now, I can't foresee a visit without a few hikes. Not only are the mountains beautiful and offer beautiful views, but as a student of Napa's wine, I have a much more dynamic appreciation of how and why the weather does what it does because I can see how the mountains impact it. I also have a better perspective on distances and where vineyards are located relative to other vineyards. And because, if you hike high enough, you can see multiple AVAs, you get a sense of how they differ in terms of topography and aspect.

I would not know how to begin reviewing hikes, which is fine because I really enjoyed the three we did and

Previous page: A Redwood dwarfing my 6'3 height and 6'5 wingspan.

would recommend them for able bodied people. The hikes we did in Napa are listed below by the name you'll find them on All Trails. We did two additional hikes, one to see some Redwood trees, for which we drove up to Ukiah, north of the Anderson Valley. We also enjoyed a hike in Cloverdale, which is about 30 miles north of Santa Rosa. I've provided some information on these as well.

I cannot recommend adding a few hikes to your next Napa Valley trip for the all the reasons outlined above. They were also nice breaks for all the driving and winery visits Jesse and I did that are chronicled in this *Good Vitis* issue. It gave us time to talk about things other than wine and travel logistics, as well as time to not talk and just listen to nature. They were revitalizing for the mind, and good for the body.

Bald Mountain via Widow Maker and Oat Mine Trail
This ~6 mile hike near Calistoga is straight up to the midway point, and then straight down. The views are incredible, and although the summit sits a bit lower than the top of the mountain range of which it is a part, you do enjoy 360 degrees of views from it.

Previous page: Jesse crossing a stream in Bothe-Napa Valley State Park.

There are options to extend the hike from the summit in several directions, all of which require additional elevation gain. Footing is generally and mostly very solid, but I do recommend proper hiking shoes. Parking spots are limited, so try to go during off peak times.

Ritchey Canyon Trail and Coyote Peak
This 5.1 mile lollipop-shape hike is located in Bothe-Napa Valley State Park, opposite the valley from Bald Mountain. There is a small entrance fee. The hike involves an elevation gain of just over 1,000 feet, and as such has a number of constant climbs and steep pitches. Footing requires attention in parts and there are multiple stream crossings, so sturdy hiking boots are recommended, and I wouldn't blame anyone for bringing hiking poles. It is a great option for hiking right off Highway 128. Since it is in a state park, that are a number of alternative routes as well as add-ons.

Preserve, Andiamo, Egglestein, NW Link, and Lower Traverse Loop
Located on the edges of Cloverdale, this 3.2 mile loop gains over 900 feet elevation, making it an

Previous two pages: The entrance sign to Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve the Redwoods that inhabit it.

appropriate choice for those looking to pack a hard workout into a short distance. The lollipop-shaked hike is a series of trails amongst a much larger trail system, and requires paying close attention to the map and trail signs to stay on course. As this might suggest, there are a number of alternative options and add-ons available to make your hike longer or shorter with less or more elevation gain. Footing was tricky in several spots, and the trail is narrow. There are several stream crossings as well, so hiking boots are recommended; poles would helpful as well.

Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve
This is a tricky spot to find because GPS cuts out several miles before you arrive at the parking lot, and the coordinates given for it on All Trails place the trailhead a few miles short of where it actually is if you're driving in from the east like we did. Your only way in and out of the Reserve, from either direction, is Orr Springs Road, which approximates a back road in England's Lake District: Narrow and twisty with numerous blind corners; usually tilted upwards or downwards; often with a steep drop off on one side; and oncoming cars coming quickly at


MONTGOMERY WOODS
STATE NATURAL RESERVE
TO GROVE TRAIL VIA
MONTGOMERY CREEK TRAIL .30 MI

you. Some of us love driving these kinds of roads, others don't. If you're the latter, I would recommend either not going or having someone else drive.

The reserve has a small network of trails. The purpose is really to see the Redwoods, so do not go if your primary interest is a workout. Nevertheless, we meandered for about two miles total and saw our fair share of beautiful, awe-inspiring Redwoods. It was wet while we were there, and found ourselves at times having to walk across fallen trees, covered in moss, to continue onwards. While this is not an extreme location nor are the trails particularly challenging, between the drive and the the mandatory first half mile or so that is entirely uphill at a fairly steep grade, and the chance of wetness, this is best for those looking for some adventure.

