

THE **tastingpanel** MAGAZINE

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AN ENTREPRENEUR'S *Journey*

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The Pursuit of BALANCE

IICHIKO SAITEN
SHOCHU BRINGS
UMAMI AND
HARMONY TO
COCKTAILS

PHOTO: HARDY WILSON

**Michael Rooney,
Beverage Director
for the Orange
County, CA-based
Vaca Group,
appreciates iichiko
Saiten's versatility
with food.**

by Rachel Burkons

Rich, earthy, meaty, and savory, umami flavors are known to add depth, complexity, and nuance to cocktails. But while they shine on their own, they also enhance the flavors they're combined with, according to Michael Rooney, Beverage Director for Vaca Group, which operates three cocktail-focused eateries in Orange County, California. "Umami is, if anything, a perfect balance between the four other tastes: sweet, salty, sour, and bitter," Rooney explains. "It fills a flavor gap."

For the Vaca Group's newest project, The Hall in Costa Mesa's South Coast Plaza, Rooney strove to achieve a comparable sense of balance in drinks that would complement the kitchen's fresh seafood and heady spiced Moroccan dishes. "I did an experiment where I added olive juice to a Manhattan," he says. "It already has sweet, sour, and bitter; [after] adding that fourth salty [element] to the cocktail, the balance of all of those flavors in the glass was umami." From there, Rooney began a quest to find spirits that could similarly harmonize with other ingredients behind the bar and on the restaurant's diverse menu. "It can be complicated to find that sort of balance with a lot of spirits," he admits, "but iichiko Saiten brought a whole new tool for developing umami cocktails."

That was intentional on the part of legendary Japanese shochu producer iichiko, according to iichiko USA General Manager Tetsuro Miyazaki, who explains that Saiten is a shochu built by bartenders for bartenders. "In 2014, we launched iichiko USA in San



PHOTO: TODD WESTPHAL

**GIVEN ITS VERSATILITY, IT SEEMS
IICHIKO SAITEN HAS FINALLY
EARNED SHOCHU A SPOT ON THE
AMERICAN BACKBAR ALONGSIDE
THE CORE SPIRIT CATEGORIES.**

UPfront

Francisco and started introducing shochu to the U.S. bar community with our traditional shochu, iichiko Silhouette. This proved challenging, as its 25% ABV was not high enough to be used as a cocktail base,” recalls Miyazaki. “We met with bartenders and brainstormed how we could improve our shochu . . . and optimize it for mixology.”

Smartly, the team at iichiko implemented their suggestions, and the result is iichiko Saiten, which boasts a healthy 43% ABV that imparts structure in cocktails. Made from 100% barley

with no additives, Saiten is distilled only once to preserve its rich umami flavor. Moreover, iichiko flipped ancient techniques on their heads by developing a new kind of koji, the key ingredient in shochu’s fermentation process. “The umami quality of shochu comes from koji, a sweet and fragrant mold that is used to create a range of Japanese products, including miso, soy sauce, saké, and, of course, shochu,” explains Miyazaki. “In making shochu, koji is generally inoculated into rice, and it makes up about 30% of the mash bill.

iichiko broke new ground by developing barley koji, which allows iichiko to be 100% barley-based and accounts for its umami-rich flavor.”

That said, iichiko Saiten isn’t a “massive umami bomb like . . . tomatoes or mushrooms,” says Ryan Ota, Bar Manager at Paper Plane in San Jose, California. Ota acknowledges that although umami-driven cocktails are on trend in Northern California, many of the examples he’s seen have been “heavy on the savory side, which can limit the audience for these drinks.” He



PHOTO: HARDY WILSON

Bar Manager Ryan Ota makes a cocktail with iichiko Saiten at Paper Plane in San Jose, CA.

explains that using shochu “is a more subtle approach. . . . With Saiten, you can bring umami notes [that aren’t] overbearing to help introduce these flavors to your guests.”

Rooney agrees: “Umami doesn’t need to be chorizo in a glass. The Japanese style of cocktailing is very delicate and nuanced, [with] perfect complementary flavors.” Rooney connects this aesthetic to Shinto, a native religion of Japan that he studied in college. “Shinto ultimately [teaches that] Japan was birthed out of the sea and that everything that lives on the island is connected and harmonious,” he says, noting that whereas Western ideologies focus on stark contrasts of dark versus light and good versus evil, Shintoism focuses on the natural balance between all things.

Finding that balance in life is hard, but thanks to Saiten, striking it in the glass is easier than ever. Rooney puts Saiten to work at The Hall with the Internally Flawless, whose clean and simple profile allows the umami to emerge as a bold primary note on the palate. Meanwhile, Ota takes a tropical approach with his Hawaiian-inspired Magic Island, where Saiten works overtime to balance out sweeter ingredients.

But according to Miyazaki, even a two-ingredient cocktail can demonstrate the flavor-enhancing power of umami. “We recommend mixing iichiko Saiten and tonic, for example,” he says. “The umami notes from iichiko Saiten and the sweetness from the tonic create an exceptional and unique flavor.”

Given such versatility, it seems iichiko Saiten has finally earned shochu a spot on the American backbar alongside the core spirit categories. And with its chic, modern bottle that handles easily—another criterion suggested by bartenders—Saiten is poised to bring harmony to bar programs across the country. ■■



MAGIC ISLAND

Created by Ryan Ota, Bar Manager, Paper Plane

- 1 oz. iichiko Saiten
- 1 oz. iichiko Silhouette
- ¼ oz. Clément Mahina Coco
- ¼ oz. mango–li hing mui syrup
- ½ oz. fresh lime juice
- ¼ oz. condensed milk

Swizzle all ingredients except condensed milk in a Collins glass over crushed ice. Top with condensed milk and dust with li hing mui powder.



INTERNALLY FLAWLESS

Created by Michael Rooney, Beverage Director, Vaca Group

- 1½ oz. iichiko Saiten
- ¾ oz. Istine Vermouth di Radda
- ½ oz. Barr Hill Gin
- ¼ oz. Yuzuri Yuzu Liqueur
- 2 dashes Honest John Orange Bitters

Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass. Stir to dilute and chill. Strain into a chilled Nick & Nora glass and garnish with an orchid.

A Message to Our Friends and Colleagues

The Tasting Panel and *The SOMM Journal* exist as platforms for wine and spirits producers, distributors, importers, retailers, and hospitality professionals. Whether we are covering new and established brands; profiling winemakers, distillers, sommeliers, and bartenders; or identifying emergent on- and off-premise trends, our underlying goal is always the same—to serve, promote, and celebrate the beverage industry as a whole.

As our world changes before our eyes, we would like to extend a heartfelt message of support—and determination. Rest assured we will continue to operate as a forum for your ideas and products as faithfully today and tomorrow as we did yesterday. We will also continue to serve as your messenger, as our magazines will continue to be delivered into the hands of the beverage professionals that you may not be able to visit with in person during this time.

We will emerge stronger, and this distancing may actually bring us all that much closer. We wish everyone good health and raise a glass to a brighter future. ■■

In solidarity,
Meredith May,
Publisher



Meredith May



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Joel Gott with a glass of his namesake wine brand's 815 Cabernet Sauvignon.



PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN

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A List of Resources for Service Industry Workers, Restaurants, and Bars

The service industry has been severely affected by restrictions and closures due to the spread of COVID-19. Below is a list of relief funds and resources for service industry workers, restaurants, and bars, some of which are open to public donations. The *Tasting Panel* staff also encourages readers to visit the websites of establishments in your area, many of which are setting up funds for their staff via GoFundMe, Venmo, and other platforms. To submit additional resources for consideration that we can add to our online list at tastingpanelmag.com, email Deputy Editor Eric Marsh at emarsh@tastingpanelmag.com.

USBG National Charity Foundation Bartender Emergency Assistance Program: This fund aims to assist members of the bartending community who have been affected by closures made in response to the pandemic. The grant is open to applicants in all 50 states, and you do not need to be a USBG member to apply. For more information or to donate, visit usbgfoundation.org/covid-19-response.

Emergency Fund for U.S. Restaurant Sommeliers: This fund is specifically dedicated to restaurant sommeliers in the United States who have lost wages due to COVID-19. To donate or apply for assistance, visit gofundme.com/f/sommelier-emergency-fund.

One Fair Wage: The One Fair Wage Emergency Fund is providing cash assistance to restaurant workers,

delivery drivers, and other tipped workers who are seeing their income decline due to the pandemic. To apply or donate, visit ofwemergencyfund.org.

Restaurants Workers' Community Foundation: The RWCF has established a COVID-19 Crisis Relief Fund to provide relief for individual workers affected by the coronavirus as well as to create zero-interest loans to businesses. For more information, visit restaurantworkerscf.org.

Dining Bonds Initiative: The goal of this initiative is to provide much-needed funds to restaurants on an immediate basis by selling "bonds" that can be purchased at a 25% discount (for example, a \$100 bond for \$75) and then redeemed for face value at a future date. The program is open to all restaurants. For more information, visit supportrestaurants.org.

The James Beard Foundation Food Industry + COVID-19 Webinar: The James Beard Foundation hosted a webinar on March 17 on the industry's response to COVID-19. To view the full recording, visit jamesbeard.org/blog/catch-up-on-our-food-industry-covid-19-webinar.

Another Round, Another Rally: This nonprofit is offering \$500 relief grants for hospitality workers who lost their jobs or had their hours slashed in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. To apply for a grant or make a donation, visit anotherroundanotherally.org.

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Bacardi Limited Commits \$3 Million to Support the Bar and Restaurant Industry

Bacardi Limited, the largest privately held spirits company in the world, has launched #RaiseYourSpirits, an initiative to support bars and restaurants debilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have been devastated to watch our longtime partners and friends lose their livelihoods virtually overnight, as dining out, nightlife, and entertainment grind to a halt around the world," the company stated in a press release. "Bacardi and our brands, including Bacardí, Martini, Grey Goose, Patrón, Bombay Sapphire, and Dewar's Blended Scotch, pledge \$3 million USD in financial aid and other support to help the people on the frontlines of our industry during this unimaginable time. This donation is in addition to the \$1 million USD pledged by Patrón."

Bacardi Limited is working with established nonprofits that are providing aid quickly to those in the industry who have been hit hard by the pandemic, including Another Round, Another Rally; CORE; the James Beard Foundation; the Restaurant Workers' Community Foundation; and the Tales of the



Cocktail Foundation. And because the company's business is "inherently local, many of [its] efforts around the world are grassroots: supporting bars and bartenders across countries, cities, and neighborhoods to provide real-time financial support, meals, and other necessities to partners in need," according to the press release.

"Bacardi is a family company, and for us, business is personal. We always say that love for our brands is built in bars, and now it is our turn to show them our love," says Mahesh Madhavan, CEO of Bacardi Limited.

"We don't have all the answers today on how best to help everywhere, but we are committed to doing what we can to see our industry through this crisis. These may be the darkest of days for bars and restaurants, but I am certain that when we come out on the other side, people will emerge from isolation with a renewed zest to live life to the fullest and celebrate together with friends and family."

More outreach and activations are to come; for more information, follow the hashtag #RaiseYourSpirits on Instagram.

"Support Your Local Bartender" T-Shirt to Support USBGF's COVID-19 Relief Campaign

To help combat the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry, E. & J. Gallo Winery brand New Amsterdam Pink Whitney Vodka is collaborating with Barstool Sports to support the United States Bartenders Guild Foundation's (USBGF) COVID-19 Relief Campaign with a custom-designed T-shirt.

"Like so many of us in the beverage alcohol industry, I started my career in hospitality. At this challenging time, New Amsterdam Vodka is 100% committed to helping those most in need throughout our communities," says Britt West, Vice President and General Manager of Spirits for E. & J. Gallo Winery.

Emblazoned with the message "Support Your Local Bartender," the T-shirt is available for \$28 plus shipping,

with 100% of net proceeds going to help bartenders affected by closures across the United States via the USBGF's Bartender Emergency Assistance Program. New Amsterdam Vodka will donate an additional \$5 for every shirt purchased. To place an order, visit store.barstoolsports.com.

"The spirit of Barstool Sports is capturing the conversations that happen between friends in a bar," says Barstool Sports CEO Erika Nardini. "Those conversations don't happen without bartenders, so we wanted to give back to them and help them in a small way."

Bartenders seeking support can visit usbgfoundation.org/beap for more information. To make a donation, visit usbgfoundation.networkforgood.com. ■■

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Beer(d) Science isn't just an excuse for an '80s movie pun: Typically featured in *The SOMM Journal*, this column explores a different style of beer and related terminology in each issue to help somms expand their beer knowledge.

The Blab on NABLAB

CLASSIC LOW-ALCOHOL BEER STYLES

THAT ACTUALLY TASTE GOOD by Jessie Birschbach

Four months past Dryuary, aka Dry January, I'm already dreading the next one. I couldn't tell you exactly why this trend of abstaining from alcohol annoys me so much (maybe it's because I drink alcohol for a living?) or why I'm not more supportive of people trying

the sake of my soul) let's not talk about nonalcoholic products.

That said, I'm trying to be more open-minded for the sake of a dear friend who recently discovered that he has a health problem and now has to alter his diet drastically—which means greatly reducing his

Mild as well as the Belgian Tafelbier are typically best when consumed in their countries of origin—though you can sometimes find them on tap at craft breweries. In fact, I enjoyed a fresh Dark Mild at The Bruery in Placentia, California, not too long ago.

BERLINER WEISSE

ABV: 2–8–3.8%

This pale, crisp wheat beer with a lactic, sour character and dry finish is often served in Germany with some sort of sugary syrup (like raspberry or woodruff) to balance its tart character. Although there apparently aren't many versions of Berliner Weisse in its home country anymore, there are a ton of domestic craft examples. Most see the addition of fruit: The Mikkeller Hallo Ich Bin Berliner Weisse Passion Fruit is one of my favorites.

GOSE

ABV: 4.2–4.8%

This vivacious, highly carbonated, tart, and fruity wheat ale always features a dash of coriander and salt. The style originated during medieval times in the German town of Goslar, but it really made its claim to fame in Leipzig. Anderson Valley Gose is a classic domestic version, but Westbrook Gose is also highly lauded. ■■

Jessie Birschbach is a Certified Cicerone and substandard homebrewer. She's also still learning, so if you have a suggestion or comment, contact her at jabs@sommjournal.com.



The town square of Leipzig in Germany, where Gose was made popular.

to better themselves—however fleetingly—but in the words of one of the great beer drinkers, *Family Guy*'s Peter Griffin, it really grinds my gears.

So does the whole category of low- or no-alcohol beer, which is growing so popular that it now apparently needs its own acronym: NABLAB. Honestly, I haven't experienced many. My colleague says Heineken 0.0 tastes strikingly similar to good ol' fashioned Heineken, but for our purposes (and

alcohol intake. He refuses to quit drinking altogether, however, so he's searching for some options that aren't completely devoid of flavor.

For his sake, then, even this spoiled beer nerd felt that a look at a few low-alcohol beer styles might be in order.

SMALL BEERS

ABV: 3–3.8%

Low in alcohol and body, small (aka low-gravity) beers like the British ordinary bitter and the Dark



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BEYOND *the* BARREL

In **Beyond the Barrel**, we taste and review products that may or may not come from a barrel but land outside the box. From brilliant innovations to zany concepts, we approach everything judiciously, with the cognizance that everything has a market.

Kāstra Eliōn Vodka (\$55/750-mL bottle) Kāstra Eliōn is distilled with handpicked Greek olives that are blended with a mix of grains and mineral-rich spring water from Mount Taygetus in southern Greece. The faint note of olive comes through as a pepperiness that's often found in extra-virgin olive oil. This full-bodied vodka is subtly sweet with little burn; perhaps it's slightly oleaginous, but the finish left me thinking more of butter. Obviously, it's tailor-made for a dry Martini garnished with olives.



A to Z Wineworks Bubbles (\$20/4-pack 250-mL cans; \$18/750-mL bottle) A blend of Oregon Pinot Noir and Chardonnay makes up this effervescent rosé, which is just the thing to serve at your friend's bridal shower or at a dinner party as a pairing with dessert, say a strawberry or cherry tart. There are notes of both fruits on the creamy-textured palate, along with watermelon and jasmine—and the packaging, too, is fun and festive. Then again, I'm sure this could be enjoyed just the same every day: on a hike, during a lazy afternoon at the beach, or while stargazing on a spring eve.

J.F. Haden's Mango Liqueur (\$30/750-mL bottle) This small-batch liqueur is appropriately made in Florida, where the fleshy, bright-orange Haden mango was introduced in the early 1900s and soon flourished in the Sunshine State. The richness of the fruit imparts a full mouthfeel; while pronounced, the flavor is not overly fruity but rather tart and tangy. Try it as a substitute for an aperitivo in a Spritz or as an added ingredient in a Daiquiri.



Cutwater Lime Tequila Soda (\$10/4-pack 355-mL cans) This tequila soda—inspired by a drink colloquially referred to in parts of the Southwest as “ranch water”—won't leave you asking questions, as it's made with only three simple ingredients: blue agave tequila, soda water, and a whisper of natural lime flavor. Clocking in at 7% ABV, 130 calories, and zero carbs or grams of sugar per container, it would no doubt be a highly satisfying option after a hard day's work under the blazing sun—but it's also refreshing any time you're in need of a thirst quencher.

Pompette Hard Sparkling Water (\$13/750-mL bottle) Pompette aims to be a more sophisticated option in the hard-seltzer game, and it hits the mark with its Cucumber Lime expression. This is like spa water in a bottle—albeit alcoholic spa water at 5% ABV—with restrained flavors and a cucumber-tinged palate that's much more cleansing than most sweet, viscous hard seltzers. Stay hydrated at the spa; drink this while still blissed out afterward. ■■



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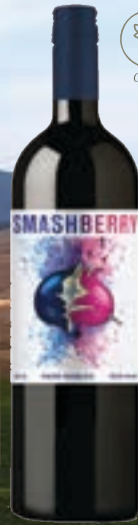
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ForceBrands is the leading specialized recruiting firm for the consumer-products industry—we build the teams that build the brands. Our industry-specific divisions BevForce, FoodForce, BeautyForce, and HerbForce offer executive-search services, board-of-director assembly, and a digital job board to connect directly with qualified candidates.

Elizabeth Ince has been named Sales Capability Manager at **Pabst Brewing Company**. She had been Senior Training Manager at Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits.

JB Woodworth has been named Executive Vice President of Sales at **Dos E Hombrés**. He had been President/Managing Director at The Cure Brand.

Allison Masley has been named Compliance Manager at **M.S. Walker, Inc.** She had been a paralegal at The Boston Beer Company.

CAREER CORNER

BevForce BUZZ:

Hiring Trends and Challenges in Wine and Spirits

In one of the most competitive job markets in recent years, hiring strategies matter. According to the recently released third edition of ForceBrands' Talent Market Report, which examines hiring trends across the consumer-products industry, more than half of respondents agreed that the beginning stages of the hiring process—identifying, sourcing, and attracting talent—are the most challenging. The wine and spirits sector reported having the most difficulty identifying talent; hiring managers in this sector also found that among the most difficult roles to fill were those related to legal counsel.

These findings may explain why recruiters were ranked the fourth most important resource for connecting to talent across all industries (social media came in at number one), revealing that hiring managers recognize the value of investing in recruiters. Indeed, more than 40% of wine and spirits employers leverage recruiters as helpful tools. For additional insights from this report, visit forcebrands.com. ■■



According to the recently released third edition of ForceBrands' Talent Market Report, more than half of respondents agreed that the beginning stages of the hiring process are the most challenging."

Want to connect with beverage industry leaders? Tap into ForceBrands' specialized beverage division BevForce at forcebrands.com/bevforce or email hello@forcebrands.com for more information.

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New Wines and Spirits for Springtime Sipping

story and photos by David Ransom



Dekantā's Makiyo Masa with her whiskies.



Nicoletta Pala of Audarya at the New York stop on the Gambero Rosso Tre Bicchieri Tour.

The year in wines and spirits is already off to an interesting start. Here are a few new products that have resonated with me enough to want to spread the word.

First, I recently had the pleasure of interviewing and tasting with Makiyo Masa of Dekantā, the world's largest online retailer of Japanese whisky; she co-founded the business with her husband, Edward Davidson (who happens to be the CEO of Braeburn Whisky), in 2015 after realizing there was a need for a global marketplace of bespoke and rare Japanese spirits. With a focus on lesser-known distilleries such as Chichibu, Karuizawa, Shizuoka, and Hakushu, Masa sources whisky from all over Japan and sometimes even has access to discontinued products. She currently has about 2,000 labels in stock, though inventory is constantly increasing; prices range from under \$100 to over \$50,000 a bottle. The day we met, Masa poured me an Ichiro's Malt Mizunara Heads 2011 Single Malt from Chichibu Distillery (\$2,300) and a Kuraizawa Spirit of Asama Single Malt (\$2,400). If you're looking to stock your shelf with hard-to-find whiskies, *dekanta.com* is the place to get them.

Next, at the Gambero Rosso Tre Bicchieri Italian wine tasting in New York, I fell in love with two wines. The first was the Audarya 2018 Cannonau di Sardinia DOC (\$26; DOCG Imports), a lovely and lively version of Sardinia's signature red grape that's filled with ripe red fruit and spice. Located just north of Cagliari in southern Sardinia, the young winery was founded by siblings Nicoletta and Salvatore Pala, whose family has been making wine for generations.

The second winner was the Torre dei Beati 2018 Rosa-ae Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo (\$18; Piedmont Wine Imports), made by Fausto Albanesi in Loreto Aprutino. Albanesi, a former engineer, started making wine part time in 1999 with a singular focus on varieties native to the Abruzzo region, such as Montepulciano and Pecorino. Today, he's a beacon for his home province; his wines are some of Italy's best, with the Rosa-ae earning him Gambero Rosso's 2020 Rosé Wine of the Year award. This 100% Montepulciano rosato is as weighty as it is deeply colored, making it a great pick for food pairings year-round. ■■



The Torre dei Beati Rosa-ae was named Gambero Rosso's 2020 Rosé Wine of the Year.

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The Art of Conversation

AT **PASTICHE** IN SAN ANTONIO, EAU-DE-VIE DEVOTEE BENJAMIN KRICK HELPS GUESTS TRAVEL THE WORLD WITHOUT LEAVING THEIR BARSTOOLS

story and photo by Lori Moffatt

San Antonio barman Benjamin Krick—who has traveled to more than 40 countries in search of perspective on both his life and his career—believes the logistics of running a bar extend beyond the bottom dollar to more meaningful concerns. He explains that he and his business partner, Lucas Bradbury, are dedicated to what they call “conscious capitalism,” which involves everything from offering employee health insurance and implementing zero-waste initiatives to supporting other local businesses. But his eyes really light up when he waxes poetic about restoring the art of conversation, little by little, via their two internationally themed bars, Jet-Setter and Pastiche.

For the latter, which recently opened in a Craftsman-style bungalow near downtown, Krick says he sought to “create a place for people to create and inspire and be inspired.” His cocktail menu has an Old World vibe, incorporating Cognac, Armagnac, absinthe, grappa, Sherry, Sauternes, and dozens of other brandies, eaux de vie, and fortified wines; his wine and beer lists likewise slant decidedly European.

Lacking a television, the space was designed to encourage tête-à-têtes instead of game watching and phone scrolling—it’s a captivating mixture of mismatched furniture, thrift-store scores, and antiques collected around the globe. “We also play a lot of French music, and it’s almost impossible to be in a bad mood when you’re listening to Édith Piaf,” Krick says. “No one’s in a hurry—the biggest compliment I hear is that people come in and lose track of time in here. That’s how I know I’m



Benjamin Krick and his business partner, Lucas Bradbury, designed Pastiche as “a place for people to create and inspire and be inspired.”

doing it right.”

On the books for 2020 and beyond are spirits tastings and classes for consumers and trade alike. The year got off to a good start during an unofficial San Antonio Cocktail Conference event in January, when guests gathered beneath the twinkling lights strung overhead in Pastiche’s funky backyard space for a crash course in Cognac with representatives from producer Cognac Park. In addition, Krick says, “We recently had a distiller from Norway come in to

do a master class on gin, aquavit, and absinthe. These kinds of events are so important to creating relationships.”

They’re also important for broadening horizons. “We’re in a time when a lot of people are excited to taste and try things from all over the world,” Krick says. “Maybe they don’t have the means to travel, but they can come to our bars. Our goal was to create places where people could go out and feel like they’ve been transported to somewhere else.” ■■

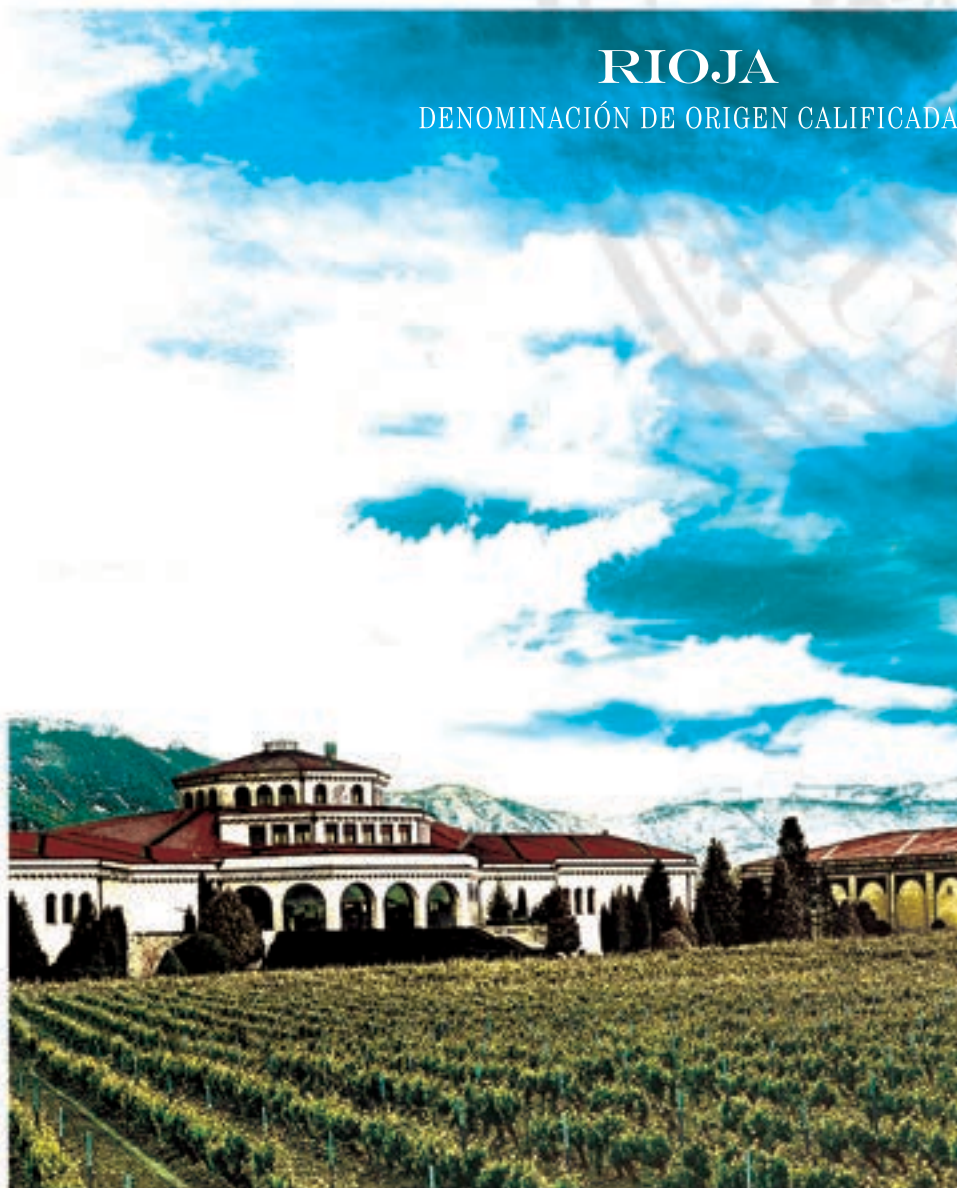
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Whisk(e)y Finds a Port in the Storm

by Ian Buxton

As the whisk(e)y war heats up—with the import tariffs on single malt Scotch being met by tit-for-tat taxes on American whiskey exports to the U.K. and the European Union—producers on both sides of the Atlantic are starting to feel real pain.

