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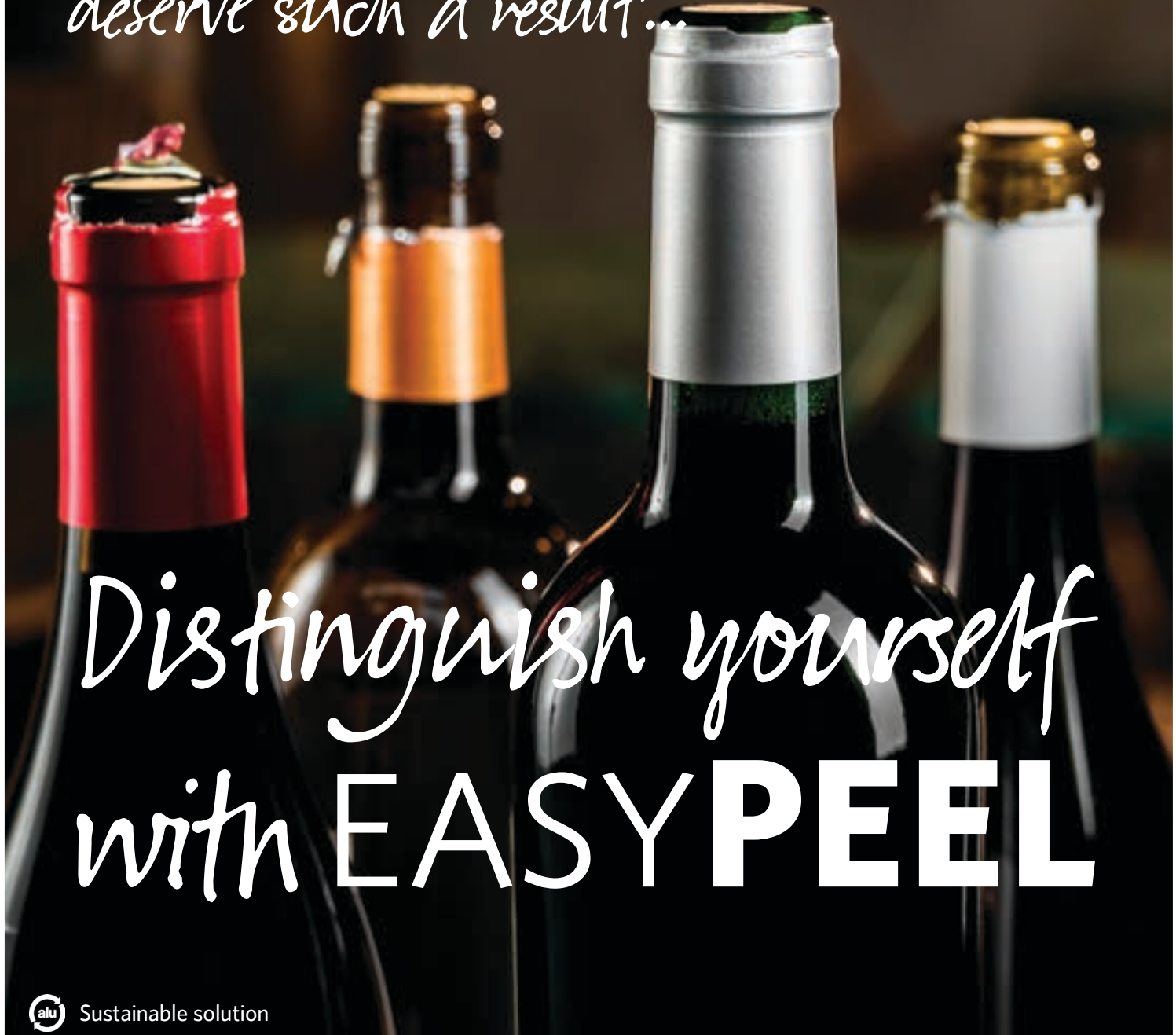
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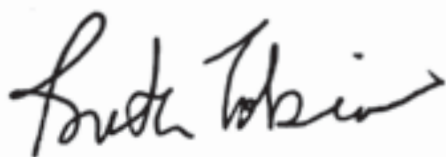


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Hope Springs Eternal



PHOTO: JENNIFER OLSON




Travel may remain off the table for a little while longer, but the world's winemakers, brewers, and distillers are doing their utmost to ensure our imaginations and palates can roam free.

"Hope for the best, expect the worst,"

my mother always said, and I've tended to live by that motto—with an emphasis on the latter half. Certainly the past year has afforded some vindication for those of us who equate pessimism with prudence if not downright prescience.

And yet, as I flip through this issue with spring on the far horizon, I find myself almost willing to entertain some measure of hope for better days to come—or at least, as Emily Dickinson would have it, to “dwell in possibility.” Overlooking the snow-covered streets from my living-room window in Denver, I turn to page 44 and imagine voyaging to the lush green island of Kyushu in southern Japan, where shochu is made; to the steep and sweeping vineyards of Peru's Ica Valley on page 66; to the azure shores of the Mediterranean that inspired, of all things, a new tequila brand on page 108. I'm awed by the ever-growing number of women and BIPOC in the industry who are making their voices heard and their influence felt—from Black Bourbon Society founder Samara Davis (page 22) and restaurateur Alpina Singh (page 18) to brand builders such as 3 Girls' Lisa Kammerer, Shelly Maggio Woltkamp, and Raquel Casity (page 35) and Heidi Scheid of the auspiciously named Sunny with a Chance of Flowers (page 81). And I'm encouraged by the seriousness with which an institution like Florida International University's Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management is tackling issues like not only diversity and sustainability but also public health and safety in the curriculum at its new Bacardi Center of Excellence (page 114). The kids, as they say, just might be all right.

Finally, the sheer ingenuity of the products reviewed in this edition is worth a cheer. Quinoa and wattleseed whiskey (page 32)? American-made *makgeolli* in a can (page 33)? Single malt from France (page 58)? Travel may remain off the table for a little while longer, but the world's winemakers, brewers, and distillers are doing their utmost to ensure our imaginations and palates can roam free. From them, even I expect the best. 

ROMANCING *the* GLOBE

The second and third generations of Félix Solís Avantis. Seated from top to bottom are Manuel Solís Yañez, Juan Antonio Solís Yañez, Félix Solís Ramos, and Pedro Solís Yañez; standing is CEO Félix Solís Yañez.

FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS
SPREADS THE GOSPEL
OF SPANISH WINE
WORLDWIDE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS

Across La Mancha in central Spain, the 17th-century windmills that served as the gigantic “rivals” of Don Quixote still dot the vast golden plain. In addition to setting the stage for the novel *Miguel de Cervantes* named for his romantic protagonist, the area has long been known for thriving agriculture despite arid conditions; grape growing and winemaking have been ingrained in the culture for centuries, much of it geared toward the production of large quantities of quaffable wine. Today, however, companies like Félix Solís Avantis are giving drinkers a reason to look twice at the region, advancing its reputation for quality wine by sourcing from prime plots with ideal microclimates. They are revealing the magic of La Mancha and its wines to the world.

Founder Félix Solís Fernández had one simple tenet—that everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy wine and share a bottle with their family and friends. In 1952, he and his wife, Leonor, relocated from central Spain to the designated wine region of Valdepeñas. Here, they bought a house and a parcel of land that would help him achieve his ultimate goal—to introduce affordable and accessible Spanish wine to the international market.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The Valdepeñas DO, established in 1932, is located in south-central Spain atop the Meseta Central. The rolling vineyards on this plateau, which sits at an elevation of 2,165 feet, reap the benefits of a higher altitude and larger diurnal shifts than the rest of the generally dry and hot region sees, as the Sierra



Félix Solís Avantis' flagship Viña Albali on the bottling line.



One of Félix Solís' vineyard sources in Ribera del Duero.



Harvesting Tempranillo in the Valdepeñas DO.

Félix Solís makes wines from across the DOs of Spain, including Toro.

Morena mountain ranges to the south and the Mediterranean Sea work in tandem to moderate temperatures and therefore hang times.

As in much of Spain, the shining grape here is Tempranillo, or Cencibel, as it's known locally. Grown in the region's chalk and limestone soils, it produces lush but structured red wines that respond well to prolonged time in oak. In fact, the aging requirements in Valdepeñas mirror those of the better-known Tempranillo zones Rioja and Ribera del Duero, but due to its relative obscurity and greater acreage under vine, the region tends to yield a more desirable quality-to-price ratio. Other international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah, thrive here as well, providing a bit of familiarity for the consumer; in blends with indigenous grapes, they can serve as a gateway to the lesser-known varieties that thrive in the Iberian Peninsula.

Seeing how this gem of a region neatly fit into his hopes for a more inclusive wine culture, Solís Fernandez purchased a bottling facility in Madrid, shipped the wine there in barrel for packaging, and then began distributing it to local restaurants and bars by truck. This was the beginning of the flagship Viña Albali line. When the Valdepeñas regulatory board issued a requirement that its wine must be bottled where it was produced in April 1975, Félix Solís moved its bottling operations home, expanding its original headquarters exponentially by building what would become one of the world's most technologically advanced wineries.

VIEWING HISTORY THROUGH MODERN EYES

Fast-forward to 2021: The company has never changed hands, and the sons of Solís Fernandez still proudly espouse their father's tenet. They remain focused on making wine affordable for everyone, not least through bold technological strides. Major investments have been made at the winery in Valdepeñas, which now has the capacity to produce more than 300 million liters annually and runs nearly 20 bottling lines—including one of the world's largest, which is equipped with robotic arms to distribute pallets to any of the 15 bay doors of the temperature-controlled warehouse in which it's housed. Following more investments in 2015, the family installed Charmat tanks for the production of sparkling wine.

Such expansions have also allowed the company to undertake the on-site construction of vats and tanks as well as the manufacture of eco-friendly packaging—developments that only further encourage growth in terms of not only case production but also portfolio diversity. Félix Solís' offerings range from the major DOs of Spain to the *Vino de la Tierra de Castilla* designation. White, rosados, reds, and blends are made in styles for many palates and pockets: table wines, sparkling wines, must wines, dealcoholized wines, and sangrias. Formats also vary, with 3-liter bag-in-boxes and 250-milliliter cans being among the most recent developments.

But for all its modern advancements, the company is still keeping its founder's simple, timeless mission front

and center. The past 20 years have seen a whirlwind of growth: After opening a second winery in the La Mancha region, it launched the Pagos del Rey label in 2002 in tandem with a new facility in the Ribera del Duero region, then opened yet another facility for Pagos del Rey in Rioja in 2006. It has also started offering fresh yet lush wines from Rías Baixas. The family contracts with over 5,000 growers in addition to managing 1,200 acres of their own; their long-standing relationship with these farmers further ensures they can produce the volume of high-quality wine necessary to export to over 122 countries.

BEYOND SPAIN

Meanwhile, Félix Solís has grown its business tremendously outside of Spain. In addition to offices in the U.K., Germany, France, Russia, and the Czech Republic, throughout the late 1990s and 2000s it opened branches in Shanghai, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Chile. The latter will soon be home to a new winery for the production of the three Chilean brands it exports across the globe; the target opening date is 2022. Here in the U.S., where success in the off-premise market has been huge, the company maintains offices in Napa and Miami.

With everyone more or less isolated at home, it's more important than ever to be able to cozy up with wine that is accessible yet transportive. And in living up to their founding philosophy, it seems the Félix Solís Avantis family is giving consumers just that: affordable and delicious expressions that introduce them to the golden plains of La Mancha and beyond. **W**

contents

Shelbyville, KY, distillery Jeptha Creed makes its whiskey from a heritage strain of corn called Bloody Butcher.

32

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEPHTHA CREED DISTILLERY

cover story

44

THE AGE OF UMAMI

iichiko Is Shochu's Greatest Champion on the Global Market

up front

5

ROMANCING THE GLOBE

Félix Solís Avantis Spreads the Gospel of Spanish Wine Worldwide

category report

89

"E" IS FOR EXCELLENCE (AND SO IS NO "E")

However You Spell It, the Whisk(e)y Category Has Earned Its Global Renown



features

40

SPANISH SUCCESSION

Wine Giant García Carrión Makes Its Name in the U.S. Market

68

PASO ROBLES IN THE RED

Tasting with the AVA's Leading Producers of Bordeaux Varietals



78

HIT PARADE

Be They Up-and-Comers or Longtime Legends, These Beverage Brands Are Dominating the Charts

103

DISCERNING PALATES

SommCon Debuts Its Virtual Buyer's Forum

114

SCHOOL SPIRITS

Bacardi and Florida International University Take a Grassroots Approach to Shaping the Future of the Beverage Industry

2020 HOT
24 BRAND
WINE BUSINESS MONTHLY

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FLOWERS

92 POINTS

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departments

- 4** Letter from the Managing Editor
- 12** Industry Spotlight
- 16** Capitol Chill
- 18** The Ransom Note
- 20** Lone Star Libations
- 22** A Voice Uncorked
- 24** Wheying In
- 26** Winning at Beverage
- 28** Taking Inventory
- 31** Tastings: Clos de la Tech and Alejandro Bulgheroni Estate
- 32** The Scotch Report
- 33** Beyond the Barrel
- 34** Five Minutes With . . . C.J. Lin
- 35** Wine Families: 3 Girls
- 38** Brand Spotlight: Green Hat Gin
- 48** Somm Sessions: Beringer Private Reserve
- 50** Brand Spotlight: Espanita Artisanal Tequila
- 53** Blue Reviews
- 60** Publisher's Picks
- 66** Publisher's Picks EXTRA
- 86** Down the Aisle
- 108** Brand Spotlight: Casa Komos
- 112** On-Premise: Miami
- 118** Dear Emma



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Apothic Pinot Noir & Merlot

The Consorzio Tutela Vini Valpolicella Goes Virtual for Its Annual Conference

Faced with continued travel bans and other complications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Consorzio Tutela Vini Valpolicella turned its annual education initiative into an online affair—and expanded its reach in the process. Instead of greeting its usual two dozen international guests in the historic city of Verona and its surrounding vineyards, the consortium dispatched 1,200 wine samples around the world for over 100 participants to engage in a virtual tasting of Valpolicella, Ripasso, and Amarone wine with experts on February 26 and 27.

Specialists from the wine industry as well as representatives from government agencies, academia, and wine-affiliated fields discussed an array of topics that impact the world of Valpolicella, from sales and distribution to geography, geology, ampelography, climatology, and enology. Recordings of the webinars, including “New Policies in Support of the Italian Wine Market” and “Positioning of Valpolicella in Key Markets,” will be available to view for a brief period at consorziovalpolicella.it.

“The format is as smart as it is efficient,” said Christian Marchesini, the consorzio’s president. “The historic appellation of Verona offers a multi-channel concept that connects all the decision-makers of the wine world: producers, buyers, wholesalers, and press from around the world.”

The Consorzio Tutela Vini Valpolicella represents more than 80% of the producers in the appellation, which is one of Italy’s leaders in wine exports. Its membership represents nearly 21,000 acres of vineyards in the 19 municipalities of the Verona province. More information can be found at the website link above. —Lars Leicht

A view of Valpolicella.

DAOU Welcomes Four New Executives to Its PATRIMONY Estate Team

DAOU Family Estates recently announced the addition of four wine industry stars to lead the charge for PATRIMONY Estate, a breakout cult Cabernet Sauvignon from DAOU Mountain in the Adelaida District AVA of Paso Robles, California.

Chris Avery, Steve Palumbo, and Nicholas Holmes—all longtime veterans of Opus One and other iconic wineries—will drive global sales and marketing for PATRIMONY Estate, while Erik Johnson, former head sommelier at The French Laundry, will act as estate director, shaping the cultural and experiential presence of PATRIMONY. Avery will serve as senior vice president of sales and marketing and Palumbo and Holmes as vice presidents of sales for, respectively, the western and eastern United States.

PATRIMONY is the masterwork of winemaker Daniel Daou, who founded DAOU Family Estates with his brother Georges in 2007. “My brother Daniel and I are thrilled to welcome these incredible talents to PATRIMONY Estate,” says Georges. “When they first realized the power of DAOU Mountain’s terroir and the energy surrounding it, they saw the future. They all felt compelled to be a part of the extraordinary passion and vision behind this phenomenon called PATRIMONY.”

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In Memoriam: Robert Whitley (1950-2021)



Renowned wine critic, collector, and journalist Robert Whitley passed away February 3 after a short battle with cancer.

Whitley was founder and publisher of the platform Wine Review Online; author of the nationally syndicated “Wine Talk” column; monthly contributor to *Reuters’* “Vine Talk” column, longtime wine columnist at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*; host of the weekly *Whitley on Wine* radio show; and director of four major international wine competitions: the San Diego International Wine &

Spirits Challenge, the Critics Challenge, the Sommelier Challenge, and the Winemaker Challenge.

Whitley started his career in journalism in 1965 at the age of 15, covering sports for the *Washington Daily News*. He moved to New York to cover the Knicks for *Newsday*, then returned to his hometown of D.C. to become an editor for *The Washington Post* before returning to his passion of sports writing at the *Charlotte Observer* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. After another editing stint at *The Washington Times*, he headed west to cover sports for *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, eventually taking over its wine column.

Gregarious, independent, astute, and generous, Whitley founded his competitions and website in part to provide opportunities for the wine writers, winemakers, and sommeliers he befriended in his travels. Through those entities, his legacy will continue. —*Lars Leicht*

Dos Equis’ New Charitable Promotion Aims to Support Restaurant Workers

As part of “A Dos of Good,” a charitable promotion extending through June, Dos Equis will match each qualifying purchase of the brand with a \$1 donation to the Restaurant Workers’ Community Foundation (RWCF) in order to support those who have been among the hardest hit by the global pandemic.

“We’ve all been affected by COVID-19 in some shape or form,” says Reggie Gustave, Dos Equis senior brand manager, HEINEKEN USA. “Within the restaurant community, regulars are losing contact with bartenders, servers, and hangouts, ending relationships and leaving everyone feeling a bit isolated. Dos Equis is committed to supporting these tireless workers. . . . We’re giving back to those who have given us so much.”

The program is activated when consumers purchase Dos Equis from an on-premise retailer and upload their receipt to dosexquis.com/adsofgood, triggering a \$1 donation from Dos Equis to RWCF. Merchandising materials to support the programming include posters, table tents, banners, digital images, and menu stickers to drive awareness and consumer engagement.

“This generosity from Dos Equis could not come at a better time for restaurant workers,” says RWCF co-founder and board president John deBary. “‘A Dos of Good’ will surely bring much-needed assistance to those receiving resources through our COVID-19 Crisis Relief Fund.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHOPIN VODKA



Chopin Vodka Partners with Vera Wang to Unveil Vera Wang x Chopin

Luxury Polish brand Chopin Vodka and iconic designer Vera Wang recently announced a limited-edition collaboration in the United States: Vera Wang x Chopin.

“Working with Chopin Vodka was one of the most educational, fascinating, and collaborative experiences I’ve ever had, learning how vodka is made and the various nuances of taste and texture. I am so grateful for the opportunity to co-create a spirit I adore so much with such a storied and respected distiller,” Wang said in reference to Chopin Vodka founder and CEO Tad Dorda.

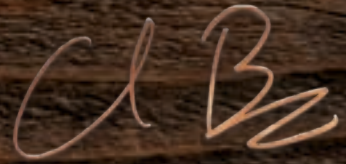
Wang was determined to retain the Chopin bottle’s iconic shape for her matte two-tone iteration, whose sophistication is guaranteed to make it stand out on any backbar. The poem on the back of the bottle, meanwhile, is an ode to the emotion, sensuality, and romance vodka represents to her. “We are honored to have our first artist-designed collaboration with the legendary Vera Wang, who is so passionate about the discovery of vodka and is a sincere Chopin Vodka connoisseur,” said Dorda.

The limited-edition collaboration will be available for presale on March 8 exclusively on chopinvodka.com starting at 10 a.m. EST. It will also be available in the weeks following from select retailers throughout the United States for a suggested price of \$99 (1 liter). For more information, visit verawangchopin.com.

92
POINTS

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approachable, just
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Change Comes to Washington

D.C. HONORS THE NEW ADMINISTRATION WITH THEMED EATS AND DRINKS WHILE A CELEB-HELMED STEAKHOUSE REOPENS IN A TONY 'HOOD

Despite the logistical challenges presented by the pandemic and security concerns, the D.C. area was aflutter all January over the inauguration of our 46th president. Instead of getting dolled up for the traditional balls and galas or bundled up to brave the elements while watching history unfold along the National Mall or parade route, though, we residents were encouraged to enjoy the festivities from our living rooms; local chefs and bartenders did their part by coming up with themed dishes and drinks to go.

potatoes, pineapples, plantains, and chili peppers. Meanwhile, we're all looking forward to sightings of the First and Second Families in our restaurants and bars, providing a much-needed boost to our industry.

One place they might visit is CUT, Wolfgang Puck's swanky modern steakhouse, which has reopened in Georgetown after first closing due to a major kitchen fire in August 2019 and then again when its location in the Rosewood Hotel was shuttered during



Immigrant Food's chicken curry pays tribute to Vice President Kamala Harris' Jamaican and Indian roots.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMMIGRANT FOOD

CUT's Golden Negroni features French liqueur Suze.



PHOTO: KELLY MAGYARICS

from D.C. distiller Capitoline—but my companion couldn't resist the tableside Old Fashioned trolley bearing six-, ten- and 12-year ryes from Vermont's WhistlePig.

But the menu offers more than liquid satisfaction, from silky, smoky charred leeks with toasted hazelnuts and Meyer lemon to fragrant ceviche with local rockfish, coconut milk, and Thai basil to blue crab fried rice flecked with ham and garlic chives—a can't-miss outlier from a kitchen that's all in on red meat. Still, we did come for steak—specifically a 40-ounce Seven Hills Farm tomahawk rib-eye dry aged for 60 days and accompanied by garlicky chimi-churri and field mushrooms sauteed with shishito peppers.

Mr. Biden: Welcome (back) to Washington. We can't wait to show you what you missed while you were gone. **W**

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.