Jesse and I on Bald Mountain


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ITIS

Drink This Report

My top-15 wines mentioned in this report

1. 2021 Chimney Rock Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon
2. 1988 Smith-Madrone cabernet sauvignon
3. 2019 Diamond Creek Red Rock Terrace Vineyard cabernet sauvignon
4. 2021 Chimney Rock Elevage (rouge)
5. 2019 HALL Bergfeld Cabernet Sauvignon
6. 2018 Caraccioli Cellars Brut Cuvée
7. 2021 Chimney Rock Elevage Blanc
8. 2021 Lucia (by Pisoni) SLH Syrah
9. 2019 Diamond Creek Gravelly Meadow Vineyard cabernet sauvignon
10. 2009 ROAR Garys' Vineyard syrah
11. 2021 Lucia (by Pisoni) SLH pinot noir
12. 2020 Moone-Tsai Napa Valley chardonnay
13. 2018 Hamel Family Wines Nuns Canyon Vineyard Red Wine
14. 2021 Williams-Selyem Allen Vineyard chardonnay
15. 2014 Stonestreet Rockfall Vineyard cabernet sauvignon

Honorable Mention: 2019 Odonata Tondre Vineyard sparkling riesling

From the Archives:

Finding structure and balance in Morgan wine

Editor's Note: This piece was originally published on December 18, 2019. It has been edited for clarity.

We're deep into the holiday season, which is a period when a lot of wine gets consumed. Between office parties, potlucks, family dinners, Friendsgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, New Years and everything else going on, the opportunities to pull corks are seemingly endless. Kayce and I hosted Thanksgiving this year, which meant having enough wine on hand for eight very thirsty people.

Back in the spring, Morgan Winery asked if I'd like to receive samples. Morgan is located in the Santa Lucia Highlands of California, one of California's lesser known wine producing regions. My only prior exposure to Morgan was their Santa Lucia chardonnay, which is available by the glass at a place I frequent and performs strongly in that role. I figured sure, why not. Then, two full cases showed up. Twelve wines, two bottles of each. Perfect, I thought, one set for Good Vitis and one set for Thanksgiving.

The Menenberg-Seifert Thanksgiving p/b Morgan Winery went well. The food and the wine delivered. Morgan makes a wide range of wines, and we were

lucky enough to receive the grenache blanc, sauvignon blanc, Metallico (unoaked chardonnay), Santa Lucia Highlands chardonnay, rosé of grenache, dry Double L riesling, off dry Double L riesling, Cotes de Crow's southern Rhone-style red blend, tempranillo, Twelve Clones pinot noir, Double L pinot noir, and G17 syrah. No matter the food you put on your plate, there was a Morgan for it.

Part of what made the Morgan line up well-suited for the diversity of a Thanksgiving meal is the style the winery produces, which is driven by the climate and terroir of the Santa Lucia Highlands – referred to as "the SLH" to those in the know - and the broader Monterey area from which they grow and source their grapes. The SLH has, probably among others, two elements going for it that helps winemakers produce elegance and refinement: natural warmth absent the wind, and routine wind patterns that bring in cool air. The result, if leveraged like Morgan does, is bright acid combined with sturdy but smooth tannin. That's a recipe for good food-pairing wine.

To understand how Morgan gets this profile, it helps to talk a bit about the SLH. The wine growing areas in the SLH are located on the inland slopes of the Salinas Mountains, which run north-south,

paralleling the California coast. Across the Salinas Valley from the vineyards lie the Gabilan Mountains. The warm air of the Salinas Valley pulls the cold air from cooler Monterey Bay located to the north down into the vineyards, which moderates temperatures.

I spoke with Sam Smith, Morgan's winemaker, who told me that were it not for this wind phenomenon, SLH would be a warmer wine growing region that produced bigger wines. "The wind gives us a cool climate. We have foggy mornings that blow off by 11am, giving us generally a few hours of sun and low wind. But by 2pm, the wind starts ripping down the Valley off Monterey Bay and continues southward."

"It has a big effect on ripening," Sam explained. "It can close the stoma [little valves in the grape skins that regulate gas exchange] on the vines, which effectively helps develop acid and serious phenolic [tannin] structure" without a quick rate of sugar production. This explains why Morgan wines can exude a precise style consisting of both depth and restraint.

Morgan's premier vineyard is called Double L. The 48-acre vineyard is long and skinny, effectively divided into two halves. The entire vineyard has

loam soil, though the “upper field” has more clay and a higher water-retaining capacity, giving it more fertility than the “lower field” and its loser sandy soil. Double L is the only certified organic vineyard in the appellation, and Morgan reserves its fruit exclusively for its own wines. Most of the Double L fruit goes into Double L designated wines, though the non-vineyard designate SLH chardonnay and Twelve Clones pinot noir receive a small amount of Double L fruit. The vineyard produces pinot noir, chardonnay, syrah, and riesling.

With prior experience in Santa Barbara and the Northern Rhone, Sam Smith brought some of the right kind of know-how to Morgan and the SLH, where he has been the head winemaker for the last four years. “The amount of natural acidity [in the SLH] is incredible,” Sam said when asked to compare the new-ish digs to his old ones, adding that “it’s one of the things I love about growing and making wine here.”