American whiskey exports to Europe fell by more than a quarter in 2019, mirroring the disruption in Scotland. “We’re deeply disappointed that a 25% tariff remains in place on exports of single malt Scotch whisky and liqueurs to the United States,” Karen Betts, Chief Executive of the Scotch Whisky Association, recently commented, adding that after four months, the tariffs are “hitting Scotch whisky producers hard, particularly small distilleries. We’ve seen a significant drop in exports already, and based on this could be facing at least £100 million [\$130 million] in lost exports over a year.”

However, though some will suffer, cult brands such as Islay’s Ardbeg may be able to ride the storm. The very name of its latest limited-edition release, **Ardbeg Blaaack**, is a sheep-themed joke acknowledging the distillery’s “dyed in the wool” enthusiasts. With an ABV of 46%, it’s been bottled in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Ardbeg Committee—the brand’s global fan club—and should retail for around \$125.



It’s not all doom and gloom at Dewar’s either, where master blender Stephanie Macleod has taken advantage of new regulation changes (see my column in the September 2019 issue) to experiment with innovative cask finishes. In that vein, the distillery has created what it claims is the world’s first Scotch whisky to finish in mezcal casks, in this case from the brand **Illegal: Dewar’s Illegal Smooth** is an intriguing double-aged eight-year-old Scotch with a pleasantly sweet, smooth taste and a wisp of smoke on its finish. (Dewar’s parent company Bacardi has a minority stake in Illegal, ensuring the supply of quality barrels.) With a surprisingly competitive suggested retail price of just \$22, it’s something that whisky explorers will definitely want to try; kudos to Macleod for this work of clever cultural fusion!

Turning briefly to Ireland: Regular readers will remember Mark Reynier, the maverick who brought Bruichladdich to global fame. For the past few years he’s been distilling in Waterford in the south of Ireland, and now his first whisky is ready. Sadly, initial sales of the **Waterford 1st Cuvée: Pilgrimage** (50% ABV; €150) will be available as of April 25 at the distillery only. If you can’t get on a plane, just remember the name, because Waterford is going to be an important part of the Irish spirits scene.

Irish Distillers already is and has been for some time. Hence the launch



“We’re deeply disappointed that a 25% tariff remains in place on exports of single malt Scotch whisky and liqueurs to the United States.”

—Karen Betts, Chief Executive of the Scotch Whisky Association

of its **Redbreast 27 Years Old** (54.6% ABV; \$500)—which, remarkably, will be a permanent addition to its storied range. Even more unusually, the whiskey is aged entirely in Ruby Port barrels from the Douro Valley—a suitably calm port for the tariff storm that currently rages ‘round the world of whisk(e)y. ■■





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When Restaurants Reopen, We'll Need Sommeliers More Than Ever

by Erik Segelbaum

The '20s certainly have been roaring—though not quite in the way some of us expected. We are facing unprecedented challenges that threaten our livelihoods and communities. Many on- and off-premise businesses saw their Q4 2019 and Q1 2020 profits evaporate thanks to tariffs (both actual and threatened) on wine, liquor, and food products from the European Union—but I already miss the days when tariffs were our largest problem. The global COVID-19 pandemic has virtually shuttered the U.S. hospitality industry. Many states have forced restaurants to close or to dramatically change the way they operate as they convert to delivery and takeout business only.

This complete pivot is neither one that most restaurateurs had built into their business model nor one they can sustain. As a result, one would expect them to cut costs as much as possible . . . and they have. Labor is the largest variable cost, which means tens if not hundreds of thousands of tipped employees have seen their income evaporate overnight—and sommeliers are often the first to be let go, as well as the last to be put back onto the

schedule. After all, a restaurant cannot function without cooks, servers, and dishwashers; theoretically, it could get by without a wine expert. And yet sommeliers, more than any other position, have the ability to dramatically impact revenue. When we finally “flatten the curve” and begin to rebuild the industry, they will be key to helping restaurants get back in the black.

Beverage is proven to be the most significant contributor to restaurant profit. Though food sales represent 60–75% of most restaurant revenue streams, the product and labor costs of food mean that profit dollars from those sales are usually closer to 10–25%. Conversely, though beverage typically represents only 25–40% of revenue, it accounts for roughly 75–90% of net profit dollars. This is due largely to two factors: lower labor costs (prep work is minimal) and greater product stability (there's less spoilage and minimal or no yield variation). Keeping your beverage specialists on the floor is vital to ensuring that these high-gross-revenue and high-profit sales continue. Most servers, bussers, and food runners cannot sell wine with the same impactful acuity as a sommelier—yet almost every some-

lier can assist in seating guests, taking orders, running food, and bussing tables. (To be clear, I am not suggesting that other positions are expendable; however, a sommelier can wear two hats by assisting with all aspects of service while contributing to the bottom line through beverage sales.)

Think about the price differential between the least and most expensive dishes in the types of restaurants that might employ a sommelier; it's likely to be between \$20 and \$50. Now consider the difference in price between the average restaurant's least and most expensive bottle of wine: It could be hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Eliminating the position that can most effectively generate those high-dollar sales is the worst possible thing an operator can do at any time, but especially right now, when every penny of revenue and profit counts.



We are arguably facing the most challenging series of events our industry has ever had to endure. As it could be some time before we are back to “normal,” financial and operational prudence must prevail. Sommeliers are among our best resources for restoring that critical revenue stream. ■■

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Virginia Is for (Food and Wine) Lovers

A JUST-LAUNCHED CHEF SERIES IN MIDDLEBURG AND A COZY WINE BAR IN VIENNA LURE DINERS OUT OF THE DISTRICT **by Kelly Magyarics**



Jan Van Haute (center) is executive chef at the Goodstone Inn in Middleburg, VA.

Four hands are better than two: That's the philosophy of Jan Van Haute, executive chef at the Goodstone Inn. On a cold February afternoon, I checked into a suite at the tony 18-room property in Middleburg, Virginia—the heart of the state's wine country—to attend the inaugural Four Hands Dinner, part of a series in which Van Haute collaborates with a featured guest chef on a multicourse tasting menu served in the exquisite, glass-enclosed setting of onsite restaurant The Conservatory. Van Haute's stellar pedigree includes a stint at the three-Michelin-starred Hof van Cleve in his

native Belgium and an appointment as executive chef to the Ambassador of Belgium in D.C.

For the inaugural event, he invited Johnny Spero, who helms the kitchen at Georgetown's Reverie. Spero took charge of the evening's first two courses: a Scandinavian-inspired scallop in buttermilk-dill sauce, topped with crunchy dehydrated scallop chips, and cod in a bouillon of *kokotxas* (Basque-style fish cheeks) garnished with caviar and sunchoke chips. Van Haute flexed his cooking muscles by preparing roasted squab—cheekily served with the talons still attached



Pan-seared salmon with mushroom farro and lemon-caper sauce at Blend 111 in Vienna, VA.

PHOTO: KELLY MAGYARICS

and accompanied by truffle, lardo, and fermented carrot—and heritage Randall Lineback beef with salsify and turnip. Then Spero returned to commandeer dessert: tangy yogurt with grape, sorrel, and Zirbenz Pine Liqueur. I'm already looking forward to future evenings of culinary turn-taking in this gorgeous venue.

A little closer to D.C. in northern Virginia, Blend 111 is a fun addition to downtown Vienna. Owner Michael Biddick's exclusively Spanish and French wine list is also dedicated entirely to natural, Biodynamic, organic, and/or minimal-intervention selections. He was all too happy to turn this Loire wine lover onto Domaine des Huards Romo, a white with intense acidity that's produced with the rare Romorantin grape (the winemaker would only sell to Biddick after the sommelier convinced him he was running a serious natural wine bar).

Your choice of a Classic or New Wave flight is the right starting point for exploring the eclectic menu—but arrive thirsty, because each comes with four generous pours of 3 ounces each. I also ordered the O Temps Suspend Ton Vol, a zesty Crémant de Loire, to sip with a well-composed cheese and charcuterie plate—and I was glad I saved more than a splash of Las Cepas Rebuzno, a balanced Rioja made with the near-extinct grape Maturana Tinta, for pairing with pepper sauce-topped filet mignon. The Spanish red was yet another unexpected find on a list full of surprises. ■■

Kelly Magyarics, DWS, is a wine, spirits, lifestyle, and travel writer in the Washington, D.C., area. She can be reached through her website, kellymagyarics.com, or on Twitter and Instagram @kmagyarics.

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Crisp, Light, Refreshing



London in Excelsis, Part 1

by Merrill Shindler

There was a time when you'd tell serious eaters you were heading to London for a week and they'd offer their condolences. But that was then, and this is now: With 40,000 restaurants that include some of the finest, most enjoyable, and occasionally quirkiest dining destinations in the world, London is standing tall. Even the gray and boiled or deep-fried and greasy staples of pub grub are vanishing; indeed, there are much-loved classic pubs with nary a plate of bangers and mash in sight.

Consider the fabled Churchill Arms. For more than 30 years, the dishes served there have been . . . Thai. In the purest of pub settings, with scowling paintings of Winston Churchill everywhere you look and an extensive list of domestic beers—among them London Pride Cask Ale, Fuller's Session IPA, and Curious Brew Lager—you can order not fish and chips or steak-and-kidney pies but pad Thai, panang curry, and kao rad nah. (And roast duck curry, which I suppose kind of counts as an Anglo-Asian amalgam.)

In the course of a recent visit to the city, I ate Turkish and Lebanese food, dim sum and sushi, French and Italian,

Caribbean and so much Indian—including the edgy cuisine served at Dishoom. This small, much-loved English chain represents the rebirth of the Bombay-style Irani café, a concept created by Zoroastrian Iranians who fled persecution in their homeland and settled in British India; it has largely vanished from the subcontinent, but not from England.

At Dishoom, the line for a table often stretches half a block, as regulars are willing to wait for dishes rarely seen in standard-issue Anglo-Indian restaurants such as *khichia*, *chundo*, *pau bhaji*, *nalli nihari*, and *kacumber* as well as breakfast items like *bun maska* and a Parsi omelet. Inexplicably, they sell their own coins to be used as legal tender in their restaurants, but they take pounds, pence, and credit cards too.

Another chain that transcends every imaginable border is Sticks'n'Sushi, a postmodernist, Japanese-inspired, Copenhagen-based concept that has eight branches in the U.K. There's a photo inside the menu of a couple of hipsters eating sushi rolls. He's heavily tattooed and has a pointed tail and horns; she's very blond and has

angel wings protruding from her off-white dress. It illustrates the restaurant's claim to offer food that's "both angelic and wicked." For my money, I'd say it leans toward the wicked—wickedly good!

This is certainly the first restaurant in my experience to provide a choice of salty, spicy, or grilled edamame—and it's pretty great grilled. The requisite miso soup is served spicy, with salmon, big chunks of tofu, seaweed, crunchy chiles, and coriander: It's the best version I've ever had.

Then it's on to sushi like the New York Subway Roll with tempura shrimp, salmon, and avocado or the Crunchy Chicken Roll with smoked cheese, supplemented by grilled skewers—19 sticks in all, including duck breast with wasabi-Caesar dressing and chicken-and-squid sausage with miso aioli. That's what I had for lunch one day after a breakfast of duck confit and waffles, topped with a massive over-easy duck's egg, on the 40th story of an office building in a restaurant called, of course, the Duck & Waffle. In a future issue, I promise I'll finally get to the fish and chips. It's worth the wait. ■■

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Regina McCarthy

DIRECTOR OF CLIENT SERVICES AT THE VINEYARDS AT DODON, DAVIDSONVILLE, MD

by Michelle Metter

PHOTO: BENSON LAU



Regina McCarthy is a passionate advocate for wines from Maryland. WSET Level 3–certified, she shares her knowledge with her guests at The Vineyards at Dodon, an estate winery located in Davidsonville.

Q Can you tell us a little about what brought you to The Vineyards at Dodon?

It offered an opportunity to learn more about regenerative viticulture and winemaking while also allowing me to develop my hospitality skill set. Moreover, the story of the soil and the winemaking philosophy at Dodon drew me in. Being involved in harvest and blending and even helping with the sheep on the farm are added perks.

Q What inspired you to write your book, *Maryland Wine: A Full-Bodied History*?

At that time, I was working for the Maryland Wineries Association. I realized, with some guidance from the owners of the oldest wineries, that there were many valuable lessons wrapped up in the history of our fledgling industry that should be documented. The story of Maryland wine is compelling.

Q What surprises are in store for somms and beverage directors who are unfamiliar with the region's wines?

For such a small state, Maryland's growing regions are diverse. Mountains are in the west, the shore is on the east, and a wide variety of soil types lie in between. Sommeliers will be surprised by the quality and diversity of wine grown in Maryland and by finding wines that are balanced and food friendly.

Q You recently joined the leadership team in San Diego for SommCon. Any key takeaways from that experience?

The level of professionalism, conviviality, and passion among the SommCon leadership team was contagious. I was amazed at the level of coordination required to execute the event and can't wait to be a part of the growing D.C. conference.

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

I'm with Philip Wagner, the first winery license holder in Maryland and the author of the very important book *American Wines and How to Make Them*, published in 1933 and used by winegrowers across the nation. In our glass is one of Maryland's first wines, made by John Adlum, author of *A Memoir on the Cultivation of the Vine*, published in 1823. ■■

SOMM CON

Michelle Metter is co-founder and Director of SommCon USA. The Tasting Panel and The SOMM Journal are proud supporters of SommCon and its Young Leader Summit. Join world-class educators in 2020 at SommCon D.C. July 12–14 and SommCon San Diego November 11–13.

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In *Down the Aisle*, the editors at *The Tasting Panel* rate retail beverages based on a combination of elements that can affect off-premise potential, including packaging, branding/credibility, value, and user friendliness.

“Talkies” are the little cards appended to retail shelves that educate the consumer through tasting notes and, sometimes, ratings. They are an invaluable tool when there isn’t a knowledgeable employee available and/or the customer is too intimidated to ask for help. For this reason, we are **nixing the traditional rating system in favor of our “Talkie” rating system to assess retail wines/spirits/beers** based on the aforementioned factors—and, of course, taste!

1 TALKIE

Clear, legible label; solid branding. Good overall for retail.

2 TALKIES

Eye-catching label and memorable branding. Very good for retail.

3 TALKIES

Creatively inspiring in both packaging and branding. Great for retail.

4 TALKIES

A near work of art and meaningful branding. Excellent for retail.

5 TALKIES

A masterpiece in packaging and a new benchmark in branding. A must-have for retail.



Andis Wines 2017 Painted Fields Red Blend, Sierra Foothills (\$25) Following aromas of plum, cherry, and walnut skin, balsamic reduction creeps in on the edges of a dense, substantial body. Barbera and Primitivo are among the varieties featured in this blend, which partially comprises fruit grown in the Shenandoah Valley subregion (home of the Andis estate). The label features a simple, seemingly hand-painted vineyard scene—a fitting illustration for the name. **89**



Bodega Aniello 2018 Blend de Suelos Blanco de Pinot Noir, Río Negro, Argentina (\$17) This white Pinot Noir is made by lightly pressing the grapes with minimal skin contact. The fruit is sourced from the Río Negro province of the Patagonia region, which is considered to be a cooler growing area than Mendoza. Pear, tangerine, honeysuckle, just-ripe peach, and peach pit on the nose give way to a medium-plus body with a rounded mouthfeel and a tinge of salinity. The mermaid drawing on the label adds an eclectic, eye-catching touch. **91**



GLOBAL VINEYARD IMPORTERS



Ballard Lane 2018 Pinot Noir, Central Coast (\$15) Blended with 2% Petite Sirah and aged four to five months in new French oak, this wine drinks like an over-\$20 Pinot Noir, with an expensive-looking label to match. Strawberries, nutmeg, and iron on the nose cross over to a weighty mid-palate sprinkled with brown sugar. Lilac glimmers throughout. **89**



MILLER FAMILY WINES



Montes Alpha 2018 Carmenère, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$22) Black cherry, black-berry, plum skin, red bell pepper, and a dash of spicy chile flakes carry over to the medium-bodied palate and dry, graphite-lined finish. Blended with 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and sporting a classic-looking label, this dry-farmed Carménère aged for one year in first-, second-, and third-use French oak barrels. **90**



KOBRAND



CULT 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$19) Aromas of black-cherry jam and dark-roast coffee beans join a touch of menthol on the full-bodied palate as pencil shavings float about. The brand is cleverly named and the minimalist, mysterious label is excellent. **88**



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A LOOK INSIDE ONE OF DALLAS' FAVORITE HANGOUTS

Editor's note: What follows is an exclusive excerpt from Texas Dives by author Anthony Head and photographer Kirk Weddle (to be published in 2021).

Taking a seat at the bar is a real treat because it's a long, narrow, Formica-topped serpent of a thing that starts near the front door, curves several times like a lazy river, and, after making a hard turn, stretches to its other end some 40 feet away. It's an S-shaped bar, only it's a rippled S, an S with some extra groove. The edge is padded to cushion elbows and forearms, and the whole thing sits on a stone and brick foundation. The bar is a thing of beauty, one of a kind, and a good place to sit with some coffee and whiskey and wait for something special to happen.

At 10 in the morning there might only be a dozen people drinking at The Goat, but they fill out the room nicely. It's not an especially large place, but in addition to that magnificent bar, there's room for several tables and chairs, a pool table, and a raised stage (looks like about 3 inches tall) big enough for a three-piece combo.

The Goat is, as advertised on its marquee, "Your Neighborhood Blues Bar," and at night it features live music, mostly Texas blues, or some nights it's blues-formatted karaoke. Depending on the action, the bar can get quite dense with people. And loud.

It's not crowded now, nor loud. This is dive time, when it's possible to actually hear the person sitting next to you, who's just as happy to be in such a place. There's just something in The Goat's character that expresses

familiarity and nostalgia—the classic smoke-filled bar of yore, minus the smoke. Such a setting is ideal for daily encounters among the unacquainted.

"We once got an award from some local publication that named us the 'Best Place to Have a Conversation with a Stranger,'" says Adam Testa, who's been GM of The Goat for about a decade. "All walks of life hang out here. Everyone's talking to everyone. All pretensions seem to be dropped when you come in here."

Owner Bill Weiss likes to keep things simple, consistent, in line with traditional neighborhood joints. He says, "We have cheap drinks and we don't serve food. We're a bar. And we serve everything in glass; there aren't any plastic cups."

The guy next to Weiss chimes in, "Amen to that." ■■

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*Sommelier and Wine Director, Atomix and
Atoboy, New York, NY*

We don't have a [printed] menu; we don't have anything written down. So we encounter [similar scenarios] daily, and it's an important conversation to be had. I think that as you're starting your career, it's a bit more of a rigid "white with fish, red with meat" situation. But as you progress, it becomes about reading the guest—what it is they actually want and how they're feeling. [Let's say] it's a guest who knows what they want—they want a young Bordeaux at Atomix, which is seafood- and vegetable-driven. Not necessarily the most elegant wine to be had with the meal, but seeing that they love Bordeaux with anything they're eating, I wouldn't necessarily dissuade them. Drinking what you love really does kind of work out in the end. I do say to guests, "Generally a white wine or bubbles work well with your meal for tonight. It's lighter fare, more delicate flavors." But if they're still happy going with a Cab, then I'm totally comfortable with that.

But when I have guests who are struggling, who aren't in the know, then I take a more active role: "I know you tend to drink red wine; maybe you would consider drinking a white for tonight? If you're OK with it, then tell me what the last great white wine you drank was, and I can extrapolate from there."

And if it's a guest who only wants to do one wine by the glass, I tell them, "We can do 3-ounce pours—the red wine that you wanted to begin with and a white." So now their experience has doubled with just an extra ounce in the glass. In a small restaurant like ours, that's very doable, and it's a really great way to go.

At Atoboy, we serve a three-dish prix fixe, and everything's meant to be shared; I tell people it's like tapas, but Korean. So you could have raw fish next to fried chicken in peanut-butter sauce. Instead of a pairing situation, then, it's more of a progression, and we're having the conversation: "Let's go big picture. How do you want to drink tonight?" That implies planning, and sometimes nobody wants to plan anything; it doesn't sound fun. You want to dinner to be spontaneous. But if you start out with a blockbuster red right away, it's going to be hard to move on to something else. So it's crucial for me to extract that information in as few words as possible. Having a mild game plan removes the stress of having to think about that in the middle of the meal.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HUGH PREECE

HUGH PREECE

Operating Partner, Salt Creek Grille, Princeton, NJ

My list here is quite diverse compared to my other restaurants; [many of the] wines need to be hand-sold. So our standard approach is: “Do you have any questions about the wine list? What are you planning to eat? What do you normally like to drink?” It’s our role to help create an experience for our guests; if we pick up that they’re not comfortable with wine and they’re just going with their go-to, we have the knowledge to say, “You know, this wine is popular with this dish.” I might try to steer them toward a red like Brachetto—it’s light-bodied with perfumed aromas and flavors of sour red cherry, strawberry, and raspberry, and it’s got high acid, which is what you really want with the fattiness and meatiness of oysters. Or if it’s the tannins they like in red wine, I’d steer them

toward a white with some tannic characteristics, like Inzolia (also known as Ansonica) or Friulano. Friulano is fantastic with oysters. We might even give them a sample and let them compare the wines with the dish [for themselves]. It’s about building awareness of what’s out there.

But some people just don’t drink white, and it’s really hard to tell them they’re wrong. Obviously there’s a point where you can’t force [anything]—this is a service industry. Have we had experiences where we failed the guest? Sure. The easy fix is to apologize and give them what they want. But I think when the staff is confident in the education that they’re giving, and the guest says, “You know what? I’m going to try it,” nine times out of ten we get great feedback. ■■

Consorzio di Tutela



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Rye DOMINION

CATOCTIN CREEK HEAD
DISTILLER BECKY HARRIS
CHANNELS THE SPIRIT
OF VIRGINIA INTO HER
SMALL-BATCH PRODUCTS

story by Matt Jackson / photos by Nick Klein



Catoctin Creek Distillery owners Becky and Scott Harris with their puppy, Otto.



The Harrises source their rye from Virginia farmers.

Cocktails are served in the Catoctin Creek tasting room.

At the core of the American distilling industry's origin story sits rye whiskey and the state of Virginia, which is believed to have been the birthplace of the craft: One of its most famous residents, George Washington, was himself a magnate of rye distillation in the country's early years. Yet, thanks in large part to Prohibition, Virginia's roots in rye production slowly faded into the annals of history—until recently, that is.

One of the players behind this revitalization is Catoctin Creek Distillery, which was established in Purcellville in 2009. "When we started, we were not at peak saturation of small distilleries. There were none in the District of Columbia and there were six in Virginia," says chief distiller/co-owner Becky Harris, who applied her previous experience as a chemical engineer to rye production. "I mean, if I can make contact lenses, which is really hard, I thought that I could learn what I needed to do to make whiskey," she says with a smile.

Harris became a trailblazer in the spirits world as one of the first female head distillers in modern U.S. history, yet she's quick to point out that American distillation's early success was largely due to the efforts of women. "In this region of the country, the tobacco industry [was] so demanding that women were the ones who took care of the brewing and distilling," Harris explains. "It really wasn't until the bigger stills came over from Europe that distillation became more industrial."



Harris at work in Catoctin Creek's distillery in Purcellville, VA.



Now considered a pioneer in her field, Harris was Catoctin Creek's only full-time employee when she launched the distillery with her husband, Scott, who serves as General Manager after spending 20 years in the field of internet technology. The couple set out to channel the area's history into the products they made in a 100-gallon still: "We wanted to figure out what we could make that reflected our region and the flavors that we have here," Harris says.

With a focus on true Virginia rye whiskey firmly in place, she sought to make her spirits using the most traditional artisanal methods available. "We really wanted to do a batch pot-style distillation, which takes eight hours to run a single batch, and it's part of our process that we feel adds to the final flavor," Harris says. "For our brand to survive in this era of increased competition, we have to do things that maybe not everybody's willing to do. Does soup that you microwave taste like soup that you cook over a long period of time? I believe that it's the same for whiskey."

Catoctin Creek has an impressively extensive portfolio for a boutique distillery. "In the rye category, we have three different [core] expressions: our 80 proof, our 92-proof Distiller's Edition, and then our cask proof. With everything being a single-barrel [selection], a lot of people ask me how I keep it consistent," says Harris. Her answer: While each whiskey features its own distinct combination of aromas and flavors, they're all defined by the same careful approach to production in their journey from grain to bottle.

"The cask proof really has to have such a great integration of the intensity and the flavor. I think there should be a density and a weight on the tongue that really makes it a holistic kind of intensity, but I want it to be enjoyable," Harris says. "The 80-proof whiskey is our front-porch sipper—it should be really easygoing. I like to tell people that it's my gateway to rye."

Offering a gentler introduction to the category has proved an asset as Harris works to turn her fellow residents of the Loudoun Valley—and beyond—on to rye. "People think that they're not rye fans," Harris says, "but it's approachable. It's got fruitiness, it's got warm spice, but it's not dominating in any way." That said, Catoctin Creek does have a more robust offering: Rabble Rouser Rye, a 100-proof bottled-in-bond expression that's aged for four years and features an energetic palate of earthy notes and oak. With a fifth edition released in February, it's proved extremely popular. "Initially, when we first started, I think I had one barrel of it, so when we released it, it was just gone," Harris says proudly. (Today Rabble Rouser is made in 20-barrel batches.)

With successes like that to grow on, Harris is now contemplating how to approach Catoctin Creek's next phase. "We are getting ready to increase the size of our equipment because we're pretty close to as much production as my people and my equipment can handle," Harris says. It's a good problem to have in such a saturated spirits market, serving as proof that the brand's future lies right where it should: in the quality of its whiskey. ■■

Access Equals Success

SOMMELIER AND
RESTAURATEUR **YANNICK
BENJAMIN** LINKS HOSPITALITY
TO SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

by Michelle Metter

PHOTO: MIKHAIL LIPVANSKIY



“Social sustainability is taking your resources and sharing them with your community.”
—Yannick Benjamin

Most U.S. beverage professionals have likely heard of Yannick Benjamin, the well-respected head sommelier at the University Club of New York, who is as revered for his advocacy on behalf of his charity, *Wheeling Forward*, as he is for his palate.

This spring, Benjamin will open his first restaurant, *Contento*, a farm-to table project that will also run an interdisciplinary program, *The Disciple's Canteen*, to enhance the quality of life of people living with disabilities. He and his team will use their experience as hospitality professionals who also have disabilities to provide skills-based training and employment opportunities to marginalized individuals.

For Benjamin, it's all about empowerment: “Social sustainability is taking your resources and sharing them with your community,” he says. “This will be a program that will empower marginalized segments of our society through the power of hospitality. We teach about the power of food and beverage and how hospitality is all around us.”

Staggeringly, according to *Wheeling Forward's* own statistics, only 35% of working-age people with disabilities are currently employed in the United States, while 65% rely on government benefits. Benjamin hopes to change that by charting a course forward for both employee and employer.

In the latter's case, step one is to take initiative. Benjamin contends that employers need to reach across the aisle to understand how they can support marginalized populations. He says they can start by implementing training programs, connecting with organizations within the disabled community, and reevaluating their interview process. “We all agree that no one should be forced to hire underqualified candidates just because they need to make a quota,” Benjamin explains, “but we are saying that in order to have a social impact, you can use your resources to help those who may have less than you.”

As for the hopeful employee, Benjamin encourages his peers to not lose heart in the face of challenges, adding that “work experience and getting your foot in the door [are] where it all begins.” His commitment to championing beverage professionals living with disabilities is further reflected by his role as a mentor to sommeliers such as Mirko Pastorelli and Peter Kuhn, who have gone on to gigs at *Vue de Monde* in Melbourne, Australia, and *Lettuce Entertain You* in Chicago, Illinois, respectively. “They both wanted to work as sommeliers,” he explains, “but because of their disabilities they were often told that this was not possible. I remind them continuously to start where you are with what you have, and do what you can to be the best. My response to adversity is simple—just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean you can't be the first.”

For more information, visit wheelingforward.org and the website for the Americans with Disabilities Act, ada.gov. ■



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Family Treasure

PASADENA'S OLDEST RESTAURANT CELEBRATES 100 YEARS
WITH A SPECIAL CENTENNIAL EL TESORO TEQUILA

by Kate Newton

The moment that Pasadena, California, institution Mijares began celebrating its centennial year in January, the memories started pouring in. The one that lingers for General Manager R-Lene Mijares de Lang, though, is that of her grandmother sipping tequila with her friends while visiting her beloved Mexico, which she fled during the Mexican Revolution. “I’ll never forget that, the little amber brandy snifters sitting there, with the breeze coming through,” Mijares de Lang recalls.