PHOTO: STACEY WINDSOR

Neighborhood Restaurant Group's Ridin' with Biden contains vodka, Aperol, and cucumber.

Spirits curator Nick Farrell of Neighborhood Restaurant Group created the Ridin' with Biden, a bottled cocktail featuring vodka, Aperol, and cucumber; the solar-powered Atlas Brew Works canned Amtrak Joe's Pilsner and Madam Veep's IPA; and chef Enrique Limardo of Immigrant Food doled out the Heritage Bowl, a nod to Vice President Kamala Harris' Jamaican and Indian roots with coconut milk-curry chicken, chickpeas,

the pandemic. Once settled into our cozy booth, my significant other and I delved into the cocktail list, dotted with regionally produced spirits. A selection of three Negronis paid homage to the drink's 100th anniversary, including a Suze-based golden version, an effervescent one featuring Thibaut-Janisson Brut from Virginia, and a Boulevardier containing proprietary rye from Virginia's Catoctin Creek Distilling Company and vermouth

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The Ransom Note is a column by Tasting Panel East Coast editor-at-large David Ransom. Each issue, David connects readers with some of the people, products, and events making news along the Eastern Seaboard.

Bearing Witness

THE DEATH OF A RESPECTED WINE WRITER AND A TIMELY DISCUSSION ON HARASSMENT IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY PROMPT REFLECTION

The year so far has been an emotional roller coaster. We can only hope that the dust will settle with a successful vaccine rollout that allows for a safe return to travel, restaurant dining, and events without restrictions as well as—maybe most importantly for those of us who report on wine and spirits—the resumption of in-person tastings. As we wait, here are a couple of recent occurrences that struck a chord with me.

January 6 marked the passing of one of New York City's most respected wine writers, Howard Goldberg, at the age of 86. A 34-year veteran of *The New York Times*, Goldberg joined the paper in 1970 and worked his way up to senior editor of the opinion section before becoming a wine writer in the mid-1980s. For the rest of his tenure at the paper, he oversaw his beat like a true old-school reporter, maintaining a constant curiosity yet never overstepping his role just to sensationalize a story. While he covered the entire industry, his pet wines were those from the East Coast, primarily New York—which is how I got to know him, as he reviewed my family's lineup of Chardonnays during our ownership of Rivendell Winery.

Once I started writing about wine, Goldberg and I crossed paths regularly. We'd often chat about the state of New York wines, including the use of the many French-American hybrid varieties that he was personally fond of but had a hard time convincing his readers were worth seeking out. Regardless of what Goldberg was writing, be it an article or one of his two books, he never considered himself to be the expert; rather, he saw himself as yet another student in search of knowledge to absorb and pass on. Humble, quick-witted, generous, and kind, Goldberg was universally respected by his peers, and I will miss him.

PHOTO: MICHAEL GOLD



Author and radio host Melanie Young moderated "Breaking the Silence: Confronting Harassment in the Hospitality Industry," a recent webinar discussion hosted by Les Dames d'Escoffier's New York chapter.

On January 19, Les Dames d'Escoffier's New York chapter hosted an eye-opening panel discussion called "Breaking the Silence: Confronting Harassment in the Hospitality Industry." The free webinar was organized and moderated by author and radio host Melanie Young, a past president of Les Dames. Panelists included Taryn Abrahams, MFP, SHRM-CP, founder of Empower Behavioral Services; Saru Jayaraman, president of One Fair Wage; Theodora Lee, owner of Theopolis Vineyards; Alpana Singh, sommelier, restaurateur, and host of the restaurant review series *Check, Please!*; and Lauren R. Taylor, president of organizations Safe Bars and Defend Yourself.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALPANA SINGH



Restaurateur and sommelier Alpana Singh appeared on the panel of "Breaking the Silence" alongside other members of the hospitality industry.



Harassment in the hospitality industry is no recent development, and it has only gotten worse during the pandemic. One example provided during the webinar—a customer telling a worker to "take your mask off so I can see how much to tip you"—seemed to encapsulate the struggle many professionals face on a daily basis, and "Breaking the Silence" addressed many facets of the issue in hopes of offering solutions. As a 15-year industry veteran, I appreciated the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and consider how we can all do better. The 90-minute webinar can be viewed on the Les Dames d'Escoffier NY YouTube channel. [L](#)



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Weathering Extremes

HOUSTON WINE MERCHANT'S ANTONIO GIANOLA ON HOSPITALITY AND HOPE FOR A POST-COVID WORLD



Houston Wine Merchant general manager Antonio Gianola says that, for him, "guest interaction is the magic spark that keeps the fire alive."

To live and work in Houston, the nation's fourth most populous city, is to accept extremes. Residents here were adapting to both natural disasters and the economic vicissitudes of the international energy sector long before "pivoting" was a buzzword for the rest of us. Even so, says city native Antonio Gianola, general manager at independent liquor retailer Houston Wine Merchant, weathering the current crisis has required exceptional agility and creativity.

Responding to the pandemic early in 2020, owner Scott Spencer and his team closed the 37-year-old shop to walk-in business, focusing on a curbside-pickup program while providing personal service via phone and email. Recently, they began admitting small parties inside for private consultations.

The gregarious Gianola, an Italian wine enthusiast who ran restaurant programs and worked as a wine broker before joining Spencer's staff in 2013, says he can't wait to greet customers in person again. "Guest interaction is the magic spark that keeps the fire alive," he says, "but most people are still partial to no-contact shopping. We've just started what we're calling 'concierge appointments,' where we connect with guests via video call so they can 'walk around and browse.' For now, that's a good compromise."

Typically, Gianola—who oversees buying for Austria, France, Germany, and Italy—would be immersed in Bordeaux futures research at this time, as Houston Wine Merchant sells the region's wines en primeur. But political uncertainty, especially with respect to tariffs, adversely impacted sales of the 2019 vintage. Still, despite the predictions of some experts, Gianola hasn't seen his customers shift their purchases from imports to domestic brands. "The palate wants what it wants," he says. As he sees it, "There are two main types of sales right now: comfort purchases of wines or styles people already know and like and experimental sales, because even though people may be stuck at home, they still want to try new things. Some people are traveling through drinking wines and making dishes from countries they want to visit, and it's rewarding to be part of that."


Looking forward to a post-COVID world, Gianola dreams of returning to Europe—especially Burgundy, as "each trip is its own master class." Closer to home, he has two hopes: one, that people remember to cultivate compassion and understanding, and two, "that the restaurants and bars we love make it through this so we can be together again." 



PHOTO COURTESY OF LINDSEY BROWN PR © JULIE SOEFFER



OLD SOUL

**FIVE GENERATIONS OF
FARMING MAKE DEEP ROOTS**



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BY PARIS VASSER

Rewriting the Narrative

THE BLACK MANHATTAN PROJECT CAMPAIGNS FOR INDUSTRY DIVERSITY DURING BLACK HISTORY MONTH AND BEYOND

Last July, amid a surmounting call to action for greater diversity in the U.S. spirits industry, I spoke with Samara Davis, founder of the Black Bourbon Society (see “Bridging the Gap” in our September/October 2020 issue). The tidal wave of revelations and hard truths had finally broken the silence from Black voices and shone a spotlight on organizations like the Society, which was created five years ago to unite and showcase the Black spirits professionals who have been integral in building the multibillion-dollar business. In addition, Davis explained, its mission is to promote Black culture in the marketplace, “introduce brands to what our audience looks like,” and ultimately

“cultivate, capture, and create conscious consumers of color.”

From the reckoning of 2020 comes a push for accountability and change in 2021. For Davis, this has involved the development of a social media campaign, #TheBlackManhattanProject, which unfolded in February to bring awareness to the need for industry inclusion via the Black Manhattan cocktail. Her partners in the initiative were Michter’s Distillery and Branca USA, which collectively donated \$20,000 to her other foundation, Diversity Distilled; founded in January 2020, it “advocates and crafts unique strategies to address the diversity, equity, and inclusion of [Black-owned] brands” in the market, according to its website. Davis said that “we’ve been having those tough conversations with [white-owned] brands behind the scenes,” directly leading to #TheBlackManhattanProject campaign, whose donations are being applied to a Diversity Distilled program that initiates job placement and recruitment of BIPOC in the spirits industry.

The campaign commenced with a series of virtual events, including an exclusive tour of the Michter’s distillery in Shively, Kentucky, and a master class featuring the brand’s master distiller, Dan McKee, and manager of maturation, Andrea Wilson. It ended with the Bartenders Battle Royale Cocktail Competition, in which eight BIPOC bartenders went head to head to reinvent the classic Black Manhattan. The cocktail was chosen for the campaign not only because it allowed for



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHTER'S

A Black Manhattan based on Michter’s rye in honor of #TheBlackManhattanProject.

the marriage of Michter’s bourbon and rye to Branca’s apéritifs but also because its simplicity encouraged a wealth of creativity.

While the goal for the campaign was to continue the momentum of the diversity movement, it has also offered a chance for the industry at large to acknowledge the long-overlooked contributions of Black distillers and bartenders. Davis spoke a necessary truth that #TheBlackManhattanProject’s celebration of Black achievement is not enough: Highlighting our stories and validating who we are in what Davis called an “appropriate, beautiful, human way” is not a 28-day but a 365-day endeavor. In her words, “It completes the human story for us.” **VZ**

Samara Davis is the founder of the Black Bourbon Society and Diversity Distilled.



PHOTO: MARCO PAGANI

LIVELY WINES

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Crisp, Light, Refreshing



Domestic Bliss

AMERICAN CHEESES THAT RIVAL YOUR EUROPEAN FAVORITES

PHOTO: JANET FLETCHER/PLANET CHEESE



You'll likely pay more for the stateside version because domestic producers face higher costs, but you won't be disappointed.

To pull this country's economy out of its doldrums, we need to buy American, we're told. When it comes to cheese, that's no hardship: For almost any European cheese you think you can't live without, American creameries make an admirable equivalent. You'll likely pay more for the stateside version because domestic producers face higher costs, but you won't be disappointed.

If you love brie . . . Try Jasper Hill Farm Moses Sleeper, a buttery, bloomy-rind cow's milk wheel from Vermont. Named for a Revolutionary War hero with roots in the area, it's bigger than a traditional Camembert but smaller than a brie. A fully ripe Moses Sleeper has layered aromas of cauliflower, mushroom, and leek. Pair with a rich white wine or a saison.

If you love manchego . . . Try Vermont Shepherd Verano, an aged 6-pound wheel from a family-run enterprise that pioneered sheep cheese in the U.S. 30 years ago. Made with raw milk from the family's own sheep, Verano is made only during pasture season. Look for aromas of brown butter and roasted nuts and a mellow flavor, with none of that wet-wool or lanolin aroma that turns some people off of sheep cheese. Pair with a tannic red wine such as Cabernet Sauvignon or a brown ale.

If you love Gruyère . . . Try Roth's Private Reserve, a large cow's milk wheel from a Wisconsin creamery with Swiss owners. Matured for 12–18 months and repeatedly washed with brine, the Private Reserve develops the creamy texture and concentrated, beefy flavor of the best French and Swiss alpine cheeses, such as Comté and Beaufort. Expect a powerful, deep fragrance mingling beef bouillon, roasted hazelnut, caramel, and cow barn. Pair with Amontillado Sherry, Vin Jaune, Rainwater Madeira, or a Belgian dubbel.

If you love English cheddar . . . Try Fiscalini Bandaged Cheddar (pictured at left) from a Modesto, California, creamery that makes this 60-pound wheel from raw milk using traditional farmhouse-cheddar methods. Wrapped in cheesecloth so it's exposed to air and can develop flavor as it ages, Fiscalini Cheddar leaves the creamery at about 14 months. It has the signature crumbly-waxy texture of British cheddar, nutty and grassy aromas, and a lively tang, without the pineapple sweetness that characterizes many American cheddars today. Pair with tawny or vintage Port or a pale ale.

If you love Stilton . . . Try Point Reyes Farmstead Bay Blue from the Giacomini family's coastal California creamery. Like Stilton, the cow's milk Bay Blue has a natural rind, a buttery texture, and aromas of toasted walnuts and saltine crackers. Pair with an Oloroso Sherry or an imperial porter. **LF**

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winning at beverage

by Erik Segelbaum



How to Level Up Your Virtual Tasting Events

There is no question that virtual wine tastings are here to stay, at least for the next year or two. This may change once we can safely return to public events, but because remote tastings have proven effective, they probably won't be abandoned altogether. While your specific approach will vary by audience—consumer, trade, or press—read on for a few hard and fast practices that will ensure your effort equates to time and money well spent.

SEND WINE

This is of the utmost importance. Nobody wants to listen to people describe the aromas and flavors of a wine they can't have—it's a surefire way to lose your audience. Which would you prefer, going on vacation or hearing about someone else's? Depending on your budget and the number of participants you're expecting, you can either ship wine gratis in sample vials or make it available for purchase. But either way, the key is to ensure access, because without it, you can expect weak attendance and engagement. Dry events are, well . . . dry.

REMIND, REMIND, REMIND

It's amazing how often people commit to attending something only to

neglect actually putting it on their calendar. Sommeliers and buyers are particularly guilty of this, so send attendees a calendar invite with login links as well as reminders both the day before and the day of the event, again with links. If you are a buyer who's signed up for an event, have the courtesy and respect to attend, as a great deal of effort went into planning and executing this tasting that you have access to—perhaps at someone else's expense. A “no call, no show” doesn't fly when it comes to either your employees or your guests, so it shouldn't be acceptable for you either.

WATCH THE CLOCK

Granted, the start time isn't always under your control, as it seems that issues related to logging in are rampant, no matter the platform. A slight delay is therefore excusable. But once you're five minutes past, it's go time! By the same token, not knowing how long an event will last can be immensely frustrating to participants. Provide a timeframe and then stick to that as closely as possible. There's nothing wrong with going a few minutes over the estimated duration, especially if there are lots of questions, but limit the overrun to a maximum of 15 minutes.

AVOID THE TECHNICAL DOLDRUMS

The worst thing you can do for any tasting is bog down your attendees with unnecessary details. Nobody needs to know the harvest date or soil pH, and those who care anyway will ask. Avoid regurgitating technical sheets and instead foster a dialogue that pertains to the overarching topic. In a virtual tasting, your wines should do as much of the talking as you do.

FOSTER INTERACTIVITY

Encourage your participants to use the chat feature to ask questions and interact—but first, provide ground rules about how exactly you would like them to engage and how/when questions will be addressed. This will ensure precious time isn't wasted and the flow of your event goes uninterrupted.

DON'T LEAVE THEM HANGING

Be sure to tell your audience where they can purchase or source the featured wines and what they cost—after all, there's no point in going to all this trouble if you can't provide those details. It's also a good idea to confirm if there will be follow-up communication, what it will be, and when it will occur. If there is ambiguity, it will have the same impact as ending an article mid— **V**

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TAKING INVENTORY YOUR BUSINESS, YOUR VOICES

What's one wine region you dream of visiting when the pandemic is over and why?



Daneen Steele-Lewis and Pascal Lewis

Owners, Harlem Wine Gallery, New York, NY

DSL: It might sound a bit pedestrian, but when we're feeling a bit freer to travel and there aren't so many restrictions, we really just want to take a deeper dive into New York state: the North Fork of Long Island, the Finger Lakes, the Niagara Escarpment, the Hudson Valley. We carry a relatively large selection of New York wines, but we feel we could be more resourceful about tasting in our own backyard. Honestly, we're a hand-sell shop; we carry many obscure varietals, regions, and small producers that maybe people haven't heard of, so when we bring them over to our New York state [section] they're like, "You're joking—New York wine?"

PL: I grew up in California [at a time] when most Americans didn't have an understanding of [domestic] wines—not even California wines. But I've been here 30-plus years, and the quality coming out of New York is second to none, most notably the Rieslings that are being produced; we also want to delve a bit more into what's happening with Pinot Gris and Cabernet Franc upstate. Repeat customers have come to understand that they can trust us, so they are willing to take the chance, and oftentimes they'll come back and say, "We really did like that."

DSL: What really is a big selling point is letting them know that the New York wine business is [truly] under the control of small family producers. They like the idea that they're getting that connection with the farmers . . .

PL: . . . with the region, with the land.

DSL: What also was instrumental in picking [New York as our answer] was that, during the height of the pandemic, the New York Wine & Grape Foundation was very smart. They would send bottles—whites, reds, sparklings—and do these virtual tastings that were really fun and informative, learning from the winemakers directly and tasting through these wines.

The funny thing is that we do often spend a lot of time on the North Fork of Long Island, and we always have these big plans to visit vineyards, but basically what ends up happening is we're doing some yardwork, getting sidetracked, and finally we pop something local open and we're like, "This is delicious; we're not going anywhere." We definitely need to explore more of New York state; it's just a matter of having the time, which, being shop owners, we don't have much of.



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Kelly Neel

General manager and wine buyer,
Quarry Wine & Spirits, Baltimore, MD

If we're talking bucket list, with time and money not being an object, I would say Patagonia. I find that I really like its cooler-climate wines. They're not as well known, they don't get to our market as frequently, and they're grown in extreme conditions, [what] with their proximity to the Andes Mountains and their positioning in the Southern Hemisphere.

If we're talking a little more realistically, the Canary Islands off the coast of Morocco—I've recently had a couple of wines from there that are lightbulb wines. One is the Dolores Cabrera La Araucaria, a Listán Negro that's really smoky, really spicy—it reminds me of a Northern Rhône if you set it on fire. The terroir there is mostly volcanic soil, and also, from what I've seen, most of the wines are pretty small-production, handpicked, and sustainable/organic, which I'm into. They're a really good example of wine that tastes like the terroir, very exotic—and who wouldn't want to go to an island now, given the state of things?

And then the most realistic place that I could go would be the Basque Country in Spain. We recently started carrying more Txakoli; it's light, bright, and gives off a carefree, zero-fucks-given vibe that you don't typically see in wine. [The wines are] fun, vibrant, and a little more eccentric while still maintaining their simplicity, a quality I've certainly been drawn to this year—nice, laid-back, celebratory wines that make me want to be on vacation now. All three of these places, with their unique terroir and exciting wines, would be a dream to visit.

Ben Jones

Wine buyer, Calandro's, Baton Rouge, LA

I had it down to two or three, but I landed on the Canary Islands. The wines were pretty obscure two or three years ago, but lately we've been getting a lot of people asking for them [in the shop]. They make a little something for everyone there—big, rich reds and light, carbonic Beaujolais-style reds as well as high-acid whites. We get a lot from José Pastor Selections, which specializes in small-production, natural wines; I really like the Carmelo Santana Ikewen—[the label] has a picture of somebody's feet stomping grapes—and La Araucaria makes one of my favorite rosés.

But all the wines have this smoky, flinty minerality from the volcanic soil, kind of like Etna in Sicily, that goes well with food. One of the big things they do there on the culinary side is salt-baked fish, and that's one of my favorite things to eat, especially being from Louisiana where we eat a lot of seafood. And apparently they make a sparkling wine with bananas, which I thought was pretty cool. Plus there are mountains; there are beaches; I've heard the weather's always like spring there, which is nice; and it would be great just to see the vines growing in those black soils, like the surface of the moon. **V**



The Billionaire Boys' Club

CLOS DE LA TECH AND ALEJANDRO BULGHERONI ESTATE
ARE WORTH THE SPLURGE **by Anthony Dias Blue**



The typical California winery story goes something like this: A retired, semi-successful dentist buys a small plot of land and moves there with his wife with the aim of becoming a “gentleman farmer.”

By contrast, the not-so-typical California winery story:

A billionaire buys a prime plot of land, constructs a state-of-the-art winery, and begins producing expensive, world-class wine (sometimes without actually moving there).

Two elite members of the latter group are T.J. Rodgers and Alejandro Bulgheroni. Rodgers—the founder and, until recently, owner of Cypress Semiconductor as well as the principal of several other Silicon Valley operations—began growing Pinot Noir in the 1-acre vineyard surrounding his home in the Santa Cruz area in 1996. The

resulting wine, called Clos de la Tech, was so remarkable that he bought more vineyard land. Each bottle sports a working computer chip on its neck.

Bulgheroni, meanwhile, owns the second-largest oil and gas company in Argentina as well as 13 winery properties in Argentina, Australia, Italy, Uruguay, and California. The biggest is Bodega Garzón, a 10,000-acre Uruguayan paradise I visited several years ago that not only produces wine but raises cattle. Winemaking for his California operation is overseen by Philippe Melka and Michel Rolland.

We start with a surprising vertical of Rodgers’ best wine, followed by a selection of bottlings from Alejandro Bulgheroni Estate in Napa Valley:

Clos de la Tech 2003 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$250) Amazing, deep, and velvety; intense, seamless, and layered. Generous, elegant, and youthful, it’s remarkable for a 17-year-old wine. **97**

Clos de la Tech 2006 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225) Aromas of mint and herbs. Smooth, lush, and juicy; rich with good length. **95**

Clos de la Tech 2008 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225)

Luscious, refined, and ripe, with notes of mint, spice, and dried cherries; elegant and long. **96**

Clos de la Tech 2010 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225) Rich and smooth, with bright raspberry and spice, warm notes of red fruits, and tangy acidity culminating in a long finish. **95**

Clos de la Tech 2012 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$120) Luscious notes of bright cherry, blackberry, spice, mint, and clove; seamless and lovely. **96**

Clos de la Tech 2015 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$150) Floral nose with scents of berry. Smooth, juicy, and tangy, with a hint of clove and rich cherry as well as a tangy acid structure; long and delicious. **96**

Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$166) Vanilla-inflected nose, silky texture, and lush notes of plum, blackberry, earth, and spice; complex and layered with bright hints of vanilla and new oak. Not bad for an “entry-level” wine. **96**

Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, Dr. Crane Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295)



Originally planted in 1858 and replanted by Andy Beckstoffer in 1998, this vineyard has yielded a glowing garnet wine with a plum nose and crisp acidity; ripe blackberry, cherry, and plum; and nuances of vanilla, spice, and licorice. It’s long and generous. **98**

Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, Las Piedras Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295) Lovely plum and blueberry nose; smooth, luscious, and complex, with hints of mocha, black olive, and chocolate. Graceful, soft, and beautiful, it reveals itself slowly but dramatically. **98**



Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, To Kalon Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295) Scents of vanilla and herbs, velvety texture, and deep and rich notes of graphite, vanilla, tangy plum, and berries as well as soft herbs and spices. All components are in their rightful place in this remarkably balanced wine from a historic vineyard. **98**

Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$395) Deep and dark, this miraculous wine stays with you—the finish seems to last for hours. Before that comes ripe plum, blueberry, and cassis followed by fresh herbs, smooth vanilla, new oak, and spices; creamy, juicy, and balanced. **99** *LT*



Going Against the Grain

WHISK(EY) DISTILLERS WORLDWIDE ARE MAKING HAY OUT OF UNCONVENTIONAL INGREDIENTS

In my last column, I explored the sometimes-controversial issue of terroir in whisky. Another hotly debated topic is that of the grains used in the spirit's production. Though both custom and legislation have led to the global dominance of conventional strains of barley, corn, rye, and wheat, a new generation of distillers is looking further afield.