Sam pointed out something about this natural acidity that hadn’t crossed my mind: “[The naturally high acid] can be tough to make wine [in the SLH] without it being over-ripe" because the naturally high acidity gives growers the ability to extend hang time for the fruit on the vine, which leads to higher

sugar accumulation in the grapes that results in "big, rich, and boozy" wines. "If you have the intention [of making more restrained, elegant wines] and you are on top of sampling, you can nail your pick [dates] and hit great balance while retaining fruit-driven profiles. The balance that we can get in most vintages is killer."

Speaking to this killer balance, we enjoyed the case of Morgan over a period of three days, and nearly every wine improved over the first 48 hours, if not the entire 72 hours, as we exposed it to more and more oxygen. This included some of the white wines as well, and is a sign of overall quality for a number of reasons. One important reason is that it indicates a hard-to-find quality in the balance of the structure of the wine, which is composed of acid, tannin, alcohol, and fruit. Initial exposure to oxygen can help some wines fully express themselves, but extended exposure will degrade all wines and expose imbalances in the structure. 48-72 hours is a long period of exposure for a wine to survive, even with the bottles re-sealed, and Morgan gets two enthusiastic thumbs up for taking the oxygen and making the most of it.

I want to focus in on four wines that stood out to me. The first two are the Double L rieslings, the dry

and off-dry versions. People don't think of California in the discussion of riesling, and it's to their detriment.

I've been an advocate for several California rieslings, especially the bottle produced by Smith-Madrone off Spring Mountain in Napa. But in full disclosure, I haven't looked to the SLH for the variety, so I was surprised when the Morgan shipment included two rieslings. After tasting them, I can add "pleasant" to "surprised."

Sam treats the riesling similarly to the other grapes planted in Double L. He typically does not drop fruit, getting between 4 and 5 acres a ton while retaining sufficient acid and aromatics. Sam noted that part of the Double L riesling signature is an herbal, minty quality and white tea freshness, which struck me on the finish of both wines, especially the dry version. The balance of these wines is what really impressed. Riesling can be a controversial grape for some: If it has high acid and poor balance, the acid is accentuated in unfortunate ways. In America, where the prevailing palate is highly sensitive to acid, that balance better be spot-on. I put the Morgan rieslings in the category of those I'd pour for riesling skeptics.

Staying on the Double L train, I want to talk briefly about the Double L pinot noir, which was the strongest wine in the lineup. The depth and seamlessness of the tannins, especially after 48 hours of oxygen exposure, stood out as quite impressive. The grapes for this wine, and generally all of Morgan's reds, are entirely destemmed. This means the tannin development comes primarily from the skins which accumulate high quantities of something called anthocyanin, which is the smoother type of tannin as compared to the corser phenolic tannins that come from seeds and stems.

We discussed how Sam gets these gorgeous tannins, and he walked me through his vineyard approach which revolves around opening the canopy (the leaves) while protecting the grape clusters from sunburn. On the side of the grapes that get morning sun, which presents a low risk of sunburn, Sam and his team completely clear the leaves. On the other side, which gets the more radiant afternoon sun, they do what is called "tunneling," which means removing the leaves that are between the clusters and the vine, while leaving the leaves on the outside of the clusters.

Sam finds that this approach strikes the right level

of tannin development and produces tannins that mature in the vineyard, which he points out are the easiest to extract when making the wine and require little else be done in the winemaking to achieve tannin development. The Double L pinot gets a relatively short amount of maceration, just one to one-and-a-half weeks on the skins. He limits fermentation temperatures to 85 degrees to avoid over-extraction and retain aromatics. Most agitation is push down, with just a bit of pump over at the beginning. Cold soak comes only in the "voluntary" form, meaning the time between crushing the grapes and when fermentation begins. The goal is to "nail the structure and aromatics. If you do, that's the holy grail." He seems to be on the right track with this one.

If the Double L pinot noir was the strongest Morgan I tasted, the G17 Syrah may be the most promising. It also happens to be the wine with which Sam is doing some whole cluster experimentation because syrah "sucks up whole cluster" better than the other red varieties Morgan is producing. The goal with the experimentation is to add aromatics and flavors without adding woody or green notes. "Whole cluster is similar to new oak," Sam explained, "you want new oak to help frame the wine, but if it tastes like oak then that sucks."

While whole clusters are an interesting experiment, picking the grapes on time is the most important thing. “There’s a real risk of waiting too long to pick. To a large extent the earlier you pick it, the more savory and floral it’s going to be. You have to check the syrah’s ripeness pretty closely and that’s what helps retain the elegance.“ I asked Sam about the future of syrah in the SLH, and he pointed out that the granite origin of the loam soil is “a natural for syrah; you pair them and it’s a no brainer.“ His Rhone experience shows through in the quality and profile of this wine.