Now, Jesucita Mijares’ legacy lives on through her namesake restaurant, which she opened after settling in Pasadena and establishing a small tortilla factory there. The subsequent three generations of her family have continued to run the business; now 88, Mijares de Lang’s mother, Alice, still works Sunday brunch service, while her brother, Tom Recendez, and her sister Tina Jimenez help with marketing/management and run the office, respectively.

Last year, Mijares de Lang joined her brother and her niece Mary Recendez on their own pilgrimage to Mexico, but this time, tequila wasn’t just a side plot: It was the impetus for the trip, as Mijares had partnered with El Tesoro to select a special barrel that they could feature in a Centennial Margarita. Over the course of their visit to the La Alteña distillery in the highlands of Jalisco, they got a behind-the-scenes look at the production process, spending time out in the fields with the jimadores and in the distillery with master distiller Carlos Camarena. They also painstakingly tasted their way through an extensive array of barrels to find the perfect fit for their limited-edition label: El Tesoro Reposado Single Barrel Centennial Tequila, whose flavor profile is abundant in citrus, tamarind, and salted caramel.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY RECENDEZ

Mary Recendez, Tom Recendez, El Tesoro master distiller Carlos Camarena, and R-Lene Mijares de Lang enjoy the fruits of their labor—Mijares’ El Tesoro Reposado Single Barrel Centennial Tequila—at the brand’s La Alteña distillery in Jalisco.

Back in Pasadena during a special event in February, that tasting panel quickly expanded to a group of 200 members of what the restaurant has deemed its “Centennial Club”: families and individuals who have patronized Mijares for decades, in some cases 50 years or more. Some are undoubtedly among the *Pasadena Weekly* readers who’ve voted the restaurant as having the “Best Margarita,” “Best Mexican Food,” and “Best Sunday Brunch” in the city; in 2019, Mijares was also voted “Best Local Restaurant.” Mijares de Lang says it all ties back to their motto: “Don’t ever compromise.” “That shocked the hell out of us, because we have some fine-dining restaurants in Pasadena, but the people voted! So we were very proud of that,” she adds.

Mijares will officially celebrate its 100th birthday with a big gathering on

September 20. Throughout the year, however, they’re giving back to the community that’s supported them by showcasing 12 local nonprofits—advertising for them, donating a portion of proceeds from monthly fundraiser nights, and, finally, encouraging guests to give what they can as well. (Among the beneficiaries thus far are Villa Esperanza Services, which offers comprehensive services for people with disabilities, and the Pasadena Community Foundation.) In a city of givers—Pasadena has one of the highest numbers of nonprofits and charities per capita in the U.S.—Mijares de Lang says it made sense to celebrate a century of success by turning outward. “You have to give to receive, and that’s another motto of ours. Our employees know it, and they join in also,” she adds. ■■

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birth of a Brand

by david gadd



Mark Anderson and his wife, Kristen, toast the success of Drake's at Spago in Beverly Hills, CA. A portion of the proceeds from the brand's sales goes to Kristen's nonprofit, Long Lake Animal Rescue.

MARK ANDERSON, FOUNDER AND CEO OF DRAKE'S ORGANIC SPIRITS, SHOWS THE INDUSTRY HOW IT'S DONE

Creating a national spirits brand is a herculean task that makes climbing Everest look like a stroll over a speed bump. It can take years of planning and execution to put all the pieces into place, from raw materials to finished product, from personnel to packaging, from logistics to marketing. The vast chasm between concept and rollout is not an easy leap for the faint of heart or infirm of purpose.

Enter Mark Anderson. If you look up the term “serial entrepreneur” in the dictionary, you’ll likely find a picture of the former rodeo wrangler turned commodities trader, whose background put him in a unique position to launch Drake’s Organic Spirits—and to do it in record time.

“I’m good at disrupting markets,” says the soft-spoken Anderson. From his base in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he oversees a production chain that stretches from Colombia to Austin, Texas, and beyond. Using contacts he had made over the course of his career, he built the fledgling Drake’s brand, which launched in 2017, into a multimillion-dollar business in just 12 months, leaving beverage-alcohol veterans scratching their heads in disbelief. And no one tells the story better than Anderson himself.

Trading Places

“I grew up on a farm in North Dakota, where we raised grain and livestock,” Anderson says in a flat Midwestern accent that underscores his deadpan humor. “In 1996, I decided I wanted to move south for warmer winters . . . so I made it to Minneapolis.” Anderson had seen the movie *Trading Places*, in which Dan Aykroyd plays a commodities trader. “I knew farming on a tractor wasn’t as appealing as farming on paper,



The only spirits line to hold five official certifications, Drake's award-winning Organic Spiced Rum, Organic White Rum, and Organic XII Vodka are revolutionizing the health-and-wellness space for alcoholic beverages.

so I started trading on the Minneapolis Grain Exchange,” he recalls.

A quick study, Anderson learned the ins and outs of futures, derivatives, and the correlations between different types of commodities. After moving into buying and selling physical commodities, he “figured out how to arbitrage physicals against futures.” Don’t ask us what that means, but by doing so, Anderson wound up controlling a significant portion of the U.S. dairy market. Not bad for an erstwhile high-school rodeo cowboy.

He attempted to retire in 2004, but it wasn’t long before the ever-curious entrepreneur was struck by a conundrum. He realized that the non-GMO movement was going to be huge in

the food industry—“It’s not a fad; it’s a lifestyle,” he explains—but he also saw that the supply chain in the U.S. had no link to non-GMO raw materials. “Ninety-six percent of all corn, 93% of all soybeans, and 100% of all sugar beets in the U.S. are genetically modified,” says Anderson, whose ready command of statistics is one element of his success.

Cornering Markets

Knowing that the most common ingredients in commercial foods and beverages are sugar and citric acid (a preservative often made from genetically modified corn), Anderson started a company, Captain Drake—named for English adventurer Sir Francis



Drake's Organic Spirits founder and CEO Mark Anderson with Spago's signature Peace on Earth cocktail, made with Drake's Organic White Rum.

Drake's Enters the On-Premise Space



Head mixologist Andrew Kim presents Pepino's Revenge, a signature cocktail at Spago Beverly Hills, made here with Drake's Organic Vodka.

Drake—to supply non-GMO versions of these essentials. He began in Thailand, where he bought half of the country's store of non-GMO citric acid, importing 200 containers a month to distribute to producers such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, General Mills, Kraft, and Unilever. Later, he shortened the supply chain by moving operations to Colombia, which could provide not only non-GMO citric acid but also sugar.

As he had in Thailand, Anderson was already purchasing half of Colombia's citric acid when he scored a meeting with the head of the Colombian sugar cartel. "He asked me if I played polo," recalls Anderson. "I told him I could ride a horse." The day after the polo game, he walked away with a majority of the Colombian Organic cane-sugar quota for the U.S.

That was in 2012, just as an initiative called the Non-GMO Project was becoming the fastest-growing certification in the food and beverage industry. Captain Drake became the first company in the world to receive an official

non-GMO designation for its citric acid and cane sugar. "That meant that any company that wanted that certificate on their label, and that had sugar or citric acid in their product, had to come to Captain Drake," says Anderson.

From Captain Drake to Drake's Organic Spirits

Anderson moved into the alcohol industry in 2015, when he began to distill USDA Organic-certified bulk alcohol from imported organic cane sugar at a microdistillery in Minneapolis for use in flavored extracts. In the process, Captain Drake reached another milestone, becoming the first company worldwide to obtain Non-GMO Project verification for alcohol.

"In 2016," recalls Anderson, "I realized that there was not another spirits brand that had these certifications." Another multimillion-dollar lightbulb clicked on: He briefly considered buying the 10,000-case distillery, but his vision was for a national spirits brand that would start at 50,000 cases or more.

The beverage program at Spago Beverly Hills—the flagship of Wolfgang Puck's restaurant empire—is overseen by Master Sommelier Phillip Dunn, who recently added Drake's to the well. Now it's making a splash in celebrity-worthy cocktails prepared by head mixologist Andrew Kim. "We get a lot of calls for gluten-free drinks," notes Kim as he mixes up Pepino's Revenge, one of the restaurant's signatures, made here with gluten-free Drake's Organic Vodka and featuring the bright springtime colors and flavors of Japanese cucumber and fresh basil.

Perfect for poolside, Drake's Organic Spiked Ice, a line of freezable 80-calorie cocktail pops, has been one of Anderson's biggest successes.



As Anderson puts it, “I needed scale.”

He was already the largest importer of organic cane sugar from the second-largest cane mill in South America, so in a brilliant move, Anderson tapped into the mill’s major byproduct: organic alcohol. “That’s how we were able to become the world’s largest organic-alcohol manufacturer without having to build a \$150-million-dollar distillation facility,” he says.

By October 2017, Anderson had received USDA Organic certification for the alcohol, and his new brand was ready to launch with two products in its portfolio: organic vodka and organic rum. On the advice of his legal team, he changed the brand name from Captain Drake, which would almost certainly be challenged by the owners of another rum brand named for a ship’s captain (“When, not if,” quips Anderson), to Drake’s Organic Spirits.

Opening Doors

Given his strong connection to South America, creating a rum—two rums, in fact—was a priority for Anderson. Drake’s Organic White and Drake’s Organic Spiced Rum, both made from organic sugarcane, debuted simultaneously. The spiced version won a gold medal at the Spirits Tasting Competition during the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America’s 2019 Convention & Exposition.

Drake’s Organic XII Vodka took a double gold medal at the same event; twelve-times-distilled, it shows a lingering aroma of its sugarcane base on the finish. Used in conjunction with the rums and vodka, a line of Drake’s Organic Mixers, introduced in 2019, gives bartenders the opportunity to create 100% organic cocktails that are also non-GMO, gluten-free, vegan, and certified kosher.

Anderson is particularly proud of his freeze-and-squeeze brain-

child: Drake’s Organic Spiked Ice, a line of 80-calorie frozen cocktail pops that he calls a “Trojan horse” product, as it’s opened yet more doors for the brand. When the initial version of the product got a social media shout-out from Beyoncé during the 2018 Coachella festival, Costco came calling and asked Anderson to reformulate the product so it could be sold at room temperature. Anderson

complied in record time, and Costco approved the new version stat. “I asked how many they needed,” says Anderson, “and they replied, ‘100 million.’ I said, ‘OK, no problem.’” Being able to go from concept to shelf in six months has made Anderson something of a marvel in the industry.

In order to help grow the brand, Anderson brought in Jim Allen, a highly respected former senior executive at Southern Wine & Spirits of America. With four decades of experience and important contacts that make him the ideal point-person for establishing Drake’s in restaurants and bars, Allen serves as Chairman of the Board. “We’re very keen on on-premise,” he says. “What Mark has done is to sharpen his pencil so that we can have an \$8.50 liter that’s comparable to other major brands for well.” Allen facilitated a key placement for Drake’s at Spago Beverly Hills (see sidebar on facing page), which adds to the brand’s luster. “This is how brands are built,” says Allen. “You build brands on-premise.”

For the time being, Anderson is focused on making Drake’s the go-to name for vodka and rum. But given the entrepreneur’s record for creative thinking, we’re willing to bet he’s not stopping there. ■■



Mark Anderson's quick-to-market approach is reflected in the Drake's Organic Bloody Mary combination pack, which is making huge inroads in the off-premise space.

Marks of Health and Wellness

Mark Anderson notes that Drake’s Organic Spirits is a leader in the health-and-wellness space for alcoholic beverages. It’s the first and only spirits brand to boast five certifications, all of which are proudly displayed on the products’ front labels.

Non-GMO Project Verified

The fastest-growing certification in the food and beverage industry is verified by the Non-GMO Project based in Bellingham, Washington.

USDA Organic

The most labor-intensive of the five certifications. Products must contain 70% or more organic ingredients in order to bear the USDA Organic seal and/or the word “organic” on the label.

Gluten-Free

The Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO) is one of several groups that confirm gluten-free certification above and beyond FDA requirements.

Certified Kosher

To be certified kosher, spirits companies must undergo inspections by a rabbi twice a year. Drake’s products are certified by the Orthodox Union.

Vegan Certification

The nonprofit Vegan Action certifies products that do not contain animal products or byproducts and that have not been tested on animals. Drake’s uses coconut-fiber filtration to avoid the animal bone present in some charcoals used for filtration.

In addition to taking a health-forward approach to production, Drake’s Organic Spirits also supports a worthy cause. A portion of the brand’s sales goes to Long Lake Animal Rescue, a nonprofit run by Anderson’s wife, Kristen.

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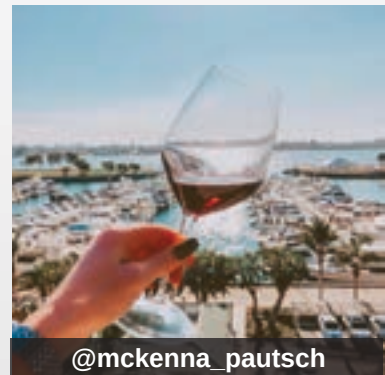
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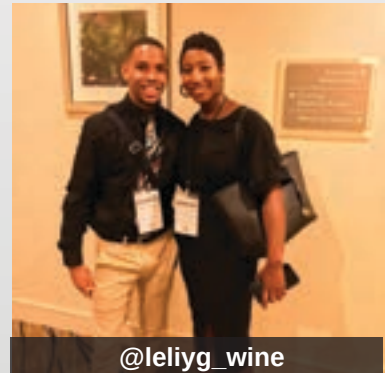
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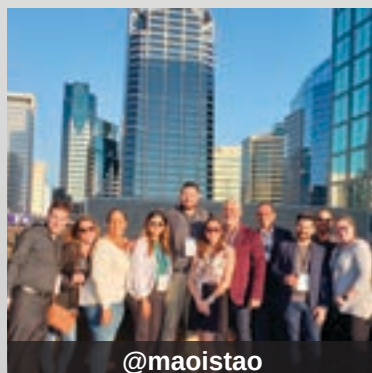
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California Snapshot

HOW **815 CABERNET**
BECAME “THE WINE
THAT CHANGED THE
BIZ” FOR LEGENDARY
CALIFORNIA VINTNER
JOEL GOTT

story by Jonathan Cristaldi
photos by Alexander Rubin



Joel Gott poses with 815 Cabernet Sauvignon at his office in St. Helena, CA.

the story of Joel Gott's rise from Tahoe ski bum to one of America's most successful wine entrepreneurs has oft been told. Aside from his eponymous brand, Gott is well known in the San Francisco Bay Area for launching Gott's Roadside, a burger joint once called Taylor's Automatic Refresher.

But *The Tasting Panel* was keenly interested in digging deeper into the wine that started it all: 815 Cabernet Sauvignon. Considering that Cab is not only the number-one varietal in the \$10–\$20 price segment but growing by 7%, according to Nielsen data, what makes this particular value brand so special? And how exactly does Gott go about producing such a consistent style year after year?

The Joel Gott 815 Cabernet Sauvignon is “the wine that changed the biz for us,” said Gott when I met him recently at his St. Helena office. “Since 1999, it has been our flagship wine; it’s our snapshot of California.” Named for his daughter’s birthday (August 15), it’s a blend of grapes from vineyards representing varying micro-climates all over the state. Unusual as it is for an under-\$20 bottle, this blending practice—instilled in him by his wife, Sarah, who picked it up while working at Joseph Phelps—has been the driving force behind each vintage of 815 since day one.



“By having so much diversification in our vineyard locations, we end up with the ability to create balance across the wines.”

—Joel Gott



Joel Gott and author Jonathan Cristaldi taste through the blending components for the 2019 815 Cabernet Sauvignon.

Although 815 Cabernet is the veritable centerpiece of the Joel Gott Wines portfolio today, it wasn't the first wine Gott made. That honor goes to a 1996 Zinfandel from Amador County; in the middle of our interview, he bolted out the door of his office, returning ten minutes later with a bottle from his own cellar. Its ruby-garnet color showed its age, but the wine was impressively fresh and alive, with a firm spine of acidity and sweet red-fruit flavors tinged with brown spices. Few would believe a California Zin that sold for under \$20 could be so ageworthy, yet the proof was right there in the glass.

Three years after the Zinfandel debuted, the first vintage of Joel Gott 815 Cabernet hit the shelves at the

Palisades Market—the St. Helena grocery store that Gott ran with his brother, which is where he first met Sarah and their joint vision for Joel Gott Wines was born. The 1999 vintage was a blend of grapes from just two appellations: Lodi and Napa. Today, incredibly, each bottling is a blend of up to 70 different lots, which are artfully and painstakingly crafted by Gott and Sarah along with their talented winemaker, Alisa Jacobson, and a small, tight-knit team.

Since 2009, a partnership with Trinchero Family Estates (TFE) has allowed the Gotts to focus all of their energy on winemaking as TFE's robust sales force pounds the pavement. It also gives the couple the resources to pick and choose among

the best available growing sites. "By having so much diversification in our vineyard locations, we end up with the ability to create balance across the wines," said Gott. "At our price point, you typically wouldn't buy Napa fruit, but we think it's irreplaceable because of its mouthfeel and texture. So maybe that classic eucalyptus character isn't in fruit from Lodi, but the Lodi fruit has that bubblegum [and] cherry-cola flavor, so you add in some Mendocino fruit to get that savory, herbaceous quality."

Gott poured a vertical of the 2012–2018 vintages to offer a snapshot into the wine's structure and even, in some years, ageability; he also walked me through the thought process behind the final 2019 blend.



A Vertical Tasting of 815

From a ripe vintage, the 2012 Joel Gott 815 Cabernet showed sweet tobacco plus a lot of earth and herbaceousness; it was still nice to drink, but tasting the 2013 was like going from night to day. “Our 2013 Cabernet offers a really good view of varietally correct and vintage-correct wines—this is delicious,” Gott marveled. Indeed it was, showing ripe black fruits on the nose and, on the palate, grippy tannins, notes of sweet red fruit and dusty blueberries, and good acidity. “What people miss,” Gott said, “is that if you find the right producer, [inexpensive] wines are ageworthy.”

You could accidentally drink a lot of the 2014 vintage; it was silky and soft with nice black fruit, savory tobacco spices, and a touch of caramel on the finish. Sadly, the 2015 was corked, but the 2016 bottling was on fire—impressively endowed with a firm tannin backbone, depth of flavor and texture, and a long and spicy finish. The less powerful but more elegant 2017 offered red fruit and pretty sagebrush spices, while a barrel sample of the 2018 showed impressive dark fruits, firm acidity, and robust tannins.

“Our barrel program is mostly American from Missouri and mostly medium toast,” explained Gott. “We also use about one-third one-year-old French barrels that aged Napa Cabernet, along with some Hungarian

oak in some years. We’re releasing the 815 just one and a half years after it’s fermented, so that one-third neutral oak really balances [things] out.”

Breaking Down the Components

Next we tasted a handful of the near-final blending components of the 2019 vintage. Diving into a glass of Lake County Cabernet, Gott found “predictably nice fruit, a nice mouthfeel—but it’s short, so pick up your glass of Napa Cabernet and taste it.” As I did, he observed that “it’s so much richer and has a long, lingering finish with long, rich tannins. That could balance the short, quick tannin of the Lake County fruit.”

Turning to the Mendocino Cabernet, Gott found varietally correct eucalyptus notes but also a lot of chalkiness. To balance that minerality, he picked up the Sonoma Cabernet and dropped a splash into the Mendocino glass, adding a depth of sweet Sonoma fruit—“almost this rich tropical thing,” in his words—and soft tannin to the mix. “Now, add in [the] Napa Cabernet,” suggested Gott. Coming from the top of Howell Mountain as well as Sugar Loaf Vineyard in south Napa, it showed what he called “ripe fruit and big tannin structure [to] balance out that herbaceous quality from the Mendocino piece.” Finally, he added, “We also have some terrific Paso Robles fruit, which

brings that dry, dusty tannin and lends this firm back-palate tannin structure . . . while fleshing out the mid-palate. The whole thing is like figuring out a Rubik’s Cube: If you play with it long enough, you find these sweet spots that mold together.”

Ultimately, said Gott, “I want someone to buy our wine and to love it the moment they taste it. I’m pretty sure [it] doesn’t sell because of the name anymore—I think it’s just that people love what’s in the bottle.” ■■



PUBLISHER MERIDITH MAY’S

Tasting Note

Joel Gott 2017 815 Cabernet Sauvignon, California

(\$19.99) Exuding aromas of violets and blackberry cream and clocking in at an ABV of 13.9%, the current vintage is instantly approachable, with luscious blue and black fruit. Chewy tannins keep the texture complex, and subtle hints of graphite and soy sauce add even more depth. The finish of vanilla, cedar, and fleshy fruit shows another level of sophistication. **92**

Challenging the *Status Quo*

FOR KARTHIK SUDHIR,
FOUNDER AND CEO OF
**PHENOMENAL SPIRITS
COMPANY**, BUILDING
GLOBAL BRANDS IS A
LIFE'S CALLING

by David Gadd

According to Karthik Sudhir, “Everybody in the middle of their lifetime asks, ‘What is it that I want to do? What is it that I want to become? What will be my legacy?’” For this successful former software engineer and technology executive, who arrived in the U.S. from India in 2005 with less than \$400 in his pocket, those questions led not to a midlife crisis but to a revolutionary new venture: Phenomenal Spirits Company, which he founded in 2017.

“Software is intangible,” explains Sudhir. “You can’t touch it; you can’t feel it. There’s no emotion to it. I built my career in the software industry for 17 years, and now is the time for me to pursue my passion, which is spirits. Spirits are something that connect to people.” Leaving his career behind, Sudhir dove in headfirst, completing the Spirits Distillation Certification and Route to Market courses at Moonshine University in Louisville, Kentucky, as well as a program in blending, aging, barrel selection, and nose-fault detection at the American Distilling Institute.

Phenomenal Spirits Company’s flagship brand, Ron Izalco Rum, represents “the hardest puzzle I’ve solved,” says Sudhir, who relishes a challenge. “I always say, ‘If it’s easy, why come to me? Let someone else do it.’”

Ron Izalco: The Essence of Central American Rum

“I sincerely believe that the time for premiumization for rum is coming,” Sudhir explains when asked why he chose to start his portfolio with this oft-overlooked spirit. Citing DISCUS data, he notes that the super-premium category of rum grew 28.5% in the U.S. in 2018—and while several brands from Central America were representing that sector, none were truly capturing the essence of the entire region.



Izalco was created to fill that niche. “We blind tasted hundreds of commercially available rums and settled on three different rums for the final blend,” Sudhir says, adding that finding that ideal combination is akin to building a house: “You need a foundation, a structure, and then a roof.”

The brand takes its name from a 6,447-foot-high volcano in El Salvador that was once known as the “Lighthouse of the Pacific” for the brilliant fireworks caused by its eruptions. Sudhir explains that the region’s mineral-rich soils produce exceptionally flavorful sugarcane, making Izalco a uniquely Central American product. Its pedigree sets it apart: In a showing that was quite impressive for a newcomer to the category, Izalco 10 Year was honored with the highest “Master” distinction at the 2019 Rum & Cachaça Masters competition in London, sponsored by British trade publication *The Spirits Business*, and walked away with a double gold medal as well as the prestigious Rum Trophy at the 2019 International Spirits Competition in the same city. It had previously earned a gold medal at the 2018 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Izalco’s mission to, in Sudhir’s words, “challenge the status quo” is readily apparent in its packaging, which was recognized with another award at the San Francisco competition. “Walk up and down the rum aisle and you will not see a bottle like ours,” Sudhir says of the French-manufactured glass vessel’s alluringly smooth curves. The high-quality, European-designed linen label and Portuguese wood cork also contribute to a distinctive first impres-

sion. “I want to come from a completely international mindset,” Sudhir adds. “We build our products to be global brands.” Indeed, Izalco launched in France and hit the U.K., Polish, and Danish markets before its U.S. rollout.

Sudhir has a firm sense of direction for his company and its ventures. “We are not distillers,” he says. “We are blenders, by heart and by philosophy.” (The individual distilleries he partners with remain unnamed due to nondisclosure agreements.) A cask-strength line extension, Izalco 15 Year, will roll out this spring: A blend of five Central American rums, the new allocation-only expression is “specifically targeted to the purist market,” says Sudhir. “Nothing is added—no sugar, no vanilla, no caramel.” He proudly predicts that “it’s going to be a blockbuster.”

“Brand Builders”

As impressive as its debut has been, Izalco is only a starting point for Sudhir. “Phenomenal Spirits Company is an incubation platform for creating incredibly high-quality, super-premium spirits,” he says. “Our goal is to turn around products in a much faster fashion than larger companies are able to do—nine to ten months from inception to shelf, without compromising quality. We work round the clock, day and night, to do it.”

Maintaining what Sudhir calls “a small, lean team,” the company just onboarded Matt Witzig as master blender and COO. The spirits industry veteran co-founded American whiskey brand Joseph Magnus and can now apply his valuable expertise to Phenomenal Spirits Company’s upcoming release of rye whiskey, whose brand name is being kept under wraps pending trademark approval. A blend of 12-year, four-year, and three-year whiskeys, it’s finished in Izalco casks—a felicitous way of integrating this new spirit into the existing portfolio.

Strong vertical integration is key to Phenomenal Spirits’ success. The company controls its own blending and bottling facility in Virginia Beach, Virginia; strategically placed for European export, it’s also crucial to the growth of the domestic supply chain. With Witzig focused on the blending operation as well as on the aforementioned rye launch, Sudhir is concentrating on brand positioning and on



Karthik Sudhir, CEO of Phenomenal Spirits Company, is the creator of Ron Izalco.

opening new strategic markets around the globe. Just recently, Phenomenal Spirits signed key distribution agreements in the U.K. market as well as with Lanterna Distributors for Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, and D.C.

For Sudhir, the essentials of brand development come down to what he calls “the three Ps,” of which Izalco is a prime example: “The product needs to speak for itself; the packaging needs to be a head-turner; and the personality of the product and the founder need to connect to the consumer,” he says. The CEO has visionary plans for the future, including products in development that he can’t divulge at present. “We are not a one-trick pony,” he emphasizes. “We are brand builders working at an astonishing pace to roll out new products.”

Confidence plays no small role in building an internationally renowned spirits brand—and Sudhir has it in spades. “My story will be told worldwide,” he says. “We are creating a brand, and a legacy, that will be here for a long time.” ■■

For more information, visit izalcorum.com and phenomenalspirits.com or follow the brand on Instagram @ronizalco.



Matt Witzig is master blender and COO of Phenomenal Spirits Company.

An Interview with Danny Wirtz

THE WINE & SPIRITS WHOLESALERS OF AMERICA CHAIRMAN HOLDS FORTH

by Michael Bilello, WSWA Senior Vice President of Communications & Marketing

Danny Wirtz is the Vice Chairman of Breakthru Beverage Group and the incoming Chairman of the WSWA.

Q Michael Bilello: Disappointingly, the WSWA Convention & Exposition had to be canceled this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But why in your view is the annual event important?

Danny Wirtz: I too am disappointed . . . but it was the right decision for the safety of all involved. We look forward to the WSWA 78th Annual Convention & Exposition set for April 6–9, 2021, at Grande Lakes Orlando, Florida.

This event is unique because it is an ever-evolving product of our trade association and its almost 400 family-owned member companies. At a time when most trade groups have outsourced their trade shows, resulting in lost connectivity with their stakeholders, WSWA has remained connected and relevant by producing the event in house with feedback from its members and exhibitors. . . . It brings wholesalers together with suppliers and retailers to discuss perspectives on marketing and brand building, explore hot topics and consumer trends, review data and technology for the betterment of the industry, meet with existing portfolio partners, forge new relationships, discover the next “hot label,” and connect on issues facing the alcohol industry.

Q MB: What is the future role of wholesalers in an industry being disrupted by e-commerce and consumer demand?

DW: Wholesalers will continue to play a critical role by protecting the proven and successful beverage-alcohol system and supporting our supplier and customer partners in business. Through the system of licensed suppli-



appointed to this position, and I am motivated by the opportunity to advance WSWA's impactful mission. We're operating in a dynamic regulatory landscape, and the issues our industry is presented with are evolving on a regular basis. That market fluidity requires all of us to stay nimble and operate with considerable ingenuity to not just stay viable but continue to build for the future and strengthen the wholesaler's position within the marketplace.