The movement that seeks to challenge whisky orthodoxy and offer consumers new taste horizons is international, but it's perhaps best represented by craft distillers in the United States, so it's here we turn for some of the most radical experiments. While a number of distilleries have released expressions made from heritage corn—among them Shelbyville, Kentucky's Jephtha Creed Distillery (Bloody Butcher) and Charleston, South Carolina's High Wire Distilling (Jimmy Red)—still others, like Corsair Distillery in Nashville, Tennessee, are pioneering the use of an array of different grains, including quinoa from South America.

A gluten-free grain used primarily as livestock feed stateside since its arrival from Africa, sorghum has also found its way into the repertoire

of some U.S. distillers. In addition to High Wire Distilling, producers that make sorghum whiskeys include Still 360 in Saint Louis, Missouri; Madison, Wisconsin's Old Sugar Distillery; and Jersey Artisan Distilling in Fairfield, New Jersey.

Virtually all of these distillers are small in scale and unlikely ever to break into the mass market. But major players have also flirted with alternative grains, most notably Jim Beam, which released a limited-run Harvest Bourbon collection in 2014 and 2015. The lineup included Whole Rolled Oat, Soft Red Wheat, Brown Rice, and Triticale, based on a rye-wheat cross also used by Dry Fly Distilling in Spokane, Washington. Oats and brown rice in particular represented a radical departure for such a large distiller. As the collection has been discontinued, its remaining supplies are sought after by collectors as investments.

Across the globe in Australia, Adelaide Hills Distillery founder and head distiller Sacha La

Forgia is working with local varieties such as wattleseed and weeping grass. Via his Native Grains series, he aims

to start a debate around crop diversity, sustainability, and the preservation of indigenous species that require fewer inputs to flourish in their native environment. Meanwhile, Western Australia's Whipper Snapper Distillery is rising to the challenges presented by quinoa's small size and bitter seed coating in order to showcase a local variety known for its earthy and peppery notes.

Even in Scotland, where a limited number of barley varieties have come to dominate production, distillers such as Bruichladdich have looked to the nation's history of production to revive the hard-to-grow heritage strain known as bere. And field-to-bottle distillery Arbikie, located amid the fertile farmlands of Scotland's east coast, has determined that rye was used in making Scotch whisky well into the 19th century; though the grain has been enjoying a revival in the U.S. for some time, Arbikie's Highland Rye can proudly claim to be unique in Scotland.

In short, the drive to experiment cannot be denied, and I anticipate the use of unorthodox grains by craft distillers to trend in 2021 and beyond. **W**



Whipper Snapper Distillery in Western Australia makes its Project Q whiskey from a local strain of quinoa.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WHIPPER SNAPPER DISTILLERY



In *Beyond the Barrel*, deputy editor Eric Marsh tastes and reviews products that may or may not come from a barrel but land outside the box. From brilliant innovations to zany concepts, he takes a judicious approach, with the cognizance that everything has a market.

Collective Project Hemp Based CBD Sparkling Juice and Teas (\$18/4-pack of 355-mL cans)

Collective Project's Cucumber, Lemon & Lime sparkling juice shows not only aromas of muddled cucumber and citrus zest but also grassy notes; the palate, meanwhile, is fresh, bright, and thirst-quenching, with a quick, clean finish. Like all of the brand's beverages, it's made with all-natural, gluten-free, non-GMO ingredients and infused with hemp-based CBD, then packaged in cans that showcase a rotating selection of artworks from artists across the globe—in this case Israeli-born Gallit Shaltiel.



Màkku (\$15/4-pack of 350-mL cans) Màkku makes three expressions of a rice beer variant known as *makgeolli*, an ancient Korean alcoholic beverage that tends to be a little sweet, somewhat sour and milky, and—due to what's known as rough filtration—slightly chalky. The brand's Original expression exhibits those characteristics along with subtle flavors of flowers, cucumber, and rainwater accompanied by a malty note. Màkku's tastefully minimalistic cans could win design awards, but make sure to gently shake before opening to integrate the sediment at the bottom.



Callisto Botanical Rum (\$33/750-mL)

This Caribbean-sourced and charcoal-filtered dry rum is infused with California botanicals that make it almost akin to a gin. The bouquet transports you to a hike up the Sierras when flowers are in full bloom, but there's also a heavy aroma of forest floor carpeted in pine needles that might make you think you're lost deep in the woods. Choose your own adventure and take a sip: The mouthfeel is creamy and silky, and the pine needles return to prevalence on the palate. They're joined by subtle tropical notes that remind you that you're drinking rum, and just before the finish, there's an amalgamation of herbs that could be described as a citrus-dressed mixture of sage, thyme, and rosemary. This liquid will likely inspire you to rethink what rum can be: Use in classic rum (or even gin) cocktails and garnish with fresh herbs and edible flowers.



First Light Original Coffee Whiskey (\$28/750-mL)

This unaged whiskey made from a mash bill of 99% corn and 1% barley receives its umber hue from all-natural (and decaffeinated) coffee extracts. On the palate are notes of freshly roasted coffee beans, sea salt, and a caramel flavor redolent of Werther's Original candies, followed by a spicy finish. Clocking in at 33% ABV, First Light is sweetened with raw organic agave syrup.



Anywhere Cellars 2016 Pinot Noir (\$7/375-mL can)

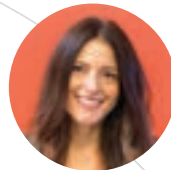
Made from California grapes, this medium-bodied red features aromas of violet, licorice root, and dried shiitake as well as notes of raspberry jam and candied cherry that combine with soft tannins to lead to an elongated finish. A cute depiction of a spacecraft orbiting an "a" on the label suggests that this wine could be enjoyed even in galaxies far, far away. **V**



SCOTTO CELLARS

C.J. Lin

FINE WINE & SPIRITS ADVISOR & BUYER,
WING HOP FUNG, MONTEREY PARK, CA



by Michelle M. Metter



Since 2011, C.J. Lin has overseen fine wine and spirits procurement, market analysis, and sale price evaluation at Southern California retailer Wing Hop Fung. I chatted with Lin—who recently took part in the SommCon Buyer’s Forum sponsored by *The Tasting Panel’s* sister publication, *The SOMM Journal*—about her career path and how buying strategies have changed since the arrival of COVID-19.

Q Tell us about your journey in the wine industry—what led you to where you are now?

I was a different person . . . before I entered the wine world. My first job was in the [law] industry, and the after-work drinks would be my stress relief. At that time, I had little interest in wine and never heard of a sommelier. I preferred drinking all kinds of [cocktails]. I was also very reluctant to explore new foods, until one day I was in the Melting Pot in Pasadena and a sommelier recommended I try their food and wine pairing. That was the first time that I really enjoyed wines. The experience totally opened another world to me. I started spending more time in wine, then eventually decided to [focus] full time on learning [about it] and then working in the industry.

Q How have you adjusted your buying strategies during the pandemic?

Obviously, people are buying fewer large-format and high-end bottles due to the closures or limited opening of restaurants; they used to [take them to dinner] because restaurants charge the same corkage fees as [for] regular bottles. They [also] used to buy cases of wine for parties or gatherings, but now they buy by the bottle instead. In [terms of] allocated items, we used to take what we can or whatever was offered to us. But right now, I have to pick and choose carefully, and sometimes I will need to cut down [my order] to half. There are so many uncertainties right now and [for] the future, so I focus more on buying more recognized brands and easy selling items.

Q You have ten minutes and one bottle of wine. What are you drinking and who are you with?

I wish to drink Pur Sang from Didier Dagueneau with Anthony Bourdain. Dagueneau made this wine beautifully—it’s like you can taste the Loire’s soils and smell its air. It is a perfect example of terroir. I admired Bourdain’s bravery and fearlessness in exploring different cultures and every inch of the world. I’m sad that this meeting could never happen. *W*

The Tasting Panel and The SOMM Journal are proud supporters of SommCon’s live and virtual education. Access to the recording of the SommCon Buyer’s Forum is available at sommgo.com, and registration for SommCon’s virtual Spring Summit is now open at sommconusa.com.

Sharing the Sisterhood

FEMALE LEADERSHIP GOES FAR BEYOND THE NAME OF LODI-BASED LABEL **3 GIRLS**

by **Kate Newton**

The gains in representation that women have made in the wine industry remain incremental and largely behind the scenes. But sometimes bringing about change—and advancing your family’s legacy in the process—calls for making a statement.

Enter 3 Girls, a label from one of California’s most established family-owned producers and the oldest operating in the Lodi region: Oak Ridge Winery, which was founded as a wine-making cooperative in 1934, 28 years after patriarch Angelo Maggio arrived from Italy and planted his first cuttings in the area. The trio of women behind the name are sisters Lisa Kammerer, Shelly Maggio Woltkamp, and Raquel Casity; these fourth-generation viticulturalists serve the family business as hospitality manager, brand ambassador, and general manager, respectively, alongside Rudy Maggio, their father and Angelo’s grandson. After launching 3 Girls in 2012 in “an effort to capture the attention of a younger audience with . . . a distinct call to female

individuality,” according to Casity, they’ve recently overseen a rebranding effort “with bright colors [and a] retro design.” But despite the new look, its overarching message remains: Women deserve—and have certainly earned—a place at the forefront of the winemaking industry.

Casity notes that the vivid labels of 3 Girls’ current releases—a 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, 2018 Chardonnay, and 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, each varietal representing one sister’s distinct personality—are “a far cry” from those of Oak Ridge; the deliberate divergence is “indicative of this shift in our company to women ownership,” Casity adds. “Our father worked his whole life as a farmer . . . [and] each of his daughters took up the farming trade and became involved in the daily operations at the winery. We proudly market [3 Girls] as ‘Estate Grown, Women Owned,’ [and while] the look caters to our personalities, the wine and process are completely representative of our authenticity and heritage.”

To produce 3 Girls, the sisters source grapes from 2,500 of their family’s vineyard acres throughout Lodi, all of which are farmed in accordance with leading sustainability program LODI RULES. Casity’s and Kammerer’s own daughters are also involved in both farming and hospitality at the winery, and two new female assistant winemakers recently joined the team. “For so long, farming and winemaking was a male-dominated industry,” Casity says, “so it’s refreshing to see this movement [of gender equity], although disparities still remain. As long as we continue to support other women [and] encourage ambition and confidence, more representation leads to more inspiration to join the industry.” **LZ**

3 Girls, a label from sisters Lisa Kammerer, Shelly Maggio Woltkamp, and Raquel Casity of Oak Ridge Winery, features a Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chardonnay made with sustainably farmed grapes from Lodi.

3 Girls 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Lodi

Melon and lime offer vivid aromatics and flavor in this bright wine with cheery acidity. Expressive and refreshing notes of peach have staying power through the clean finish. Vivacious! **90**
—*Meridith May*

3 Girls 2018 Chardonnay, Lodi

Vanilla wafer and a keen, toasty profile define the initial impression of this white that’s abundant in personality. Rich notes of ripe tangerine, pineapple, guava, and banana boost an already luscious finish of crème caramel. **90**
—*M.M.*

3 Girls 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon

Blueberry and plum preserves spread joy across the palate. Seasoned with a hint of cocoa and roasted coffee, the finish perks up with another wave of dark fruit to sip and savor. **90** —*M.M.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF OAK RIDGE WINERY





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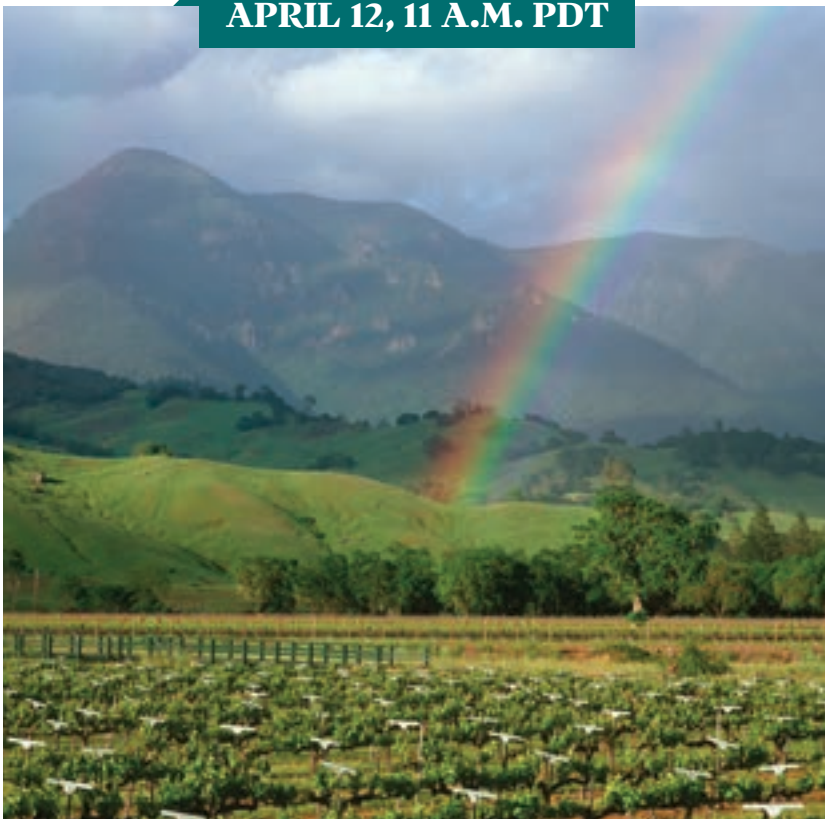
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A More Perfect Union

MGP ADDS A FEATHER TO ITS CAP WITH THE ACQUISITION OF BELOVED BRAND **GREEN HAT GIN** by Izzy Watson

Green Hat Gin's head distillers, Travers Lingle and Ian MacLurg, in the brand's distillery in Washington, D.C.

Sporting a stylish green fedora and toting an equally snazzy leather briefcase, Prohibition-era outlaw George Cassiday spent five years smuggling countless bottles of alcohol into House and Senate offices in the U.S. Capitol Building, averaging 25 deliveries a day. The infamous “Man in the Green Hat” has been synonymous with the Washington, D.C., spirits scene ever since.

Inspired by Cassiday, Green Hat Distillery was founded in 2011 in the city's Ivy City neighborhood, becoming the first distillery licensed in the nation's capital since Prohibition. Green Hat also operates a retail tasting room and bar as well as a popular gin cocktail garden and has recently embarked on a new chapter. Last spring, the brand was acquired by MGP, a leading supplier of premium distilled spirits, and as a result is now available in many additional markets.

“Throughout our brand-development process over the past several years, we kept hearing from consumers about their favorite gin brands, and Green Hat Gin kept coming up in these conversations,” shares Andy Mansinne, MGP's VP of brands. “After we met with its founders, we knew that the qualities and

principles of the brand aligned with the values of the MGP Brands organization. As with our other brands, Green Hat Gin possesses the important qualities of authenticity and provenance.”

Green Hat currently offers four expressions, of which the Original Batch is undeniably the benchmark. Its botanicals create a crisp and refreshing London Dry-style gin with distinctive notes of celery, fennel, and lemongrass that earned an impressive 95 points from *The Tasting Panel* (see tasting note). Its three other bottlings are the Citrus Floral, whose flavor profile is ripe with lemon, orange, and cherry blossom; the spicy, high-proof Navy Strength; and Summer Cup, a fruit and herb cordial that can either be served on its own or used as a cocktail ingredient.

MGP anticipates that Green Hat will be available in all of its markets by July; furthermore, the company intends to reopen the distillery's tasting room and garden as soon as local coronavirus guidelines allow. In the meantime, just as Cassiday persevered through one of the nation's greatest challenges wearing his signature hat, so fans of the brand can endure another by enjoying the gin named for it. **LV**



Green Hat Original Batch Distilled Gin, USA (\$30)

Green Hat is made in the first distillery to open in Washington, D.C., after the end of Prohibition. This 83-proof botanical beauty has a nose of lime and tarragon with a mellow hint of juniper. Notes of anise and root vegetables add character to the flavor of terroir: a stony quality that surges with black pepper and tobacco. The liquid glides across the palate and the lemon zest on the finish leaves a freshness with a zip of spice behind it. Brilliant. **95** —*Meridith May*

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CAROLYN STYNE

Wine Director & Partner, Lucques, AOC & Tavern, Los Angeles

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Spanish SUCCESSION

WINE GIANT
GARCÍA CARRIÓN
MAKES ITS NAME IN
THE U.S. MARKET

by David Gadd

Established in 1890, García Carrión was designed for export from the outset. Drawing on his family's centuries-old agricultural heritage in Spain, founder José García Carrión—great-grandfather of the company's current president—built what was for that time an impressively scaled facility in Jumilla to produce wine for sale in France, where the vineyards had been devastated by phylloxera.

This visionary vintner surely foresaw that his company would grow, but even he could not have predicted that it would come to dominate the Spanish market. In the 130 years since its founding, García Carrión has become the largest wine company in Europe and the fourth-largest in the world, extending its commercial activities to more than 156 countries on five continents.

Yet because its wines are sold under a variety of separate brand names linked to Spain's most prestigious growing regions, this five-generation global powerhouse remains relatively unknown to the American wine-buying public. Now it's aiming to change that: Under the direction of national sales director

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN



Tom Bernth, García Carrión's stateside strategy for the immediate future is to enhance U.S. consumers' connection to and appreciation of Spanish DO and DOCa wines by offering exceptional quality at unbeatable prices.

To this end, the company has made massive investments in all of its wineries. "Our technology is second to none," says Bernth, who notes that the updates have allowed it to reduce its operating and logistical costs while continuously improving quality. Further tactics, such as regional and brand diversification and strong vertical integration, are key to remaining at the top of its game.

With its own vineyards and winemaking facilities in ten DO and DOCa zones, García Carrión presents a cross-section of the best Spain has to offer, thus introducing Americans to a wide array of regions, varieties, and styles—from Reserva reds to sparklers and sangria. Here's a look at some of the labels available. (For more, see page 79.)



ANTAÑO

In Rioja, the best known and most traditional of Spain's many growing regions, the Marqués de Carrión winery produces 50 million bottles of red wine from the venerable Tempranillo grape each year. Its vast cellar houses 30,000 French and American oak barrels to facilitate the lengthy aging requirements for the various levels of Rioja—from 12 months for Crianza to 36 for Reserva. Located in the town of Labastida in Rioja Alavesa, this state-of-the-art facility is home to the stately Antaño Reserva, a classic Rioja aged for 26 months in American oak.

Antaño 2016 Crianza Tempranillo, Rioja, Spain (\$11) The red-fruit aromatics are stunning in this luxe red. Chalky peppered-plum-skin tannins are firm, but the palate is rewarded with notes of chocolate, cherry, and sandalwood. Juicy to the core, with a finish highlighted by red apple and walnut. **91** —*Meridith May*

The historic Bodega Jaime Serra, located south of Barcelona, is one of several regional wineries in the García Carrión portfolio.



VIÑA ARNÁIZ

In the important Ribera del Duero DO, Viña Arnáiz melds tradition with technology to produce beautifully nuanced Robles, Crianzas, and Reservas from Tinta del País, as Tempranillo is known locally. Cellar capacity for the winery—which has won architectural awards for its design on the foundations of a 12th-century fortress—is an astonishing 1 million bottles, reflecting the DO's prolonged aging requirements. Viña Arnáiz has twice been named Best Winery in Spain at the prestigious Vinitaly competition.

Viña Arnáiz 2018 Roble, Ribera del Duero, Spain (\$11) The nose is all heart, with concentrated dark fruit, cedar, and cassis. And the palate? All passion. Minerality and a spiced, grilled meatiness highlight a sensational mouthfeel. Taste the terroir: a combination of slate and tilled soil with a hint of sweet tobacco. It may be austere, but this is a sipper that wows from start to finish. **93** —M.M.



DON SIMÓN SANGRÍA

García Carrión markets two versions of Don Simón, which is the number-one-selling sangria brand in the world. The first, Don Simón Original Sangría, comes in 750-milliliter and 1.5-liter bottles as well as 3-liter bag-in-boxes—all of which now boast Gaudí-inspired packaging with a thermochromic label that changes from transparent to yellow when the product is chilled. The second is Don Simón Premium Fizzy Sangría; in addition to a just-launched rosé, the company is planning to release the flagship red expression in 250-milliliter grab-and-go cans this year.