I’ll conclude by making a genuine pitch for trying Morgan’s wines. In addition to the four discussed above, I’d also recommend the SLH chardonnay as a great value American chardonnay (yes, it’s not buttery or heavy, don’t worry) and the grenache blanc as a great entry-level wine for experimenting with something a bit different. Regardless of which wines you ultimately pick up, they represent an honest effort to produce high quality wines from an area where elegance and balance are achievable in unique ways.

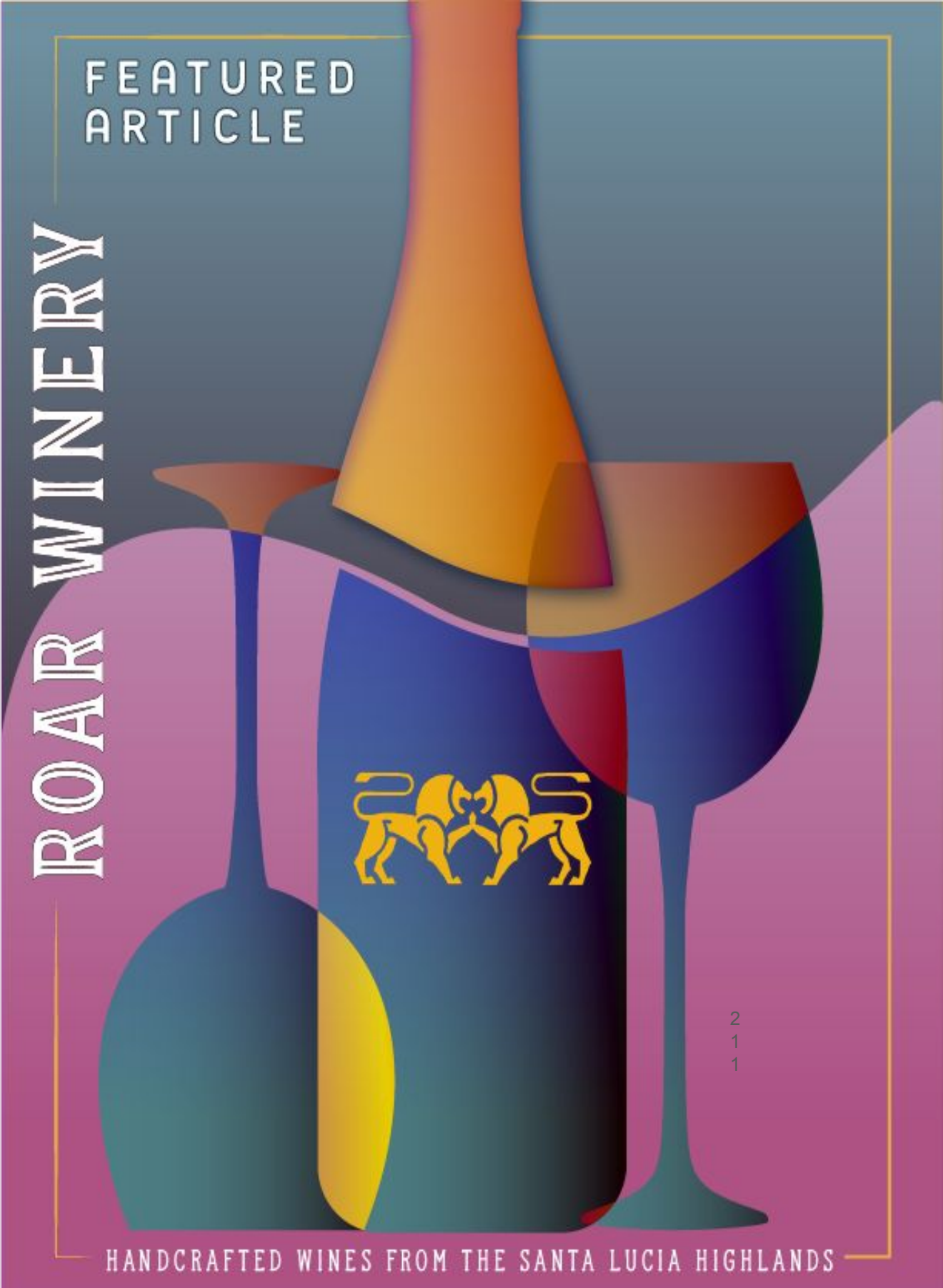
You have the right to remain...an oenophile

From the Archives

ROAR Wines: Hand crafted wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands

FEATURED ARTICLE

ROAR WINERY



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HANDCRAFTED WINES FROM THE SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Editor's Note: This piece was originally published on September 19, 2023. It has been edited for clarity.