We must not only attract and retain our next generation of leaders but also meet our customers and consumers where they are and where they want to be. I see a great opportunity to promote thoughtful dialogue on how we can continue to embrace innovative thinking [in

running] our businesses. . . .

ers, wholesalers, and retailers, we are able to pair logistics expertise with data insights and education to really expand and specialize brand exposure by market and serve the modern consumer.

At Breakthru, we . . . ensure input from and alignment with our suppliers and our customers so that what we develop and invest in makes sense for [them] and drives mutual benefit. . . . It's this kind of approach—working together across the industry—that we believe is most beneficial for the consumer.

Q MB: What are your goals as incoming WSWA Chairman?

DW: It's an incredible honor to be

running] our businesses.

An aspect of our industry that particularly excites and inspires me is the collective focus on corporate social responsibility. This year's campaign in collaboration with the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility and DISCUS [Distilled Spirits Council of the United States], “We Don't Serve Teens,” will garner the time and support of WSWA wholesalers nationwide with the delivery of kits that are designed to prevent underage drinking [and] encourage parents to initiate and maintain a dialogue with their teens about [its] dangers. For more information on the campaign, you can visit responsibility.org. ■■

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Moving Beyond the *Mason Jar*

**OLE SMOKY ADDS DILL PICKLE
MOONSHINE AND 1-LITER
BOTTLES TO ITS LINEUP**

by Eric Marsh

When you hear the word “moonshine,” you might think of bootleggers on high-speed chases down dusty, windy Appalachian backroads, the police hot on their tails—and you might envision their stash of Mason jars, the vessels most emblematic of the spirit since Prohibition. So did the founders of Ole Smoky Moonshine, who made the obvious choice to package their product in the jars when the brand debuted almost ten years ago.

“The Mason jar is an iconic element of the brand’s heritage,” says Vice President of Marketing Will Ensign. “It’s strongly connected to moonshine’s roots.” As Ensign’s colleague, President of Wholesale Michael Bender, points out, it’s common practice in moonshine country for friends to bond by passing the jar around. “We chose the jar initially because that is how we all grew up experiencing moonshine,” Bender adds. “It’s a connection to our past, the traditions, and the stories of east Tennessee.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OLE SMOKY

Jesse Pierce makes a Lightnin' Lemonade with White Lightnin' at 6th and Peabody, the Ole Smoky distillery bar in Nashville, TN.

What's more, Ole Smoky's jars have proven eye-catching enough on backbars and retail shelves to sell themselves. There's only one drawback: Their shape can be awkward behind the bar, where pouring just 2 ounces of liquid into a jigger from a Mason jar can get messy. "I've never heard a single complaint about the quality of our liquid from an on-premise buyer," Bender remarks, "but far too many have pushed back on the challenges of using the jar."

And so a new era for Ole Smoky Moonshine has begun: In addition to its Mason jars, the brand will now offer seven of its expressions in a 1-liter bottle. Among them are the versatile, six-times-distilled White Lightnin'—which can be used in place of not just whiskey but any white spirit, from vodka to tequila—and one of Ole Smoky's newest offerings, Dill Pickle Moonshine. If the latter sounds curious, just consider the pickleback craze or the fact that pickles are a classic Bloody Mary garnish.

The expression was par for the course for a brand that's forever inventing new products, which today also include 15 whiskey expressions (beyond its moonshines) as well as cream liqueurs. It uses its four distilleries spread across Tennessee as test markets for its creations. "Our distillery tasting rooms are the best test kitchens money can buy," Bender says. "We had 4.5 million visitors in 2019, and we take



Autumn Morehead makes a cocktail with Ole Smoky Hunch Punch at 6th and Peabody in Nashville, TN.



Ole Smoky CEO Robert Hall.

their feedback seriously."

Ole Smoky's Moonshine Pickles have received rave reviews from those visitors since the brand released them nationally last year as a suggested Bloody Mary garnish. They quickly became a hit with bartenders, who have also taken to chopping them up for use in those aforementioned pickleback shots. Their only complaint was that the pickles took up too much real estate in the jar, meaning there wasn't enough leftover moonshine to use in shots and savory cocktails. Ole Smoky responded by releasing Dill Pickle Moonshine and, in light of the product's instant popularity, opted to include it in the bottle launch.

In addition to White Lightnin' and Dill Pickle, the other five expressions now available in 1-liter bottles are Apple Pie, Blackberry, Hunch Punch,

Peach, and Strawberry, all of which are "popular flavors that are appropriate for the packaging format and are in great demand from bartenders," according to CEO Robert Hall. "[They] can be drunk in shots but also make terrific cocktails."

That assertion is endorsed by Jesse Pierce, a bartender at 6th and Peabody, the Old Smoky distillery bar in Nashville. He says he "loves the variety you get with Ole Smoky products": There's an expression for everyone, from bachelorette partygoers "all the way down to your grandpa who's been drinking the same thing for 30 years." What could a brand that sells peanut-butter whiskey and sour-watermelon moonshine come up with next? There's only one way to find out: Stop by one of its distilleries for a taste of what Ole Smoky's cooking up. ■■

COVER STORY

AN ENTREPRENEUR'S *Journey*

Purple Brands founder
Derek Benham.



THE SUCCESS STORY BEHIND
DEREK BENHAM'S
PURPLE BRANDS

BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI

PHOTO COURTESY OF PURPLE BRANDS



Purple Brands head distiller Jeff Duckhorn and winemaker Joe Tapparo.

Since the 1930s, the Del Mar racetrack in northern San Diego County has attracted Hollywood celebrities, U.S. politicians, and world leaders—all eager to place bets with the hopes of hitting it big. From Del Mar's fourth-floor Turf Club, a dark-blue sliver of the Pacific Ocean is just visible on clear days. But Derek Benham, who has a home in Del Mar, hasn't set foot in the famous landmark—instead, he spends many mornings riding on that surf. “I enjoy it, but I'm not very good,” he admits. Still, he's traveled as far as Indonesia, Bali, the Maldives, and Costa Rica just to indulge his favorite pastime.

It's a fitting one for Benham, who eschews business gambles in favor of catching waves of opportunity in the wine industry. His first company, Codera Wine Group, produced Blackstone Merlot, which he grew to 650,000 cases annually before selling to Constellation Brands in 2001. He took just a month off from that triumph before founding Purple Wine Co. and relaunching Mark West, a

Pinot Noir-focused brand, which he grew to 600,000 cases annually—and then sold, again to Constellation, in 2012. Never one to rest on his laurels, he springboarded shortly thereafter into his latest endeavor, Purple Wine + Spirits, expanding his portfolio to include distilled products in 2013. (It's a wonder he has any time for surfing.)

Today, the company, recently renamed Purple Brands, boasts six wine brands: Scattered Peaks, a Cabernet Sauvignon made in partnership with Joel Aiken, as well as Avalon, Four Vines, Calista, Bex, and Raeburn Winery, which is enjoying immense on- and off-premise success. The company is also diving deep into the production of artisanal spirits. In early 2016, Benham launched his first spirits brand—Benham's Gin. Soon after, Redwood Empire Whiskey was born.

In short, Benham is no ordinary entrepreneur. Rather than simply providing funding for Purple, he's also bringing 38 years of experience, branding ingenuity, savvy distributor partnerships, and the knack for timing he needs to usher the company's brands onto the national stage.

Scaling a Brand

It was 1982 when Benham graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with dual degrees in English and philosophy. At 22, he took a job as a salesperson for Lost Hills, a Lodi-based winery that was failing for a slew of reasons the young Benham felt he could correct. He proved to be adept, singlehandedly selling 60,000 cases a year in the Bay Area alone. That track record allowed him to convince the owners to “throw me the keys,” he says, and they did—when he was just 26.

Benham downsized the company's workforce, sold off excess bulk wine and old equipment, and raised some capital to pay down debts, effectively stabilizing the business over the next few years: “That's really where I cut my teeth in different aspects of the biz,” he explains. Having turned Lost Hills into an appealing asset, he orchestrated its sale to the former owners of La Crema.

His next move was to co-found Codera Wine Group with his brother, Courtney. The idea for the pioneering virtual wine company was to create varietally focused control labels for

major retailers like Cost Plus and Trader Joe's and see if any of them took with consumers, indicating potential for a national brand. One of them did: Blackstone.

"I was inspired, quite frankly, by the Clos du Bois Merlot program," says Benham. "I thought, 'I like Merlot. I can make a really good one for \$10.' And we caught the wave of the French paradox, and it became a darling of on-premise [when the] by-the-glass . . . phenomenon started in the mid-1990s." (The term "French paradox" was coined in 1992 by researchers who hypothesized that red wine reduced the risk of heart disease, fueling a red wine boom in the U.S.)



The Purple portfolio includes spirits brands such as Redwood Empire and wine labels like Raeburn.

After the sale of Blackstone to Constellation, Benham moved into Pinot Noir with the formation of Purple Wine Co. and the Mark West label; recognizing that the grape was underrepresented in the value tier, he sought to produce a \$10 bottle with high-quality grapes. "I had grower relationships that go back to [Lost Hills] and beyond," Benham explains, "because my father was a big almond and pistachio grower [who] also knew a lot of vineyard growers. So I had sourcing that other companies didn't have for Merlot and, subsequently, for Pinot Noir."

Benham says that Mark West was originally a brand in the Russian River Valley that pumped out good Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer, but it needed to be "resuscitated."

At the time, "nobody got into [Pinot

Noir] because you couldn't get any," so he asked the growers he knew in Monterey to graft Pinot over vineyards that had once grown his Merlot. As a result, he became the largest buyer of Pinot Noir grapes from the Central Coast almost overnight.

As with Blackstone, timing was again in Benham's favor: Mark West launched not long before the release of the movie *Sideways*, which made Pinot a household name, and the brand in turn became synonymous with the variety in the super-premium market, which in the 2000s hovered around \$8–\$12 per bottle. Around the time that Benham sold the brand, it became clear

of Chardonnay, [and] it sold out, like that," he says with the snap of his fingers. "We got the flavor profile right, and the \$19.99 price was racy—it was of value comparable to twice its price, maybe more."

Winemaker Joe Tapparo trained at UC Davis and cut his teeth at Ruby Hill in Livermore and Geyser Peak in Sonoma before joining Purple in 2008; he says that his success with Raeburn is about doing "as much as possible on the front end, in the vineyard and during harvest, to put the initial quality stamp on what we'll have working for us in the pipeline."

That simple philosophy, coupled with a deft hand in the cellar, has served Tapparo well enough that he decided to toss a curveball at Benham. "He slipped some Pinot Noir through without me knowing, and it's blowing up!" Benham said in amused disbelief. "We'll produce 20,000 cases, and we're only into our third vintage. He also snuck through 6,000 cases of Russian River Rosé and it was a hit—vanished."

For the Pinot Noir, the grapes undergo a three-day cold soak in open-top fermenters, with up to three punch-downs daily, before the wine ages 11 months in 100% French barrels, a quarter of which are new. "For \$24.99 a bottle," says Tapparo, "I feel like it should be the company motto, but it really holds true—we like to overdeliver for the price point."

As for the rosé, "it's Provençal-style but with slightly more weight," Tapparo explains, adding that there are no rules for the blend. The current release is a combination of Pinot Noir, Grenache, and Zinfandel, each of which contributes "unique layers and a gauntlet of aromatics," he says. Citrusy and crisp, it's certainly a crowd-pleaser, and at \$20 it's tremendously easy to drink.

The second wave, originating in Graton, is fueled by gin, vodka, and, above all, whiskey. "After the sale of Mark West, I wanted to do spirits our way in the Russian River Valley, where I could have as much control over the production process as possible," says Benham. That's how a section of an old apple-processing plant was converted into a distillery, where head distiller Jeff Duckhorn says he aims to "take a balanced approach to all our spirits—I want depth and complexity, so that whatever you are drinking takes your palate on a ride."

The program may be young, but it's

that price points for the super-premium category were moving north into the \$12–\$15 range; today, Benham says, "the consumer sweet spot" has moved to \$15–\$25.

Riding the Purple Wave

Against the pleasant backdrop of Graton, a sleepy town with less than 2,000 residents just north of Sebastopol in Sonoma County, two Purple waves are building momentum and will soon break into the U.S. market. The first is Benham's Raeburn Winery, launched in 2013. Based in the Russian River Valley with a focus on Chardonnay, it has been recognized by *Impact Magazine* as one of the fastest-growing brands in the country.

"Our first vintage was 10,000 cases

PHOTO: ALAN CAMPBELL

off to a running start with Redwood Empire Whiskey. To make up for his lack of experience in selling spirits, Benham invested in a seasoned team led by Aaron Webb, a Brown-Forman alum who now serves as President of Purple Brands. And to augment the 25,000 cases of whiskey produced annually by the company's own stills, he began building up an inventory of reserve lots purchased from distilleries in Kentucky, Indiana, and Tennessee that now encompasses some 11,000 barrels. Duckhorn's strategy is to leverage different distillates of various ages and mash bills, a process that lends "real length and depth to our spirits," he

servationist—who has also inspired Redwood Empire's partnership with nonprofit organization Trees for the Future, ensuring that one tree will be planted for each bottle sold.

Duckhorn's also up to some interesting tricks with respect to the white spirits. For Benham's Gin (\$35; *Tasting Panel* 95), he distills each botanical separately before blending, which he says "creates a layered effect [that] allows you to pick out the individual botanicals in your glass." The newly launched Benham's Vodka (\$27) is a blend of different distillates—corn for the structure and base; wheat to add some texture and silkiness; and grapes to provide some

The Cabernet Whisperer of

SCATTERED PEAKS

by Deborah Parker Wong

To meet Joel Aiken is to be in the presence of a bona fide Cabernet whisperer. The winemaker emeritus of Beaulieu Vineyards and consulting Purple Brands winemaker has been making Cabernet Sauvignon for 37 years—longer than almost anyone in Napa Valley.

Winemaking is a business that naturally requires patience, tied as it is to the cycles of vine and vintage; Cabernet Sauvignon, which begins to show its true colors only after a decade or more in the cellar, is particularly trying. In conversation, Aiken's own patience is palpable. In the space of a few questions, he was able to make clear his intentions—shaped by the insights afforded by nearly 40 vintages—for the wines that we tasted.

In selecting sources for Scattered Peaks, the icon label at the apex of the Purple portfolio, Aiken looked first to the Napa sub-AVA of Rutherford and an old favorite of his, the Morisoli Vineyard, as well as to higher-elevation sites that he'd been eyeing for years. The Scattered Peaks 2017 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40) was sourced from Rutherford and a property in Pope Valley, while the Scattered Peaks 2017 Small Lot (\$125) is a marriage of fruit from the Morisoli Vineyard and grapes from Sage Ridge, which sits at an elevation of 900 feet just south of Howell Mountain. Beyond the dusty, grippy, and perfectly ripe tannins one would expect from Rutherford, it's the new-oak complexity that makes these labels so imminently drinkable upon release.

Aiken's restraint in the cellar and careful selection of coopers has produced wines of instant gratification that also hold the promise of future reward. No wonder that, when Scattered Peaks made its debut at the 2020 Premiere Napa Valley auction, its ten-case barrel selection lot went for \$19,000.

PHOTO: ALAN CAMPBELL



Raeburn's 2019 Rosé received a rating of 93 from *The Tasting Panel*; its 2018 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir both received a score of 95. All three are Russian River Valley designates.

says. "I love fermentations of all kinds and have been making beer and bread and other fermentables for many years. I take this approach in the distillery. When starting a new project, there is a lot of experimentation and tasting."

The current Redwood Empire portfolio includes the just-released Pipe Dream Bourbon (\$45), blended from barrels aged four to 12 years; Emerald Giant Rye Whiskey (\$45; *Tasting Panel* 97) aged four to five years; and Lost Monarch (\$45), a blend of straight whiskeys. As the name suggests, the brand's striking design is strongly connected to the redwood forests in Northern California. Inspired by John Muir, who's widely considered the founder of America's national parks system, the labels feature caricatures of and quotes from the famous con-

fruity top notes—joined by a splash of rye for a touch of spice.

The fact that Benham is now making waves in the spirits market, however, doesn't mean that he's finished innovating in the wine space, where the need "to move as a company into higher price points," in his words, is being met by Raeburn in the \$15- to \$25-plus range and Scattered Peaks at around \$40. Harkening back to Blackstone and Mark West, he acknowledges that the ultra-premium and luxury categories they fall into today are populated by super-suppliers that have made it harder to compete. But, he says, "The expectation of our channel partners is that we overdeliver on quality, and that's our history. I think we do that with all our brands—we put our money where our mouth is." ■■



The “Royal” family: Nathan, David, Mordy, and Joseph Herzog.

BOTTLE Royal

THE KOSHER FOOD
& WINE EXPERIENCE
IS ROYAL WINE
COMPANY’S CROWN-
JEWEL EVENT

story by Meridith May and Jessie Birschbach / photos by Devin Berko

At the 15th annual Kosher Food & Wine Experience, held in Los Angeles in February, Royal Wine Company CEO Mordy Herzog expressed his pride in the emerging Israeli wine segment. “I think we can all concur that there’s a glut of wine to be sold, and we are finding that wine is being consumed less than before,” Herzog—joined by family members Joseph, David, and Nathan—noted. “However, the kosher wine category is growing and its consumers are skewing younger.”

Explaining to *The Tasting Panel* that winemaking in Israel “date[s] back to biblical times,” Herzog added that in his view “the wines are world class, grown in mostly high-elevation vineyards. You can say the people who drink, love, and understand [them] are connected to the land and its rich history. It is the newest Old World wine renaissance that we are thrilled to celebrate.”

But while wines from Israel are an important division in the Royal Wine portfolio, so are stunning labels from Spain, Chile, France, New Zealand, Italy, and the U.S., as the company demonstrated at the country’s leading kosher wine event for trade professionals and enthusiasts.

Israel



Teperberg chief winemaker Shiki Rauchberger and Export Manager Darren Labe.

TEPERBERG

The family behind Teperberg, the third-largest winery in Israel, is now celebrating 150 years of making wine in the holy land across five generations; their vineyards span from north to south across the Golan Heights, the Upper Galilee, the Jerusalem Mountains, and the Negev Desert.

“Our winery is located in the foothills of the Judean Mountains,” chief winemaker Shiki Rauchberger explained at the event. “But 75% of the vineyards sourced are never more than 32 miles away. We have a large playground here.”

The **Teperberg 2016 Legacy Cabernet Franc (\$70)** from the Judean Hills represents the highest tier in the family’s portfolio. Fermented with wild yeast and seeing extended maceration, this fresh and violet-packed red aged 18 months in French (Burgundian) oak and offers a silky mouthfeel, notes of mature blackberry and dark chocolate, and an impactful dose of acidity.

TULIP

Since its beginnings in 2003, Tulip Winery has dedicated itself to employing many of the 200 locals who live in the northern Israeli community of Kfar Tikvah, or “Village of Hope.” Winemaker and proprietor Ro’i Itzhaki helps his employees—who have developmental and emotional disabilities—integrate into mainstream society by giving them meaningful work.



Tulip’s U.S. Ambassador, Tal Bender.

The **Tulip 2016 Reserve Syrah (\$45)** from Galilee is extraordinarily expressive. Silky and clean, it shows grace with powdered tannins, white-peppered cherries, and tart cranberry. “We used to make this in a heavier style,” said Tulip U.S. Ambassador Tal Bender. “The alcohol was at 15.5%, and we blended in Petit Verdot. Now, we’ve lowered the ABV to 14.5% and age [the wine] for 14 months instead of 18 months to tone down the oak and brighten the fruit.”

BARKAN VINEYARDS

Barkan’s young winemaker, Yannai Levinson, told us that “you really can taste the difference” between the three wines in his Altitude series. In addition to the **Barkan 2016 Altitude 720 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45)** he was presenting—which is grown at 720 meters in the Upper Galilee—it includes two other Cabernets grown at 585 and 624 meters, respectively. But the series is just one of many lines produced by one of Israel’s largest wineries.

“We have 25,000 acres of vineyards from all over the country, so we have a large selection of grapes, and this gives us an advantage over so many others—it makes it easy for us to offer the right quality for the right price category,” said Levinson, who added that Barkan is “the most award-winning winery in Israel.” After we tasted the minty, herbal Altitude 720, it was easy to understand why.



Winemaker Yannai Levinson displays the Barkan Vineyards Altitude 720, a high-elevation Cabernet Sauvignon from the Upper Galilee.

Spain



Capçanes winemaker Jürgen Wagner with Tasting Panel Publisher Meridith May.

CAPÇANES

Based in Montsant, Spain, Capçanes winemaker Jürgen Wagner understands the nature of Garnacha. “I like to refer to my old-vine Garnacha as my queen,” he told us as we tasted his highly regarded **Capçanes 2015 La Flor del Flor de Primavera (\$75)**. “I just have the feeling that the wine knows it’s good. This Garnacha is self-assured, not loud and over-the-top like some others. She’s quiet and confident, in a humble way.” Indeed, the wine, whose name means “Flower of Spring,” is a lovely and poised 100% Garnacha from what Wagner described as “ridiculously low-yield” vines in a vineyard that was planted in 1910.

U.S.

HERZOG WINE CELLARS

Joe Hurliman—head winemaker at Herzog Wine Cellars in Oxnard, California—has many projects up his sleeve, sourcing grapes from all over the state’s best growing regions. Now in his 22nd harvest, he introduced us to his latest, the **Herzog Single Vineyard 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75)** from Calistoga. “I believe that the vineyard dictates style and flavor profiles,” he told us. “I would have bottled the 2016 last year, but the wine told me it wanted



another year in barrel. I went to the family and begged them for the longer aging process. They agreed, and we are just now releasing it.”

It’s worthy of the wait, offering up a wallop of blue and red fruit on the nose, which the palate surrounds with dark chocolate and a dash of cinnamon. The extra aging brings out the feminine elegance that Hurliman told us he was trying to emphasize. Seamless and round, with supple tannins, the wine is further enhanced by notes of heather, violet, and wild strawberry on the finish.



Royal Wine’s National Sales Manager, Doug Simon.

France

Menahem Israelievitch’s thick French accent hints at his important role as Managing Director and winemaker for Royal Wine Europe: “I go to all the châteaux and convince them to make 5,000 bottles of kosher wine,” he explains. “Once they agree, I organize all the winemaking with my team of cellar workers, who have been certified by the rabbi, and we work together to make a kosher version of [their] wines—we do exactly the same work they do.”

Israelievitch estimates that Royal Wine works with around 35 French producers. “We want to make sure we’re offering something from each of the well-known appellations of France to the kosher consumer,” he explains, adding that the majority of the wines are not mevushal (pasteurized).

Making French wines of this caliber already takes an incredible amount of effort, but meeting the kosher requirements makes it even harder, demanding additional personnel and a few extra steps to the production process. The result, however, is that kosher consumers seeking world-class wines from France really can have their babka and eat it too.

“Winemaking in Israel dates back to biblical times. . . . The wines are world class, grown in mostly high-elevation vineyards. You can say the people who drink, love, and understand them are connected to the land and its rich history.”

—Mordey Herzog

CHÂTEAU MALARTIC-LAGRAVIÈRE/ CHÂTEAU GAZIN ROCQUENCORT, Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux

Bruno Laplane of Château Malartic-Lagravière in Pessac-Léognan had nothing but positive things to say about working with Royal Wine, calling Israelievitch “a very good guy. It’s really difficult to create a brand in the wine business, so why would you risk ruining your brand’s reputation for only 5,000 bottles? You really have to trust these guys, and we do. They’re very smart.”

The Bonnie family, who own Malartic-Lagravière, acquired the neighboring Château Gazin Rocquencort property in 2006; dedicated to the estate’s restoration, the Bonnies currently reside in its 17th-century mansion.

The sustainably farmed **Gazin 2018 Rocquencort White (\$52)** we tasted was refreshingly bright and herbaceous. “I have to tell you, tasting the kosher and non-kosher versions of this wine against each other, it’s very hard to tell them apart,” Laplane said of the 100% Sauvignon Blanc.



**Menahem Israelievitch, Managing Director/
winemaker for Royal Wine Europe, with Bruno
Laplane of Château Malartic-Lagravière.**



**Menahem Israelievitch with Karine Barbier, PR Manager
for Château Lascombes.**

CHÂTEAU LASCOMBES, Margaux, Bordeaux

Luckily for kosher consumers, the one and only kosher wine available from Margaux is a second-growth Bordeaux: Château Lascombes.

Almost New World in style, the **2016 Château Lascombes (\$160)** was rich, fruit-forward, and intensely layered with pencil shavings and anise.

Returning for her second year on the Kosher Food & Wine Experience tour, Karine Barbier, PR Manager for Château Lascombes, called 2016 “an incredible vintage. [The Royal Wine Company] has some plots that are very representative of our terroir. . . . Although we don’t touch the wine, we’re still there to control the quality. In fact, I tasted the 2016 this morning, and I must say that the kosher version still very much remains in the style of Lascombes. Lascombes is known to be very powerful with noticeable tannins—powerful but elegant.”



**Château Roubine CEO Valérie Rousselle and Menahem
Israelievitch display two kosher rosé cuvées.**

CHÂTEAU ROUBINE, Côte de Provence

Château Roubine CEO Valérie Rousselle may have acquired her 130-hectare property in Lorgues, Provence, in 1994, but its history goes back to the 14th century, when the Knights Templar sold the land to St. John of Jerusalem in 1307. Today, its 90 hectares of vineyard harbor several Mediterranean grape varieties. At the apex of its offerings is the delicately sharp **Château Roubine 2019 Cru Classé Rosé (\$26)**, a blend of seven different grapes, the majority being Grenache and Cinsault.

In 1955, based on a demanding set of criteria—wine quality, estate history, et cetera—25 Provençal wine estates were designated cru classé; Provence has been the only region outside of Bordeaux to institute this type of classification system. Today, there are only 18 Grand Cru estates, and Château Roubine remains one of them. ■



A New Era in an ANCIENT LAND

TASTING ISRAEL'S
BEST WINES

BY ANTHONY DIAS BLUE

PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



When I first started writing about wine, it was an easy subject. All we had back then were lots of French wines, some inexpensive Italian imports, and a smattering of California labels. Whew, how things have changed!

The first time I tasted a wine from Israel, I was resoundingly unimpressed, so I paid little attention to imports from this isolated region for the next decade or two. Nonetheless, being the consummate journalist that I am, I finally got the message. Over the past few years, I've become aware of the increasing quality of Israeli wines, many of which could hold their own with labels from the places mentioned above.

This year—having tasted example after example from a group of mostly young Israeli wineries located in appellations such as Galilee and the

Vineyards in the Golan
Heights region of Israel.

PHOTO: ALEKSANDRA TROCHIMUK

Judean Hills—I'm sensing a breakthrough. Although I was slow to catch on, don't get the impression that wine-making in the country is something new. The first vineyards of the modern era were planted in what is now Israel in 1882, with the financial and technical support of Baron Edmond James de Rothschild of Bordeaux's Château Lafite. The winery he helped establish was Carmel, still the largest producer in Israel.

Even so, it took a long time for a world-class industry to emerge, as the laws of kosher production constrained Israeli vintners. But modern technology eventually allowed them to overcome this hurdle.

Today there are many quality wineries in Israel turning out wines made from European as well as local varieties; quite a few of the following (all of which, coincidentally, are kosher) can stand side by side with the finest in the world.

BARKAN WINE CELLARS

Surprisingly, this huge, modern winery with a state-of-the-art visitor center was founded in the late 1800s.

2018 Malbec, Galilee (\$12) Medium ruby color; soft vanilla nose. Bright and juicy with lively plum and crisp acidity; clean and fresh with balance, length, and notes of earth. A great value. **88**

2017 Classic Pinot Noir, Negev (\$12) Soft cherry nose; sleek and crisp with tangy cherry and lively acidity; long and fresh. **90**

2016 The Gold Edition Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Crater Vineyard, Galilee (\$20) Deep garnet color; toasty nose; earthy with a smooth texture and good acid structure. Long and balanced. **90**

2016 Special Reserve Winemakers' Choice Chardonnay, Judean Hills (\$22) Fresh and juicy with racy acidity; silky and smooth with clean, bright flavors. **91**

2013 Supérieur Cabernet Sauvignon, Galilee (\$66) Deep garnet color. Nicely structured with depth, intensity, and notes of ripe plum. Long and fleshy. **91**

A view of one of Carmel Winery's vineyards.