Don Simón Original Sangría, Spain (\$9/1.5-L)

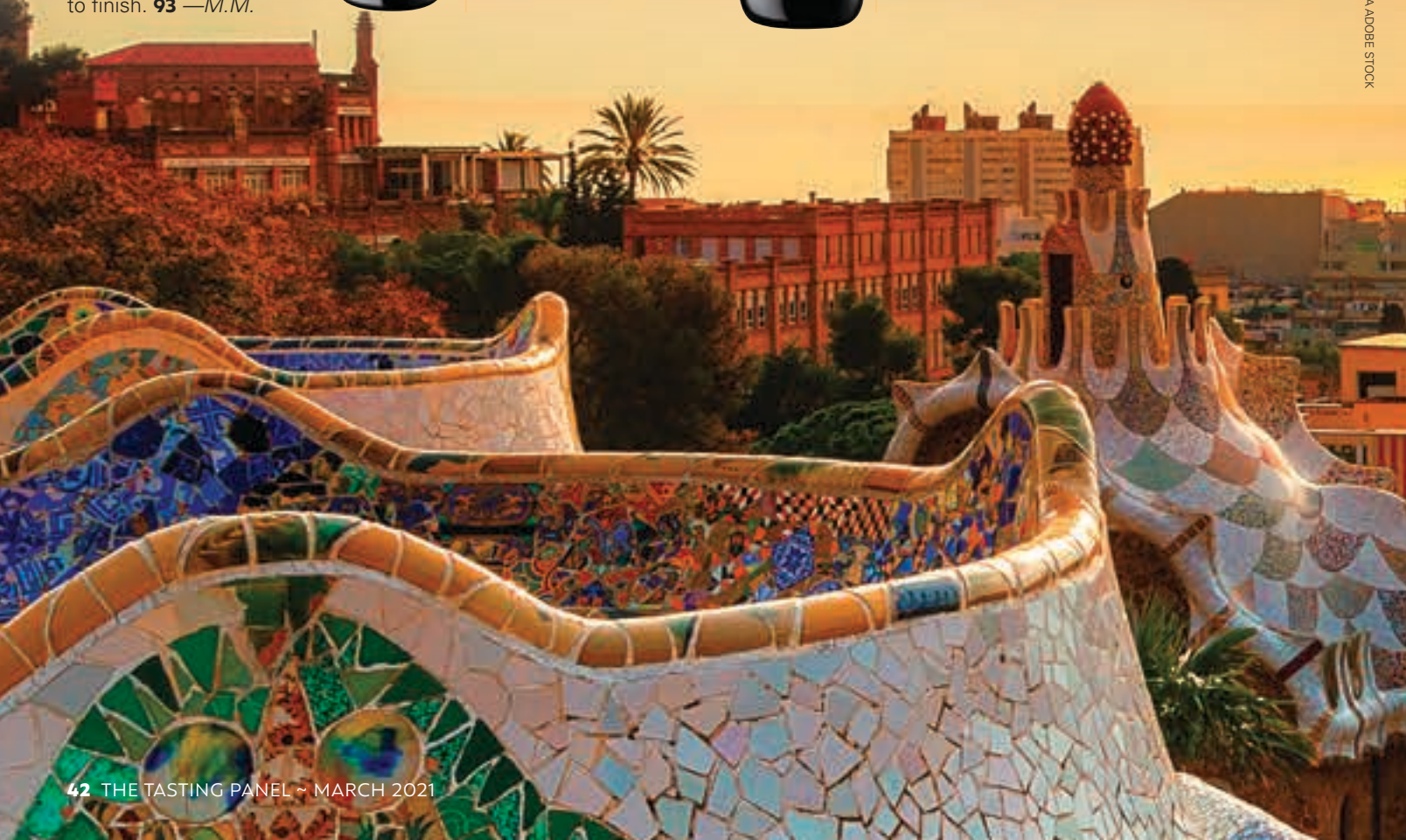
This truly delicious quaff offers aromas of orange peel, pomegranate, and rose petals as well as a delicate array of fresh fruit flavors: mandarin orange, Bing cherry, and red apple kissed with cinnamon. Vanilla and sweet basil season the dry finish. **91** —M.M.



PATA NEGRA

The term *pata negra* refers to a black-footed pig that yields the highly prized Spanish ham known as *jamón ibérico*. By extension, it denotes any product that is of the highest possible quality—and therefore makes an appropriately catchy name for this freewheeling brand. From a crisp white Rueda Verdejo to reds such as an intense Tempranillo Gran Reserva from the historic Valdepeñas DO, Pata Negra is produced at García Carrión facilities across the country, offering curious consumers a delicious geography lesson in Spain's quality-oriented wine regions.

Pata Negra 2016 Tempranillo Reserva, Rioja, Spain (\$13) Crushed peppered cherries define a dynamic red with supple tannins. Broad strokes of underbrush accompany the generous fruit. Savory notes of cedar, beetroot, and cocoa are integrated for added depth. **91** —M.M.



JAUME SERRA CRISTALINO

Along with DO wines and sangria, Cava is one of what Bernth calls García Carrión's "three pillars of success." The Spanish sparkler, which boasts its own DO status, is a bargain compared to Champagne—though it too is made by the traditional method, unlike Prosecco. Jaume Serra Cristalino cements García Carrión's strong footprint in this important export market, says Bernth: "We feel we have one of the best Cavas in the market, aged on the lees for 12 months." With handsomely packaged Brut, Extra Dry, and Brut Rosé offerings, Jaume Serra Cristalino delivers an exceptional quality-to-price ratio—and bubbles to boot.

Jaume Serra Cristalino NV Brut Rosé, Cava, Spain (\$11)

This blend of 80% Trepat and 20% Pinot Noir has a deep cranberry hue. A nose of raspberry and cherry pit leads to bright, fresh notes of watermelon and strawberry. Tiny bubbles are pleasant on the palate, as is an underlying middle of wet stone. This charmer is a great value. **90** —*M.M.*



OPERA PRIMA

While Cava is made by the *método tradicional*, the always forward-thinking García Carrión team realized way back in 1999 that there was also a growing market for Charmat-method bubbly. Enter Opera Prima, which has been "a phenomenal success," according to Bernth, leapfrogging Jaume Serra Cristalino in 2019 to become the company's number-one sparkling-wine brand. "We have aggressively been adding new [expressions and formats] for the last two years," Bernth notes.

At an irresistible line price of just \$7 per 750-milliter bottle, these colorful sparklers range from a Brut and a Rosé to several off-dry, Moscato-based expressions that make for dazzlingly aromatic apéritifs. "I would put the Brut up against most Proseccos," says Bernth. "For retailers, the beauty of Opera Prima is not just its quality cork-and-cage finish but [the fact] that we also offer the Brut and Rosé in a Stelvin screwcap." **90**



Bernth believes that García Carrión's diverse portfolio will not only appeal to a broader American market and elevate the company's bottom line but, even more importantly, lead to a greater recognition of the quality and value of Spanish wine in general. To that end, the company's in-house marketing department in Madrid is working closely with two U.S. agencies—AP Keaton in Great Neck, New York, and ADX Creative in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—on new promotional campaigns and tactics. "Our main priorities in the U.S. are Cava, Rioja DO wines, and sangria," says Bernth, who adds that private-label projects are a growing focus as well.

"We have a motto at García Carrión: Innovate or die," Bernth asserts. "We will certainly live up to that in 2021 with the new items we are launching that will positively impact the market, both on- and off-premise." Somewhere, founder José García Carrión is lifting a glass with a hearty "Salúd!" **LT**

iichiko's distillery is located in the lush Ōita Prefecture of southern Japan.

the age of

U M A M I

IICHIKO IS SHOCHU'S GREATEST CHAMPION ON THE GLOBAL MARKET

by Jessie Birsebach

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THIS A LOT LATELY: If umami has existed for millennia—ever since humans discovered fermentation—why have we only relatively recently begun to talk about it? The meaty, nutty flavor profile is the backbone of East Asian cuisine, and I can't think of a single culture that lacks for fermented ingredients. But it wasn't until 1907, when MSG was discovered, that scientists began to give umami the same gustatory clout as sweet, salty, bitter, and sour.

Perhaps this overdue credit has something to do with our somewhat nascent understanding of the science of fermentation, but there's no denying that the concept of umami marked a milestone in our evolving comprehension of the perception of taste. And that awareness, fortunately, is prompting us to explore the depths of this complex and savory character like never before.

In fact, over the past decade, chef and restaurateur David Chang's Momofuku Culinary Lab has been dedicated entirely to *koji*, the cherished fungus he describes as smelling like Fruity Pebbles that creates the enzymes needed for fermenting foods and beverages. (Most fermented products in Asia are *koji*-based.) Known scientifically as *Aspergillus oryzae* and affectionately as "Japan's national mold," this delicate, citrusy, floral fungus encourages fermentation that in turn bolsters the magical metamorphosis of a distinct taste modality found in, for instance, soy sauce and saké.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IICHIKO

Sanwa Shurui president Masahiko Shimoda and his towering pot still.

It also makes its presence known in leading Japanese shochu brand iichiko, whose dedication to *koji* and the umami profile it imparts perhaps separates it from other members of the category. According to Masahiko Shimoda, president of iichiko's parent company, Sanwa Shurui, "iichiko has been relentlessly developing shochu for many years with the single-minded focus of a koji spirit, namely a liquor that distills koji culture."

When I took my first sip of iichiko's Saiten expression, it was clear that no other spirit, at least to my knowledge, embodies umami and "koji culture" so fully. After flavors of honeydew, lime zest, sweet pea, lavender, and toasted cashew melted away, the finish left me with an uncanny perception that I'd just swallowed a forkful of pasta with zesty tomato sauce and copious amounts of parmesan cheese. The enlightening experience confirmed for me that iichiko has managed to elevate shochu to an entirely new level at just the moment that umami is basking in newfound popularity, making iichiko a particularly attractive, gloriously savory addition to a bartender's spice rack. But to explore just how bar professionals can showcase the singular iichiko in their programs, we must first understand what shochu is.

Distilling "Droplets of Sweat"

As with anything that can claim a far-reaching history, the origins of shochu are not as transparent as the spirit itself. According to the Sake School of America, by the 16th century the spirit was being produced throughout Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's main islands. The leading theory of how distillation arrived in the area involves what's known as the Ryukyu Route: It's believed that some sort of alembic distillation device arrived during the 14th century in the Ryukyu Kingdom (present-day



Barley has been cultivated on the island of Kyushu for generations. iichiko features the two-row *nijo* barley.





Kevin Diedrich, owner/mixologist of Pacific Cocktail Haven in San Francisco, CA, offers his 1000 Cranes cocktail featuring iichiko Saiten to go.

Okinawa), which was then a major trade center for China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia. The distillate was originally referred to as *arakishu* during the Edo period (1603–1868), derived from the Arabic word *araq*, which means “droplets of sweat.”

In essence, shochu is a clear distilled spirit typically made from rice, potatoes, buckwheat, grains, molasses, or other ingredients heavy in starch, though its base will depend on the dominant agricultural product of the prefecture from which it’s sourced. Shochu, which typically has an ABV of roughly 25%, is brewed much like saké before undergoing one of two distillation processes: In the traditional method of distillation that iichiko uses, known as *Honkaku* (“genuine”), a single raw ingredient is fermented with koji and distilled just once in a pot still;

the newer *Ko-ru* method, meanwhile, employs multiple raw ingredients and distillations, resulting in a higher proof and purer alcohol.

The iichiko Way

In the lush Ōita Prefecture on the island of Kyushu—the aforementioned birthplace of shochu and the home of iichiko—barley is king. The ancient grain has been cultivated there for several centuries, but iichiko specifically features the two-row *nijo* barley in both its Silhouette and Saiten expressions due to the deep flavor and rich aroma it contributes (craft beer brewers generally prefer two-row barley to six-row barley, as they believe it has a fuller, maltier flavor). In shochu production, barley is polished not only to encourage the growth of koji but to create a brighter flavor profile; iichiko’s

Diedrich showcases the delicate iichiko Silhouette in his Shirueto Old Fashioned with salted pandan syrup and Peychaud’s bitters.

polishing process removes 30–35% of each kernel’s surface.

The water the distillery uses, meanwhile, is sourced from a nearby spring that filters through roughly 1,000 feet of volcanic rock. What’s left after trickling through 22 layers of sandstone and porous tuff is an iron-free, pure, soft liquid that’s conducive to a gentle fermentation process, which in turn ensures that the aromatic profile of both the more traditional Silhouette expression (25% ABV) and the higher-proof Saiten (43%) is preserved.

Contributing further to that profile are iichiko’s low- and high-pressure distillation techniques; Silhouette is blended mainly via the former and Saiten mainly via the latter. “Vacuum distillation allows for a lower boiling point of about 130 degrees Fahrenheit, thereby concentrating delicate aromas and flavors,” says Shimoda. “On the other hand, atmospheric distillation has a regular boiling point of around 200 degrees Fahrenheit. High-temperature distillation captures various powerful flavors in the mash. The careful and harmonious blending of the two distilled raw shochus is employed in crafting [both] iichiko [expressions].”

Developing Saiten’s extraordinary profile, however, relied on far more than tried-and-tested science. Since it was formed by three family-owned companies in 1958 (a fourth came aboard shortly thereafter), Sanwa Shurui has produced a portfolio that encompasses saké, wine, and shochu, releasing its first *honkaku* shochu in 1979. Today, iichiko remains the leading brand of barley shochu in Japan, but building its reputation in the United States has required a different approach. For more than 20 years, the brand’s strategy in the U.S. market primarily involved on-premise sales in Japanese restaurants, but as part of a strategic pivot roughly seven years ago, iichiko USA was established to develop a shochu that could fit into the program of most any on-premise establishment, “particularly among mixology accounts,” says Shimoda. Enter 2020’s Bartender of the Year, Kevin Diedrich.



The four founders of iichiko's parent company, Sanwa Shurui, from left to right in 1985: Shigeaki Akamatsu, Eiji Kumanomido, Noboru Wada, and Taichiro Nishi.

The Game Changers

Roughly three and a half years ago, Diedrich sat down with a handful of other seasoned bartenders at his San Francisco establishment, Pacific Cocktail Haven, to help consult on and “put together the profile for” Saiten. “We blind tasted so much shochu that day!” recalls Diedrich with a laugh, noting that “they ended up taking a lot of our feedback” before the spirit was released in 2019.

The uber-talented bartender is known and respected for developing PCH's inventive cocktail program into one of the country's best. He was already a fan of Silhouette when he met with the panel: It's “nice and delicate, and at 25% alcohol, that's what I might expect from a shochu,” he says. “[It] has soft melon notes and great grapefruit-citrus high notes. It's also very herbal and grassy. But what I've really come to appreciate about shochu, and especially iichiko, is the texture that it gives you—especially in cocktails, because [it's] really the vehicle used to coat your mouth with [each drink's respective] flavors. I fell in love with the Silhouette because it's got this great big palate, but very smooth, with a little bit of ginger and white pepper in there.”

That said, Diedrich notes that the lower alcohol content of most shochu can hinder its ability to stand up to certain flavors, thereby limiting the types of cocktails it can be featured in. “That's kind of why Saiten came into the mix a couple of years ago, and it's been a game changer ever since—especially in terms of [something] that can shine

with citrus flavors and/or in spirit-forward cocktails,” he says. Diedrich struggles to find a true comparison for Saiten given its uniqueness, but since it “has that kind of funk and umami in it,” he sometimes employs it as he would a rum agricole.

As you refer to the recipe at right as just one example of how Diedrich capitalizes on Saiten's distinct blend of melon and umami, consider this: Based on his lexicon alone, it's abundantly clear that he understands the nuances of flavor. After years of building bar programs for companies like Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, the Four Seasons, and Michael Mina Restaurants, he was able to forge his own path for the first time at PCH.

After taking over a space in Union Square that was formerly occupied by a beloved bar, he and his team had to fight to earn a loyal following. But earn it they did—and then, in 2020, the pandemic hit. Even as Diedrich and his colleagues strove to do everything they could to stay open while adhering to shelter-in-place restrictions, the accolades kept pouring in: PCH was named the Tales of the Cocktail Foundation's “Cocktail Bar of the Year” and took the #74 spot on the extended list of “The World's 50 Best Bars.” Diedrich himself was named “American Bartender of the Year” by the Tales of the Cocktail Foundation and “Bartender-Operator of the Year” by the Bar & Restaurant Expo.

Meanwhile, even in lockdown, Diedrich has continued to share his talents with the world of mixology, spurring its progression in the process.

It's an invaluable ability he shares with iichiko Saiten: As Shimoda puts it, “We want to have a positive impact on the American distilled spirits market through our partners in Davos Brands by bringing a different perspective and a new flavor of shochu. In the end, I would like to make shochu a global category, joining the likes of whiskey, brandy, rum, gin, vodka, and tequila.” If any shochu can accomplish this, it's indeed iichiko: Thanks to its stunningly complex umami character, the brand is shochu's greatest hope for global success. **VE**

iichiko is part of the Davos Brands portfolio.

1000 Cranes

Created by Kevin Diedrich, owner of Pacific Cocktail Haven, San Francisco, CA

- 2 oz. honeydew- and cucumber-infused iichiko Saiten
- ¾ oz. lemon-verbena syrup
- ¾ oz. fresh lemon juice
- 2 oz. yuzu soda

Fill a shaker with ice and add the infused iichiko Saiten, lemon-verbena syrup, and fresh lemon juice. Shake vigorously, pour into a tall glass filled with ice, top with yuzu soda, and garnish with thinly sliced cucumber.

“This garden-style drink features high melon notes and tart yuzu soda. In the background is Saiten's mushroom-umami character, which pushes through the middle of the cocktail. It's a great drink to [serve] those who are new to shochu.”

—Kevin Diedrich



PHOTO: CLARA RICE

Mountain Fruit at Its *finest*

BERINGER PRIVATE RESERVE IS A TIMELESS EXAMPLE OF THE BENEFITS OF HIGH-ALTITUDE VITICULTURE by Kelly Magyarics, DWS



**Treasury Wine Estates
education manager
Gillian Ballance, MS.**

It's easy to associate the Napa region with its namesake valley. But half of its AVAs are in the mountains, and the air up there has a profound effect on the wines they produce.

That was the key takeaway from “Mountain Fruit at Its Finest” as the December installment of Somm Sessions, a monthly series of educational taste-along webinars sponsored by *The SOMM Journal*, SommFoundation, and Treasury Wine Estates. Somm Sessions invites sommeliers, wine directors, buyers, and other beverage professionals to learn about and taste some exceptional bottlings while receiving the chance to win a \$500 scholarship, access to SommFoundation’s Global Diagram of Wine for one year, and even a spot at its annual Crush Camp.

Moderated by Lars Leicht, vice president of education for *The SOMM Journal* and *The Tasting Panel*, and Treasury Wine Estates education manager Gillian Ballance, MS, the webinar focused on the role mountain-grown fruit plays in Beringer Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, an iconic Napa Valley wine first released in 1978. Ballance recalled that Beringer Private Reserve was one of the first cult California Cabs on the wine list at New York’s famed Windows on the World, where she once worked as a sommelier, and said that she was thrilled for the opportunity to discuss the winery’s majestic higher-altitude vineyards and their impact on the final blend.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TREASURY WINE ESTATES



**The Steinhauer Ranch
Vineyard sits at 1,800 feet
on Howell Mountain.**

While grapes grown on the easy-to-cultivate valley floor lend opulence and richness to a wine, as Leicht pointed out, mountain fruit provides concentration, structure, and ageability. With higher elevations come cooler temperatures and larger diurnal shifts, both of which allow grapes to retain acidity and freshness, as well as more intense sunlight to draw out phenolics and a greater exposure to breezes that facilitate photosynthesis. At high altitudes, soils tend to be leaner and less fertile with better drainage, promoting the development of deep, character-building roots that cause vines to struggle and focus all of their energy on the grape. (“A good mother knows that to bear good fruit, you have to suffer,” Leicht told attendees.) Berries here are smaller, with a greater proportion of skin to pulp and therefore more anthocyanin, tannin, extracts, and resveratrol. As a result, the wines they yield are darker in color and possess tremendous complexity

couldn’t deny the positive results—though it would be another century before a tasting of hillside fruit from Chabot Vineyard led Beringer’s wine-making team to consider the potential for a high-altitude Napa Cabernet. Their success was cemented with the 1986 vintage, which won *Wine Spectator’s* Wine of the Year award in 1990.

The current vintage, 2017, is made with grapes from eight sources; 75% of the fruit hails from mountain vineyards, while 25% comes from St. Helena and Oakville vineyards on the valley floor. The blend comprises 96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Merlot; the more Merlot, Leicht said, the softer the style and the quicker the maturation process. Each lot is harvested and vinified separately, with 80–100% matured in new French oak barrels for 18–22 months before the wine is aged an additional year in bottle.

“There’s an underlying lushness on the attack, but then that beautiful minerality and earthiness comes out



Beringer 2017 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$170)

With Howell Mountain fruit serving as chief engineer, this sturdy red offers a majestic ride. Its grace is powered by brilliant blackberry and graphite overtones along with mellifluous tannins; roasted coffee and cedar act as base notes. **98** —*Meridith May*



Howell Mountain was the primary source for the Beringer 2017 Private Reserve.

along with savory notes such as earthiness, minerality, and spice.

In the 1870s, before the American wine industry was hobbled by Prohibition, farmers in Napa took advantage of the local Mediterranean climate, long growing season, and inversion effect to begin planting at higher elevations; fraternal Beringer winery founders Jacob and Frederick Beringer were among the first to plant vineyards on Spring Mountain, a small AVA above St. Helena. Though these pioneers bemoaned the labor and harvesting challenges presented by mountain viticulture, Leicht said, they

on the sides,” Leicht said. “It finishes with this . . . clean, minerally aftertaste that’s gorgeous and round, with a nice savory character.”

Mark Beringer—the winery’s eighth chief winemaker, who assumed his current role in 2015—deemed the 2017 vintage “brooding, dark, and luscious.” He admitted that it’s really meant to be cellared but promised that it does open up after decanting. “When they are youthful, they are all arms and legs and trying to figure it out,” he noted. “As they age, it all comes together.”

The great-great-grandson of Jacob and a self-professed “soil geek,”

Beringer is thankful for the opportunity he had to work with his predecessor, Laurie Hook, with whom he walked the vineyard rows and tasted through the lots to establish a baseline for the new release. He then experimented with techniques he implemented as vice president of winemaking at Duckhorn Vineyards, including optical sorting, open-top wood fermentation, and extraction methods. Despite late-season challenges—from a Labor Day heat wave to October wildfires—the 2017 vintage yielded enough fruit to make a quality Private Reserve, according to Ballance, who described it as having more power and depth than the relatively restrained 2016.