There are certain wineries that inspire reverence for me, and I've been lucky enough to be able to cover some of them. True legends, wineries like Corison, Emidio Pepe, San Giusto a Rentennano, Delille Cellars, Smith-Madrone, and Belle Ponte immediately come to mind.

Each of these wineries are special for unique reasons. Cathy Corison's legend began because she was making wine in Napa before women were doing that sort of thing, and she was (and continues to be) extraordinarily good at it. Smith-Madrone is keeping America's riesling torch shining bright while making really good traditional cabernet since 1971 on Spring Mountain.

Emidio Pepe was organic/biodynamic/sustainable before those terms meant much to most wine people and they use their unique approach to make some of the most quirkily, intriguing, and age worthy white and red wines in Italy, if not in the world. Rentennano, whose property's history could inspire a novel (and inevitable Netflix series), might just be the best producer in Chianti and might just make the world's best merlot (I'm looking at you, Cheval Blanc).

while it gets well-deserved global praise for its red wines, also makes one of America's great white wines. Belle Pente, whose first vineyard was planted in 1994, is one of Oregon's pioneers and makes a wide range of elegant white and red wines that shows off the diversity of what Oregon can offer inclusive of, and well beyond, chardonnay and pinot noir.

The newest edition to this list is the Santa Lucia Highlands' ROAR wines and its founders and owners, the Franscioni family. The Santa Lucia Highlands, or SLH for short, is an American Viticultural Area (AVA) located south of Monterey Bay, California. Running along the Santa Lucia mountains, it was first planted to vine by Spanish missionaries and conquistadors. Its real development as a wine region, however, began in the 1970s. Although the Francionis landed in the SLH in 1907 and established themselves as farmers, it was current patriarch Gary that began the family's focus on vitis vinifera, or wine grapes, in the 1990s.
While other families like the Hahns (Hahn Estates) and Smith (Paraiso) seeded the modern SLH wine revolution in the two decades prior to Gary's first plantings, it was the Pisoni family, who got involved in the 1980s, and the Franscionis, who together in my estimation have evidenced the region's ability to

be world class.

In the world of a product that's been continuously made for 8,000 years, it's a rare opportunity to talk shop with people who are doing something for the first time. So, logging on to Microsoft Teams to see Gary sitting on his couch with sons Nick and Adam ready to answer my questions was pretty damn cool. Gary Franscioni began as a grower, selling his grapes to wineries. The first two vineyards he established, both in partnership with the Pisonis, have become California grand cru: Garys' Vineyard (in 1996) and Rosella's Vineyard (in 1997), which is named after his wife. Not long thereafter, ROAR was launched because "we wanted to make our own wine," Gary told me, explaining that "our first vintage was 2001. It wasn't a 'why?' but a 'why not?' We grow the grapes, let's be meticulous with them. Growing the best grapes makes the best wine, and making wine makes you a better grower." The Franscioni vineyard holdings have continued to grow as they have developed additional sites, including Soberanes and Sierra Mar. They also source from Clos Pepe and Pisoni vineyards as well.

It wasn't always grapes for the Franscionis, however. "The area was underdeveloped in terms of wells and water systems [when] many of the uplands," which

are now resplendent in vines, “were grazing lands for cattle until the 50s.”

The Franscionis were some of the first well developers, which they used to farm beans “and some other stuff.” When the “the gold rush of planting vineyards” began in the 1980s, in part because “Prudential [Bank] was investing in land appreciation,” Gary was watching.

While SLH farmers started investing in permanent crops like grapes and citrus, Gary went off to college as a food science major. “I had a class and they took us to Napa. I fell in love with the beauty of vines, and since then I always had in the back of my mind that I’d [grow wine grapes].” While he knew he was going to farm all his life, “it took me 20 years to get the capital to plant the first vineyard and I haven’t stopped since then.”

Gary’s sons, Nick and Adam, make ROAR and vineyard management a family business. While both were born into it the business and spent their summers in the vineyards, however, Nick grew up having “an interest in doing other things.” Even though they were very familiar with the business - “vineyards are literally around the house” and it was “amazing to be around,” Nick yearned for “a bigger

city, more neighborhood" growing up. "It's very rural in the SLH," he told me, "[it was] kind of [growing up on] a slightly isolated big property" surrounded by other big properties. "Because I was so far removed from the typical American experience, I left to go into business and technical school." However, after "really enjoying" that, he realized the family property was where his heart was. "I cut off everything I was doing and moved back to work with my dad and brother." While it was good to explore and see what was beyond the vineyards, "[I] realized it wasn't as great as I thought it'd be."