CARMEL WINERY

This enormous company, founded in 1882 by Bordeaux's Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, was the most important employer in the settlements that would become Israel; David Ben-Gurion worked there before he became the first Prime Minister of the newly established state. Today it operates two large wineries.

2017 White Riesling, Kayoumi Vineyard, Galilee (\$25) Crisp and juicy, with citrus notes and racy acidity; tangy, bright, and fresh. **88**

2017 Selected Sauvignon Blanc, Galilee (\$12) Silky-smooth and bright with a nice twinge of acidity. Its soft and mellow character follows through nicely on the finish. **88**

2018 Private Collection Red, Galilee (\$14) A clean and bright 50/50 blend of Cabernet and Merlot. Fresh and long with juicy plum and lively acidity. **88**

2017 Riesling, Kayoumi Vineyard, Galilee (\$25) Soft petrol nose; smooth, floral, and dry; juicy, tangy, and fresh; long and charming. **90**

DOMAINE DU CASTEL

This family-owned boutique winery in the Jerusalem corridor was founded in 1983. Production is small and quality extremely high.

2018 Estate Bottled Chardonnay, Jérusalem-Haute Judée (\$48) Golden color; toasty aromas and flavors; silky and tangy, long and elegant. **91**

2017 Estate Bottled Grand Vin, Judean Hills (\$78) This stunning blend of four Bordeaux varieties is richly colored and fragrant; it's lush, elegant, and complex, with sprightly acidity to lift it, yet also long and bright. One of the best Israeli wines I've ever tasted. **96**

FLAM WINERY

Israeli wine pioneer Israel Flam, a graduate of the University of California, Davis, founded this family-owned winery in 1998. His son Golan, who has worked in Italy and Australia, serves as winemaker.

2018 Classico Red, Judean Hills (\$30) Deep, rich color and lush plum nose; smooth, fresh, and juicy with ripe plum and berry notes; generous and layered, long and stylish. **92**

JEZREEL VALLEY WINERY

This boutique winery specializes in Rhône and native varieties.

2017 Alfa Special Reserve, Sharon (\$30) Rich garnet color; spiced plum nose and smooth, velvety texture; balanced with vanilla, oak, spice, and ripe plum. A blend of 70% Shira, a local variety, with 30% Cabernet. **91**

2018 Nahalal, Galilee (\$39) Rich garnet color and toasty nose; smooth, lush, and rich palate with blackberry, spice, and more toast. An exciting modern blend of Shiraz and Carignan. **92**

MATAR

In 1970, Sam and Tiva Pelter immigrated to the Golan Heights from the U.S. and established a farm. In 2012, their son Tal—who studied winemaking in Australia—and his brother Nir founded Matar.

2017 Cumulus, Galilee (\$21) Rich garnet color; smooth, earthy plum nose. Silky and deep with notes of ripe plum and herbs; graceful and balanced. **90**

2017 Stratus Shiraz, Galilee (\$31) Lush garnet color; soft berry nose. Bright and juicy with lively acid structure and fresh blackberry; balanced, deep, and long. This is further proof that kosher wines can be truly impressive. **92**

DOMAINE NETOFA

Established on the slopes of Mt. Tabor in the kibbutz (commune) of Ein Dor, this small winery produces a large range of quality Galilee wines from its 30-acre vineyard.

2017 Latour White, Galilee (\$29) Soft, smooth, lush, and juicy; clean, balanced, and long. 100% Chenin Blanc. **88**

2018 Tempranillo Rosé Latour Rosado, Galilee (\$29) Bright pink color; smooth, dry, and tangy; balanced and amiable. **88**

2017 Tel Qasser Red, Galilee (\$33)

Medium ruby color; silky, smooth, and bright with juicy blackberry and cherry notes; clean and pleasant, if a bit thin. **88**

2016 Tempranillo Dor, Galilee (\$50) Rich ruby color; bright berry and plum.

Clean, lush, and balanced; fresh, juicy, and long. **91**

2016 Latour Red, Galilee (\$29) Deep ruby color. Smooth and ripe, lush and tangy with blackberry and plum. **91**

2017 Tel Qasser Roussanne, Galilee (\$32) Round, smooth, and luscious with juicy fruit; elegant, ripe, and classic. **91**

2018 Latour White, Galilee (\$26) This 100% Chenin Blanc is a lovely example of an underappreciated variety. Floral, lush, and crisp; smooth, balanced, and long. **91**

2017 Latour Red, Galilee (\$27) A smooth and lush blend of Syrah and Mourvèdre with juicy plum and berry notes as well as minerality; dense, ripe, and balanced with depth and length. **92**

OR HAGANUZ WINERY

Operated by a religious community, this winery—whose name translates as “the hidden light”—was founded in 2005 and produces 18 different wines.

2017 Marom Blend, Judean Hills (\$33)

Dark garnet color; ripe plum nose; smooth, juicy, and deep with earthy, spicy, and meaty notes; rustic, tangy, and long. **89**

SHILOH WINERY

Located in one of the world's oldest wine regions, this winery overlooks the Shiloh River Valley. Established in 2005, it consistently wins medals in competitions around the world.

2017 Legend Fiddler, Judean Hills (\$36) Dense garnet color; earthy, lush nose; deep, rich, and spicy; rustic, powerful, and long. **90**

2017 Shor Barbera, Judean Hills (\$31) Dark and smooth with notes of black cherry, blackberry, and spice; dense and intense yet balanced and long. **90**

2017 Chardonnay, Judean Hills (\$26) Clean, smooth, and fresh with tangy pear and peach plus a hint of French oak; elegant and long. **91**

2016 Legend Honi, Judean Hills (\$36) Rich garnet color; earthy nose; smooth, dense, and juicy; bright, racy, and long. **91**



Harvest at Barkan Wine Cellars.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WINES OF ISRAEL

An aerial view of vines in the Judean Foothills.



2016 Secret Reserve Merlot, Judean Hills (\$40) Smooth, lush, and juicy; tangy, rich, and dense with finesse and notes of ripe plum and blackberry. **91**

2017 Secret Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Judean Hills (\$40) Succulent and meaty with concentrated plum and spice notes; intense and juicy, balanced and ripe. **91**

2017 Secret Reserve Petit Verdot, Judean Hills (\$42) Spicy yet lush and intense with a smooth, rich texture; concentrated and deep with balance and sophistication. **91**

2016 Secret Reserve Shiraz, Judean Hills (\$41) Deep berry color. Silky and smooth with depth and finesse; nicely structured with notes of juicy plum and toasty oak; good balance and length. **91**

2017 Secret Reserve Petite Sirah, Judean Hills, Israel (\$45) Dark garnet color; soft, earthy nose. Smooth and lush with ripe blackberry; deep and rich, jammy and long. **91**

2018 Privilege Winemaker's Blend, Judean Hills (\$23) Deep garnet color; lush, dense, and juicy with an earthy component; smooth, ripe, and deep with a rich finish. **91**

2016 Exclusive Edition Mosaic, Judean Hills (\$99) Aromas of ripe plum and blackberry; juicy, dense, toasty, and supremely balanced with notes of vanilla and licorice; long and opulent yet elegant. **94**

TABOR WINERY

This small winery in the Galilee region produces high-quality expressions.

2014 Storm Adama II, Galilee (\$26) Deep garnet color; ripe plum nose; meaty, dense, and rich; concentrated and long. **91**

2016 Malkiya Cabernet Sauvignon, Galilee (\$55) Deep garnet color; classic plum nose; fresh, juicy, and bright; clean, smooth, and tangy; long and balanced. **91**

TULIP WINERY

Founded in 2003 in Kfar Tikva by the Itzhaki family, who are now in partnership with the Weissman family, this winery hires people with disabilities and special needs.

2016 Espero Red, Galilee (\$34) Fresh, juicy, and herbal; smooth and lush, rich and long. **90**

VITKIN WINERY

This family boutique winery focuses on Mediterranean varieties and exotic blends. Winemaker Asaf Paz earned a master's degree in Bordeaux and has worked in California and Australia.

2017 Grenache, Galilee (\$40) Clean, pure, and silky; smooth, juicy, and balanced; long and lush, with true varietal characteristics. **92**

YARDEN WINES

Golan Heights Winery's best-known brand is Yarden, which is marketed extensively in the U.S. It specializes in Bordeaux varieties.

2018 Sauvignon Blanc, Galilee (\$16) Fresh, bright, and crisp with lively citrus and snappy acidity; clean, long, and balanced. **89**

2016 Merlot, Galilee (\$31) Silky-smooth with toasty plum and berries; juicy, tangy, and nicely balanced. **90**

YATIR WINERY

David Ben-Gurion fulfilled his dream of making the Negev bloom by planting the Yatir forest; within it, at 900 feet above sea level, is the vineyard of Yatir Winery, which is partially owned by Carmel. Winemaker Eran Goldwasser studied and worked in Australia.

2016 Mt. Amasa Red Blend, Judean Hills (\$37) Deep garnet color; lush plum nose; clean, smooth, and ripe with tangy plum flavors and firm, juicy acidity; crisp and long. **90**

2016 Yatir Creek, Judean Hills (\$48) Deep garnet color; smooth plum nose; lush and rich with bright, deep plum and berry notes; lovely style and length. A true grown-up wine composed of mostly Syrah with Tannat and Malbec. **93**

2016 Yatir Forest, Judean Hills (\$81) Deep, dark color; rich, ripe fruit nose. Smooth, velvety, and seamless; concentrated with generous plum, blackberry, and toast. Luscious and elegant; long, lovely, and exceptional. Is this the best wine ever made in Israel? Could be! **96** ■■

WINE IS **SOIL**
WINE IS **LAND**
WINE IS **INNOVATION**
WINE IS **HISTORY**
WINE IS **PEOPLE**
WINE IS **LIFESTYLE**
WINE IS **ISRAEL**

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WINES
OF 

Each Vintage Is a New Chapter

HERZOG WINE CELLARS' NEW LINEAGE TIER CELEBRATES NINE GENERATIONS OF WINEMAKING HISTORY

by David Gadd

When you've been making wine for nine generations, you're bound to have something to celebrate. The Herzog family's 250-year winemaking tradition stretches from the stately 19th-century court of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—where founder Menachem Herzog was deemed a baron by Emperor Franz Josef—to a state-of-the-art winery on the California coast, where the Herzogs continue to push the boundaries of enological exploration.

Appropriately, in 2018, the family introduced Lineage, an aptly named tier of affordably priced wines that pays homage to that legacy. "They're hanging their heritage on this brand," explains David Whittemore, Marketing and Public Relations Director for Herzog Wine Cellars. The impressive pedigree of the new releases can be attributed to the know-how accumulated by each generation: As winemaker Joe Hurliman puts it, "Lineage really is an indication of the winemaking, the wine, and the grape knowledge of this family."

Lineage launched with popular single-varietal wines and blends that appeal to a wide range of consumers; the fact that they're kosher, like all Herzog expressions, is simply an added bonus. "Our goal was to bring a quality \$20 wine to market. We know what quality wine is, and these wines are quality wines [that] just happen to be kosher," explains Herzog Wine Cellars General Manager Joseph Herzog, an eighth-generation viticulturalist.

According to Hurliman, "Nearly all of the fruit used to produce the Herzog Lineage series is farmed, harvested, and produced directly by Herzog Wine Cellars," allowing the winery "to reach the high level of quality we want for [each] wine."

Made from the aromatic Musqué clone, the Herzog Lineage Sauvignon

Blanc from Lake County exudes tropical fruit on both the nose and palate. The Lineage Chardonnay, from a Herzog-owned vineyard in the Clarksburg AVA south of Sacramento, is full-bodied yet elegant, with citrusy overtones. Also from Clarksburg is the Lineage Pinot Noir, which offers an explosion of cherry and strawberry with a kiss of delicate oak. And the

including Portuguese varieties sourced from the Herzogs' Prince Vineyard in Clarksburg, it makes for a perfect accompaniment to hard cheeses and charcuterie. And finally, the Lineage Rosé is a Provençal-style charmer prime for warm-weather quaffing, either by itself or with Mediterranean-influenced cuisine.

Lineage's quality and price point are



The new Herzog Lineage Momentus Sparkling White takes its place between the just-released Lineage 2019 Lake County Musqué Clone Sauvignon Blanc and Lineage 2019 Clarksburg Rosé.

Lineage Cabernet Sauvignon is currently sourced from Paso Robles—one of the most exciting appellations in the New World for Bordelais varieties. A bold expression of black fruit with a hint of tobacco, it's ideal for pairing with roasts and chops.

Historically, many wines produced in California were field blends—a tradition that the Herzog Lineage Choreograph Red Blend harkens back to while upping the ante on complexity. Comprising 12 different grapes,

a natural fit for modern consumers, and the tier has proven to perform well in the off-premise space—but it's also finding a strong niche in on-premise accounts. "The Lineage wines are still affordable, even with a restaurant markup," Whittemore notes. As the family turns the page on yet another decade spent honing their craft, its members are moved to muse on their legacy: "We are telling our family story, and each vintage is a new chapter," Joseph says. ■

PHOTO: TONY PINTO, PINTO PRODUCTIONS

Anthony Dias

BLUE *REVIEWS*

Presented by  **BLUE LIFESTYLE**

In each issue, Editor-in-Chief Anthony Dias Blue selects a wide range of the best wines and spirits from among the more than 500 he samples over the course of a month. The reviews are subjective editorial evaluations, made without regard to advertising, and products are scored on a 100-point scale:

85-89: VERY GOOD

90-94: OUTSTANDING

95-100: CLASSIC

Once products are selected for publication, producers and importers will be offered the option of having their review accompanied by an image (bottle photo or label art) for a nominal fee. There is no obligation to add an image, nor does the decision affect the review or score in any way.

 The "twisty" icon indicates wines sealed with a screwcap closure.

For additional Blue Reviews, go to bluelifestyle.com.

Prices are for 750-mL bottles unless otherwise noted.

DOMESTIC

94 **Beekeeper Cellars 2017 Zinfandel, Montecillo Vineyard, Sonoma County (\$65)** Deep, dark garnet color; lush and rich with sweet plum and blackberry. Dense and balanced, ripe and intense, with generous length.

91 **Beekeeper Cellars 2017 Hidden Hillside Reserve Zinfandel, Sonoma County (\$55)** Opaque color; succulent and concentrated with lush flavors of blackberry, cassis, and spice; smooth and long.

92 **Black Kite Cellars 2017 Sierra Mar Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands (\$45)** Medium ruby color; soft cherry nose that carries to a lush and dense palate with spice and a tangy acid structure. Balanced with a lasting finish.

94 **Black Kite Cellars 2017 Gap's Crown Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$62)** Vibrant ruby color; smooth cherry nose. Sumptuous texture and tangy, ripe notes of cherry on a dense, meaty, and rich palate; long and elegant.



96 Crown Point Vineyards
2014 Estate Selection,

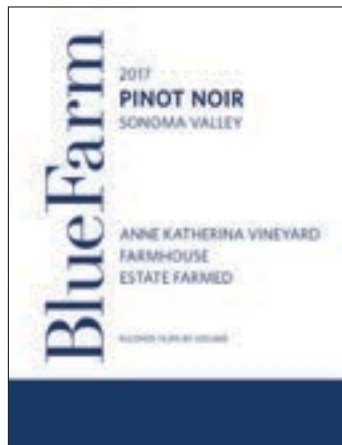
Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara AVA (\$150) A bold and delicious wine from the extremely interesting Happy Canyon area, located north of Santa Barbara. Deep garnet color with an exquisite nose of plum and vanilla and a rich, luscious texture; ripe and dense with abundant spice and a refined style. 73% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Malbec, and 11% Merlot.

95 Crown Point Vineyards 2015 Estate Selection, Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara AVA

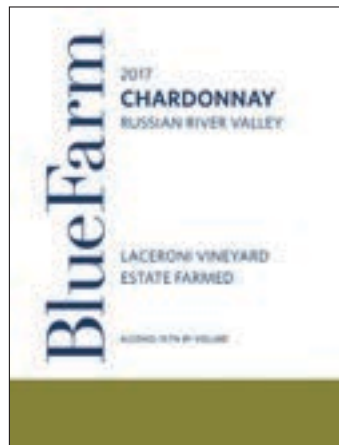
(\$150) Fragrant and juicy, with complex, vibrant layers of toast, brioche, and plum; silky and tangy, long and balanced. 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Cabernet Franc, 9% Petit Verdot, 9% Malbec, and 2% Merlot. Give it a year or two.

97 Crown Point Vineyards 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon, Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara AVA

(\$150) Deep, lush color; intensely smooth and delicious with lovely vanilla and toast. A remarkable wine from a great vintage, showing chocolate, spice, and considerable length.



94 Blue Farm 2017 Pinot Noir, Anne Katherina Vineyard, Farmhouse Block, Carneros, Sonoma Valley (\$95) Medium crimson color with a nose of cherry and toast. Lush, deep, and savory with intense notes of cherry and a silky texture. A classic from the edge of Carneros with a name I love.



95 Blue Farm 2017 Chardonnay, Laceroni Vineyard, Russian River Valley (\$70) Lovely toasty nose; smooth, refined, and crisp yet with a glossy texture. Long, bracing, complex, and classic; juicy, balanced, and stunning.



94 Paula Kornell 2017 Blanc de Noir, Méthode Champenoise, Napa Valley (\$50) Paula hails from a family of sparkling winemakers, so it's no surprise that her first effort is quite masterful. Pale pink hue; dry with ripe berry flavors elevated by pure, crisp acidity and muscular bubbles; long, balanced, and truly impressive.

BLUE REVIEWS



93 Ehlers Estate 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$65) Deep, dark, and fragrant, from a producer known for delivering consistent quality. Clean, lush, and dense with ripe plum, a core of juicy acidity, and a rich, long finish.

93 Montinore Estate 2016 Reserve Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley (\$38) Opaque ruby color; lush notes of black cherry with depth and tangy style. Succulent, rich, and graceful; deep, long, and balanced.

94 Ehret Family Winery 2015 Hillside Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Bavarian Lion Vineyards, Knights Valley, Sonoma County (\$98) Smooth nose of plum that goes juicier on the palate with cherry, chocolate, and spice. Elegant, precise, and lovely; refined and stylish.



92 Piña Napa Valley 2015 Cahoots! Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$49) Dark garnet color and aromas of blackberry that persist on the creamy palate alongside ripe plum. Lush, bright, and stylish, it's a serious Napa wine at a reasonable price.



91 Piña Napa Valley 2018 Low Vineyard Chardonnay, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley (\$34) Light golden color; fresh, clean, and lush with smooth tropical fruit and soft new oak. Elegant, silky, and classic; long and balanced.

91 Silver Wines 2018 Pinot Noir Rosé, Santa Barbara County (\$32) Pale salmon hue; juicy and rich with a silky texture and tangy flavors. Showing more depth than your typical rosé, this is made in a *vin gris* style: whole cluster-pressed, barrel-fermented with proprietary yeast, and aged on the lees for ten months.

95 Work Vineyard 2016 Zina's Pinot Noir, Petaluma Gap, Sonoma Coast (\$55) Ruby color and a fruit-forward nose. The palate is silky-smooth with crisp cherry and savory spice, but it's the racy fruit and bright acidity that distinguish this masterful wine.

IMPORTED

91 Altamasi Brut Metodo Classico, Trentino DOC, Italy (\$34) Fresh and bright with crisp, dry fruit and tangy acidity; ripe, clean, and juicy with an energetic mousse and a long finish. 100% Chardonnay made via the traditional method.

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL



95 Almaviva 2017 Bordeaux Blend, Maipo Valley, Chile (\$140) A collaboration between Viña Concha y Toro and Baron Philippe de Rothschild has yielded this remarkable blend of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Carménère, 5% Cabernet Franc, 5% Petit Verdot, and 2% Merlot. It's silky and lush, with length, complexity, and a multifaceted palate of ripe plum, soft herbs, and toasty oak.

DIAGEO

90 Château La Clare 2014 Médoc, France (\$29) Soft plum nose; lush and toasty with ripe plum and spice in the typical Bordeaux style. Kosher.

ROYAL WINE CORP.

92 Château Royaumont 2017 Lalande-de-Pomerol Red Blend, France (\$40) A spicy nose gives way to a smooth and juicy palate; charming and balanced, long and elegant. Mostly Merlot, with characteristic softness and finesse. Kosher.

MARTINE'S WINES INC.

94 Cortonesi 2015 La Mannella, Brunello di Montalcino, Italy (\$75) Earthy, berry-tinged nose; smooth and lush with deep blackberry and floral notes; graceful and complex.

QUINTESSENTIAL WINES

92 Enrico Serafino 2015 Monclivio, Barolo, Italy (\$40) Smooth, toasty, and dense with racy acidity and elegant fruit; long and stylish with finesse and depth. 100% Nebbiolo.

DALLA TERRA WINERY DIRECT

93 J. de Villebois 2017 Pouilly-Fumé Marnes Kimméridgiennes, France (\$53) A long, lovely 100% Sauvignon Blanc with a ripe fruit nose; deep and intense with a polished texture and succulent, layered flavors.

VINEYARD BRANDS



94 **Tenuta Sant'Antonio**
2015 Campo dei Gigli,
Amarone della Valpolicella,
Italy (\$73) Deep, rich color;
 intense and lush with concentrated
 fruit but good acid structure as well.
 Balanced, complex, and smooth with
 a lasting finish.

DALLA TERRA

92 **Poderi Colla 2015 Barolo**
DOCG Bussia Dardi Le Rose,
Italy (\$47) Tangy and elegant with refined
 fruit and soft spice; silky, juicy, and long. 100%
 Nebbiolo.

EMPSON



96 **Tenuta Sant'Antonio 2010**
Lilium est Riserva, Amarone
della Valpolicella, Italy (\$90) Earthy
 nose of wood; smooth, bright, and juicy with
 intensity, depth, and a graceful style. A rich,
 balanced, and delightful blend dominated by
 Corvina and Corvinone.

DALLA TERRA

91 **Umani Ronchi 2015 Centovie**
Montepulciano d'Abruzzo
DOC, Italy (\$45) Deep garnet color and a
 dense, rich palate of plum and cherry. Lush
 and concentrated, long and intense. 100%
 Montepulciano.

VINEYARD BRANDS

VALUE

88 **Château Les Riganes 2018**
Bordeaux Red Blend, France
(\$12) Silky, refreshingly clean, and simple
 with some charm; juicy and bright with soft
 plum and a tangy finish. Kosher.

ROYAL WINE CORP.

88 **Casa Relvas 2019 Herdade de**
São Miguel Colheita Seleccio-
nada Rosé, Alentejo, Portugal (\$15)
 A blend of Touriga Nacional, Syrah, and
 Aragonez with a medium pink color; Smooth
 and fresh, with dry and tangy flavors, crisp
 acidity, and a long finish. Spring, aka rosé
 season, is here!

QUINTESSENTIAL WINES

88 **CULT 2017 Cabernet Sauvi-**
gnon, California (\$19) Toasty
 vanilla nose; smooth and lush with plum,
 gentle toast, and more vanilla on the palate;
 fresh, bright, and long with good value.

92 **Flechas de Los Andes 2017**
Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina
(\$25) A kosher expression from one of
 Argentina's best wineries. Deep garnet color
 with a ripe nose, silky texture, and racy
 notes of plum and berries. Lively, juicy, and
 balanced, with good acid structure.

ROYAL WINE CORP.

90 **J. de Villebois Brut Crémant**
de Loire, France (\$21) Brisk
 and lively with bright citrus and persistent
 bubbles; refreshing, racy, and long.

VINEYARD BRANDS



91 **Marqués de Cáceres 2016**
Excellens Cuvée Especial Red,
Rioja, Spain (\$20) A lovely expression of
 Tempranillo with deep, vibrant color; lush,
 generous, and dense; smooth and ripe.

VINEYARD BRANDS

91 **Left Coast Cellars 2017 Cali's**
Cuvée Pinot Noir, Willamette
Valley (\$24) Medium ruby color with a
 silky texture; notes of fresh, earthy cherry;
 and good acid structure. Juicy and tangy with
 a lengthy finish.



91 **Broadway Vineyards**
2018 Abstraction Char-
donnay, Carneros (\$25) Creamy
 and lush with tangy acidity, notes of
 juicy pear, and a seamless, long finish.

BLUE REVIEWS



94 **Morgan Winery 2018 G17 Syrah, Santa Lucia Highlands (\$25)** Rich fruit nose; silky, lush, and well-balanced with succulent blackberry, toasty oak, and spice. If every Syrah were made with such finesse and style, it would be the most popular variety on the market.

91 **Left Coast Cellars 2018 Truffle Hill Chardonnay, Willamette Valley (\$24)** Bright and fresh yet creamy, with flavorful citrus notes and crisp acidity; long and balanced with a tangy style.

88 **J. de Villebois 2018 Touraine Sauvignon Blanc, France (\$16)** Fragrant, creamy, and rich with clean, fresh fruit; minerals; and soft spice on a gentle palate.

VINEYARD BRANDS

92 **Michele Chiarlo 2018 Moscato d'Asti DOCG Nivole, Italy (\$25)** Fresh and juicy, foamy and sweet with spice, lovely style, and charm.

KOBRAND

91 **Montes 2017 Alpha Chardonnay, Aconcagua Costa, Chile (\$22)** A long, tangy expression from a top Chilean producer: Soft vanilla nose; smooth and well-balanced with tropical fruit and an alluring oak component.

KOBRAND

89 **Montes 2017 Malbec, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$13)** Deep garnet color; smooth, earthy, and fresh with dense, luscious berry notes and a lasting finish.

KOBRAND

92 **Morgan Winery 2018 Tempranillo, Arroyo Seco (\$24)** Medium ruby color with a smooth berry nose, silky texture, and bright, focused fruit. A charming wine with graceful flavors—if Cabernet has gotten too intense for you, here's a delightful alternative.

91 **Samuel Charles 2018 Reserve Red Blend, Lodi (\$18)** A sustainably farmed blend of 50% Zinfandel, 40% Merlot, and 10% Petite Sirah with a medium garnet color: Lush and spicy with vanilla, ripe blackberry, and plum; long and balanced.

QUINTESSENTIAL

91 **Umani Ronchi 2018 Vellodoro Terre di Chieti Pecorino IGT, Abruzzo, Italy (\$17)** Bet you thought Pecorino was just a cheese, but turns out that it's also the name of an ancient grape variety. This rendition is fresh and lively with minerality and floral aspects; it's smooth, juicy, and quite distinctive, with length and balance.

VINEYARD BRANDS

90 **Viña Maquis 2017 Gran Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$20)** Deep garnet color; silky-smooth with rich flavors of plum and spice; fresh, lively, and tangy with a hint of herbaceousness.

GLOBAL VINEYARD

91 **Yamhill Valley Vineyards 2017 Estate Grown Pinot Blanc, Willamette Valley (\$25)** Lush and smooth with notes of ripe melon, fresh acidity, and crisp minerality; long and balanced.

SPIRITS

96 **El Tesoro Extra Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$100)** Pale amber color with rich aromas of toasted agave that reappear on the mellow yet intensely lush palate alongside a flavorful burst of vanilla, caramel, and spice; elegant, deep, and generous.



97 **Cardinal du Four 21 Rébellion Armagnac, France (\$355)** Soft amber color and a polished, toasty nose; elegant, complex, and deep, with floral notes joining sweet caramel, vanilla, and oak. Perhaps the most refined Armagnac I've ever tasted.

92 Tanteo Blanco Tequila, Mexico (\$40) Smoky and earthy nose of baked agave, which remains front and center on the palate's creamy texture; floral and long, rich and rustic.

92 Old Pulteney 12 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$45) The soft, toasty nose gives way to flavors of dried fruit and a clean thread of toast and malt. Balanced and classic with a long, rich finish, this is a lesser-known but high-quality single malt that's worth your attention.

91 Montanya Platino Rum, USA (\$65) Clear and silky with some heat on the intake and a sweet, smooth finish; a dense, spicy, and long expression from an award-winning Colorado producer.

93 King St. Vodka, USA (\$30) This project from actor and entrepreneur Kate Hudson exudes a soft vanilla nose; slightly off-dry, with a smooth texture and rich character. Mellow, lush, and balanced with a long finish.