Beringer pointed out that though a majority of the grapes (62%) came from Howell Mountain, all of the wine’s sources brought something to the table. For instance, the Spring Mountain fruit that represents 4–5% of the blend adds minerality, dark fruit, grippy tannins, and a black olive-like savoriness, while the yield from Mount Veeder was capped at 1% to prevent the inky, spicy character of the small black berries from overpowering the other components. “It’s just like blending in a small amount of a varietal like Petit Verdot,” Beringer explained. “Mountain fruit can have an impact very quickly.” **T**

Blood Orange and Classic Margaritas made with Espanita Reposado and Blanco, respectively.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESPANITA ARTISANAL TEQUILA



Sin Compromiso

by *Allyson Reedy*

Some tequilas are made for sipping, others for mixing—and then there’s Espanita Artisanal Tequila. Launched in the U.S. by company founder Marina Wilson in 2017, the brand is so good for both that you’ll be hard-pressed to decide between drinking it straight or pouring it into a cocktail. (Spoiler alert: You can’t go wrong either way.)

Such versatility is exactly what Wilson set out to achieve when she decided to rely on her background in spirits imports to create her own brand, a move that was something of a rarity in the machismo-driven world of tequila. But she saw an opportunity in the market for the

**ESPANITA
ARTISANAL
TEQUILA
GOES THE
EXTRA MILE,
ON THE
PALATE AND
BEHIND THE
BAR**

product she envisioned—and so she filled it. As she explains, “I had a desire to create a craft brand that, in my opinion, answered the demand that consumers had for high-quality, traditionally produced tequilas [that are] presented appropriately and priced competitively. If you look at the younger generation of consumers, many of them don’t have the disposable income to go and regularly buy \$90 tequilas. It’s just not something most people can afford to do.” (Espanita retails for \$28–\$35 per bottle, depending on the age expression.)

When developing the recipes with the team in Arandas,

Jalisco, that distills Espanita’s Blanco, Reposado, and Añejo expressions, then, authenticity and affordability were nonnegotiable. “It took quite a few back and forths until we got them just right,” Wilson says.

Each step of Espanita’s methodical production process is designed to ensure that every drop of tequila in the bottle not only meets its full potential for aromatic and flavor complexity but honors the generations of hard work and craftsmanship that have made tequila the globally respected category it is today. It all starts with hand-selected blue agave grown in Jalisco’s highlands, an



area known for yielding sweet, fruity flavor profiles. They're harvested only when the plants have reached their peak sugar content at nine to 12 years old.

At that point, the piñas are roasted at low temperatures in the *horno*—a traditional Mexican stone oven—for up to 72 hours to convert their complex starches into nice and toasty simple sugars that the yeast, a proprietary strain unique to Espanita, can feed upon during the fermentation process, which takes up to seven days. As Wilson explains, “Ripe, slow-cooked piñas acquire a honeyed, earthy aroma that is so characteristic of baked blue agave. The use of the traditional oven also adds fruit and roasted-agave flavors to tequila and increases the intensity of the toasted sugar, with its characteristic delectable sweetness reminiscent of syrupy candy, to the palate and finish.”

Next, the fermented juice is double distilled in alembic pot stills. This is done slowly in small batches to thoroughly remove any impurities while preserving flavoring components, resulting in a smoother, softer mouthfeel. While distillation is the end of the road for the production of the Blanco tequila, the Reposado and Añejo expressions are aged in ex-bourbon casks of American white oak, amping up their flavor quotients even more.

All of this extra care makes for a complex yet boldly agave-forward spirit. “A lot of tequilas don’t have a strong agave presence, and if you mix it into a cocktail with ingredients that are intense, it can get overwhelmed,” Wilson says. “It’s very important that the tequila can stand on its own, but you still need to know that it’s a tequila drink when it’s mixed. . . . It’s that prominent

agave flavor and the fragrant, distinct aroma that make it so great in cocktails.”

Despite its short history, Espanita has already picked up a famous fan: Grammy-winning international superstar, education advocate, and motivational speaker Armando Christian Perez, known widely by his stage name, Pitbull. He’s now serving as the brand’s global ambassador, and he, too, likes to sip it straight as well as mix it. (Because we know you’re wondering, his go-to drink is Espanita Reposado on the rocks with lime and salt, but he’s also big on Bloody Marias made with Espanita Blanco.) Pitbull is known for his style, so it’s no surprise that he would appear in ads for the brand, looking dapper and holding the attractively packaged tequila. The bottles are embossed and branded with celestial images that are deeply entrenched in the indigenous



Espanita Reposado is a natural base for cocktails featuring mango.

The Curruca de Oriente starts with Espanita Blanco.

lore of Mexico, a nod to the country's rich heritage and respect for tradition that's reflected through the liquid itself. Espanita Blanco, for example, features a half moon, which as an early phase of the lunar cycle represents growth, future possibilities, and the freshness of the unaged expression. The Reposado bottle has an image of the sun—the celestial body that gives life to those blue agave fields. Finally, the 18-month-aged Añejo features both the sun and moon together, bringing the symbolism full circle. All expressions also feature additional production details on the label in a display of the brand's commitment to transparency—one that's sure to attract curious consumers.

"Espanita was made for consumers, especially the younger generation, who are discovering craft spirits, exploring tequilas, and want[ing] to enjoy its presentation and quality at a competitive price," Wilson says. On that score Espanita delivers—whether you sip it, mix it, or, better yet, both. *LV*



Grammy Award-winning artist Pitbull is Espanita's global ambassador.



PHOTO: @SZCHEFS

CURRUCA DE ORIENTE

- 2 parts Espanita Blanco
- 1 part fresh lime juice
- 1 part yellow bell pepper juice* or 1/2 yellow bell pepper, seeded and muddled
- 1 part grapefruit-ginger syrup** or fresh grapefruit juice muddled with two slices of ginger root

Add all ingredients to a shaker, fill with ice, and shake. Double strain into a Collins glass rimmed with savory salt and garnish with cilantro leaves and leftover grapefruit slices.

*Seed and chop 1 pepper, blend it in a processor with a small amount of water, and strain.

**Blend 3 parts strained grapefruit juice, 1 part ginger extract, and 6 parts sugar until the sugar dissolves.



Cocktail Cartel co-founder Eddie Fuentes.

PHOTO: @SZCHEFS

Espanita Behind the Bar

Espanita is a great mixing tequila, but each expression has its own strengths. The herbaceous, zesty Blanco, for instance, is best in tart or savory drinks like Margaritas and Bloody Marias; lime, lemon, cilantro, jalapeño, and mango all complement it nicely. Soft, with oaky undertones from the bourbon barrels, the Reposado is perfect in Tequila Sunrises and in combination with flavors like ginger, grapefruit, cinnamon, and chipotle peppers. And as for the Añejo: Think about the drinks you like dark spirits in—Old Fashioneds, Manhattans—and that's where this tequila belongs. Its smooth, honeyed flavors are enhanced by orange, coffee, vanilla, and chocolate.

Eddie Fuentes, mixologist and co-founder of Miami-based beverage consultancy Cocktail Cartel, created this riff on a Paloma to showcase Espanita Blanco's citrus and herbal notes.

Espanita Tequila Blanco Aromas of white-peppered sweet agave, vanilla, and ginger. On the palate, a bright prickle of black pepper on lime and agave is followed by musky vanilla. White flower petals go creamy midway, preceding an earthy, herbal finish. **93** —*Meridith May*



Espanita Tequila Reposado Aromas of cream soda, pecan, and lime zest are extroverted, but they don't mask the wonderful scents of agave. Cocoa spiked with red pepper and ginger converges with a touch of cedar as it grabs hold of lemon and ripe pineapple. **93** —*M.M.*



Espanita Tequila Añejo Earthy scents of mushroom and dried leaves lead to a dusky, brooding palate. Cigar leaf, caramel, and sandalwood inform a woody profile that persists without overpowering the heady agave notes. **93** —*M.M.*



Anthony Dias

BLUE REVIEWS

Presented by  **BLUE LIFESTYLE**

In each issue, senior editor 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:

88-89: 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

92 7Cellars 2018 Elway's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$40) Lush garnet color and a soft nose of plum and herbs; fresh and juicy, with a silky texture and bright notes of plum and berry. Clean and stylish, it's another win for founder John Elway.



92 7Cellars 2019 Elway's Reserve Chardonnay, Carneros (\$27) Bright golden color and fresh aromas. Silky, long, and nicely balanced, with juicy style, lively acidity, and notes of crisp pear, citrus, and vanilla.



94 Alma Rosa 2018 El Jabali Pinot Noir, Sta. Rita Hills (\$68) Medium ruby color and a bright cherry nose. Velvety yet tangy, with a fresh and elegant palate of cherry and toasty, sweet, subtle oak. A charming expression from Richard Sanford, one of the pioneers of this area.



BLUE REVIEWS



93 Alma Rosa 2018 El Jabali Chardonnay, Sta. Rita Hills (\$48) Smooth, lush, and creamy, with soft oak; elegant and precise, juicy yet delicate. A refined, lovely, modern wine from one of California's best regions.

93 Cadre 2019 Sea Queen Albariño, Edna Valley (\$28) Round, smooth, and aromatic, this variety is typical of Galicia in northern Spain but is well suited to the ocean-influenced Edna Valley. Lush, generous, and long, with notes of peach and melon as well as bright minerality. ☺

PARAGON VINEYARD CO.

92 Cadre 2019 Band of Stones Grüner Veltliner, Edna Valley (\$28) Smooth and aromatic, with bright acidity, herbal notes, and minerality. Fresh and juicy, pure and balanced, with a lasting finish.

PARAGON VINEYARD CO.

93 Cadre 2019 Stone Blossom Sauvignon Blanc, Edna Valley (\$28) A stunning mineral-inflected wine with notes of herbs, melon, peach, and ocean-influenced citrus; pure aromatics; lovely depth of flavor; and good balance and length. ☺

PARAGON VINEYARD CO.

95 Cliff Lede Vineyards 2017 Rock Block Series Dancing Heart Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$110) Deep garnet color and a lush berry nose. Silky-smooth, with toasty plum, sweet oak, spice, and chocolate, all in balance; rich, long, and elegant. If you're not tuned in to the superior products from this winery, now is the time to start!

93 Cliff Lede 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$78) Rich, aromatic nose of plum and blackberry. Firm and structured, with soft tannins; balanced and long.



94 Gary Farrell 2018 Russian River Selection Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$45) Lovely ruby color and a nose of bright cherry that carries over to the silky palate with sweet oak. A fresh and masterful wine with hints of cola and spice.

VINTUS



95 Gary Farrell 2018 Russian River Selection Chardonnay, Russian River Valley (\$35) Golden color and an aromatic nose. Velvety, rich, and toasty yet crisp, fresh, and elegant, with gorgeous structure and depth.

VINTUS

92 Inman Family Wines 2018 Brut Rosé Sparkling, Russian River Valley (\$68) This elegant and dry yet juicy sparkler made with 100% Pinot Noir has a pale salmon-pink hue and a smooth, fresh palate with notes of strawberry, raspberry, watermelon, and brioche. Refined and long.

97 Knights Bridge 2017 Collinwood Cabernet Sauvignon, Knights Valley (\$150) Opaque garnet color and aromas of rich plum and spice. Smooth and deep, with soft tannins and notes of boysenberry and cassis as well as spice, chocolate, and licorice. Full and luscious, it's an exciting wine from a new Knights Valley player.



97 Knights Bridge 2017 Linville Cabernet Sauvignon, Knights Valley (\$150) Ripe plum, berries, and vanilla on the nose give way to a silky texture. Fresh and juicy, with notes of plum, blueberry, lush vanilla, and exotic spices; generous and long.

97 Knights Bridge 2017 Haggerty Cabernet Sauvignon, Knights Valley (\$150) Rich, chewy, and intense, with a deep garnet color and dense aromas of berry and earth. Massive and layered on the palate, with a creamy mouthfeel, flavors of chocolate and spice, and good balance.

91 Lambert Estate 2018 Thoroughbred Cabernet Sauvignon, Dry Creek Valley (\$39) Medium garnet color. Smooth, ripe, and velvety; clean and lush, with deep plum and blackberry culminating in a long finish.

91 Landmark Vineyards 2018 Hop Kiln Estate Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$40)

Rich ruby hue; silky and succulent, with ripe berry notes, crisp acidity, and good depth. Earth, spice, and fruit add complexity.



94 Quilceda Creek 2017 CVR Red Wine, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$70)

Soft, warm, vanilla-inflected nose. Rich, luscious, and toasted, with notes of plum, raspberry, and cherry that go deep on the palate with sweet new oak. Good length and lovely balance.



92 Landmark Vineyards 2018 Rodgers Creek Vineyard Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$45)

Deep golden color and a toasty nose; juicy and buttery, with notes of vanilla and toast. A lovely and graceful modern wine that hits all of the desirable elements without being heavy or ponderous.



95 Qupé 2017 Roussanne, Bien Nacido Hillside Estate, Santa Maria Valley (\$40)

Rich golden color and a soft vanilla nose; lush texture and a lovely, buttery, toasted palate. Creamy, layered, and long—it's masterful.

93 Ridge Vineyards 2019 Three Valleys Zinfandel, Sonoma County (\$28)

Vibrant ruby color and a juicy berry nose. Silky, bright, and softly rich, with flavors of berry and spice; long and fresh. This great winery really knows how to make the most out of Zinfandel.



91 Waxwing 2018 Syrah, Lester Family Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (\$35)

Smooth and spicy, with clean, rich, and earthy flavors; long and dense.

IMPORTED

95 Cap Maritime 2018 Chardonnay, Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge, South Africa (\$54)

Looks like Hamilton Russell has some serious competition in the South Africa Chardonnay department from the offshoot of Marc Kent's Boekenhoutskloof operation: This bottling is racy and lush, with creamy vanilla, toasty oak, and generous citrus. It has a smooth texture and lovely balance, with a fruit-forward style that is thoroughly modern.

VINEYARD BRANDS

92 Constantia Glen 2018 TWO, Constantia, South Africa (\$35)

From the most historic region in South Africa comes this fresh and lovely blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon; bursting with bright acidity, tangy citrus, and crisp herbs, it's pure, lively, and long.

VINEYARD BRANDS

95 Lanson Green Label Brut Champagne, France (\$61)

Juicy, crisp, and elegant, with finesse, style, and grace. A stunning, fruit-driven organic effort from a very reliable house.

LANSON INTERNATIONAL AMERICAS

92 Louis Jadot 2019 Pouilly-Fuissé White Burgundy, France (\$31)

Golden color and a fresh nose; smooth and juicy, with a mellow texture, good depth, and bright acidity. Ripe, racy, and refined, it encapsulates what Chardonnay is supposed to taste like.

KOBRAND

93 Maison Roche de Bellene 2018 Meursault Vieilles Vignes, France (\$48)

Old vines have produced a lovely golden wine with sunny, fresh, rich, and tangy flavors; minerals, toasted oak, and elegant style add to the picture.

DR. LOOSEN

94 Maison Roche de Bellene 2018 Beaune Premier Cru Vieilles Vignes Hommage à Françoise Potel, France (\$73)

Smooth and juicy, with fine Pinot Noir flavors of cherry and ripe plum. Tangy, pure, and refined; long and rich.

DR. LOOSEN

93 Palladino 2017 Bricco delle Olive Barbera d'Alba Superiore, Italy (\$27)

Succulent, delicious, and dense yet totally accessible, with a smooth texture, lush berry notes, and a lasting finish. A ripe, rich, and delightful expression of an underappreciated variety.

ENOTEC IMPORTS

BLUE REVIEWS

95 Champagne Taittinger Brut La Française, France (\$50)

One of my favorite nonvintage Bruts, this bottling is bright, lively, crisp, and balanced, with smooth, exuberant Chardonnay-driven style. Racy, elegant, and totally charming; long and memorable.

KOBRAND

95 Champagne Taittinger 2014 Brut, France (\$103)

Here we have Chardonnay sharing the spotlight equally with Pinot, making for a complex expression with lush fruit and layered flavors. Deep and intense but also refined, it's a beautiful and complete wine.

KOBRAND

95 Tenuta di Fessina 2018 A'Puddara Etna Bianco, Italy (\$66)

This knockout wine is even better than the last vintage: It's rich, aromatic, and nuanced as well as dense and layered with ripe citrus, minerals, and bright acidity. The winery, located on the slopes of Mt. Etna in Sicily, has become a star in a very short time; the proprietor is Florence native Silvia Maestrelli.

VINEYARD BRANDS

92 Vincent Girardin 2016 Santenay Terre d'Enfance, France (\$31)

Rich ruby color and a smooth cherry nose; silky and crisp with tangy cherry. Racy, fresh, and balanced; long and charming.

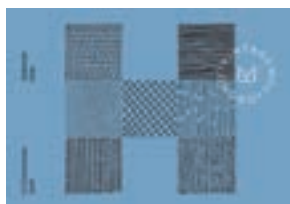
VINEYARD BRANDS



94 Viñedos y Bodegas García Figuero 2017 Crianza 12 Tempranillo, Ribera del Duero, Spain (\$32)

Smooth, clean, and deep, with ripe blackberry, cassis, and good acid structure; jammy, dense, and balanced. A complete wine that checks all the boxes.

QUINTESSENTIAL



92 Vintage Longbottom 2019 Chardonnay, Adelaide Hills, Australia (\$28)

Pale gold hue and a soft, fruity nose; silky and fresh, tangy and fully fruit driven. Smooth, juicy, and generous.

QUINTESSENTIAL

VALUE

91 Antigal Winery & Estates 2020 Uno Sauvignon Blanc, Mendoza, Argentina (\$15)

Lush with bright fruit and a smooth texture; pure, balanced, and long. A terrific value.

CORK ALLIANCE



89 Be Human 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington (\$17)

Pale salmon pink; dry and silky, with refreshing notes of strawberry and apple; balanced, long, and stylish.

89 Care 2020 Solidarity Rosé, Cariñena, Spain (\$10)

Strawberry appears on the nose as well as the crisp, dry, and juicy palate alongside sweet raspberry; fresh and long.

GRAPE JUICE GROUP

92 Avaline Vin de France Red Wine, France (\$24)

An impressive blend of Grenache and Syrah with a lush berry nose. Smooth yet fresh; crisp and clean yet spicy, with depth and balance.

AVALIN



91 Antigal Winery & Estates 2018 Uno Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (\$15)

Deep garnet color and a rich, aromatic nose. Silky and fresh, with tangy, succulent style; notes of blackberry and spice; and good depth. A charming Malbec at a great price.

CORK ALLIANCE

92 Care 2019 Old Vines Garnacha Nativa, Cariñena, Spain (\$13)

Ruby hue and a spicy berry nose. Smooth, ripe, rich, and mellow yet clean and balanced, with loads of charm; long and surprisingly complex.

GRAPE JUICE GROUP

90 Carmel Road 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$18)

Deep garnet color; velvety and juicy, with sweet plum, black raspberry, and cherry. Gentle and balanced, charming and long.

94 Echo Bay 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$19) Bursting with lush and ripe notes of peach, gooseberry, and citrus as well as some lovely floral notes. Polished, long, and deep, it won a double gold medal at the San Francisco International Wine Competition. 🍷

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES

88 Echo Falls Fruit Fusion White Wine with Peach & Mango, Great Britain, United Kingdom (\$8) Smooth, sweet, and quite charming, this tastes just like fresh peach and mango. Juicy and bright; clean with good acid structure. 🍷

QUINTESSENTIAL



90 Lubanzi 2019 Coastal Region Red Blend, South Africa (\$18) This fresh, lively, and long Shiraz-dominant GSM blend is quite delicious, with crisp flavors of tangy berries and spice.

CAPEVENTURE

88 Funckenhausen 2020 Rosé, Mendoza, Argentina (\$15) Pale salmon-pink color with a succulent and mellow palate. Simple but quite appealing; tangy and refreshing. 1 liter. 🍷

GLOBAL VINEYARD

90 Herdade do Esporão 2019 Monte Velho White, Alentejo, Portugal (\$9) Smooth and juicy, with clean, fresh, and tangy flavors. Bright and aromatic, with balance and style; an incredible value.

NOW WINE IMPORTS



93 Morgan Winery 2019 Albariño, Arroyo Seco (\$22) Aromatic, bright, and charming; juicy and silky, with racy acidity and a backdrop of smooth, rich flavors. Another fine product from this outstanding producer. 🍷

97 Navarro Vineyards 2019 Riesling, Anderson Valley (\$22) Golden color and aromas of candied apricot. Good acidity and silky, sweet flavors of honey and vanilla define the creamy and lush palate before giving way to a long and intense finish. This Mendocino winery clearly excels at late-harvest wines.

94 Vietti 2018 Barbera d'Asti Tre Vigne, Italy (\$18) Vibrant ruby color and a fresh cherry nose. Juicy and pure, with racy acidity and lovely notes of raspberry and cherry. I will never understand why Barbera is not much more popular than it is, but until that happens, you'll fortunately be able to buy great wines like this one at low prices.

DALLA TERRA

93 Vietti 2019 Roero Arneis, Italy (\$25) Smooth, lush, and deep yet bright and tangy with fresh, balanced fruit; lively acidity; and layered flavors—a gorgeous wine.

DALLA TERRA



91 MyStory Wine Co. 2017 Bourbon Barrel Aged Malbec, Paso Robles (\$22) Spicy, toasted nose and a clean, silky, fresh palate, with juicy fruit; tangy acid structure; and bright, toasty nuances as well as good length and balance.

SPIRITS

95 Crystal Head Onyx Agave Vodka, USA (\$55) Deep, rich nose and a smooth and sumptuous texture. The clean, intense palate displays an obvious note of agave. Elegant, seamless, and concentrated, it's clearly another triumph for this brand.



BLUE REVIEWS



93 Black Infusions Black Fig Vodka, USA (\$32) Deep mahogany color and aromas of ripe fig. Creamy, authentic, and rich, with profound flavors of dried figs—all that's missing are the little seeds. Deep and sweet, long and balanced; try it on the rocks.