Adam emphasized the rural nature of the SLH, noting that from where they live, and in the SLH in general, "it's 15 minutes to drive to get milk, and everything between is farmland." For him, "when you're young you have this idea of being in the hustle and bustle of the city, but when you get older you have an appreciation for how beautiful the land is." Plus, he added, "being fourth generation is pretty cool, and how my dad evolutionized the family farm, keeping that going, there's a since of pride."
Keeping that going has meant starting a winery together. "It's a family business," Nick said, that Gary described as being "about the passion of growing and making wine. We look at quality, not quantity."

Production is 5,000-6,000 cases per year, which is enough for the four person team of Gary, Nick, Adam, and winemaker Scott Shapley. “We have a lot of high touch to it, very detailed,” Gary said, “so we like the size; it allows us to be very selective.” If they were to expand, the “production approach would have to change. We think it’s at a pretty optimal size right now.” The growth trajectory is limited by family size and vineyard acreage, and they all agreed that “we’re comfortable with the product and in a pretty happy zone. We just want to make the best [wine].”

Doing that in the SLH has a significant advantage. “You can go to Oregon and, pick a number, five out of 10 [vintages], you might have frosts or heat waves. Same with Burgundy, three out of 10 good years,” Gary told me. But in the SLH, Nick pointed out, “temperatures are so steady off the Monterey Bay [that] you don’t have spring frosts. We get cool summers that extend the growing season. Day temperatures are perfect for pinot [noir]. Dad believes it’s the weather, nine out of 10 good years, so if you miss [a vintage] you’re doing something wrong.” Nick also pointed to their proximity to the sea, the sloped vineyards, and well-draining soils as advantages. Adam added the absence of frosts: “We hear about that up north and how it’s a problem [but thankfully we don’t experience it].”

Despite these advantages, the region turns out a wide range of wine quality and even its best examples don't often make the world mainstage. "The SLH can be a bit top heavy," Nick explained. "You can find excellent wines, but there aren't a huge number of them and they're small production. There isn't the mass amount available across the country" to spread the SLH gospel. While the average SLH wine is "very good," Nick said, there isn't "a lot of heavy hitters to make [the SLH] a top appellation, which prevents the SLH from getting top level exposure."

Gary pointed to another dynamic at play in the SLH, that of big names not located in the SLH growing or buying large amounts of SLH fruit and making a mix of designated and non-designated wine. Some of these names, like Gallo, are now buying up large amounts of vineyards and land. "You worry about losing the artisan flavor" when that happens, Gary said. "If you go to the Russian River Valley, there are 90 wineries that are making small lots of high end wine. Down here, there's 4, maybe 5."
That the SLH isn't a flagship California AVA (my words, not theirs) isn't a "notoriety problem," Nick said. "We like that [the SLH] is a hidden gem [because] you don't have a ton of people flocking in and inundating our small infrastructure. It's kind of

nice to be kept under the radar, to be that secret at the table that gets busted out and no one knows. We want more love, but it's a balancing act: [we] don't want too much to take away from the beautiful rural aspect."

Adam added that while "it would be nice to have some great food options [in the SLH] like Napa [has], when people come here and they're shocked at why it's so beautiful, it's because it's rural."
This point of local infrastructure and its role in how an AVA's reputation develops is one I encountered when covering California's Anderson Valley a few years ago. While the wines of the two AVAs are distinctly different, this factor is not: Both are remote regions with little visitor infrastructure like hotels and restaurants, and lack extensive networks of roads in, through, and around themselves. Being off the beaten path and with little ability to house or feed visitors means few people visit.

Not being able to build robust tourism infrastructure makes it very hard to develop a national or international reputation. One of my favorite Oregon winemakers, Shane Moore, once told me that wine tastes best when drinking it at the winery or with the winemaker. And from my experience, he's right. It's much easier to develop

lifelong customers and sell wine that way, and it's incredibly powerful marketing as it develops passionate word-of-mouth ambassadors. Limited foot traffic means limited opportunities to build those deep and long-lasting connections with customers.

Given this, the wine has to do all the talking. When I get samples I'm really excited about, like these, I like to share them with friends whenever possible. So, I emailed a few friends and we met up to spend an evening with them, which is what you really should do with these wines. They're great wines out of the gate, but they evolve. Patience and introspection is rewarded, and they inspire and dominate conversation.

Nick described the house style as "complexity, layers, evolution of a wine." He noted that they can be "tricky for critics to review; how long are they experiencing them? [From] first to last sip, how much does that bottle change?" His implication is that with ROAR wines, the answer revealed by time is "a lot."

"One of the most important parts" about ROAR wines, Nick said, "is not having something monolith. We want evolution [that comes from having] backbone and structure [along with] site identity.

backbone and structure [along with] site identity. They evolve and change, and that's about layering in complexity." ROAR wines should also have, he said, "some power behind them."