PASSION SPIRITS, LLC

93 Hard Chaw Strong Irish Whiskey Cream, Ireland (\$25) Definitely not your granny's wimpy cream liqueur; this baby packs a wallop thanks to its intense core of Irish whiskey. That said, it's still very smooth, with a luscious character that persists through the finish.

93 Cocalero South American Herbal Spirit (\$27) A blend of 17 South American botanicals with a light green color and a soft herbal nose; sweet, spicy, and fluid. Rich, complex, and long with a seemingly endless finish.

LEVECKE IMPORTS

91 The Bitter Truth Golden Falernum Liqueur, Germany (\$35) Pale amber color with lovely aromas of spice and orange and a creamy texture. It's very sweet and candied, so it's not for consuming on its own, but use it wherever simple syrup could use a flavor boost (and break out your tiki mugs). ■■

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In each issue, Tasting Panel Publisher Meridith May selects her favorite wines and spirits of the moment. Check here for the latest arrivals in our offices, the hottest new brands on the market, and an occasional revisited classic.

Publisher's PICKS



Meridith May with her Australian Cattle Dog, Porter.

WINES



Ménage à Trois 2018 Lime-light Pinot Grigio, California (\$12) White-floral aromas steeped in pear nectar make for an enticing introduction to this zesty blend of 78% Pinot Grigio, 10% French Colombard, 6% Riesling, 4% Muscat, and 2% Chenin Blanc. It offers a festival of global flavors, including elderberry, Asian pear, a squeeze of lime, and honeyed green apple. Salinity enters mid-palate, mustering up a spitfire acidity that ignites the palate. **90**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Ballard Lane 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Coast (\$13) Exuding heady aromas of cedar, blackberry preserves, and roasted coffee, this blend of 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, and 3% Cab Franc overdelivers with beautiful balance. It's aged for eight months in French oak and offers bright acidity overlaying a dry, dusty palate. Walnut, dried sage, and ripe cherry keep the flavor profile exciting. **90**

MILLER FAMILY WINE CO.



Cline Family Cellars 2018 Pinot Noir, Sonoma County (\$15) Considering that they were early pioneers of planting Pinot Noir in Sonoma County, it's no surprise that the Cline family continues to bring out the best in this variety. Between its dusted cocoa-cherry tannins and whip of acidity, this delectable red sports savory qualities with a whisper of earth tones and clean, fresh ripeness. Cigar leaf and cola chime in as cranberry washes over the top of a toasty nutmeg finish. **90**



Concha y Toro Reserva Casillero del Diablo 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Chile (\$12) Decidedly fresh and uplifting scents of peach tart, jasmine, and gooseberry march in step with wonderfully balanced acidity and flavors of lemon verbena, white grapefruit, and wildflowers. An alcohol level of 12.8% keeps it trippingly light. **92**

FETZER VINEYARDS



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Barrel Burner 2018 Chardonnay, Paso Robles (\$15) Clay Brock is the winemaker behind this delicious white—a bright star in flavor and texture. Scents of lemon oil, caramel apple, and honeysuckle lead to an unctuous body that unfolds in a stream of white tea, Anjou pear, vanilla wafer, and white peach. Pineapple adds a tropical note and the acid is lively, clean, and fresh. **92**



MILLER FAMILY WINE CO.



Oda al Vino 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$24) Made with organic grapes, this dynamic red offers up pungent scents of blue flowers and blueberry. Teeth-coating tannins lengthen the impact of plum skins outlined in graphite. The great acidity level makes the wine prime for food pairings. **89**



Schug 2018 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$25) Cold-fermented in stainless steel and made with minimal use of new oak, this lean white has the texture of glass and flavors of key lime seasoned with tarragon and dill. Apple pie spices dominate the nose before honeyed pear lends focus on the palate, driving an inherent energy that lingers. **92**



Schug 2018 Pinot Noir, Carneros, Sonoma County (\$35) Mocha, baking spices, cherry, and plum are bundled into a rich perfume. Earthy flavors of wild strawberry follow, with bright acidity leading the way. Powered by notes of cedar, the ripe fruit joins hints of oregano and maple on the silky finish. **92**



Kate Arnold 2017 Daffodil Hill Pinot Noir, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon (\$45) Sourced from a warm site at an elevation of 550 feet, this wine was made with Dijon clones grown on Jory soil. An expressive floral nose expands with cherry, blueberry, and earth before sweet cherry liqueur and rose petals spiced with cinnamon and tobacco leaf make an entry on the palate. Woodsy briar notes make their mark on a cocoa finish as balanced acidity keeps things fresh. **93**



Andis Wines 2017 Cabernet Franc, Sierra Foothills (\$40) The fruit for this single-vineyard Cab Franc was grown on volcanic soil at a high elevation. Slate and heather coat black fruit on the nose, paving the way for a dynamic palate with dry, grainy tannins. Notes of mocha and coffee wash over grilled plums as violets bloom, surrounding bold structure, elegant texture, and savory aromatics. **93**



Merry Edwards 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$36) I don't think there's another Sauvignon Blanc out there with the complex array of aromatics and unique flavors offered up by this stellar super-Sauv. Sixty percent of the fruit was sourced from the Merry Edwards estate; comprising 42% Sauvignon Musqué, the blend was barrel-fermented in French oak and spent six months on the lees. Scents of salted butterscotch, peach blossom, just-mowed grass, and pineapple fill the nose before developed flavors of jasmine-soaked pear and honeyed tangerine mesmerize on the palate. The acidity pulls it all together. **95**

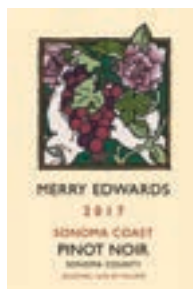
Publisher's PICKS



Zinke 2017 Grenache, Derby Vineyard, Paso Robles (\$45) Spiced apples and dried tomato leaves adorn the palate of this lithe Grenache, which sports a translucent cranberry hue and aromas of rhubarb and mountain brush. Seasoned with white pepper, it has a specific tannic structure that's classic for this variety and offers an inherent ripeness of wild strawberry that's held in check. It finishes expressively with dried cherries and rose petals. **93**



Merry Edwards 2017 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$48) Grown on the southernmost boundary of the Sonoma Coast in the Russian River Valley, fruit from six vineyards makes up this elegant blend of Californian and Burgundian Dijon clones. Aromas of cardamom-spiced cherry skins, briar, saddle leather, and cola are a treasure to the nose, and an impression of complexity, balanced acid, and round tannins accompanies a generous juiciness on the palate. A slight grip on the mid-palate includes flavors of espresso, blueberry, and oak before the finish reveals an earthy character punctuated by cinnamon and black pepper. **95**



MAISONS, MARQUES & DOMAINES



Niebaum-Coppola 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon 1882, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$48) Named for the first vintage produced by Inglenook founder Gustave Niebaum, this Cab—blended with small portions of Petit Verdot, Cab Franc, and Malbec—begins with fresh scents of blue fruit backed by slate, mocha, and cedar. Riddled with cocoa and tilled soil, the tannins, as expected, are dusty. Spiced cedar goes for a joyride on the lengthy finish. **93**



Smith-Madrone Vineyards 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley (\$52) An exquisite bouquet of lavender, dried violets, and jasmine arises in tandem with sweet black and red fruit. This is a silky and statuesque wine with a fruit-forward bent, but echoes of graphite and chocolate add complexity of character; its freshness and concentration of fruit is perceptible. The grapes were grown at 1,800 feet atop Spring Mountain (16% Cab Franc is blended in) and aged 18 months in 65% new French oak. **94**



Dutton Estate Winery 2017 Karmen Isabella Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$46) Sourced from three dry-farmed vineyards (out of the more than 80 certified sustainable and fish-friendly sites the winery farms), this Pinot Noir aged 11 months in French oak. Cherries in tilled soil, red tea, and savory baking spices are all at play on the intriguing nose. Expansive flavors of cocoa and pomegranate establish themselves deliciously atop a sumptuous texture. Round notes of chili pepper are subdued but still integrate with cedar, cinnamon, and orange peel. **93**



Neely 2017 Hidden Block Estate Pinot Noir, Spring Ridge Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (\$48) Impressive scents of sassafras, earth, and cinnamon confirmed that we don't get to sample enough expressions from this California AVA—but it was the hints of lavender and wild cherries that really sold us. Tilled soil and coffee come in mid-palate. There's an Old World sense about this wine, which aged ten months in French oak—it's juicy and expressive and not about the fruit. **93**





Flora Springs 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$50) A long list of mineral, fruit, and floral notes makes up the complex nose, with leather, slate, dark chocolate, and plum leading. Creamy waves of blueberry and plum morph into teeth-coating coffee-bean tannins. Enjoyable and undoubtedly age-worthy. **93**



Silverado Vineyards 2015 SOLO Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$125) This deep, breathtaking, structured red—Silverado's flagship wine—is made exclusively with the Silverado Disney-Heritage clone, one of only three in California designated by UC Davis. Its gorgeous nose features dark plum, dried violets, vanilla, and oak. Teeth-gripping tannins control a wave of chalky dark fruit as espresso and tar are seasoned with white pepper and a touch of mint. **97**



Silverado Vineyards 2016 GEO Cabernet Sauvignon, Coombsville, Napa Valley (\$75) This single-vineyard Cab with expressive and sumptuous aromas of blackberry pie, mocha, and slate hails from Mount George Vineyard. Chocolate and blueberry enter first on the palate, where they're lifted by broad-shouldered yet elegant tannins. Plush and generous notes of leather are seasoned with clove and anise on the mid-palate. **96**



Black Kite Cellars 2017 Gap's Crown Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$62) From one of the most revered vineyards on the rugged North Coast, this Pinot Noir offers up clean and fresh aromas of rhubarb and heather with a hint of sea breeze. Flavors of wild strawberry, prickly pear, and cinnamon coffee cake are plush and pleasurable. **94**



Calera 2016 Mills Vineyard Pinot Noir, Mt. Harlan, Central Coast (\$75) Grown on limestone soil at an elevation of 2,200 feet, this wine exudes a mesmerizing nose of Chinese five spice and tea leaves. An underscore of wet stone melds with the luscious notes of cherry, rose, and cinnamon. **94**

DUCKHORN WINE CO.



00 Wines 2017 EGW Chardonnay, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$95) Grapes from old vines aged 12 months in 20% new French oak followed by six months on the lees in stainless steel. The perfumed nose comprises white tea, honey nougat, chamomile, and lemongrass. Unctuous and round-bodied, lithe and luxurious, the wine has a rich nature balanced by a streak of acidity that clings to lively notes of linen and lemon. **96**



00 Wines 2017 VGW Chardonnay, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$75) A true luxury, with aromas of lemon oil, pineapple, and salted melon. Floral notes join honey on a palate saturated with lemon-lime, making a delicate impression on the tongue. A melted-caramel effect surpasses expectations on the finish. **95**



Silverado Vineyards 2017 Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$56) From three of the winery's heritage vineyards—Mt. George in Coombsville; Silverado Vineyard; and Oakville Station, a historic site overseen by UC Davis—this melodic red (85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot, and 1% Cab Franc) aged 18 months in 48% new oak (mostly French, with a smaller percentage of Hungarian and American). Following a perfume of mountain brush, dried violets, blackberry, and slate, the palate makes a bold and elegant statement; its reserved power and beauty show in notes of spiced cedar, sweet tobacco, and a mélange of Italian herb-seasoned blue, red, and black fruit. **95**



Publisher's PICKS



00 Wines 2017 Shea Pinot Noir, Yamhill-Carlton, Oregon (\$95) Fermented in clay amphorae, this petal-soft Pinot Noir blooms in the glass with rose, jasmine, and cranberry. Woodsy heather, cherry pie filling, and cinnamon take hold on the generous mouthfeel before sea-salt caramel melts on the finish. It's a complex wine without an edge. **96**



Montes 2017 Purple Angel, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$95) This blend of Carménère (92%) and Petit Verdot (8%) is a stunning example of Chile's sophisticated presence on the global wine stage. Powerfully aromatic scents of violets and crushed blueberries give way to a silky entry of dark chocolate, espresso, and sour cherries. A grilled meatiness ensues on the palate against a slate backdrop. **95**



KOBRAND



J. Lohr 2016 Signature Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$100) The Cabernet Sauvignon grapes for this rich and seductive red were sourced from Beck Vineyard, located in the Creston District at an elevation of 1,700 feet; small percentages of Cabernet Franc, Saint-Macaire, Petit Verdot, and Malbec were blended in. A nosing of cinnamon, wild berries, and heather leads to a sumptuous and concentrated palate of coffee-laden blackberry and notable phenolic maturity. **94**



Ladera 2015 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$115) Made with fruit grown at elevations of over 1,600 feet, this wine comprises the vintage's best lots, which were individually aged in 100% French oak for 22 months prior to final blending. The nose is exceptionally inky and deep with black cherry and cocoa-tinged blueberry; on the palate, dark chocolate dotted with white pepper majestically melts in broad strokes. This is an assertive red, but the luscious fruit balances out the edge of its mountain-bound concentration. **96**



SPIRITS



Flybird Strawberry Margarita Wine Cocktail, Mexico (\$13) Produced with agave wine that's filtered, fermented, and then blended with agave blanco tequila. At 30 proof, it's a tart, semi-sweet expression with a pleasantly dry finish that keeps it from being cloying. Authentic notes of strawberry linger on the tongue with a hint of vanilla bean in a taste profile that we believe is as good as it gets for a ready-to-drink cocktail. **90**

DON SEBASTIANI & SONS



Papa's Pilar Dark Rum, USA (\$40) Seductive and clean aromas of chocolate, cola, and dark cherry are abundant on the nose of this 86-proof spirit, which comprises a blend of hand-selected rums that were solera-aged for up to 24 years. Starting and finishing with caramel apple, the palate also leans toward black-peppered molasses with roasted coffee bean and anise. **94**

HEMINGWAY RUM COMPANY



Artingstall's Brilliant London Dry Gin, UK (\$45) Created by film director and writer Paul Feig, this 84-proof spirit was the recipient of a Best in Show award as well as a double gold medal at last year's Spirits Tasting Competition during the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America annual convention—and deservedly so. Following a well-scripted perfume of lavender, blueberries in cream, and sweet red peppers, white pepper lifts with creamy peppermint on a palate bursting with floral notes. **94**



Santori 2017 Howell Mountain Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$92) This small-production red (400 cases) is structured and elegant in form, flavor, and balance. Texturally rich and concentrated, it's a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon with stage presence. The nose goes earthy with black olive, leather, and graphite as dark cherry and grilled meat impart opulence on the palate; a juiciness persists all the way to the finish. **94**



Ole Smoky Tennessee Apple Pie Moonshine, USA (\$25) True to its name, with an exquisitely spiced bouquet of cinnamon, brown sugar, and baked apple—along with a defined crust aroma that's downright delectable. The flavors are so authentic that you can bet no one would believe the spirit was made with anything but the most traditional ingredients. Clocking in at 70 proof, it offers a nectar-like texture, with a squeeze of lime on the creamy finish. **92**



Glendalough Pot Still Irish Whiskey, Ireland

(\$55) This 86-proof spirit matured in ex-bourbon casks for three years before it was transferred for an additional year of aging in virgin Irish oak casks, which were sustainably harvested from the mountains surrounding the distillery. The nose proffers aromas of jasmine, sweet summer peach, and toffee, and the palate is feather-light, with nuances of peanut brittle and cocoa-dusted apricot. **93**



Riazul Extra Añejo Tequila, Mexico (\$145)

This estate-grown blue agave spirit from the Jalisco Highlands aged for four years: American oak bourbon barrels for three and Oloroso Sherry casks for the remainder. With an enticing nose of caramel, vanilla, and luscious apricot nectar, it reflects the higher sugar content of agave grown at high elevations. On the palate, orange pekoe tea melds with jasmine and all-spice. The luxurious finish has a warm hint of zesty cedar and cherry. **95** **II**



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MEET THE NEWEST MEMBER
OF THE JACK FAMILY:

JACK DANIEL'S COCKTAIL BITTERS

by Eric Marsh

One of the old slogans for Jack Daniel's was "It's not Scotch. It's not Bourbon. It's Jack." Specifically, it's Tennessee whiskey, which means that it adheres to all of the rules of bourbon production except for the fact that it's charcoal mellowed. But Jack's charcoal is not any charcoal. The whiskey is slowly dripped through 10 feet of hard-packed sugar-maple charcoal made right at the distillery in Lynchburg, Tennessee, after it's aged in charred white American oak barrels made at Jack's own cooperages. And then there's the source of the limestone spring water every bottle of Jack Daniel's is made with: the mineral-rich Cave Spring Hollow, located on the property Jack Daniel himself purchased well over a century ago. In short, Jack Daniel's is in a category all its own.

Eric "ET" Tecosky learned as much when he toured the distillery about seven years ago, shortly after taking his position as the brand's first U.S. Ambassador. The tour exemplified how Jack Daniel's has remained innovative over the years, but it also raised a question for Tecosky about what else could be achieved: "Jack Daniel's makes its charcoal and its own proprietary yeast on site, and it's such a unique spirit even among Tennessee whiskey. . . . Why don't we make our own bitters to perfectly accentuate it?"



PHOTO: CHRIS HALJAR

Jeremy Hart is manager of The Birch on Elm in Manchester, NH.

That was the start of a gestation period that involved much conferring with Jack Daniel's assistant master distiller Chris Fletcher and countless trips to the local spice store. "I considered the taste profile of Jack and then procured herbs, spices, and a plethora of other flavors that best accompanied it," Tecosky says of developing the recipe for the bitters. In addition to working closely with Fletcher, he "borrowed the palates" of industry confidants and other Jack aficionados before deciding on the exact proportions of each component.

Then came the search for the best purveyor of each ingredient, which took some doing, but he eventually found them. The resulting bitters are, unsurprisingly, delicious, with discernible notes of vanilla, oak, and what he describes as "darker fruits as well as ginger spice and maple on the finish."

Jack Daniel's Bitters are slated to hit shelves any day now, and the brand's fans will be able to experience the product for themselves. Tecosky says that while the bitters perform well alongside Jack in classics like Manhattans and Old Fashioneds, even "just adding a few dashes to a Jack and Coke can deeply enhance the drink." We reached out to two veteran bartenders to see how Jack Daniel's Bitters inspired their own creativity.

Jack Daniel's Cocktail Bitters ON THE JOB

Jeremy Hart has been behind the stick for 22 years, the last three of which have been spent as manager of The Birch on Elm in Manchester, New Hampshire. After tasting the bitters, he says his "first thought was [to put] a spin on a Boulevardier—I like the way the herbaceousness of the bitters plays with the spicy notes of Jack Daniel's Single Barrel Rye." He played around with variations on the classic drink before arriving at a combination of the Single Barrel Rye, Luxardo Bitter Bianco (in place of Campari), Green Chartreuse (instead of sweet vermouth), and Jack Daniel's Bitters. "I wanted to create a cocktail that would let all of the ingredients shine," Hart says, adding that the bitters complement not only the rye spice but also the abundant herbal notes in Chartreuse.



PHOTO: CHRIS HALJAR

Jeremy Hart's twist on a Boulevardier.



PHOTO: EUGENE LEE

Cari Hah is bar manager at Big Bar in Los Angeles, CA.

Cari Hah, bar manager of Big Bar in Los Angeles, says she first detected notes of chocolate and coffee in the bitters, which led her to "immediately think of a tiki cocktail." What's more, she points out, the proprietary Jack Daniel's yeast "lends a banana aroma to [its] whiskeys" that makes it ideal for tiki drinks. Her creation mixes Jack Daniel's Old No. 7 with rum, falernum, orgeat, grapefruit, lime, cinnamon syrup, a few drops of absinthe, and, of course, Jack bitters. The ingredients, in her view, "all come together with the banana note in the whiskey and the bitters' deep spice, creat[ing] a really complex balance."

Whether it's a play on a Boulevardier, a spiced-up Zombie, or an entirely new concoction, Jack Daniel's has plenty of great expressions on the market to help bartenders and cocktail enthusiasts build their dream drinks—and its bitters will likely enliven them all. ■■



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIÑA MORANDÉ

ADVENTURE

Story

KNOWN FOR INNOVATION IN ITS HOMELAND, VIÑA MORANDÉ
AIMS TO BECOME A HOUSEHOLD NAME STATESIDE

by Ruth Tobias



Pablo Morandé founded Viña Morandé in 1996.

In Winemaking Director Ricardo Baettig's words, Viña Morandé's Adventure line possesses "the gene of innovation" passed down by company founder Pablo Morandé.

"THE BIGGER THEY COME, the harder they fall."

That old saw applies to the business world insofar as major companies with strict bottom lines tend to be far more risk averse than are scrappy startups. Which makes a well-established, widely exported winery like Chile's Viña Morandé something of an anomaly, as—nearly a quarter-century since its launch—it's doubling down on the innovative approach to production it was built on.

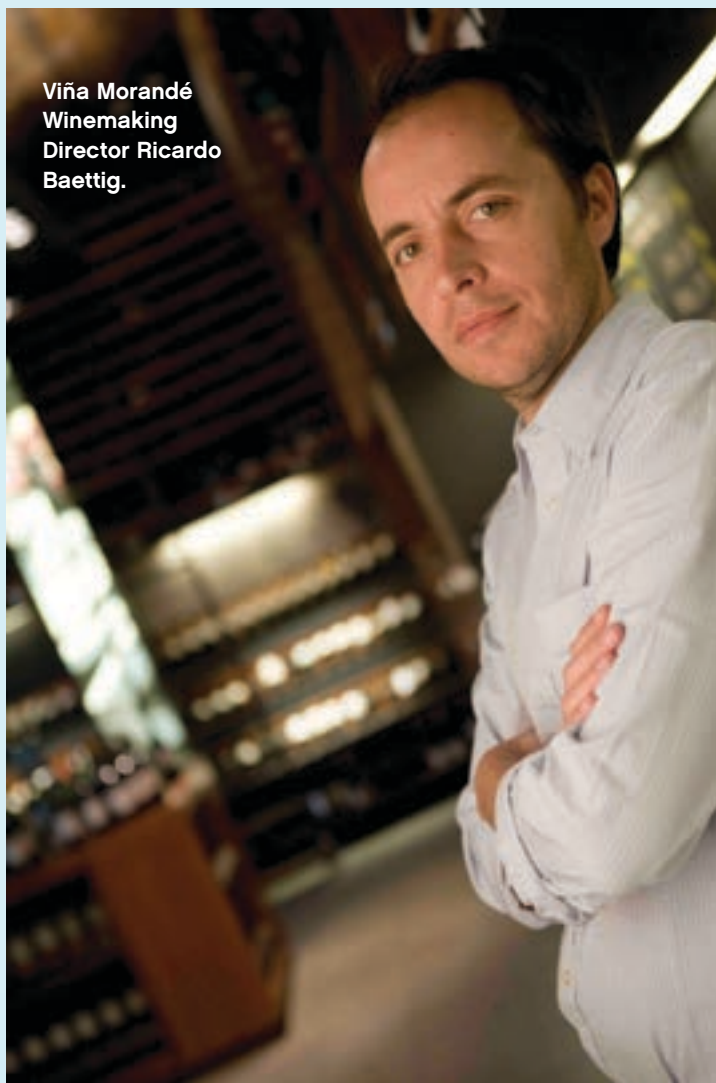
According to Winemaking Director Ricardo Baettig, Pablo Morandé was "very forward-thinking when he founded the company in 1996." Not only was he a pioneer in Casablanca, where he planted the Sauvignon Blanc that the cool coastal region is

now known for, but he also recognized the value of old vines and locally traditional grapes well before much of the wine world, creating a portfolio tier called Adventure—Aventura in Spanish—to showcase them. Sadly, admits Baettig, “nobody at the time was asking for or understood” a line of inexpensive wines from such obscure grapes as Blauer Portugieser and Romano (aka César). “It was a failure, commercially speaking. He was too ahead of his time.”

About seven years ago, however, Viña Morandé recognized that “the world was more keen on these types of wines, so we relaunched the project—and it’s been a complete success this time,” Baettig says. In fact, he adds, “it’s been so powerful that many other big companies are doing their own versions. They saw that it’s a great opportunity for Chile—[one] very oriented by winemakers, who push the companies to make these wines.”

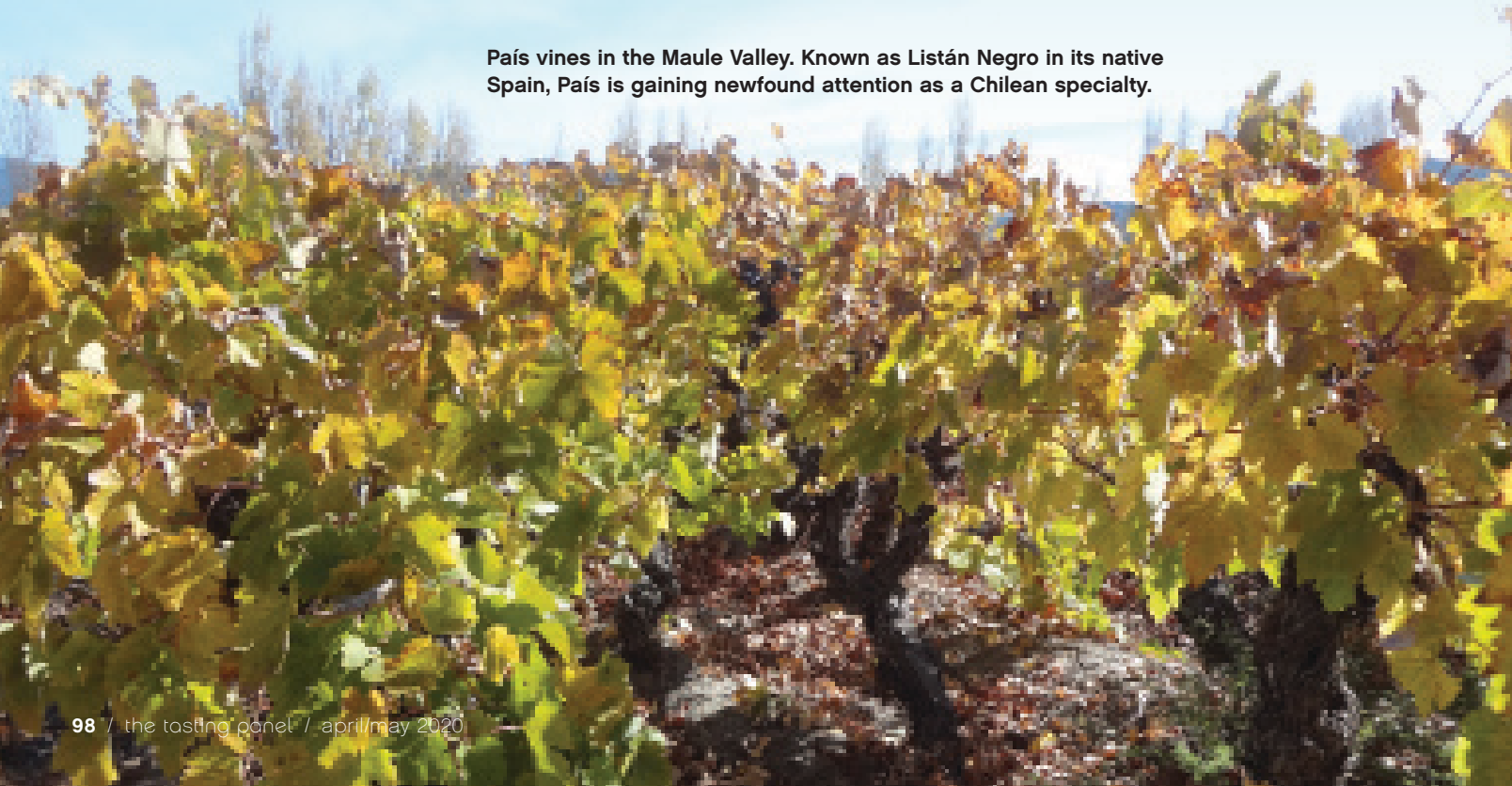
In addition to crafting four of the ten expressions himself, Baettig oversees the line as “a sort of curator,” he explains, encouraging his team of winemakers to experiment with what interests them most: “You never know what’s going to be a good idea for sure, but the idea is to [showcase] interesting hidden jewels from the country—uncommon varietals, unusual vinifications. We’re not trying to make blockbusters, just wines that are as pure and reflective of the terroir as possible.”