93 Black Infusions Gold Apricot Vodka, USA (\$32) Brilliant orange-gold hue, with ripe apricot prevalent on the nose; rich apricot flavor comes through deliciously on the silky texture. The test of any flavored vodka is that it be fresh and authentic, and this one passes by a long shot—it would also be great on the rocks.



94 Cutwater Tequila Añejo, Mexico (\$50) Pale amber color and a sweet agave nose. Clean, spicy, and a bit sweet, with a smooth, refined texture; rich and balanced, deep and long.



93 Doña Vega Mezcal Espadín, Mexico (\$50) The spiciness of the rich nose carries over to the smoky palate, which offers a velvety texture and notes of pepper and sweet agave. Lush, generous, and complete.



93 Alfred Giraud Heritage French Malt Whisky, France (\$155) Well, here's something new: a quality single malt from France. Spiced and silky-smooth, with notes of malted barley and lovely depth; toasty, mellow, and rich. This is a remarkably accomplished spirit.

93 Alfred Giraud Harmonie French Malt Whisky, France (\$190) Pale amber color and a soft nose. Rich, deep, smooth, and complex; toasty, elegant, and charming, with good balance and a persistent finish.

92 Restoration Kentucky Rye Whiskey, USA (\$40) A complex expression from Castle & Key with a ruddy light-amber color. Aromatic, smooth, and spicy; clean and balanced, with toasty, elegant style.

93 SIA Blended Scotch Whiskey, Scotland (\$52) This new women-owned blend is mellow, silky, and refined, with creamy flavors and notes of sweet oak. Long and lush, it's an exceptionally smooth and amiable entry-level Scotch.

96 Woodford Reserve Master's Collection Very Fine Rare Bourbon, USA (\$130) Lovely caramel color and a rich nose of sweet vanilla and honey. Silky, luscious, and balanced, with notes of spice and treacle; creamy, deep, and layered.



94 O.H. Ingram River Aged Straight Rye Whiskey, USA (\$73) Soft amber color and smooth aromas of spice. Creamy, layered, and elegant, with sweet, lush flavors of vanilla, oak, treacle, cinnamon, and caramel; long and lovely. *LZ*



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In each issue, Tasting Panel publisher/editor-in-chief 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

PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



WINES



MAN Family Wines 2019 Skaapveld Syrah, Agter-Paarl, South Africa (\$11)

The name "Skaapveld" refers to the grazing lands of the coastal region that produced this juicy and delicious Syrah blended with Mourvèdre, Cinsault, and Grenache. Gamey notes of grilled meat and white pepper season pomegranate and rhubarb. The mouthfeel is equally fulfilling, with vibrant acidity and a finish that delivers a good dose of red fruit, bay leaf, cinnamon, and cedar. Well done! **90**



VINEYARD BRANDS



J. Lohr 2019 Riverstone Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$14)

The fragrance of star fruit, pineapple, and chamomile mesmerizes before a creamy wave of lemon curd, salted peanut brittle, spiced cantaloupe, and jasmine lights up the senses. **92**



Goose Ridge Vineyards 2018 g3 Merlot, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$15)

Blended with a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec and aged 16 months in barrel, this well-developed red features showy aromatics and a ripe palate. High-toned acidity and dusty coffee tannins keep it food friendly and structured as blackberry skin offers more texture. **92**



10 Span 2018 Chardonnay, Monterey County (\$12)

The California condor, with its 10-foot wingspan, is the mascot for this brand. While vision is the condor's most highly developed sense, our nose plays a key role in our exploration of wine, including this 75% barrel-fermented white with luscious aromas of vanilla and lemon curd. Generous notes of honeyed pear and yellow apple span the unctuous and buttery palate as chamomile and vanilla soar their way to the finish. **90**



THE WINE GROUP

Worthy of a smooch.

French-style double bizou.

Wildly infatuated.

Seriously smitten.

Head over heels in love.



Tassajara 2019 Pinot Noir, Monterey (\$18) This Pinot Noir with 5% Petite Sirah, 4% Tannat, 2% Chardonnay, and 2% Tempranillo is not only unique but made with certified-sustainable estate-grown fruit. It's a floral beauty marked by earth soaked in cinnamon and cherry as well as bright acidity underscored by savory notes of brush and sweet tobacco. I loved every sip! **93**



VINO DEL SOL



Hahn 2019 Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey County (\$18) The weighty, mouth-filling body of this extremely expressive wine is defined by notes of lemon-flavored butterscotch, brioche, and ripe papaya. Good mineral content exhibits the terroir and creates a shock of dryness on the palate. **92**



SIMI 2019 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$19) Aromas of peach and pineapple crest into a wave of butterscotch. This is an easy-drinking, balanced sipper that is not too rich and not too lean. **90**

CONSTELLATION BRANDS



Imagery 2019 Chardonnay, California (\$20) Adding 5% Chenin Blanc to this lean, crisp, and fragrant wine brings out an array of floral notes on the nose and palate. Scents of peach and pear are fresh and clean. **91**

THE WINE GROUP/BENZIGER



Hahn 2019 GSM, Arroyo Seco, Monterey County (\$20) A balanced and extraverted blend of Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre with flavors of dark chocolate, sweet plum, and cinnamon-tinged earthiness. **91**



Château de Pizay Morgon, Beaujolais, France (\$20) This outstanding Gamay comes from 45-year-old vines grown on an estate in the foothills of the Beaujolais mountains that dates back to the 14th century. Earth and spice lift notes of rhubarb and beets as well as soft hints of powdered strawberry, plum, and cocoa. There's no denying a core of slate joined by fine acidity and an array of floral tones throughout. It's a beauty. **93**

DAVID MILLIGAN SELECTIONS



Château Cabezac 2019 Cuvée Alice AOP Minervois, Languedoc-Roussillon, France (\$20) This charming blend of Grenache Blanc, Macabeu, and Roussanne is steely and lean, with a verve that brings out white floral tones, anise, and tangerine zest. **92**

DAVID MILLIGAN SELECTIONS



Nobilo 2019 Icon Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$20) Plumeria, gooseberry, and pink grapefruit romance the nose. High acidity vibrates with the zest of lime and grapefruit as well as honeyed pear while oregano and sage enliven the exciting palate. **92**

CONSTELLATION BRANDS



Château de Seguin 2015 Cuvée Carpe Diem, Bordeaux Supérieur, France (\$20) This 100% Merlot with a fine French profile is a great value: You can taste the earth through slate and dry, chalky tannins. Aromas and texture mingle through notes of plum and plum skin, underbrush, and dark roast coffee. **90**

PLUME RIDGE



Butternut 2018 Chardonnay, California (\$15) Heavenly tropical aromas of gardenia and ripe pineapple are brought down to earth by yummy scents of lemon cookies. Surprisingly, the expected buttery notes from this popular—and well-respected—label are reined in by vivid acidity. Brisk notes of salted pear, basil leaf, and pine nut edge in midway. This may be one of the top food-friendly Chardonnays out there for under \$20. **92**

MILLER FAMILY WINE COMPANY

Publisher's PICKS



Tribute 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Monterey County

(\$20) An exciting perfume of grapefruit zest and oregano leads to freshly squeezed pink grapefruit and tangerine marmalade on the palate, where Italian herbs and jasmine are highlighted by a fine acid structure. Partial sur lie aging in neutral barrels adds a lovely texture. **92**



Tribute 2018 Pinot Noir, California

(\$20) Aromas of sweet earth and black cherry intertwine with scents of spiced rose petals. Plum seasoned by underbrush and burnished with stunning acidity brings out winsome earthy notes. Cocoa-dusted cedar with some salinity defines the finish. **91**



Tribute 2018 Chardonnay, Monterey County

(\$20) First comes the stunning nose of honeyed peach and acacia flowers, followed by vibrant, sunshine-blessed flavors of peach nectar, honeysuckle, and yellow apple. Vanilla wafer plays on the palate, adding to a succulent texture rimmed by graceful acidity. **93**



Black Stallion 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley

(\$20) The nose introduces a stunning, sensually aromatic trio of lemon verbena, pineapple, and vanilla custard. A wave of creaminess defines the mouthfeel, but lime and grapefruit zest combined with a foundation of minerality give the wine a leaner edge mid-palate. Oregano and sage season Granny Smith apple before the finish of vanilla-buttered pear restores the creamy texture. **92**



DELICATO FAMILY WINES



Frey Vineyards 2018 Chateau Frey Pinot Gris, Mendocino

(\$20) Certified organic by the USDA as well as certified Biodynamic, this wine aged in stainless-steel tanks. Clean, pure notes of peach nectar come through with clarity before an ethereal curtain of mango drops in midway, assuming a light, velvety texture. It finishes with notes of lanolin, wet stone, and pine nut. **93**



Out East 2019 Rosé, Côtes de Provence, France

(\$20) This blend of 70% Grenache and 30% Cinsault charms the senses with a nose of earth and salty black raspberry. One of the more serious and complex rosés we've tasted this year, it's lean, lively, and distinctive, with flavors of rose petal and melon. Minerality adds a drying mouthfeel to the classic Provençal profile. **92**

OUT EAST



Jip Jip Rocks 2019 Shiraz, Padthaway, South Australia

(\$20) Named for local outcrops of 350-million-year-old pink-red granite, this wine is an exceptional value, with spicy flavors of rhubarb and plum that generously spread across the palate. Blackberry preserves, licorice, white pepper, and stony notes merge with dark chocolate and cedar on the finish. **92**



KYSELA PERE ET FILS, LTD



Steenberg 2018 The Black Swan Sauvignon Blanc, Constantia, South Africa

(\$25) This white has a distinct personality: It's leesy, with a thread of steely minerality and herbal notes softened by lemon butter drizzled on cashew. It finishes with a plethora of white tea flowers. **91**

BECK FAMILY ESTATES.



Yamhill Valley Vineyards 2018 Pinot Blanc, McMinnville AVA, Willamette Valley, Oregon

(\$25) The oldest winery and second-oldest vineyard in the McMinnville AVA, Yamhill Valley Vineyards produces 100% estate-grown wines. The stunning aromas and flavor profile of this delicate yet highly expressive white capture our attention with scents of vanilla pudding, yellow flowers, and Bosc pear that lead to a magnificent mouthfeel. Striking acidity lies within the slightly creamy body and notes of tangerine and jasmine linger. **92**



Steenberg 2018 Sémillon, Constantia Valley, South Africa

(\$25) Fantastic scents of lanolin, lime, and white cherry are a testament to this variety's aromatic capabilities. Notes of mandarin orange, honeysuckle, and hazelnut—almost a recipe for biscotti—group together with good acid structure and a lean edge. Glossy and beautiful. **92**



BECK FAMILY ESTATES



Schild Estate 2016 Edgar Schild Reserve Old Bush Vine Grenache, Barossa Valley, South Australia

(\$30) These low-yielding vines were planted in the southern Barossa Valley in 1916. The wine is juicy, with focused acidity and notes of spiced clove and mulberry. Sage-kissed black cherry and sandalwood meld with tarry notes of soy and balsamic. A superior sipper! **94**





Keermont 2017 Terrasse, Stellenbosch, South Africa

(\$34) The terraced, dry-farmed vineyards at Keermont inspired the name of this marvelous Chenin Blanc-based blend (39%) with Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Viognier. Fermented in French oak and rested on the lees for 12 months, it's layered with floral notes of buttercup as well as vanilla and melon. A dollop of pineapple and lime softens the high acidity and lifts up the wine's savory qualities, highlighted by its sleek, salty mouthfeel. **93**

KYSELA PERE ET FILS, LTD.



Brick Barn Wine Estate 2019 Estate Grown Albariño, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County

(\$38) This cool Santa Ynez Valley estate experiences the same maritime breezes that influence the nearby Sta. Rita Hills AVA. As this variety loves that type of climate (think Rías Baixas and even Edna Valley!), the conditions here have produced a streamlined white with poetry and verve. Aromas of honeydew and salted pear are delicate and clean, and on the palate, jasmine and thyme spark notes of melon, chamomile, and pine nut. Acidity is thrilling, as it should be. **93**



Laetitia 2018 Reserve du Domaine Pinot Noir, Arroyo Grande Valley, San Luis Obispo County

(\$44) Foggy summer mornings and a late harvest season created a very pretty wine with full ripeness and fine acidity. Light, feminine rose petals and a chalky cocoa-raspberry tannin structure define its billowy, willowy nature. Aged in French oak for 11 months. **92**

VINTAGE WINE ESTATES



Angela Vineyards 2017 Pinot Noir, Yamhill-Carlton, Willamette Valley, Oregon

(\$38) Winemaker Alban Debeaulieu has the ability to "showcase [his wines'] individualities while treading lightly on the earth," according to the winery. Organically farmed and aged for 12–18 months on the lees in French oak, this expression features aromas of chocolate-covered cherries and balanced, pleasurable flavors of red apple, cinnamon, and clove. It's mouth-filling, with nice weight and a spice rack that engages red berries and pomegranate as they become juicier with each sip. **92**



Concha y Toro 2018 Marques de Casa Concha Etiqueta Negra, DO Puente Alto, Maipo Valley, Chile

(\$40) This blend of 73% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, and 10% Petit Verdot offers a textural massage, with a profound flavor profile and powdery dark-chocolate tannins. Deep and enduring scents of sweet plum preserves, cocoa, and underbrush give way to a dark and haunting palate. Campfire marshmallows lend a bit of smoke, with notes of licorice and blackberry pie that are more subtle than overtly sweet. **93**



FETZER VINEYARDS



Montinore Estate 2017 Reserve Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon

(\$40) From a Demeter-certified Biodynamic and CCOF-certified organic 200-acre vineyard in the northern part of the Willamette comes this truly deluxe expression. Juicy and exotically spiced with rose and cinnamon, it shows mid-palate flavors of cocoa and pomegranate before an earthy finish adds a touch of soy sauce while expressing the terroir. **93**



Trione Vineyards and Winery 2017 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County

(\$42) This is a full-bodied Pinot, with rose petal and cinnamon peeking out of underbrush. It's savory, rich, and spicy, with an earthy finish. **93**



Champagne À L'EST Brut, Épernay, Champagne, France

(\$45) Wine company Out East partnered with La Maison du Champagne's highly regarded winemaker Christophe Rapeneau for this sparkler that arouses the palate with verve. A Pinot Noir-dominant blend with 27% Chardonnay and 13% Pinot Meunier; it opens up with aromas of lemongrass and oregano. Minerality comes to the surface as the bubbles dissipate; notes of green apple and lime zest follow. **93**

OUT EAST



Publisher's PICKS



Turnbull 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

(\$50) Known for its prestigious Oakville fruit (three of the four vineyard sources for this vintage are within the AVA), this "affordable luxury" Napa Cab represents a renowned label that has been producing wine since 1979. The round and opulent liquid shows a terrific concentration of black fruit; dusted tannins highlighted by dark chocolate; and a meaty character dappled with violets and cassis. **94**



Trione Vineyards and Winery 2016 Henry's Blend, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County

(\$58) Each component of this rich small-production blend of 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 13% Petit Verdot, 13% Cab Franc, and 5% Malbec fermented and aged separately; they were then blended after 12 months. It's highlighted by lush, sumptuous, violet-kissed black fruit as well as notes of leather, chocolate, and white pepper. **94**



Sea Smoke 2018 South- ing Pinot Noir, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Barbara County

(\$80) Working with ten clones of Pinot Noir on 135 acres that boast a variety of elevations and soil types, winemaker Don Schroeder has room to create a wine from the most complex lots of each vintage. Aging 16 months in 28% new French oak results in a lush experience that's not about delicacy but rather energy and stamina. Scents of jasmine and vanilla linger as broad strokes of pomegranate, rhubarb, plum, and cinnamon integrate with a fine thread of minerality. **96**



Craggy Range 2017 Pinot Noir, Te Muna Road Vineyard, Martinborough, New Zealand

(\$50) Grapes from the higher of the designated vineyard's two terraces are fermented with indigenous yeast to produce this wine, whose notes of candied watermelon and raspberry play out with searing acidity. It's delicious and elegant, thanks to a gossamer of cherry, beetroot, red tea, and cocoa. **94**



KOBRAND



Ancient Peaks 2017 Oyster Ridge, Santa Margarita Ranch, Paso Robles

(\$60) Calcium-rich soils and white oyster fossils from ancient sea beds proliferate in the vineyard that produces this special cuvée; a blend of 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot, and smaller portions of Malbec, Cab Franc, and Merlot, the 2017 vintage shines. Exemplary aromatics of violets, chocolate, and dates fill the air, and on the palate, an explosion of plum and blackberry is reined in by slate and dusty, firm tannins. Its generous mouthfeel, bold personality, and persistent fruity-floral perfume prove its world-class status. Aged 23 months in 95% French and 5% American oak barrels. **94**



Feudo Principi di Butera 2014 Deliella Nero d'Avola Sicilia IGT, Italy

(\$90) Refined Old World acidity and chalky tannins result in an elegant and polished red that aged in one-year-old Tonneau French oak for 18 months, followed by an additional eight months in bottle. Sugared cocoa and plum skins are accented by grape licorice and tart cherry. **94**



1821 FINE WINE & SPIRITS



Duckhorn 2018 Chardonnay, Hu- ichica Hills Vineyard, Napa Valley

(\$58) Situated in Carneros, this wine hails from a vineyard planted on clay-loam soils; it fermented on the lees, aged in French oak, and underwent only 22% malolactic fermentation. Its subtle creaminess and reined-in richness allow a lovely mineral profile to show itself. Balanced, blessed with ripe pear; and enhanced by chamomile, the palate also reveals vanilla custard with a dot of spearmint. **94**



Brandlin 2016 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley

(\$75) Brandlin's estate fruit is sourced at elevations up to 1,250 feet on 38 acres planted to Bordeaux varieties. This blend of 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Malbec, 7% Cab Franc, and 5% Petit Verdot is an eloquent, concentrated journey above the fog line on Mount Veeder's steep slopes. Roasted coffee, chocolate, fig, and a plush, velvet-lined array of dark berries make the ascent invigorating. **94**



CUVAISON ESTATE WINES



Duckhorn 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley

(\$100) VP of winemaking Renée Ary reached a new level of eloquence with the 2017 vintage, as evidenced by our tasting of many of her vineyard designates. Working with 22 coopers and 45 different types of French oak barrels, Ary has the ability to bring out the personality of each site. This Rutherford Cab allows flavors of bright black cherry and blackberry to emerge from a rich, earthy, and sweet soil core. Midway, flavors of espresso, violets, and mountain herbs add to its structure as well as its broody nature. Tannins barely dust the teeth as chocolate melts and flowers bloom. **96**



Ladera 2016 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$115) *Ladera* is Spanish for “hillside,” and this winery lives up to its name with its wonderful interpretations of mountain fruit. Winemaker Jade Barrett refers to 2016 as “one of those classic vintages in Napa Valley, with no serious heat spikes or threat of rain. Our Cabernet Sauvignon was able to mature gradually.” Thanks to that maturity, luxury comes in via a blissfully generous array of black and blue fruit. While dark chocolate paints the palate, sturdy tannins are bound with fine acidity and a balanced richness. **97**



Corison 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$195) With pure focus, this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon zeroes in on sleekness. Aged 20 months in French oak, it has a relatively low ABV of 13.9%, and the acid and fruit are balanced, leaning toward elegance without lacking for power. Notes of dark chocolate join hints of mint and dried heather that meld in turn with plum for a sensational mouthfeel. **95**



Spottswoode 2017 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$225) The day after the fruit was picked for this vintage in early October 2017, wildfires broke out in Napa Valley; they were preceded by hail in June and a very hot summer. Despite the climatic misfortunes, the flames had no impact on this 138-year-old estate, which in 1985 became one of the first vineyards in Napa Valley to be farmed organically. Recently, Biodynamic methods have also been adopted, enriching soils and strengthening vines, according to vineyard manager and winemaker Aron Weinkauff. The wine—89% Cabernet Sauvignon with 7% Cab Franc and 4% Petit Verdot—balances spice and oak with seamless distinction. Accompanied by boysenberry, earth, and dark chocolate, crushed violets paint a deep hue on the nose. Plum-skin tannins are as sturdy as the blue fruits that wash over the palate. **98**



SPIRITS



Coconut Cartel Special Guatemalan Dark Rum with Coconut Water, Guatemala (\$38) An outstanding añejo rum with just an echo of toasted coconut. The palate is almost ethereal: A luxurious dollop of cocoa and coffee lingers, with a spark of spice and a hint of minerality appearing on the sleek finish. **93**



PARK STREET IMPORTS/
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O.H. Ingram River Aged Straight Whiskey, USA (\$78) River-aged barrels are exposed to the drastic rise and fall of the water’s temperatures; the constant friction of the water keeps the vessels in motion, aiding the maturation process for a minimum of three years. This rye-based 96-proofer features aromas of tangerine and butterscotch that lead to a silky palate coated with notes of crème brûlée, papaya, dried apricot, and pine nuts. The long finish brings forth key lime pie and graham cracker crust. **94**



Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino, Mexico (\$120) A stunning nose of sugared pineapple is surrounded by bright agave freshness and lime zest. The satin-coated liquid warms the palate as lilac-scented lime and a wash of tangerine peel converge for a tart starkness. It’s mineral-driven and dry, with a gravitas that’s also palpable in its seamless finish. **98**



Blue Run Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, USA (\$169) Jim Rutledge, the former master distiller for prestigious brand Four Roses, crafts this 13-year-old whiskey that honors the Bluegrass State. The nose is earthy, with notes of brown rice, peach, and pekoe tea, and the palate vibrates with energetic flavors of maple-kissed MacIntosh apple followed by apricot and tangy orange peel. Chocolate caramel comes in mid-palate and the mouth reels with the liquid’s staying power. **96** *LT*



SOUTH SIDE PRIDE

EXPLORING
Top-Tier Wines
FROM THE BOTTOM
HALF OF THE WORLD

The most recent installment of Geographical Digest, an ongoing series from our sister publication *The SOMM Journal* in collaboration with *National Geographic*, *The New Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia*, and *SommCon*, delved into the wines of notable producers dispersed throughout the Southern Hemisphere. Despite their incredible diversity, they have one thing in common: All of their memorable expressions, including those listed here, have an uncanny ability to transport your palate to their far-flung places of origin.