Building this type of profile, the layering of complexity with power as Nick called it, comes from a lot of attention towards the fruit, Gary said. "We pass by every vine every 12 days, we give each vine the opportunity to make the best fruit we can. We do that for the 100-day growing season, we're very dedicated."

It's not coincidental that the region's best wines mostly come from the vineyards owned and managed by the Franscionis and Pisonis. While there are few high end vineyards in the SLH that are unassociated with either family - I'm thinking Morgan's Double L and Talbott's Sleepy Hollow - the list is quite short. When high end wineries without SLH vineyard holdings look to make SLH wines that fit into their portfolio, it's the Franscioni and Pisoni vineyards they hope to secure.

Case-in-point is the new Rombauer SLH Pinot Noir that we profiled in March 2023. Essentially, after tasting pinot grown throughout California and Oregon, Rombauer wouldn't commit to pinot noir

unless they got access to Franscioni vineyards, and they're not interested in expanding production unless it's with more Franscioni fruit. Other notable wineries producing high scoring wines from Franscioni and/or Pisoni fruit include Patz & Hall, Testarossa, Kosta Browne, Twomey, Miner, Clarice Wine Company, and Siduri.

The ROAR business model is often described as "grower-producer," meaning that they grow the grapes and produce them, and sell some as well. Given the high demand for Franscioni fruit and the producer aspect of their business, I wanted to know how they manage those two aspects that I thought might end up competing with each other.

While they were quick to dismiss any issues related to competing interests, Gary's initial response to this question was about the variety of what they produce, which I think was to make the point that by things being a bit complicated, there's actually little competition that bubbles up.

"We get different clones and do different selections to get a mixture of [grapes] that ripen at different times," Gary said, explaining essentially that they want to "get as many variables as possible" for themselves and their clients. "Different blocks,

different clones, difference spices," Gary explained, offer ROAR and their clients options, defusing competition over resources.

From there, Nick noted, "other producers are contracted; everyone has their blocks, and there's hardly room for anyone new. We know when each client wants their fruit to come in, we know what their ferments are like, their winemaking approaches." At the same time, "it's interesting to learn from them too. Certain tactics, [like] why they choose certain pick dates, their ferment approaches, [it's] always interesting to hear from and learn from different winemakers. Adam [Lee, for example] has a unique approach to making Clarice. Everyone is fixed in their place, they know and trust the fruit, they don't want to move [to another block or vineyard]."

The fruit only does so much of the work, however, because it also matters how it gets treated in the winery. "Mother Nature has a lot to do with it," Gary said, "but we do all we can" to maximize the fruit's potential. "We give [the fruit] all the love we can" once it comes in.

Their process includes cold soaks in the 17 to 21-day range, normally, during which the grapes get their

fair share of punch downs. They also use “the best oak - all French, and we turn them over every year-and-a-half,” Gary told me. Most fruit doesn’t take well to entirely new oak, but “SLH fruit can take [it]; don’t forget, we have good acidity here. A lot of the time, we have to wait for the acid [levels in the grapes] to drop [before harvesting them].”

Having tasted the wines, I was surprised by this news of entirely new French oak on each wine as none of them presented as obviously having been raised in this manner. I’m hardly ever a fan of 100% new oak on wines as that’s just not my palate, but to Gary’s point, their SLH fruit can take it. They’re significantly structured wines, and so maybe I wouldn’t have been surprised if I had focused on this aspect of the wine. The aromatics and flavors, sure, there was evidence of French oak, but it didn’t suggest to me that it was made entirely in new barrels. I normally shy away from fully-new oaked wines when I’m footing the bill, but I’d make an exception for ROAR.

It’s not a stretch to say that the ROAR’s wines are among the my favorite California pinot noirs. The chardonnay, from Sierra Mar vineyard, is also quite good. But it was the syrah, from Rosella’s Vineyard, that is the most memorable from the line up;

months later, it's the wine I most wish I could sip whilst writing this article.

"We wish we could produce more" of the syrah, Nick told me. "We've produced it since 2003, maybe 2005. We have a few acres of it on each ranch." But alas, as with syrah anywhere in America, the market will only take so much. "Talk to anyone in the industry, they love syrah. But customers don't rave about it, it's hard to market, there's a stigma about it." However, "it's very durable, very flexible, it can give you a whole bunch of different flavors. It will probably past the test of time with climate change. I'm a believer that one day the market will come around [to it], [it'll have] a Sideways pinot moment."

Wines from the SLH can have an inherent richness more significant that most other growing areas in the United States. The best quality examples deliver layers and complexity beyond most California pinots, chardonnays, and syrahs. Raised by the best, as exemplified by the ROAR line up, they're further elevated by substantive and juicy acid that makes that richness dynamic.