To that end, most of the labels are sourced from dry-farmed old vines, some as old as a century, grown in vineyards no larger than 7 hectares—“so obviously we’re focusing on quality instead of quantity,” Baettig says. Many are certified organic. Three of them feature País, which is native to Spain (where it’s known as Listán Negro) but has “almost disappeared” there, according to Baettig. In Chile, by contrast, the grape’s historical reputation for



**Viña Morandé
Winemaking
Director Ricardo
Baettig.**

País vines in the Maule Valley. Known as Listán Negro in its native Spain, País is gaining newfound attention as a Chilean specialty.



producing rustic wines of “very little value” is being rehabilitated by “new generations of winemakers like me,” he asserts, adding that “we’ve had much more opportunity to travel than older generations” to places like Beaujolais and Galicia, where the similarly light-bodied yet distinctive likes of Gamay and Caiño Tinto, respectively, have also undergone reevaluation in recent years. Two of the bottlings, Aterciopelado and Bestiario, incorporate a percentage of Malbec, reflecting Chile’s long tradition of co-planting the two grapes to obtain deeper color and softer tannins. Baettig’s own label, Creole, is a blend of País from head-trained vineyards in the Secano Interior—the birthplace of Chilean viticulture—and Cinsault.

Speaking of Cinsault, Rhône varietals are (as in Chile as a whole) another focus of the Adventure line, including Tiraziš, a cool-climate Syrah from Casablanca; Mediterráneo, a GSM blend with Carignan and Roussanne; and Vigno. The latter is named for a consortium of 15 producers launched in 2012 to promote the long, rich heritage of Carignan in the Maule Secano; Morandé is a founding member, and Baettig’s contribution to the project blends the grape, sourced from 70-year-old vines, with Syrah and Chardonnay.

And that’s still not all. Rounding out the current lineup is Malmau, a Malbec made from vines found growing wild in an abandoned Maule vineyard; a Maipo Cabernet Franc called El Padre; Gran Petit, a blend of concrete egg-fermented Petite Sirah and Petit Verdot; and Despechado, a Casablanca Pinot Noir that’s fermented with native yeasts in concrete eggs and aged in amphorae. “*Despechado* means somebody that loses the love of somebody else,” says Baettig, explaining that the name is a wry allusion to the wine’s source—a “lovely, very small vineyard that nobody paid attention to, because to go and pick it is a pain in the ass.” He calls the result “a Beaujolais type of wine that the clay-pot aging adds a lot of texture to.”

In short, the Adventure line lives up to its name—but

Winebeer is a Sauvignon Blanc-based sparkling wine that’s infused with hops.



Viña Morandé was among the first wineries in Chile to adopt the use of concrete eggs; it has also led the country in initiatives as diverse as high-density planting and late-harvest production.

then, the same could be said of Viña Morandé itself. Whether experimenting with high-density plantings or producing Chile’s first late-harvest wine, reiterates Baettig, “we’ve been doing these types of things since the beginning of the company.” The construction of a new wine-making facility in the Rapel Valley is a testament to the fact that they intend to continue far into the future: Scheduled to be completed in time for the 2021 vintage, the winery will serve as a R&D lab of sorts for not only Adventure but various Morandé imprints. As

Baettig points out, “Even our Gran Reserva wines are not very orthodox; our Chardonnay, for instance, is 40% fermented on the skins. So I will make that in the Adventure winery.” Still other examples include HAX—a self-billed “high-antioxidant wine” made by a team who work “almost like pharmacists” to elevate the phenolics and anthocyns—and Winebeer, a hopped sparkling white wine.

Ultimately, Baettig says, his goal is “to show the world that Chile is much more than good-value wines—we are really passionate, a little mad, and have very unique stuff to offer. You can imagine, for a winemaker, that’s sort of a dream come true.” ■■



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The Tasting Panel: Blind Wine Speed Tasting

Sunday 3:00 PM – 4:45 PM

Nielsen, What's Trending In Beverage Alcohol

Sunday 5:00 PM - 5:45 PM

The Tasting Panel, Panel Discussion: Seeing Clearly for 2020

Sunday 5:45 PM – 6:45 PM

The Tasting Panel, Deconstructing Innovative Spirits” Speed Tasting

Monday 12:40 PM - 2:00 PM

TIP Session – Thought Interaction Pods

Monday 5:00 PM - 6:00 PM

Grand Tasting & Awards Ceremony

Monday 7:00 PM – 8:30 PM

The Sasha Group (a VaynerX Company), Marketing for 2020 & Beyond: Winning the Fight for Consumer Attention

Tuesday 12:40 PM – 1: 30 PM



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Temecula Valley 50 Years Old and
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- Precisely ~ BORDEAUX: Teaching One of the Classic Fine Wines Regions with Gary Twining, CWE
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GIVE OUR *Love* TO AGAVE

THE TEQUILAS AND MEZCALS ON OUR SHORT LIST THIS SEASON

MANY OF US MAY NOT remember our very first sip of tequila, for all the wrong reasons. But most of us likely do remember our first sip of really *good* tequila for all the right ones: As burgeoning beverage professionals, we were developing a genuine interest in exploring its clean and green, fruity and floral, or earthy and savory complexity.

Long underestimated as rough and rustic, the agave spirits of Mexico—not only tequila but also mezcal, sotol, bacanora, and so on—have in recent years finally been gaining the respect they're due for their agricultural and artisanal heritage. As they command an increasingly large portion of backbars and connoisseurs' cabinets from coast to coast, it's high time we offer a toast to the category as a whole—and to the brands we're sampling now in particular.

From Mexico to Michigan: TEEQ TEQUILA

DON FERGUSON FOUNDED the Canton, Michigan–based Teeq Tequila out of what he calls “pure passion and respect for the agave industry,” which he advocates for at every turn. “There’s still such a big misconception in the market when it comes to tequila,” he says. “What we wanted to do was educate people [and] open up their minds.”

To that end, Teeq offers three expressions: not only “an extremely smooth, fruity, and flavorful” Blanco and a Reposado aged eight months in second-generation Tennessee whiskey barrels but also “something different, something unique,” according to Ferguson—Coconut Lime Blanco.

“There just aren’t that many flavored tequilas, and the ones that do exist are sweetened,” he explains. Determined to do better, he spent seven months testing the best natural extracts before releasing the expression. The result is the ultimate gateway to agave—one that shines in cocktails made with fresh tropical juices or all by itself, with an ice cube and a squeeze of lime.



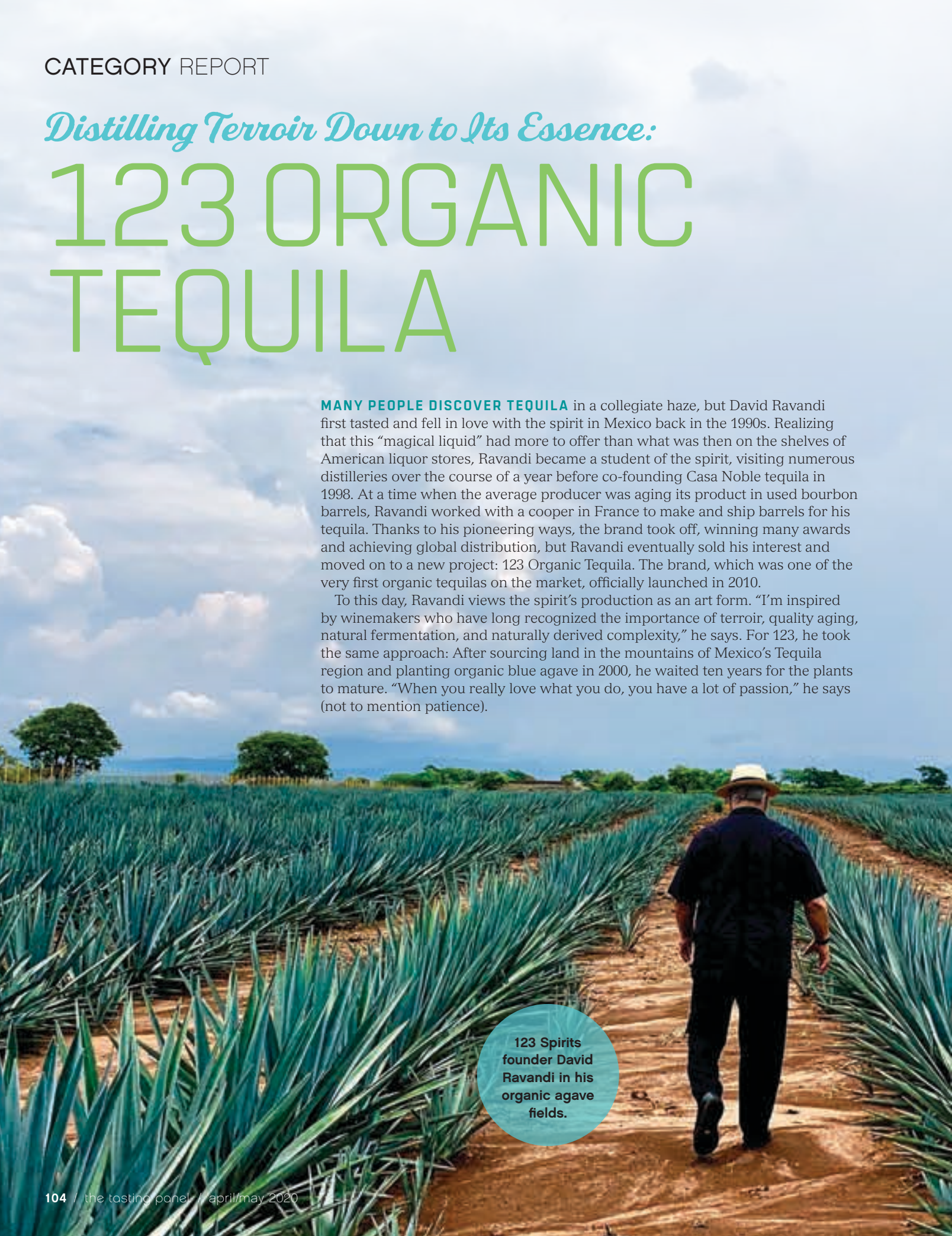
Teeq Coconut Lime Blanco The sweetness of the coconut and the floral quality of the lime are beautifully accented on the nose of this 70-proof, 100% agave tequila. A twinge of tartness from key lime and a hint of tropical banana lend dimension to the coconut character of the unique spirit. Vanilla bean and fennel add a smoothness to the texture on the finish. **92** —*Meridith May*

Distilling Terroir Down to Its Essence:

123 ORGANIC TEQUILA

MANY PEOPLE DISCOVER TEQUILA in a collegiate haze, but David Ravandi first tasted and fell in love with the spirit in Mexico back in the 1990s. Realizing that this “magical liquid” had more to offer than what was then on the shelves of American liquor stores, Ravandi became a student of the spirit, visiting numerous distilleries over the course of a year before co-founding Casa Noble tequila in 1998. At a time when the average producer was aging its product in used bourbon barrels, Ravandi worked with a cooper in France to make and ship barrels for his tequila. Thanks to his pioneering ways, the brand took off, winning many awards and achieving global distribution, but Ravandi eventually sold his interest and moved on to a new project: 123 Organic Tequila. The brand, which was one of the very first organic tequilas on the market, officially launched in 2010.

To this day, Ravandi views the spirit’s production as an art form. “I’m inspired by winemakers who have long recognized the importance of terroir, quality aging, natural fermentation, and naturally derived complexity,” he says. For 123, he took the same approach: After sourcing land in the mountains of Mexico’s Tequila region and planting organic blue agave in 2000, he waited ten years for the plants to mature. “When you really love what you do, you have a lot of passion,” he says (not to mention patience).

A man wearing a dark shirt, dark pants, and a light-colored hat is walking away from the camera down a dirt path in a vast field of blue agave plants. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. In the background, there are some trees and a fence line.

123 Spirits
founder David
Ravandi in his
organic agave
fields.



The brand differentiates itself from the rest of the market in multiple ways. First and foremost, the organic process is discernible on the palate. “The juice has a cleaner and truer identity,” Ravandi says. “Chemicals and spraying, as well as additional sugar or yeast during fermentation, change the flavor profile.” And with agave as inherently beautiful as that which he grows on his estate, Ravandi’s sole goal is to champion it.

Ravandi’s plants, which are both

USDA- and EU-certified, grow at elevations of 4,200–6,000 feet, where they’re highly stressed: The higher the altitude, the more dramatic the weather and temperature swings. “This keeps the plant on its tiptoes,” Ravandi says. “It has to work hard to reach for water.” And the harder the plant has to work, the more fibrous its heart, or *piña*, will be and the more character it will have. Once harvested, the piñas are roasted on a pit fire; the mashed and pressed agave juices then ferment

in oak tanks and eventually undergo double distillation.

Ravandi’s dedication to the production process has paid off: Every single case of 123 Organic Tequila made annually is pre-allocated per market. In 2014, at the urging of a friend, Ravandi also began releasing Diablito, an extra añejo expression he originally created not for sale but for personally enjoying with cigars. Now he produces 2,500 bottles a year, and tequila fans clamor for the elixir, which has a creamy body and long-lasting finish after aging for 40 months in French Limousin oak barrels.

Ravandi’s belief in the concept of tequila as an art form doesn’t stop at the juice: 123 Organic Tequila comes in hand-blown recycled-glass bottles—no two are the same—affixed with recycled-paper labels printed with soy ink. The labels, which celebrate Mexican folklore and heritage through intricate line drawings, extend to the whole lineup of Blanco, Reposado, Añejo, and Extra Añejo. In each sip of 123—which shows nuances ranging from almond and honey to lemon peel and anise—Ravandi tells the story of a passionate tequilero who believed the world deserved a line of tequilas that could speak in turn to dedicated craftsmanship and a sense of place. —Amanda M. Faison





Jamie Carawan, Vice President of Brand Menu and Culinary for Buffalo Wild Wings, is a fan of Dulce Vida.

PHOTO: BONNIE J. HEATH

Keeping It Real:

DULCE VIDA

WHEN MILESTONE BRANDS acquired Dulce Vida and its 100-proof Blanco tequila in 2016, they didn't know they'd be advancing future drinking trends. But that's exactly what happened as the brand evolved to include a line of organic, 80-proof Blanco, Reposado, and Añejo tequilas as well as real fruit infusions that readily met consumers' demand for refreshing cocktails that are low in sugar and carbs.

"Dulce Vida is helping drive the healthier-for-you movement in spirits," says Milestone Brands CEO Eric Dopkins. "The organic tier is on fire, and our fruit-infused flavors are just starting to break out. And now the Hundo 'Rita at Buffalo Wild Wings is going back to the roots of the brand—100 proof is going mainstream."

About that Hundo 'Rita: Jamie Carawan, Vice President of Brand Menu and Culinary for Buffalo Wild Wings, fell so hard for Dulce Vida's flagship 100-proof tequila that he made a Margarita out of it and put it on the menu at all of the chain's 1,208 locations. "We love the idea of letting our guests 'make it one hundo,'" says Carawan. "It is a fun, cultural play—but ultimately it is a great-tasting Margarita that will resonate with our guests." And the Blanco also shines on its own, he adds: "As a lover of tequila, I highly scrutinize any silver, as it will be the base for any aged

tequilas. Dulce Vida's silver delivers. In the end, flavor always wins out, and we love the flavor of this tequila."

While the 100-proof original may be revolutionizing the Margarita, it's Dulce Vida's 70-proof fruit-infused tequilas that are turning out to be the true cocktail heroes. Using real fruit from exceptional growers, Dulce Vida's Lime, Grapefruit, and Pineapple-Jalapeño expressions simplify mixology while making it healthier. Don't believe us? A cocktail made with a Dulce Vida fruit-infused tequila, some club soda, and a squeeze of lime has fewer carbs and calories than a Michelob Ultra but delivers a bigger buzz.

"Our infusions become a go-to for simple afternoon drinks; they are truly special," says Dopkins of the skinny Margaritas and Palomas he makes with the products. "[But] it's something that no one else is doing right now—no other brand is using real fruit. We believe that consumers are rediscovering tequila through Dulce Vida . . . without the heavy sugar of other Margaritas."

And there's a lot to rediscover, between the 100-proof tequila at the brand's core and the bestselling line of organic tequilas in the U.S. as well as the flavored expressions. Now that Dulce Vida has positioned itself as a standby for today's tequila drinker, we can't wait to see what they do next. —Allyson Reedy

*Outstanding
in Its Field:*

CAMPO BRAVO



YOU'D BE HARD-PRESSED to find anyone on the planet who knows agave better than the farmers of Jalisco, Mexico. Take the family behind Campo Bravo: For five generations, they've worked their land, carefully cultivating the plant's spiky, fleshy leaves. So when they decided to use their prized estate-grown Blue Weber agave to make their own tequila? Yeah, it was a pretty darn good decision.

"I've been presented with more than 100 brands in the past 24 months, and I've never been as impressed as [I was with] Campo Bravo," says Eric Dopkins, CEO of Austin-based Milestone Brands. Though at the time of the introduction he was in Mexico to source more agave, not to buy a tequila brand, he immediately signed on to partner with and distribute it, sending out the U.S.'s first bottles in January.

The mission of Campo Bravo—whose name means "brave field"—is to create the best bottle of tequila that can be purchased for \$20 by combining the experience, passion, and heritage of these multigenerational Jalisco farmers into a peppery, citrusy, smooth sip. It's rare in the tequila world for a single family to control the entire production process, from growing the plants all the way through designing a meaningful bottle, and you can taste the difference: The 80-proof Blanco is a true example of a farm-to-bottle spirit. "The response we're getting is that it tastes like a super-premium tequila but at a premium price," Dopkins says. "It's a brand that overdelivers in character, quality, and tradition. Everything about it—the liquid, the packaging—screams Mexico tradition."

Although Campo Bravo is new to the market, the response has been enthusiastic. Milestone Brands has already landed both major and smaller independent accounts in on- and off-premise channels around the country. It makes sense; with tequila prices on the rise, getting a premium well at a bargain is a victory. And the fact that it comes in a well-designed bottle that looks good on a backbar or retail shelf is just a bonus.

For now, Campo Bravo's Blanco tequila is available in 750-milliliter and 1-liter packaging, but a 1.75-liter bottle will be released later this year. It has been such a hit that Milestone is launching a Reposado in 2021 and an Añejo in 2022, both of which will also be affordably priced. "This is a well worth bragging about," Dopkins says of the flagship. "There's not a better tequila out there for the money. People are just blown away by it."

—Allyson Reedy



Slow and Steady Wins the Race:

ILEGAL MEZCAL

IN BUSINESS, IT'S OFTEN SAID THAT

speed is essential to competitiveness in the marketplace; brands aim to shorten their ideation lifecycles and release new products early and often. The key to Ilegal Mezcal's success, however, has been quite the opposite. You might even say it takes its cue from the 100% Espadín agave it sources, which takes ten years to mature before it can be harvested and used to create the sweet and smoky distillate native to Oaxaca. "'Sin prisa' is our motto—it means 'without rushing,'" says Ilegal founder and CEO John Rexer. "We reinforce, over and over, that this mezcal is going to be something we can be proud of long-term."

Founded 14 years ago out of Café No Sé, Rexer's bar in Guatemala, the brand just celebrated ten years on the U.S. market. "I can't believe we got here, but we're here," says Rexer with a smile. To commemorate the milestone, Ilegal is conducting pop-up bars all over the country. The goal, he explains, "is to bring people into a smaller venue where they can get to know Ilegal in an unpretentious way. I guess the one non-negotiable for any guest experience is that if it's not fun and real and all about the customer, we're not interested."

PHOTO COURTESY OF ILEGAL MEZCAL



Ilegal founder and CEO John Rexer with Global Brand Ambassador Gilbert Marquez at Salòn de la Fama in Oaxaca.

The simplicity of Ilegal's lineup underscores the brand's commitment to showcasing the true essence of Espadín: "Capturing the flavor of the plant is what it's all about," says Rexer. Ilegal Joven is a full-bodied yet delicately flavored unaged mezcal, expressing herbal aromas and bright citrus on the palate. The Reposado, aged for four months in used bourbon barrels, is a smooth sipper with herbaceous tones and flavors of baking spice and winter fruit, while the Añejo is aged for 13 months in American oak for a rustic yet rich, fruit-forward profile.

While producing mezcal to compete with the world's finest aged tequilas, Rexer also made it Ilegal's mission to be an active member of its community. "We are also an activist brand known for causes we support," he explains. "The company has had a philosophy since day one: You don't 'give back,' you 'give along the way'—and not just with money but with time and talent." Ilegal is actively involved with Team Brownsville, an organization that provides food, water, and other resources to asylum seekers at the border, as well as in school-building and beach-cleaning projects throughout Mexico. It also focuses on engagement with Latin American workers in the U.S. service industry. "The hospitality business is made up of people from all over the world, and many [of them are] from Latin America. It's a community that can be mobilized quickly to make a change and have a big impact," Rexer asserts.

Of the brand's new campaign, Love Your Neighbor, he adds, "We [launched it] about a year ago, and we'll be amplifying that message, especially given the humanitarian crisis that is growing at the border. We invite everyone to get involved." To learn more about their initiative, visit ilegalmezcal.com/love.

Ilegal's commitment to community is reflected even in its approach to sales. "Communication is everything," Rexer says. "I try and make sure that those selling Ilegal know they have an obligation to those making Ilegal in Oaxaca—that their livelihoods are affected by how well we do and that as long as we have attention to detail, we will do well." His insistence on forging personal connections has been a pillar of the company since day one. "In the U.S., our plan is to continue growing at a healthy pace while maintaining [the] very hands-on, person-to-person approach that has built the business. . . . We want to make sure it is here for many years to come." —*Matt Jackson*



Dos Auténticos:

MEZCAL BURRITO FIESTERO AND KOCH EL MEZCAL

AS FOUNDER AND CEO of Chopin Vodka, Tadeusz “Tad” Dorda has proven that vodka can not only exhibit distinct flavor but even display terroir. He’s so dedicated to this concept that he does not produce any artificially flavored vodka, relying only on the base ingredient—whether it’s potato, rye, or wheat—to capture the unique character of the land in which it’s grown. It’s no wonder, then, that he seeks out spirits producers who take a similar approach for his Chopin Imports Limited (CIL) portfolio. Enter his mezcal brand partners, Koch El Mezcal and Maguay Spirits.

MEZCAL BURRITO FIESTERO

Mezcal Burrito Fiestero is made in El Mezquital, Durango, with 12- to 14-year-old Cenizo agave. Through its reforestation campaign ONE FOR ONE, the company plants one agave for every bottle it makes, ensuring its supply far outpaces what it actually needs for production.



Age: Joven

Agave: Cenizo

State: Durango

Method: Twice-distilled in copper

Master Distiller: Arturo Conde

Price: \$49

Tasting Notes: A bright grilled-lemon entry leads to a surprisingly creamy, smooth palate. A top note of fresh thyme overlies the buttery, lemony base, which finishes with a trace of sandalwood.

KOCH EL MEZCAL ARTESANAL

When CIL COO Chuck Kane’ visited the *Tasting Panel* offices recently, it was as clear as the mezcal we were sipping that he was invested in Koch El Mezcal. “This isn’t a lifestyle brand—this is a *life* brand,” he said. “This is about making Oaxaca a better place.”

Koch El Mezcal currently helps to support 58 families from 16 different villages in and around Oaxaca by not only purchasing their mezcal but also giving them seedlings for their agave fields. On a trip to visit them all, says Kane’, the mission spearheaded by co-owner Carlos Moreno “started to really sink in. Months later, once we had everyone signed up and on board and were down there to celebrate, seeing all those people, it suddenly felt like a responsibility.” But if Moreno’s endgame is helping his fellow Oaxacans, the byproduct is incredible mezcal.



Age: Joven

Agave: Espadín

State: Oaxaca

Method: Roasting in underground conical ovens; horse-drawn grinding; spontaneous fermentation in open-air cypress wooden vats; distilled twice in copper

Master Distiller: Pedro Hernández

Price: \$49

Tasting Notes: Fresh, sweet, and spicy on the nose with a delicate mesquite undercurrent. High-toned pineapple and jalapeño splashed with sweet barbecue sauce warm up to a savory, fascinating, Vegemite-esque mid-palate. White carnation meanders in the background.

For an interesting side-by-side comparison, we also tasted the **Koch El Artesanal Tobalá** and the **Koch El Ancestral Tobalá**. Though they are made from the same type of agave, they undergo different production processes. The Tobalá piñas for the former expression are ground by horse, the latter’s piñas by donkey. Whereas the Artesanal is fermented with spring water in open-air wooden vats, the Ancestral is fermented with river water in open-air clay pots. And perhaps the most interesting difference is that while Artesanal is distilled in copper, the Ancestral is distilled in a clay-pot still.

As a result, the Artesanal showed sharper, brighter, and more peppery; the Ancestral, by contrast, offered a softer, fuller mouthfeel with floral and pastel candy notes.

Santo Tequila
founders Guy Fieri
and Sammy Hagar.

The Life of the Party:

SANTO TEQUILA

CELEBRITY-OWNED WINE AND SPIRIT BRANDS are common these days, but often the names on the label have nothing to do with the product itself. Occasionally, though, the celebrities actually bring something special to the table: That's the magic that good friends and fellow agave aficionados Sammy Hagar and Guy Fieri achieved with Santo Tequila.

Hagar's history with spirits began in 1996, when he founded Cabo Wabo Tequila for patrons of his flagship nightclub in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. It was among the first 100% blue agave tequilas available in the U.S., and he quickly turned it into one of the best-selling premium tequilas in the country before selling to Gruppo Campari in 2007. His success with the brand is now almost as legendary as his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame career—and as for Fieri, who hasn't watched an episode of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and thought partying with him would be a lot of fun? So when the famed duo met up at Hagar's annual Birthday Bash in Cabo and decided to join forces to produce a premium tequila, a great brand story was underway.

Hagar then looped in Juan Eduardo Nuñez, a renowned third-generation master distiller in Mexico with whom he has a long and dynamic history: Nuñez helped him launch Cabo Wabo, and in 2017 they created Santo Mezquila, the world's first blend of premium tequila made from Blue Weber agave and mezcal made from Espadín agave. Now he'd be making Santo Tequila Blanco. "Guy and I shook hands, and a few months later we were sipping the most amazing blanco tequila we'd ever tasted," Hagar told *Food & Wine* last spring.

As consumer palates expand and mature, the demand for high-quality tequilas that are as delicious to sip neat as in a cocktail is also growing. And that's exactly what Nuñez and his team at the historic El Viejo Distillery in the Jalisco Highlands of Mexico—the Napa Valley of tequila—have handcrafted in the traditional method from 100% fully aged, twice-baked Blue Weber agave. In fact, acclaim for the Blanco has led to the creation of two new expressions, Santo Reposado and Santo Añejo; aged in French wine casks, both are scheduled for release this summer.

So now's the time to follow the lead of the two wild and crazy—but savvy—guys behind the brand: Turn your casa into a cool little "Triple D"-style joint of your own. Pick up a bottle of their tequila, throw some pollo on the grill, turn up Hagar on Spotify, get the cocktails rolling, and experience the higher spirit of Santo. —*Daniel Staskel*

Santo Tequila Blanco, Mexico (\$40) Soft agave nose; clean, creamy, and mellow with balance, spice, and a nice bite at the finish. Another winner from rocker Sammy Hagar—make your Margaritas with this stuff. **92** —*Anthony Dias Blue*



A bottle of Løs Sundays Blanco Tequila stands on the left, its clear glass partially filled. The red label features the brand name in white, with 'Blanco' in a script font and 'TEQUILA' in bold. Below, it reads '100% PURO DE AGAVE · HECHO EN MEXICO'. To the right, a faceted glass is filled with ice, tequila, and a lime wedge, with a splash of liquid captured mid-air. Two more lime wedges lie on the white surface in the foreground.

KNOWN FOR THEIR APPETITE for discovering new and exciting brands, the millennial generation is now the most powerful consumer segment driving demand for tequila. Yet most super-premium tequila producers are telling the same old story without engaging this diverse and culturally aware audience. Recognizing the gap in the market, the founders of Løs Sundays Tequila designed their three expressions—Blanco, Reposado, and Coconut—just for them.