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC





Viñas Queirolo is located in Peru's Ica Valley.



Intipalka 2019 Chardonnay, Ica Valley, Peru (\$14) From Viñas Queirolo's Ica Valley vineyards 1,500 feet above sea level, this seductive white greets with a nose of vanilla and chamomile. Its round, leesy body shows butterscotch and tropical fruit. **92**



Intipalka 2019 Malbec, Ica Valley, Peru (\$14) Juicy with spiced cranberry and black cherry. Underbrush and coffee tannins add depth. Plum and slate meet midway, joining sensations of earth and leather. **92**



Intipalka 2018 Gran Reserva N° 1, Ica Valley, Peru (\$50) A showpiece blend of 55% Malbec and 45% Tannat sourced from high-elevation desert vineyards that influence its concentration. Aromas of cherry, coffee, and terroir come through. Acidity is augmented by the flavor of sour cherry while earthy notes of soy sauce, mulberry, beetroot, and blackberry are deep and inviting. It's luxury unleashed. **95**

Bodega Norton 2018 Reserva Malbec, Mendoza (\$19) A big-bodied, silky red with a brooding side. Concentration of rich, meaty notes with dark chocolate and blackberry preserves. Elegant yet plush—a fantastic steak wine. **92**

KOBRAND

Argento 2018 Finca Altamira Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (\$40) Plush and elegant, with meaty notes that ride alongside violets, licorice, and blackberry preserves. Mulberry-washed cedar is spiced with vanilla and cinnamon. **93**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY WINES & SPIRITS

Reyneke 2016 Syrah, Stellenbosch, South Africa (\$29) Made with organic grapes, this dense red has a yin-yang pattern of dominant savory and lighthearted floral tones. Notes of licorice and granite reflect the vineyard soil as black pepper comes through with grace. **93**

VINEYARD BRANDS



Eccentric 2020 Chardonnay, Mendoza, Argentina (\$10) Weighty, ripe, and lush with mango and vanilla wafer. The rich and oak-centric palate leads to a caramel finish. **90**

GRUPO PEÑAFLORES

Finca Flichman 2018 Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendoza, Argentina (\$15) Striking notes of licorice bathed in dark chocolate, blueberry, tar, dried flowers, and tobacco. Savory but gentle in the mouth and noteworthy for the price. **91**

SOGRAPE/EVATON



Mascota Vineyards 2018 Unánime Merlot, Mendoza, Argentina (\$23)

This 100% Merlot sourced from Uco Valley vineyards in Gualtallary, Tunpungato, is a lush, magnanimous red overflowing with blackberry and plum. Notes of dark chocolate, black pepper, and cigar leaf set a savory tone. Primed acidity keeps this impressive wine tasting fresh through the lengthy finish. Aged in French oak for 12 months. **93**

MASCOTA VINEYARDS

Château Los Boldos 2020 Grande Reserve Sauvignon Blanc, Cachapoal Andes, Chile (\$21) Staggering notes of clean, fresh-squeezed grapefruit. Dots of tarragon, a thread of minerality, and floral tones weave through the bright fruit. **92**

Château Los Boldos 2019 Grande Reserve Merlot, Cachapoal Andes, Chile (\$21) Chewy tannins meet ripe black cherry and raspberry. Espresso and earth show up midway, while slate joins spiced toast on the finish. **90**

Château Los Boldos 2019 Vieilles Vignes Syrah, Cachapoal Andes, Chile (\$15) Aged 12 months in French oak, this wine offers aromas and flavors of spiced coffee, blackberry, and slate. It continues to develop with an earthiness sweetened by black licorice and soy sauce. **91**

Paso Robles
in the

RED

**TASTING WITH THE AVA'S LEADING
PRODUCERS OF BORDEAUX VARIETIES**

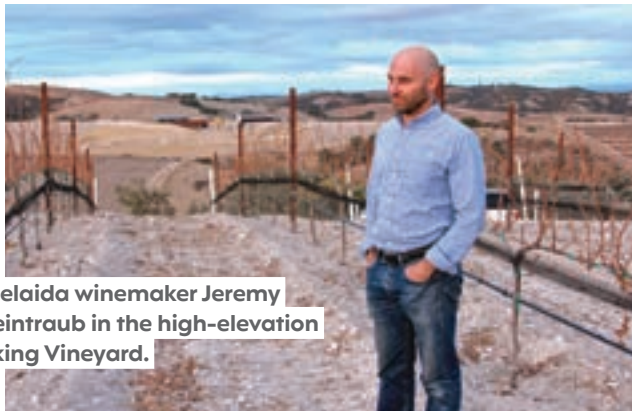
story by Meredith May / photos by Mary Lagier



At Brecon Estate, Roy the border collie shows the way to the winery's elegant reds.

When *Tasting Panel* and *SOMM Journal* VP of education Lars Leicht and I ventured north to the Central Coast late last autumn, we never expected to meet up with so many members of the Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC). But we're glad we did: The nonprofit group of 23 winery and grower members has proven worthy of world-class status for Bordeaux-style reds.

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO



Adelaida winemaker Jeremy Weintraub in the high-elevation Viking Vineyard.

A High Point:

ADELAIDA VINEYARDS & WINERY

"We're focused on growing balanced, long-lived wines," said Adelaida winemaker Jeremy Weintraub, a New York native who has found a new home in one of Paso's highest-elevation vineyards. "The desire is to have our wines pair well with food."

Weintraub sees soil composition as a key factor in the aromatic and flavor profile of Paso wines. "The high pH of our limestone soils results in wines with good acidity and structure, which is the opposite of many other regions," he pointed out. Relatively low in organic matter and dramatically thin, these soils ensure that Adelaida makes some of the AVA's sleekest, most elegant wines.

Adelaida Vineyards & Winery 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon Signature, Viking Estate Vineyard (\$125) The perfume of wild strawberry and florals is exceptional. A sweetness ensues as acid spreads out across the tongue and meets up with gentle, chalky tannins before a long finish. **96**

Adelaida Vineyards & Winery 2017 Cabernet Franc Signature, Viking Estate Vineyard (\$80) With its dried violets and integrity of fruit, this is a clear interpretation of the Viking Vineyard, marked by structure, textured tannins, and a lack of pyrazines. "This grape is most suited for our environment," noted Weintraub. "It endures all that Paso Robles has to give, from extreme heat to cold." **95**

The Stylists:

J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES

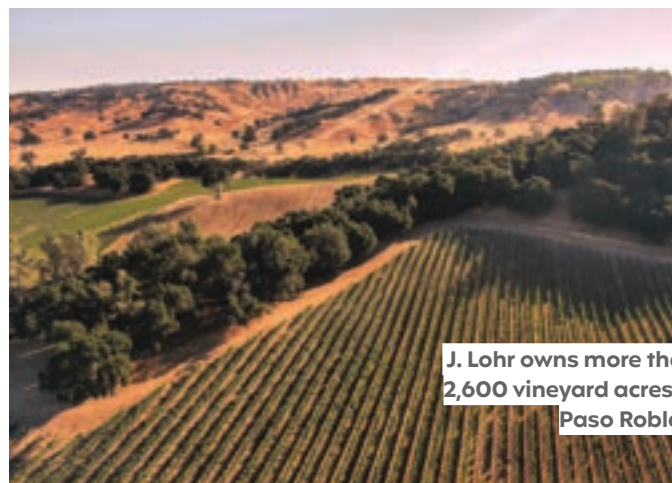
It was in the mid-1980s that Jerry Lohr became a trailblazer in Paso Robles, fortuitously sensing that the area had considerable potential for superb expressions of Bordelais varieties. In the years since, J. Lohr's reputation for sustainability as well as quality has grown, earning the winery an annual certification from the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance—an honor it has maintained for over a decade.

J. Lohr Estates 2018 Los Osos Merlot (\$15) The fruit for this wine was grown in the moderately cool El Pomar District sub-AVA. Ripeness comes in at a perfect pitch, and 16% Malbec adds a juicy mouthfeel to complement the high pigment and supple tannins. Red berries, currants, and cocoa are dense and expressive; the use of oak is restrained so as not to impact aromatics. "Let fruit have its day," as director of winemaking Steve Peck put it. **91**

J. Lohr 2018 Seven Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon (\$17) The winery's top-selling appellation Cab displays meaty aromas as notes of cedar and oak integrate with the tannin structure. Aged for 12 months in 60-gallon American oak barrels, this red is ripe and ready with spicy espresso and bold dark-cherry flavors. **90**

J. Lohr 2017 Signature Cabernet Sauvignon (\$100) This new 3,200-bottle release is a high-toned floral beauty with a black-pepper middle. Wild strawberries are extroverted, violets aromatic, and the plush-velvet texture exquisite. The Cabernet fruit, which comes from the estate's Beck Vineyard in the Creston District sub-AVA, sees the addition of 4% Cab Franc, 3% Malbec, and 3% Saint-Macaire; known as the eighth Bordeaux variety, the latter has a savory, dense, roasted effect. Aged 20 months in new French oak. **95**

PHOTO: JEREMY BALL



J. Lohr owns more than 2,600 vineyard acres in Paso Robles.

In the “Heart” of Paso:

NINER WINE ESTATES

“Our future is in this site,” Niner Wine Estates president Andy Niner pointed out on a cool fall morning. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we were seated outdoors at his winery’s restaurant with winemaker Patrick Muran, chilled to the bone. But what warmed our hearts—besides the best tomato soup and cheese plate ever—was the view of the surrounding vines.

Located in the Willow Creek District, defined by its sedimentary hillsides, Heart Hill Vineyard has been home to Niner Wine Estates for the past 14 years. Planted to Bordeaux varieties, it yields standout bottlings of Cab Franc and Carménère. Niner’s other vineyards include its flagship Bootjack Ranch, first planted in 2001 in the Geneseo District, and its newest site, Jespersen Ranch, planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay just 4 miles from the Pacific in Edna Valley.

Niner Wine Estates 2017 Cabernet Franc (\$45)

“For us, Cab Franc has always had an audience,” Niner explained. While it’s not usually used as a dominant varietal, many producers have found Paso to be its sweet spot. “The acidity is vivid,” noted Muran. “That’s the key to its longevity.” Red fruit abounds in this wine (which also contains 18% Cabernet Sauvignon), taking cinnamon and beetroot down an energetic path. **94**

Niner Wine Estates 2017 Malbec (\$45)

Juicy and plush with 13% Syrah and 9% Cabernet Sauvignon. Approachable and food friendly, it shows red plum and cocoa tannins. **93**

Niner Wine Estates 2017 Fog Catcher (\$100)

Spending 29 months in 85% new French oak, this blend of 44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Malbec, 20% Petit Verdot, and 10% Cabernet Franc offers Old World sensitivity and finesse while echoing the beauty and reined-in power of a Nebbiolo. It reveals its ethereal nature through dimensions of strawberry and cocoa intertwined with minerality. **95**



Niner Wine Estates president Andy Niner with winemaker Patrick Muran at estate vineyard Heart Hill.



Damian Grindley, winemaker and proprietor of Brecon Estate, stands with *The Tasting Panel* and *The SOMM Journal*'s VP of education, Lars Leicht, and publisher/editor-in-chief, Meredith May. Border collie Roy looks on.

Connecting the Calcareous Dots:

BRECON ESTATE

Australian native and world-class caver Damian Grindley was drawn to his adopted home's calcareous soils. "Many cave regions, like the Limestone Coast of Australia, are on limestone foundations," he explained in a previous interview with our contributing editor Randy Caparoso. "And there you have the link to Paso Robles."

Grindley's winemaking career took him from Australia to Europe before he arrived in California in 2011. His estate is located in the Adelaide District, where limestone is most ubiquitous. He purchased it with the goal of creating wines that aged well, understanding that Paso's day-to-night temperature extremes and dry climate as well as limited potassium uptake in the limestone soils meant good acidity. "All of these elements contribute to optimal bottle aging," he explained.

Brecon Estate 2017 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$78) This own-rooted Adelaide District Cab is a gentle giant that contains minor amounts of Petit Verdot, Tannat, and Petite Sirah. Its elegant mouthfeel is proof of perfect ripeness, and its tamed tannins add to its sense of refinement with notes of cinnamon; cedar; and concentrated, vibrant blackberry. Brecon Estate claims one of Paso's oldest plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, which is here blended with some of its youngest, from Hawks Hill Vineyard. **97**

Brecon Estate 2018 Reserve Cabernet Franc (\$78) This single-vineyard wine hails from the oldest Cab Franc vines in Paso Robles, according to Grindley. The mouthfeel and flavors are refined, and the depth of color and elegant tannins match the ongoing fragrance of plum and violets. **97**

Brecon Estate 2017 Meritage (\$64) This wine is a dream of lavender spice with incredible balance between power and elegance; its color, aromatics, and mouthfeel are superbly engaging. Old-vine Cabernet Sauvignon comprises about 22% of the blend, which Petit Verdot leads at 37%; Malbec and Cab Franc are roughly equally represented. Minerality makes a fine platform for the dramatic effects of this stunner. **98**



Finding the Sweet Spot:

VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY

With seven different estate vineyards—two in the Estrella District, one in the Creston District, three in the Adelaida District, and the flagship Huerhuero Vineyard, whose hilly terrain straddles the Geneseo and El Pomar districts—at his disposal, Vina Robles winemaker Kevin Willenborg has the ability to pick and choose fruit according to flavor profile, phenolics, structure, tannin level, and aromatics for the array of wines he produces. “Our ownership is vested heavily in [estate] vineyards,” he pointed out, noting that his winemaking style aims to highlight the differences between them.

Vina Robles 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$26) With 15% Petit Verdot, this striking red sourced from the estate’s Huerhuero and Creston Valley vineyards shows lots of color and structure as well as notes of cassis, dark cherry, cocoa, and pine. The cool Pacific breezes and calcareous subsoils of the Templeton Gap (El Pomar) are a good match with Creston Valley’s higher, warmer location on shallow, granulated limestone soils. **92**

Vina Robles 2018 Mountain Road Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$56) The Terra Bella and Adelaida Springs Ranch vineyards in the prestigious Adelaida District determine this wine’s highly structured profile, while elevated acidity produced by fruit with a low pH defines its elegance. Mid-palate creaminess is a luxe experience. **94**



PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANCIENT PEAKS WINERY



Karl Wittstrom is co-owner of Ancient Peaks Winery.

Where the Deer and the Winemakers Play:

ANCIENT PEAKS WINERY

Ancient Peaks Winery, owned by Karl Wittstrom and his partners Doug Filipponi and Rob Rossi, is the only commercial growing operation in Santa Margarita Ranch, Paso Robles’ southernmost sub-AVA. After leasing out their vineyards for years, they began farming and selling the grapes themselves around the turn of the millennium before launching their own venture in 2005.

Wittstrom’s favorite thing about the wine business is the opportunity to interact with people (no surprise to anyone who has experienced his hospitality). But he still gets his fill of ranch life too, as only 1,000 acres of the Santa Margarita Ranch are planted to vine; the balance contains pistachio orchards and grazing land for cattle—plenty of cattle. (It’s also home to its share of wildlife, including feral pigs, deer, and black bears.)

Due to the cool climate, frost is a risk here, but molds and mildews are at a minimum. Bud break and therefore harvest occur relatively late; the latter usually begins about two weeks after its onset in the rest of Paso, extending in some years into November. This longer, milder growing season ensures balanced flavors in the resulting wines.

Meanwhile, thanks to Santa Margarita Ranch’s diverse soils, the Ancient Peaks team need look nowhere else to source grapes with distinct character. Swaths of rocky alluvium, shale, granitic and volcanic soils, and ancient seabed make for a patchwork of vineyard sites suited to each of the 12 varieties grown on the property, which in turn yield a portfolio that shows off all those combinations of terroir in vivid detail. —Lars Leicht



Ancient Peaks 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Margarita Ranch (\$22) The winery’s flagship grape, Cabernet Sauvignon, also leads the charge for the region itself as a world-class producer of Bordeaux varieties. This one is ripe and balanced, with intuitive acidity unlike that found in any of Paso’s other sub-AVAs. Cedar delivers subtle hints of cocoa and spice while dark cherry and cherry pith give way to a channel of calcareous minerality, black olive, and beetroot. Aged 20 months in French and American oak. **93** —M.M.

Passageway to Paso: **ROBERT HALL WINERY**

“Our Paso Red is the truest and most pure expression of the Paso Robles region,” declared Don Brady, head winemaker for Robert Hall Winery. It’s a strong statement, but the Texas native—who has been in charge of winemaking since the estate was founded in 1999 by entrepreneur Robert Hall—stands by it. Along with winemaker Amanda Gorter, he aims to capture the soul of Paso as one of the few winemakers who sources from all 11 sub-AVAs; the Paso Red incorporates fruit from nine of them.

Located in the Geneseo District, the winery—which was purchased by O’Neill Vintners and Distillers in 2016—also farms 135 acres of its own. We tasted two of the flagship reds and were most impressed, as they overdelivered on quality for the price.

Robert Hall Winery 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20) Featuring the largest proportion of estate fruit in the portfolio, this well-structured blend of 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Merlot, 3% Syrah, and 3% Cab Franc aged in French and Eastern European oak for 18 months. Dense and energetic flavors of high-toned fruit join notes of dark chocolate and blackberry preserves infused into mocha latte. **91**



Robert Hall Winery 2018 Merlot (\$20) This lush red, aged in French and Eastern European oak for 18 months, blends in 7% Cabernet Franc and 3% Petite Sirah for a bloom of floral aromas. Violets also romance the palate, along with sweet black cherry. The acidity is bright and tannins are finely grained. **92**



Where There's Hope: **HOPE FAMILY WINES**

Stasi Seay, director of vineyards at Hope Family Wines, also sources fruit from all 11 Paso Robles sub-AVAs, working with 44 growers that each represent one to ten different vineyards. “We look for soils that drive quality,” she commented, showing me some white-flecked chunks of earth. “We bring these rocks back, looking for those with the highest calcium source.”

In fact, the region’s diversity of soils is so important to their process that the winemaking team has assembled a sample kit to serve as a three-dimensional educational tool. Containing everything from whale bone fragments to shark’s teeth, limestone rocks, and red soil deposits, it’s shared with the sales team, who takes it on the road.

Austin Hope 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$56) An opaque black-purple hue and deep blackberry and anise aromas are the first clues to the depth of flavor and intense concentration in this wine, whose quality is further marked by round tannins. **93**

Austin Hope 2018 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$125) We noted a berry-pie character here, as well as a plethora of floral components. Blended from 50 separate vineyards, the fruit is fresh and vibrant; balsamic comes into play with red currant and stewed strawberries. **95**

Treana 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$30) This elevated everyday drinker is perfect for the by-the-glass programs whose price point it was created to satisfy. With a good mouthfeel, it’s certainly well structured and varietally correct, with ripe, dark berries. **90**



Hope Family Wines’ traveling soil kit shows the diversity of Paso’s terroir, encompassing 45 different soil types across 40,000 vineyard acres.

The Mighty Mountain:
**DAOU
VINEYARDS**

A dramatic view of DAOU's mountain vineyards.

"We've measured 600 Bordeaux and Cabernet Sauvignon wines from all over the world and never found phenolics [such] as we have on our mountain," claimed Daniel Daou, the winemaker-owner of DAOU Vineyards. Daou's wines not only possess abundant color, tannins, aromatics, and flavor but also the acidity and limestone minerality you'd expect from what he refers to as a French style. "It's a rare phenomenon: Paso Robles is armed with the soils of Europe and a perfect climate for ripeness," said the French-trained enologist.

DAOU is perched at 2,200 feet above sea level in the Adelaida District, making it the highest-elevation winery in Paso Robles. Calcareous clay soils and wind that blows nonstop through the dry-farmed vines create wines that, at an average of 14–14.7% ABV, have that "it" factor to add to their luxury and quality.



DAOU Vineyards 2017 Soul of a Lion (\$150) Made from cherished estate fruit (78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Cab Franc, and 9% Petit Verdot), this wine offers incredible color, structure, lasting aromatics, and density of flavor. Around its juicy inner core are blackberry preserves and espresso with a dusting of chalky, calcareous tannins. **98**

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAOU VINEYARDS

Setting Forth with Self-Determination:

POMAR JUNCTION VINEYARD & WINERY



Pomar Junction's Matt and Nikki Merrill.

The advantage to estate-farmed fruit is a measure of control that Pomar Junction enjoys. But “keeping the business in the family is [also] a matter of controlling one’s own destiny,” according to eighth-generation grower Matt Merrill, who with his wife, Nikki, is a minority owner (founder Dana Merrill, Matt’s father, is majority owner). In addition to growing grapes for themselves in the El Pomar District, the Merrills manage over 12,000 acres of vineyards throughout the Central Coast, selling most of their yield to other wineries.



Pomar Junction 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve (\$45)

This Cab shows the Old World character that winemaker Jim Shumate sought. “I pick and choose the rows I want for [it],” he declared. While Matt Merrill noted that canopy management is key to its balance, the

wine is also influenced by its aging regimen, spending 21 months in French and American oak. Earthy notes have a tannic grip while blackberry tartness paints the lithe palate. **93**

“I am always looking for fruit that is phenolically mature; that is, I am not looking for sugar.”

—Pomar Junction winemaker Jim Shumate



Pomar Junction 2014 Cab Forward (\$65)

Scents of ripe blue and black fruit are enhanced by cassis and spiced earth in this reserve blend of 43% Cabernet Sauvignon, 28.5% Petit Verdot, and 28.5% Merlot. On the ripe and rich palate, floral notes of lilac are clear with white pepper, spearmint, and Italian herbs. Silky tannins make for a superb mouthfeel. **94**

The Bordelais Approach:

JUSTIN VINEYARDS & WINERY



JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery sommelier and wine educator Jim Gerakaris, CWE.

Tasting with JUSTIN's sommelier and wine educator, Jim Gerakaris, CWE, always leads to wonderful conversations. On our most recent visit, he delved into his admiration for Cab Franc and the winery's acquisition of new vineyard sites to explore the grape's capabilities in Paso Robles. "Tannins are perkier in Cab Franc," he asserted.