It's rare that I have zero apprehension in recommending every wine tasted in a single article, but this is one of those occasions. The wines of the

Franscionis live up to the legend of the family's grape-growing prowess, and beyond that there's something special about these wines vis-a-vis wines made by other producers that use Franscioni fruit. It's sort of a je ne sais quoi element, I think some kind of evidence of a home court advantage. There's a deliciousness to them that puts them at the center of a group's attention and continues to demand that kind of attention until they're gone.

Tasting notes and scores are below. When it comes to tasting chardonnay and pinot noir together, I tend to prefer the Burgundian tradition of tasting the reds before the whites, which I did here. However, given the heaviness and prospect of gaminess with the syrah, I saved it for after the chardonnay. One more note, for what it's worth, this was the first time that I've preferred a winery's Rosella's designate to its Garys'.

2021 ROAR Soberanes Vineyard Pinot Noir – The rich, deep nose offers concentrated cherry and blackberry compotes. The sweetness continues to draw your nose back into the glass, revealing licorice, black pepper, and dried Mission fig. On the palate it's of medium stature with tight, gritty tannin and big, juicy acid. The balance is spot on. Flavors include cherry, blackberry, black tea, blood orange,

kirsch, and baking spice. Continued swirling eventually evidences some floral notes. It's an elegant powerhouse of a wine that could use a good three to five years to unwind, after which it should continue to evolve for another five-plus years. 94 points. Value: A.

2021 ROAR Garys' Vineyard Pinot Noir – The nose is soft, pretty, and a bit earthy with moist soil, a bit of fungal quality, purple flower petals, Bing cherry, and rhubarb. Medium bodied, it has broad tannins and mellow yet juicy acid. While sturdy, the palate is soft. The tannins gain grit quickly, stiffening the structure while helping the wine find balance. The flavors are similarly mellow, and include sweet cherry, raspberry, lilac, white pepper, and maybe a bit of dried mint. While all of the 2021 ROAR pinots should be decanted if being consumed young, this one needs it more than the others. I'd give this one at least five years to age if possible. 94 points. Value: A.

2021 ROAR Rosella's Vineyard Pinot Noir – The fruit-forward nose wafts a core of really deep cherry, strawberry, and red plum. With extended air it develops love florals and some earthiness. This one is full bodied, very round and plush. At first it's soft, but air draws out the super finely grained tannins

and helps it develop a sensational mouthfeel. The flavor profile includes sweet cherry and raspberry, violet, spicy black pepper, and plum. Extended aeration transitions it from red-fruited to dark-fruited in nature as the tannins get grippier. At the same time, it develops a non-bitter black tea note. It's the least developed of the 2021 pinots, but it also has the best balance. I'd be tempted to lay this one down for at least seven years. 95 points. Value: A.

2021 ROAR Sierra Mar Vineyard Pinot Noir – The nose has a saline element that jumps out of the glass, which is then followed by a variety of berry marmalades, cigar box, candied citrus rind, and a bit of fungal funk. Full bodied, it remains fresh and bright. The tannins are broader than the other pinots, while the acid is balanced and the structure nicely integrated; it's the most lifted wine of the lineup despite its weight. Red plum, raspberry, cherry, and blood orange represent the fruit flavors, while white pepper and mint add some spice and accentuate the tannic grip. This one might need the most time of the pinots, suggesting a solid ten years of aging potential. 95 points. Value: A.

2021 ROAR Sierra Mar Vineyard Chardonnay – Just like the Sierra Mar pinot, the first aroma to meet

your nose is saline. After that it's cantaloup rind, lemon curd, and vanillin delivered in a very broad and nostril-filling manner. Full bodied, it's quite smooth with a sweet acid that's neither juicy nor sharp. The sensuous mouthfeel and balance is expertly constructed. The flavor profile is a touch sweet and dominated by lemon tart. Beyond that there's tangerine, preserved orange peel, slate, and white paper. I'm not sure if extended aging is going to make this any better, and that's not a bad thing. 94 points. Value: A-.

2021 ROAR Rosella's Vineyard Syrah – Classic varietal nose of brambleberry, black plum, cherry, garrigue, hickory, and violet. Barely full bodied, the balance is elite as the dense, heartily grained tannin and juicy, thick acid clearly love each other. The mouthfeel is absolutely gorgeous even as the tannin presents substantial grip and builds a super dense wine. Flavors include dark plum, dark cherry, menthol tobacco, worn leather, violet, and red meat. It's been a long time since I've had an American syrah this good; it's a modern, American take on Côte Rôtie. While delicious now, I agree with Nick's (much more informed) observation that this will come into its own in eight to ten years. 95 points. Value: A.


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