LØS SUNDAYS

TEQUILA FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

"We wanted a product that was fun and approachable," says Løs Sundays founder Mitchell Hayes, an Australian who developed a love of tequila when he moved to the United States to work in the action sports industry. "In Australia, most people drink vodka and whiskey. But here in the U.S., I noticed a lot of people in our network were drinking tequila. They all seemed to love [it], but when I asked which one they liked, they weren't really loyal to a particular brand. I decided I wanted to build that brand—not just to sell another tequila product but to go beyond the bottle and engage with the millennial generation, new tequila consumers, and the female demographic, which seemed to be overlooked in this space."

Since its inception in 2017, Løs Sundays has positioned itself in the market as a producer not only of award-winning tequila but also of branded apparel and merchandise, on-premise events, short films, and socially conscious campaigns with organizations like the American Red Cross to assist in California wildfire relief. On its social media channels, it engages with its followers through curated content and posts bearing cheeky slogans like "Because tequila is cheaper than therapy" and "Stop trying to make everyone happy—you're not tequila." As Hayes points out, "there are only so many pictures of a brand's bottle that you can look at on a company's social media platform until you unfollow them. That is not Løs Sundays. We make sure to keep our consumers engaged and entertained with our content."

Yet style and image never outweigh quality. "We founded our company on three pillars—quality, originality, and style," co-founder Oliver Williams says. "But our first priority is always quality." For all three expressions, Løs Sundays uses 100% sustainably harvested Blue Weber agave from both the highlands, which provides bright floral notes, and the lowlands for earthy, peppery tones. As the plant takes at least eight years to mature, the Løs Sundays team takes care to protect its lifeblood. "Our distillery owns about 70% of



Løs Sundays' Coconut, Blanco and Reposado tequilas have each won awards in 2020 from both Best Tasting Spirits and the San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

the land it sources its agave from; the rest comes from direct-to-farm relationships where we negotiated 25- and 30-year contracts," explains Williams. "We're never sourcing agave on the free market, which leads to juvenile harvesting. That's not good for the industry or for the agave."

After harvesting the plants at a minimum of 23 Brix, the *tequileros* cook the hearts in traditional stone-and-brick *hornos* for 36–54 hours, crush them by roller mill, ferment the resulting liquid over several days in stainless-steel tanks, and then twice-distill it in a pot still to maintain the agave's nuanced flavors. The Coconut expression (\$33), commonly referred to by the founders as their "gateway tequila," receives an infusion of natural coconut extract in its final hours of distillation; the unaged Blanco (\$38) is light and bright and appealing to the developed agave palate, while the Reposado (\$42) is aged ten months in American oak

whiskey barrels sourced from Tennessee for a finish that's even more refined.

With its savvy approach to marketing as well as production, "Løs Sundays adds a point of difference to the existing market by presenting super-premium tequila in a way that is relatable to the millennial generation," says Regan Gillotte, the brand's Marketing Director. Certainly, it makes for easy-breezy mixology. "Universally, our favorite way to enjoy Løs Sundays is with a splash of soda and a citrus wedge—our signature Sundays and Soda," Hayes says. "With the Reposado, I like it neat or simply on the rocks—it's that smooth."

He adds, "Our tequila is some of the best in the market, and we are serious about that, but that doesn't mean our marketing [needs to be] serious. We want to have fun sharing Løs Sundays with our consumers and build authentic relationships that last a lifetime." —Lori Moffatt

BLIND TASTING AND THE *Nominees* ARE . . .

ELEVEN WINES MAKE A STAR
TURN DURING A BLIND SPEED
TASTING AT CRAFT L.A.

story by Jessie Birschbach / photos by Devin Berko



From left to right: Thomas “Mac” Gregory, Corporate Director of Food & Beverage, Pacifica Hotels; Catherine Morel, Lead Sommelier, 71Above; Jared Hooper, Wine Director, Faith & Flower; Jason Hayes, Managing Wine Director, Mastro’s Steakhouse Thousand Oaks; Andrey Tolmachyov, Wine Director, Maude; Daniel Veit, Wine Director, Margo; Jessie Birschbach, Managing Editor, *The SOMM Journal*; Caroline Blundell, Assistant General Manager, Stella Barra; Diana Turk, Wine Buyer, K&L Wine Merchants; and Todd Thurman, General Manager, Craft L.A.

The day after the Oscars, *The Tasting Panel* hosted a blind tasting of 11 wines at Tom Colicchio’s Craft L.A. in Los Angeles’ Century City neighborhood. The residual excitement from the cinema world’s most prestigious awards ceremony hung thick in the air of the dining room, known as a hot spot for the entertainment industry; the restaurant even shares a courtyard with the mammoth Creative Artists Agency building.

This afternoon, however, the stars that shone the brightest were liquid, and in lieu of the Academy was a panel of ten experienced sommeliers and wine buyers from all over La La Land. After about 45 minutes of blind tasting and serious note taking, the wines were revealed—and although there weren’t any golden statuettes to disburse, there was certainly high praise for each one.

SCATTERED PEAKS

2017 Small Lot Cabernet Sauvignon,
Napa Valley (\$125)

Derek Benham, founder of Purple Brands, never strays from his favorite formula for brand building: offering extreme value, of which wines like Blackstone Merlot and Mark West Pinot Noir are proof positive. No wonder Dave Trebilcock, Purple’s Director of Marketing, felt he had to offer a disclaimer as he unsheathed a bottle of Scattered Peaks Small Lot Cabernet Sauvignon. “This bottle retails for \$125—so you’re likely wondering how we’re delivering incredible value, in the classic sense,” he said.

To start, Benham doesn’t spend money on owning a “big, fancy winery,” noted Trebilcock, adding that “this wine

was made at a boutique custom-crush facility in Oakville that’s set up to make world-class, limited-production Cabernet Sauvignon.” And what Benham saves in overhead, he spends on grape sourcing and production. At the helm of Scattered Peaks is Beaulieu Vineyards (BV) veteran Joel Aiken, who worked with Napa legend André Tchelistcheff and made the famed BV Georges de Latour Private Reserve. He uses fruit sourced from two very special sites: the Morisoli Vineyard in Rutherford and Sage Ridge Vineyard in the Vaca Range, just south of Howell Mountain. Sixty percent of the blend comes from Morisoli, which Trebilcock pointed out is “surrounded by Scarecrow, Phelps, and Inglenook. If we actually charged for this wine what we pay for the grapes, it would be \$160 a bottle.” He added, “With some air you can drink it young, yet it has longevity. We think this wine offers quality found in wines that cost much more.”

PURPLE BRANDS



BUYER NOTES ★

Aromas of wild berries and dusted cocoa and a velvety, seamless entry. Tannins are luxurious and the fruit voluptuous. Finish is expressive and earthy. —Diana Turk, Wine Buyer, K&L Wine Merchants

Lush black fruit (cassis, black currant), pencil lead, and fresh-cut flowers. Dusty tannins and really nicely structured. —Daniel Veit, Wine Director, Margo



J. LOHR PURE PASO™

Red Blend, Paso Robles (\$27)

J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines Area Manager Seanna Boyle proudly displayed the recently launched J. Lohr Pure Paso, noting, “This is the first release for this wine, and we’ve already received several reorders.” Predominantly featuring Cabernet Sauvignon from J. Lohr’s Shotwell Vineyard in the El Pomar District AVA, Pure Paso also comprises 26.5% Petite Sirah, 2% Merlot, 0.5% Petit Verdot, and 0.5% Malbec; the goal for the label, according to Boyle, “is to provide an interesting blend of two of Paso Robles’ most historic varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah.”

The producer itself hardly needed an introduction: The Lohr family—and founder Jerry Lohr in particular—has helped shape the Central Coast region into what we know today. With sustainability at the heart of their efforts, the Lohrs own over 2,600 acres in Paso Robles alone. Lohr planted the winery’s first 280 acres in Monterey County in 1972, and they also own 35 acres in Napa Valley.

BUYER NOTES ★

A nose of peppered plums and vanilla. Love the spice rack of flavors with concentrated black fruit and dark chocolate. Drying tannins are supple. Overdelivers on quality and taste profile. —*Jared Hooper, Wine Director, Faith & Flower*

Silky, smooth mouthfeel with unexpected viscosity that is wonderful. The dark berry fruit, chocolate undertones, and toasted caramel are impressive. —*Jason Hayes, Wine Director, Mastro’s Steakhouse Thousand Oaks*



BLACK STALLION

2016 Limited Release Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$60)

Before the reveal, Andre LaMon, Southern California Area Manager for Transcendent Wines, offered a hint: “There probably are not many more spectacular wineries in Napa. It’s a beautiful property.” Once the largest equestrian ranch in the U.S., Black Stallion was eventually converted into a winery by the Indelicato family in 2010. Winemaker Ralf Holdenried and his team create the four tiers of Black Stallion via meticulous individual lot tastings.

“The Limited Release Cab comes mainly from a blend of vineyards located in the high elevation mountains and the Valley’s lower elevations which help to balance and soften the texture,” LaMon explained. “[It’s] pretty small production too—we only make about 1,600 six-packs.” The 2016 vintage aged 21 months in 100% French oak (56% new).

“I just brought this into Faith & Flower,” said Wine Director Jared Hooper. “I was leaning toward calling this mountain fruit because of its balance. It’s not underripe but not overripe.”

TRANSCENDENT WINES

BUYER NOTES ★

Mesmerizing scents of chocolate go deep. The luxurious palate has big shoulders with a graceful physique. Cherry and white pepper glide to the supple finish. —*Thomas “Mac” Gregory, Corporate Director of Food & Beverage, Pacifica Hotels*

Ripe, dark fruit with notes of maraschino cherry, eucalyptus, olives, and chocolate. Plush tannins and earthiness remind me of a Bordeaux. —*Andrey Tolmachyov, Wine Director, Maude*



Herzog assistant winemaker Alicia Wilbur.

HERZOG LINEAGE

2019 Sauvignon Blanc Musqué Clone,
Lake County (\$17)

Our group was the first to sample the 2019 vintage of Herzog's Lineage Sauvignon Blanc from Lake County, released just in time for Passover. "Lake County is our most northern property," said the kosher producer's insightful assistant winemaker, Alicia Wilbur. "We set out to find a location to grow amazing Cabernet Sauvignon, and this 26-acre property just happened to have a beautiful 5-acre patch of Musqué Clone Sauvignon Blanc," she said. "We knew it was special [and that] we had to make wine from it." First released in 2018, the Lineage tier was created to reflect the Herzog family legacy of offering terroir-driven wines at an affordable price.

During crush, the grapes go through a special low-pressure extraction process typically used for sparkling wine; this is important for whites, according to Wilbur, to minimize bitterness. The wine is then fermented in stainless steel. "This clone can really express those perfume-y, floral notes, especially when we pick at a higher Brix," said Wilbur. "I think this Sauvignon Blanc has that tropical pineapple character but lots of earthy, savory tarragon character too."

BUYER NOTES ★

A lovely array of white florals, white tea leaves, and bright lemon verbena. On the palate, flavors of Asian pear, tarragon, and orange blossom—along with fine acidity—keep this fresh and expressive. —*Caroline Blundell, Assistant General Manager, Stella Barra*

Tons of peach, tangerine, and juicy pineapple along with sweet white florals—like creamy peach yogurt. —*Catherine Morel, Wine Director, 71Above*



CALDORA

2015 Yume Montepulciano d'Abruzzo (\$25)

"This is a damn good bottle of wine for \$17 wholesale," said Bill Brandel, VP/Sales & Marketing for *The Tasting Panel*. Brandel called upon his nearly two decades of experience as a sales representative at Southern Wine & Spirits to present the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo with the fervor it deserved.

Yume—which means "dream" in Japanese—is made with Montepulciano grown in the Ortona area of Abruzzo; the vineyard is managed by the Soggiorno Proposta Community Center as part of its patients' recovery from addiction. The 2015 vintage was fermented at a low temperature for better extraction of color and fruit flavor. After malolactic fermentation, it aged for six months in both American (40%) and French (60%) barriques.

GONZÁLEZ BYASS

BUYER NOTES ★

Spiced nose of new leather and blackberry jam. The spice continues on the palate with creamy red fruit and Old World acidity. A hint of Asiago cheese. —*Catherine Morel*

Tobacco and spice-box character, pleasing dry palate—definitely an Italian red that is mellow with touches of cocoa and tar. Brambly finish is fruit-accented. —*Diana Turk*



7 Deadly Zins winemaker Scot Dahlstrom.

7 DEADLY ZINS

Lodi (\$20)

According to 7 Deadly winemaker Scot Dahlstrom, 7 Deadly Zins is the number-one selling Zinfandel in the U.S. and has been for five years. Given the wine's positive reception, it was easy to see why. Explaining that it was named after the seven old-vine Zinfandel vineyards used for the label's first vintage in 2002, Dahlstrom spoke of his current growing sites: "I'm really just trying to highlight the growing region of Lodi. The vineyards are located right at the delta, so they get a lot of coastal influence. [They] also get really warm days, which are great for ripening, but then at night that coastal influence kicks in and cools [everything] down—much more so than in the rest of the Central Valley."

The head-trained old vines are certified under Lodi Rules, one of the most rigorous sustainable-winegrowing programs in the country. But what seemed most important to Dahlstrom was balance. "The idea here, with Zinfandel especially, is . . . not to be too over the top with the jammy fruit," he said. *Tasting Panel* Publisher Meridith May agreed: "These are Zinfandels with elegance that overdeliver for the price."

THE WINE GROUP

BUYER NOTES ★

Ripe cherry, plum, and minerally damp earth lined with sweet oak. —*Daniel Veit*

Blackberry and dark plum open up nicely. Subdued floral notes and an elegant but concentrated red—I am guessing Zinfandel—with good style. —*Jason Hayes*



TRINITY HILL

2016 Homage Syrah, Hawke's Bay,
New Zealand (\$100)

Maude Wine Director Andrey Tolmachyov's guess that this wine was a Northern Rhône Syrah made Mt. Beautiful USA National Sales Manager Karl Ziegler smile. "I'm so pleased you thought this was Northern Rhône, because that's exactly what [Trinity Hill chief winemaker Warren Gibson] was hoping for," said Ziegler.

Besides, the grapes were sourced from a site that is perhaps just as special as the Rhône Valley: the Gimblett Gravels district of Hawke's Bay, New Zealand. Situated atop an old riverbed created by a flood in the 1860s, the 800-hectare area is defined by its gravelly, river rock-laden soils (hence the name). It's also warm enough to ripen varieties like Syrah.

Calling Gibson "one of the best winemakers in New Zealand—probably [among the] top three for red wines if not the best"—Ziegler admitted that the Trinity Hill Syrah is "not for the faint of heart." A big, tannic wine, it has been on the scene since the late 1990s, though it's made only in the best vintages.

MT. BEAUTIFUL WINERY

BUYER NOTES ★

Tons of freshly cracked black pepper backed by slightly underripe plum. Herbaceous and high-toned. Gripping tannins beg for food. Definitely one of my favorites! —*Andrey Tolmachyov*

Graphite on the nose and sanguine notes through the palate with a kick of acid on the back end. Tannic finish and very bold overall but balanced. Smoky perfection. —*Diana Turk*



Richard Zeller is the COO of 3 Badge Beverage Corporation.

GEHRICKE

Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$39)

Although the suggested retail price of this Cabernet Sauvignon was one of the lower in the lineup, the wine showed as one of the pricier in the glass. Richard Zeller, COO of 3 Badge Beverage Corporation, attributed this to 3 Badge Enology's goal of providing "affordable luxury."

Zeller offered a quick breakdown of Knights Valley: "It's a small, 2,000-acre AVA established in 1983, cradled between Dry Creek up against the Mayacamas. Because of the St. Helena volcano that erupted many years ago, the valley is a lot of ash and gravel. It drains very well. It gets about 40 inches of total rain but only about 6 inches during the growing season, so as a result we get this shorter, stockier, more intense fruit and lower yields."

The Gehricke Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is blended with 14% Malbec and 2% Petit Verdot and aged in French oak for 18 months. Only 4,000 six-packs were made because, according to Zeller, "there just isn't a lot of Knights Valley fruit available."

3 BADGE ENOLOGY

BUYER NOTES ★

Baking spice on nose and palate. The rounder, balanced texture suggests bottle aging. Peppery nose and refined spices. Old World. Gravelly and Bordeaux-like. —*Caroline Blundell*

Gripping tannins and luscious fruit and aromatics—dark chocolate storms in and integrates with good acidity and a generous mouthfeel. Refined, with concentration. —*Thomas "Mac" Gregory*



Brian Harley, Southern California Market Manager for Ferrari-Carano.

FERRARI-CARANO

2017 Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley (\$30)

Ferrari-Carano may have started out in the 1970s as a small family-owned winery in Sonoma, but today it owns over 1,500 acres in the Alexander Valley, Russian River Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Napa Carneros, and Mendocino Ridge/Anderson Valley regions—all of them sustainably farmed.

Brian Harley, Southern California Market Manager for Ferrari-Carano, introduced the winery's 2017 Pinot Noir as "a blend of three different vineyards at 1,600 feet, 1,200 feet, and 600 feet. Our Mendocino Ridge property is all Pinot Noir. We're lucky because we own all our vineyards, so we control everything." He added that Director of Vineyard Operations Steve Domenichelli "has been our vineyard manager now since 1987, so consistency has been there year over year."

The hand-harvested berries are destemmed and cold-soaked in open-top stainless-steel tanks for three days. Once fermentation starts, punch-downs occur one to three times daily. The wine then goes through malolactic fermentation in barrel. "This wine is a rustic beauty, and to me, Sonoma is just that—rustic beauty," said Harley.

BUYER NOTES ★

Ripe plum, cherry, orange, mushroom, and warm oak in a medium body. —*Daniel Veit*

Jewel-toned fruit and forest floor. Violets are expressive on the nose, giving way to a velvety palate. The tannins on the finish are beautifully integrated. This is a really special Pinot Noir. —*Diana Turk*



CALERA

2016 Pinot Noir, Jensen Vineyard, Mt. Harlan (\$95)

Calera founder Josh Jensen is known throughout the industry for his significant contributions to California Pinot Noir. Upon returning to the U.S. after working in the vineyard at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Jensen searched for two years before finally finding Calera's limestone-rich property in 1974. Tara Gray, Regional Sales Manager for Duckhorn Wine Company, spoke of her colleagues' excitement over obtaining these prestigious vineyards along with the Calera brand three years ago. "[Jensen] was looking to retire and did not have a family to pass the winery on to," said Gray, adding that "Mike Waller is still Calera's winemaker; he has been working with Josh since 2007 and continues to make the same terroir-driven style of wine today."

Calera's 13-acre Jensen Vineyard, located on a hillside in the Mt. Harlan AVA, is now certified organic. Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir is only made with the site's best fruit, said Gray: "All the wine-making is done . . . as it has always been: Very minimal contact, very gentle winemaking, whole cluster, native yeast, and very minimal new oak—just enough to balance it out. This wine is my favorite in the portfolio," she continued. Considering the gem-filled lineup Gray is working with, that's a high compliment.

DUCKHORN WINE COMPANY

BUYER NOTES ★

Vanilla, tart raspberry pie, and cherry. Great acidity and an overall delicious wine. This is tied for my favorite of the day! —*Jason Hayes*

Dark, deep cherry in this layered and complex Pinot Noir. As it opens, some of the lighter, gentler red fruit comes through. This is showing very well. —*Jared Hooper*



PENFOLDS

2017 Bin 389 Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz, Australia (\$80)

One of Australia's most iconic wines, Penfolds Grange is made with Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from several sites in South Australia, where blending is paramount. "We call Bin 389 our 'Baby Grange,'" said Shelby Krause, Luxury Sales Ambassador for Penfolds. "Some of the fruit is aged in the previous vintage of Grange barrels, imparting those subtle American oak characteristics that are loved in our most prestigious wine." A multiregional blend of 54% Cabernet Sauvignon and 46% Shiraz, the 2017 Bin 389 was sourced from McLaren Vale, Barossa Valley, Padthaway, and Wattonbully and aged 12 months in American oak hogsheads (29% new).

As a refreshing treat, Krause also brought a bottle of Penfolds Bin 311 Chardonnay. "What we love about this Chardonnay is that it really bridges that Old World and New World gap," said Krause. "This is made for someone who is looking for either a White Burgundy or a Napa Chardonnay."

TREASURY WINE ESTATES

BUYER NOTES ★

This wine is fruit-driven and New World in style with a beautiful, aromatic, eucalyptus-herbal nose. —*Caroline Blundell*

Super-dark with inky florals. Roasted coffee, cocoa nibs, and violet edges; pen ink and huckleberry juice with eucalyptus leaves; iodine with black cherry and raspberry. —*Catherine Morel* ■■

Portrait of a Leader

by Eric Marsh

COLLEAGUES AND
FRIENDS HONOR
HOSPITALITY-
INDUSTRY LEGEND
DOUG BROOKS AT
THE MILLENNIUM
ADVISORY BOARD
ICON AWARD
RECEPTION

Millennium Advisory Board members

Devin Burns, Nate Grover, Edi Kevorkyan, Jamie Carawan, David McPhillips, Tylor Field, Randy Steinbrenner, Cindy Busi, Frank Lewis, Patrick Henry, Helen Mackey, Heather Berry, Doug Brooks, Mary Melton, Cami Lehmann, Scott Marshall, and Patrick Kirk.

The 12th annual Millennium Advisory Board Icon Award Reception was held in February at the Omni Costa Resort & Spa in Carlsbad, California, as part of the 2020 VIBE Conference. The Millennium Advisory Board (MAB) is a group of beverage industry leaders who aim to create and promote a vision of the future for the food and beverage industry; during its biannual meetings, members determine who will receive the Icon Award—the purpose of which, according to MAB founder Patrick Henry, is to “honor leaders in our industry that have truly made an impact or difference.”

During a sunset cocktail hour preceding the reception, this year’s award recipient, Doug Brooks—former Chairman of the Board, CEO, and President of Brinker International—mingled with former and present colleagues as well as some of the biggest buyers in the beverage industry. Between handshakes and commendations, Brooks told me he’s been with Brinker for 42 years. He started out managing a Chili’s Grill & Bar—one of the worldwide hospitality group’s largest restaurants—and worked his way up through 17 other positions before “eventually becoming President of Chili’s and then President of Brinker, and then CEO and Chairman of the Board,” he said. He remains a consultant for Brinker and still gets “to hang around the company that [he] helped grow from two restaurants to 2,000.” As the 170-plus attendees made evident, Brooks has forged many lifelong friendships during his career, serving as a mentor as well as a colleague.

At dusk, Henry began the ceremony by introducing some of Brooks’ former associates, who gave commemorative speeches about his work, leadership, and personal character. There was also some gentle ribbing about his stab at marketing in the early 1990s, when he started a short-lived Chili’s beer brand called Rusty’s Road Knight Amber.





Buffalo Wild Wings Vice President of Brand Menu & Culinary Jamie Carawan jokes with Doug Brooks, former Chairman of the Board, CEO, and President of Brinker International.

Henry passed the microphone to Scott Zaleskin, who worked with Brooks at Brinker for many years before taking on his current role of Vice President at Pernod Ricard. Zaleskin remarked that, since Brooks worked his way up the old-fashioned way, he remained at the pinnacle of his career “a guy who cared about the bottom 90%, not the top 10%”—and that despite his status as CEO, he was egoless and “always the nicest guy in the room.” He also told a poignant story about Brooks’ perseverance: “Many of you may not know this,” Zaleskin said, “but Doug had a freak bike accident many years ago, and he lost a leg because of it.” Rather than becoming bitter or idle, Brooks founded the Limbs for Life Foundation, which helps amputees get prosthetic care. It’s one of many charities he’s part of.

Next up was Jamie Carawan, Vice President of Brand Menu & Culinary for Buffalo Wild Wings, who said Brooks “broke the mold for CEOs” by connecting with people in a heartfelt way. Brooks was “a master of building culture” that focused on “results, people, and fun,” Carawan added, which effectively bolstered employee morale.

Brooks himself used the majority of his time at the podium to thank a long list of colleagues. He said he was proud



Ken Ruff, Beam Suntory Vice President of National Accounts, On-Premise, with Icon Award honoree Doug Brooks and MAB co-chairman Patrick Henry.

to have worked for a company that, since its inception in 1975, has created some 2.5 million jobs as well as to have had the opportunity to “work with the greatest leader ever in the restaurant business, Norman Brinker,” whom Brooks worked with for 27 years. “Each year has been rewarding,” he added.

However rewarding, managing as many as 125,000 employees might seem more than a little nerve-racking to some. When I asked Brooks what’s paramount for good leadership, he responded by saying that a great leader needs three bones: a wishbone, a funny bone, and a backbone. A leader needs the latter, he said, because they “have to make tough decisions that can impact people or investments.” A funny



In celebration of Brooks’ long career with Chili’s Grill & Bar, the restaurant’s famous Margaritas were served in abundance.

bone, he insisted, is imperative in the restaurant industry “because you need to create an environment where people aren’t afraid of you, where people are able to have fun.” And a wishbone? “A wishbone means you’re creative and innovative, that you think about the future and are always striving to get better at what you do.” And it’s largely thanks to Brooks’ creativity and innovation that Brinker now has some 1,700 restaurants within 49 states and 32 countries.

As a driven leader, trailblazer, altruist, and philanthropist, then, it seems that Brooks has made an impact on his industry not only nationally but globally—which is to say he’s more than worthy of such an award. ■■

Words of Wisdom from Wine Speak 2020

Guests of Wine Speak 2020 laughed sympathetically when panelist Laura Catena of Bodega Catena Zapata explained why she left medicine to join the family business in the 1990s. “I do a lot out of rage,” she told them—and at a time when Argentina’s industry was being undervalued on the market, “I started making wine because I wanted to help my father and my country.” They laughed knowingly when Master Sommelier Madeline Triffon recalled the night that she served Dom Pérignon on ice to legendary actress Olivia de Havilland: “I know the way it’s supposed to be and I know the way she wants it. Guess which way it’s going to be.” And their collective gasp gave way to more laughter when Neyers Vineyards’ Bruce Neyers told a story about pioneering Sonoma winemaker Joseph Swan stealing budwood from Domaine Romanée-Conti.

In short, there was a whole lot of good cheer to accompany the deeply personal insights that one gleans only from a gathering like this one, in the view of Amanda Wittstrom-Higgins, who launched Wine Speak three years ago with co-founder Chuck Furuya, MS. “The size of the event is small and intimate so that we can really dig



Ancient Peaks VP of Operations and Wine Speak co-founder Amanda Wittstrom-Higgins looks on as Madeline Triffon, MS, reflects on her three-plus decades in hospitality during the “Dream Big Darling: Wine from a Different Perspective” seminar.

THIS PASO ROBLES SUMMIT BRINGS ALL WALKS OF WINE LIFE TOGETHER

by Ruth Tobias



Above, Chuck Furuya, MS, moderates a panel at Atascadero City Hall during the three-day Wine Speak conference. Inset: Paso Robles’ diverse soils on display at the grand tasting.



deep into stories,” she explains. “The audience can really participate and create relationships because of how it’s structured.”

To be sure, the beverage professionals who attended the conference—held in the town of Atascadero in California’s Paso Robles region last January—had plenty to participate in over the course of three days. The slate of seminars and panels was full and diverse, from a blind tasting led by Triffon with fellow Master Sommeliers Fred Dame and Nunzio Alioto to an overview of Paso Robles through the eyes of four of the appellation’s star winemakers: Tablas Creek’s Jason Haas, Epoch’s Jordan Fiorentini, J. Lohr’s Steve Peck, and Ancient Peaks’ Mike Sinor. There were vineyard tours, a lakeside grand tasting, and a BYOB dinner at the Carlton Hotel, to which “everyone brings something special,” in the words of Wittstrom-Higgins, be it old vintages or highly allocated bottles.

“One gentleman who comes every year and has a very large cellar—he’s a big collector—was so excited to let the young somms try wines they would otherwise never get to,” she says.

Not as excited as they were, no doubt—which brings us to yet another objective of Wine Speak, according to Wittstrom-Higgins, who’s also the founder of Dream Big Darling, a nonprofit that aims to support women in the industry. Having granted scholarships to eight young conference attendees, she says, she was moved by “just seeing their faces when they met some of the speakers and panelists—it was like they were meeting their heroes.” Making those connections between hospitality newcomers and veterans, local and international winemakers, and so on is all part of the program, she adds: “It doesn’t touch on just one segment of our industry but the totality: We can all be together under one roof.” ■■

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