JUSTIN sources grapes from ten of the 11 Paso Robles sub-appellations. "We make full use of the region's mesoclimates," Gerakaris explained. "We'll use our best-of-the-best lots to begin the blends for our best wines—a very Bordeaux-

centric way to make wine." Each parcel gets its own tank and "are all candidates for blending."

Gerakaris is a true believer in the ageworthiness of Paso reds. In a previous interview with Caparoso, he commented, "We often hear people wrongly dismiss the generous styles of Paso Robles wines as not having the ability to age. JUSTIN ISOSCELES can easily age over ten, 15 years. And I recently had some Eberle Cabernet Sauvignons from the 1980s that are holding up really well."



JUSTIN 2017 JUSTIFICATION (\$60) This wine has what Gerakaris calls a Right Bank style, with Cab Franc leading the way (joined by 35% Merlot). Fruit from the Adelaida District lends fullness balanced by chalky minerality; its dark flavors combine with strawberry as well as chocolate and cinnamon notes that differentiate the wine from the norm

in Paso. Aged 20 months in French oak, it's a fine match for duck with Chinese five spice, according to Gerakaris. **95**

JUSTIN 2016 ISOSCELES (\$76) Cabernet Sauvignon (85%), Cab Franc (8%), and Merlot (7%) experience a long hang time, Gerakaris explained, for a rich, mouth-filling style, though the wine remains fresh and balanced. Notes of boysenberry, cherry, persimmon, and orange peel come into play with a light dusting of blue flowers. We would drink this alongside a classic oxtail ragù with polenta. **96**



At McPhee's Grill in Templeton are Gary Eberle; winemaker Chris Eberle (no relation—really!); and Lars Leicht, VP of education for The Tasting Panel and The SOMM Journal.

The Pioneer:

EBERLE WINERY

Eberle founded his eponymous winery in 1979 and has been Paso's pied piper ever since. His estate tours and tastings are inspiring; his personality vivacious and authentic; and his wines European-inspired, ageworthy beauties. Over dinner at McPhee's Grill in Templeton, we tasted an estate-bottled Eberle Cabernet from 1987 that was alive and vibrant with concentrated plum preserves, roasted coffee, and a braised-beef finish.

Eberle 2016 Reserve Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (\$100)

"The fruit ... must be pristine or we don't bottle it for this particular label," Eberle insisted. Released in 2020, the big, robust red boasts über-concentration and color resulting from one month of skin contact. Own-rooted 40-year-old vines also add distinction. Winemaker Chris Eberle—who is, surprisingly, no relation to Gary—commented, "I could do anything with this fruit and it would still come out the same way." **97**



Other Paso Reds of Note

Allegretto Wines 2017 Malbec (\$75)

Ripe, floral, savory, and meaty, with notes of iron filings. Blackberry and sweet tobacco add a creamy, sweeter tone, as does a finish of chocolate and cedar. **93**



Allegretto Wines 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Willow Creek Vineyard (\$85)

The nose shows off bacon fat, dark chocolate, and an enduring fragrance of sandalwood. Black currants perform a ritual on the palate that reveals its depth of fruit. **94**

Chateau Margene 2018 Stella's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$94)

Aged in (70% new) French oak for 24 months, this blend of 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Cab Franc, and 4% Merlot comes from an estate vineyard in the Creston District sub-AVA; proprietors Mike and Margene Mooney are founding members of the PRCC. Intense fruit and savory notes strike a balance in the European style, underscored by the elegance of the mouthfeel and acidity.

95



Hearst Ranch 2018 Babicora Malbec (\$35)

Blended with some Petit Verdot and Cabernet Sauvignon, this expression contains grapes grown in the sandy clay-loam soils of the estate's Saunders Vineyard, located in the Estrella District on Paso's east side. Aromas of dried blue flowers mesmerize as salty mineral notes bring out the ripeness of the dark blue fruit. **93**



Sixmilebridge 2017 Cabernet Franc (\$70)

This wine hails from an organically farmed 94-acre site set on steep limestone hills in the Adelaida District. Winemaker Anthony Yount and his wife, vineyard manager Hillary Yount, called the terroir "extreme," noting that "the soils are pure pink—it's unlike anything we've ever seen before." The wine is extremely expressive, with dried herbs, pea tendrils, and dark chocolate on the nose. Black raspberry and blackberry notes, along with vibrant acidity, add to a savory wine with loads of texture. Set for release this spring. **95**



Riboli Family Wines 2017 Opaque Malbec (\$35)

Forward flavors of ripe plum and what winemaker Ben Mayo called a "tamed, calm animal meatiness" make this a great pairing with game or lamb. Aged in 38% new French oak for 24 months, it has a spice-box nose that Mayo explained "is a reflection of Paso Robles terroir." **92**

San Simeon 2017 Stormwatch (\$80)

This big, fleshy red with a broad, generous mouthfeel utilizes all five Bordeaux varieties. It's oak driven, weighty, and ripe, with sturdy tannins and a storm of anise and espresso on the finish. **93**



Glunz Family 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25)

Made from small-berried Clone 4 grapes grown in the Geneseo District (plus 7% Petit Verdot), this wine is concentrated but tempered by its acidity. Big-boned and robust with spicy notes of cedar and chocolate, it aged for 18 months in French oak. **92**



Opolo 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$36)

Differentiating itself with a smoky nose of grilled meatiness, this well-balanced expression has a notable tannin grip plus chocolate and plum. It finishes with cigar leaf and blackberry preserves. **92.5**



Castoro Cellars 2018 Reserve Malbec (\$30)

Hailing from the Estrella District, this is a decidedly balanced Malbec without any of the weedy character often associated with the grape. Deep, tarry notes of dark fruit and coffee are impressive. While herbal hints of bergamot and oregano sidle up to it, the fruit remains ripe and delicious. Tannins leave a dry grip on the finish. **93**

Castoro Cellars 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Whale Rock Vineyard (\$45)

This wine is crafted with fruit from the winery's CCOF-certified organic Whale Rock Vineyard in the Templeton Gap sub-AVA, where ancient whale bones have been found. In this cooler part of Paso Robles, with more recorded rainfall, the fruit develops more color and tannin than elsewhere in the region. Minerality and spice meld with creamy dark chocolate and a blackberry mouthfeel. A fine toastiness emphasizes the satisfying finish. Aged in French and American oak for 16 months. **94 1/2**



PHOTO COURTESY OF CASTORO CELLARS



HIT PARADE

BE THEY UP-AND-COMERS OR LONGTIME LEGENDS, THESE BEVERAGE BRANDS ARE DOMINATING THE CHARTS

In the music industry, the artists who wear the mantle of rock stardom run the gamut from long-haired guitar gods in leather pants to brooding emo idols who wear black from head to toe to the sincerest of flannel- and denim-clad singer-songwriters. Their counterparts in the alcohol-beverage industry are just as diverse. Some brands serve as the equivalent of classic bands, as much household names as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Others enjoy edgy reputations in the vein of alternative acts like Bon Iver or Tame Impala, indulging the acquired tastes of their avid followings. And still others come out of nowhere to alter the landscape of their respective categories almost beyond recognition—think Run the Jewels or Billie Eilish.

In this report, we take a look at some companies whose success in the off-premise space—whether long-established or newfound—is as thunderous as a stadium anthem yet as sweet as a love ballad.





GARCÍA CARRIÓN

AMPS UP

Spanish wine giant García Carrión is intent on rocking the U.S. retail market with a wide array of offerings that provide consumers with unbeatable bang-for-buck. Check out our full story on García Carrión on page 40, but here's a closer look at a trio of retail superstars that will bring the company to center stage this year.



PATA NEGRA TORO

This popular cross-regional brand is named for a gastronomically legendary breed of black-footed pig in Spain whose name signals products of the highest quality. While Pata Negra's DO-driven offerings range from Rueda Verdejo to a Gran Reserva from historic Valdepeñas, our pick for the breakout star in this affordably priced lineup is Pata Negra Roble from Toro. The Toro DOP is located in Castilla y

León, and its wines, made from the Tempranillo grape (known locally as Tinta de Toro), reflect the soul of its rugged region of origin. Fermented in stainless steel, Roble is aged four months in barrel, imparting just a kiss of oak. Its stylishly modern packaging seals the deal.



JAUME SERRA CRISTALINO BRUT

Cava is one of the strong suits of García Carrión, which brings *método tradicional* bubbles to the retail shelf at an astonishingly affordable price via its Jaume Serra Cristalino brand. Spain's answer to Prosecco and Champagne struts its stuff in the Jaume Serra Cristalino Brut, made from the classic Cava trifecta of

Macabeo, Parellada, and Xarel•lo grapes. With just 11.5% ABV and 9 grams per liter of residual sugar, this scintillating Brut Cava is a certified star on the shelf and in the glass, always ready for casual quaffing.



DON SIMÓN SANGRÍA

Fans can't get enough of Don Simón Sangría, available in multiformat traditional and Fizzy versions. The Europeans "buy it like bottled water," according to Tom Bernth, García Carrión's U.S. national sales director; with 9 million cases sold annually, it's the number-one sangria in the world. Count on U.S. sales to grow exponentially with the introduction of new Gaudí-inspired packaging featuring a chromothermic label that changes color when the product is properly chilled. New 250-milliliter grab-and-go cans will surely also fly off the retail shelf as Americans discover the joy of pop-top sangria for barbecues and beach bashes. We say, "Rock on, García Carrión!"



SLAYING THE COMPETITION: 7 DEADLY



Not only has 7 Deadly Zins been the number-one-selling Zinfandel in the U.S. for the past six years, it also ranks among the top ten super-premium red wines on the domestic market, according to Nielsen data. If that doesn't qualify this Lodi-sourced label for retail superstardom, we're not sure what could.

According to senior brand manager Carolyn Lescher, 7 Deadly appeals particularly to affluent, epicurean-minded Gen X men, but it has proven to resonate across demographics while seeing notable seasonal sales spikes. Due to the edgy name and packaging, she says, "We see a lot of organic activity around Halloween. So we're leaning into this with our Sin City Sweeps campaign," an annual fall consumer sweepstakes featuring prize trips to Las Vegas as well as cross-promotional programming with another Halloween-friendly brand, The Kraken Rum.

Another recent joint promotion, the Sinful Pairing campaign with Ghirardelli Intense Dark Chocolate, was tailored to Valentine's Day. "We supported this tempting taste experience with a 360-degree program," explains Lescher, activated through social media and digital advertising as well as showstopping in-store point-of-sale materials. Suggested pairings included 7 Deadly Zins with 72% cacao chocolate, 7 Deadly Red with sea salt-almond chocolate, and 7 Deadly Cab with raspberry-infused dark chocolate.

Of course, 7 Deadly is meeting its customers where they live in the virtual world now more than ever, as 2020 saw the brand launch its first consumer-facing digital campaign to help grow awareness for its leading varietal label, 7 Deadly Zins. Creating a series of sin-themed 30-second videos that aligned with their target audience, the team saw clickthrough rates at nearly four times the benchmarks for wines, according to Lescher.

The aforementioned 7 Deadly Cab is the newest SKU in the lineup; released in 2020, it's continuing its national rollout this year. "This wine completes a trifecta of offerings grown in the diverse terroir of the Lodi AVA and continues the brand's legacy of supporting wines grown in accordance with the LODI RULES Certified Sustainability program," says Lescher. "Early results have been extremely positive." Indeed, not only has the brand's core customer base proven to "buy almost as much Cabernet Sauvignon as they do our Zinfandel," she notes, but "we also learned that Cab drinkers who previously didn't purchase the brand have been introduced to the franchise through the extremely high new-buyer trial rates of our 7 Deadly Cab." And based on the stats for repeat purchases, they appear to be here to stay.

With an ever-growing portfolio and compelling campaigns to expand its fan base, then, it's clear that 7 Deadly isn't about to stop slaying in the retail game. —Rachel Burkons



Heidi Scheid with Sunny with a Chance of Flowers winemaker Casey Di Cesare.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE: SUNNY WITH A CHANCE OF FLOWERS

PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHEID FAMILY WINES

When the pandemic hit last March, just three months before the debut of her Sunny with a Chance of Flowers label, Heidi Scheid had a moment of doubt: Maybe this wasn't the ideal time to be launching a low-alcohol wine. "We joked that maybe we should pivot and turn it into a really high-alcohol wine," says the executive vice president of Scheid Family Wines. But the clouds cleared when Sunny proved to be a hit: In fact, sales of the Positively Sauvignon Blanc, Positively Chardonnay, and Positively Pinot Noir—which, at 9% ABV, all have zero sugar and 85 calories a glass—have been even stronger than pre-pandemic estimates.

Sunny's future remains bright, as the wines are landing on the shelves of many major retailers, including Kroger, Whole Foods, and Albertsons. Given that "we weren't really sure if [better-for-you wine] was even going to be a category," Scheid admits, "we were flying blind a little, but thankfully

it's way exceeded our expectations." It's about time: Compared to market sectors perhaps less bound by tradition (some might say snobbery), the wine industry has been a little late to the health-and-wellness game. Sunny has used this to its advantage, playing up its nutrition facts on its bright, colorful

a big Cab or a Martini, but for me, it's not usually on a Tuesday night. It's nice to be able to enjoy two or three glasses of wine and be totally coherent." Still, younger consumers are clearly enjoying Sunny too, as evidenced by its following of social media influencers; by featuring the brand on their pages,

"PUTTING 'ZERO SUGAR' ON THE FRONT LABEL . . . DEFINITELY GIVES US AN EDGE." —**HEIDI SCHEID**

bottle. "Putting 'zero sugar' on the front label . . . definitely gives us an edge," Scheid says.

Originally, she thought the brand would resonate primarily with wellness-focused millennials, but it turns out she was overlooking one key demographic: her own. "I'm a boomer, and there's a really big market for older consumers trying to watch out for their health. There's a time and a place for

they're helping to introduce people to a new, better-for-you category of wine in which Sunny's cheery expressions are leading the way.

Expansions are already on the horizon, Scheid reports, with trials of a rosé and a Cabernet Sauvignon currently underway. "It just has an aura of positivity," she says of the young brand. "It's a hard wine to talk about without smiling." —*Allyson Reedy*



THE HEADLINE ACT:

Z. ALEXANDER BROWN

What do you get when you cross a Grammy Award-winning, multiplatinum recording artist with an accomplished Napa Valley winemaker? A knockout of a wine label in the form of Z. Alexander Brown, which happens to be a dynamite off-premise seller. The collaboration between Zac Brown of the eponymous Zac Brown Band and Delicato Family Vineyards winemaker John Killebrew is growing substantially, with retail sales up 22% for the 13-week period ending in late December 2020—double those of the super-premium wine category as a whole.

"Z. Alexander Brown has been on fire at retail," says Delicato Family Wines portfolio director Andrew Blok. "We've found that the combination of Zac Brown's story and the quality of the wine resonate really well with super-premium wine buyers. We see this in the brand's strong consumer pull and high repeat-purchase rate."

Contributing to its success has been the brand's Cabernet Sauvignon, which saw a 33% increase in sales during Q4 of 2020, as well as an updated label on its Proprietary Red Blend that has clearly resonated with shoppers. "Once consumers discover the wines, they not only choose them again and again, they become passionate advocates for the brand," Blok adds. —Allyson Reedy

AN UNDISPUTED PIONEER:

RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS

Rod Strong proved a visionary in recognizing the great potential hidden in the diverse topography, soil types, and microclimates of Sonoma County. He channeled that faith into his viticultural decisions, becoming the first wine-grower to plant Chardonnay in the Chalk Hill AVA in 1965, and, three years later, among the first to plant Pinot Noir in the Russian River Valley.

But perhaps his greatest impact on the California wine industry lies with an entirely different variety: Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1971, Strong planted it on a hill named Alexander's Crown in what is now part of the Alexander Valley AVA. Rodney Strong Vineyards' 1974 Alexander's Crown Cabernet Sauvignon went down in history as the first single-vineyard Cab in Sonoma County, today renowned for growing the beloved Bordeaux grape in its gravely alluvial soils. The winery currently farms 14 estate vineyards there; making an early commitment to sustainability, it was the first in the county to offset its carbon footprint and boasts one of the largest solar-panel systems in the world.

The company continues to honor its founder's legacy of innovation and passion through its winemaking and winegrowing practices, adding to the list of reasons why it's one of our most groundbreaking "rock stars of retail."

Rodney Strong Vineyards 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$22)

From a rainy spring season to summer heat waves, this vintage endured some challenges but pulled through with determination: Aged for 16 months in [20% new] French oak, it's an expressive red that speaks of violets, blueberry, soy sauce, and underbrush on both the nose and palate while further proving its worthiness with alert acidity, a stream of dark chocolate, and lush notes of coffee. 80% Cabernet Sauvignon with small percentages of Merlot, Syrah, Cab Franc, Malbec, Petite Sirah, and Zinfandel. **92** —Meridith May



Rodney Strong Vineyards 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$28)

Mesmerizing scents of Worcestershire, plum, jasmine, and baking spices equate to love at first whiff. Energetic and vibrant, with an innately bold character, this wine showcases the plush tannins we adore from Alexander Valley with grace. The fruit, sourced from four estate vineyards situated on benches and hillsides, offers sleek and well-defined notes of chicory, Bing cherry, dates, and plum. Winemaker Justin Seidenfeld added in touches of Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec and aged the wine 18 months in 41% new French oak. **93** —M.M.



OASIS IN THE DEZO:

A SUPERFRUIT-CENTRIC RTD BRAND BLOOMS



Dezo co-founders Tim Demirjian, Marc Kessler, and Tomas Crowe make no bones about their original motivation for developing a line of canned superfruit cocktails: They were in search of a hangover cure. Or better yet, a hangover blocker, on the grounds that prevention is the best medicine.

It's a quest they came by honestly. Kessler was born into the booze biz; his family owns and operates the oldest continuously operating bar in the country, the Bell in Hand Tavern, in Boston—where he grew up with Demirjian, who in turn befriended Crowe at Tulane University. "Obviously, in New Orleans, we were doing a fair amount of drinking and partying," Demirjian admits, until the day Crowe told him: "I can't keep doing this. We've got to find way to make the drinking experience more transparent, using vitalizing ingredients so that we're not wasting a whole day [recovering]." Hundreds of miles away, Kessler was on Crowe's wavelength, says Demirjian, "telling me about the drink he's making back at the Bell in Hand with gluten-free vodka and coconut water for a clean buzz."

So it was that the old friends moved cross-country to Crowe's native Los Angeles to begin R&D on a product they could enjoy all evening without a drop of regret come morning. Realizing that, in Kessler's words, "a lot of brands were trying to minimize the negative impact [of alcohol], but no one was going after the value-add space of nutrients and antioxidants," they took inspiration from local juice bars to come up with the first three Dezo expressions, all carbonated with gluten-free vodka and a touch of Himalayan sea salt: Spiked Coconut Water with açai, Spiked Cactus Water with lemon, and Spiked Watermelon Water with cucumber and lemon. And though they're not making any specific health claims, Kessler says with a laugh, "We have done a good amount of field testing, and it's pretty unanimous—[people with] multiple degrees of separation saying the same thing: 'I feel really great in the morning.'"

Certainly they're developing an audience of true believers, and fast. With partner and national sales director Nebil "Bilo" Zarif on board, they've landed 200 California accounts since launching Dezo last July, and they entered the Massachusetts market in February. In the meantime, they're not only exploring ideas for line extensions but also working with L.A. bartenders to create Dezo-based cocktails and ultimately "build a lifestyle behind the product," as Demirjian puts it. Adds Kessler, "What we're trying to do is pioneer this superfruit cocktail category, and we feel like we're really the first mover in the space. There's an opportunity to create new sections on menus and even in grocery stores: Superfruit cocktails are what's next." —*Ruth Tobias*

DEZO RANCH WATER

- ▶ 1 oz. blanco or reposado tequila
- ▶ ½ oz. fresh lime juice
- ▶ 3 slices jalapeño
- ▶ 3–4 oz. Dezo Spiked Watermelon Water

Rim one side of a Margarita glass with a blend of Tajín and sea salt. Add the first three ingredients to a shaker filled with ice. Cover and shake for 20 seconds until well chilled. Strain into the glass over ice and top with Dezo.

DEZO DESERT SUNRISE

- ▶ ½ oz. PAMA Pomegranate Liqueur
- ▶ 1 tsp. orange marmalade
- ▶ ¼ oz. fresh lemon juice
- ▶ 3–4 oz. Dezo Spiked Cactus Water

Add the first three ingredients to a cocktail shaker and dry shake for 20 seconds. Add ice and shake again for 20 seconds to chill. Pour over ice into a Collins/Highball glass. Top with Dezo and garnish with pomegranate seeds and a rosemary sprig.

DEZO COCONUT COLD BREW

- ▶ 1½ oz. cold-brew coffee or espresso
- ▶ ½ oz. chai tea concentrate
- ▶ ½ oz. coffee liqueur
- ▶ ½ oz. vanilla-bean (or regular) simple syrup
- ▶ 3 oz. Dezo Spiked Coconut Water

Add the first four ingredients to a shaker with ice and shake for 20 seconds. Strain into a tall glass filled with cold-brew ice cubes and top with Dezo.

Publisher's Note: For their innovation, quality, authentic flavor, and unique packaging, I'm giving all of Dezo's expressions, at 5.5% ABV and an SRP of \$13, a collective score of **94**. —*M.M.*

Dezo Spiked Coconut Water

Lightness and purity are redefined in this new take on sparkling water. Delicate coconut and sweet berry are but an echo on the palate, yet they're memorable.

Dezo Spiked Cactus Water

South-of-the-border character sings on the palate through subtle yet perky flavors—including clean florals and red-fruited fabulousness.

Dezo Spiked Watermelon Water

Floral and fruity on the nose, with a stream of clean, crisp, honey-kissed cucumber. White flowers adorn the palate while lemon cleanses it.





LESS IS MÁS: MUCHO MÁS SEEKS TO SIMPLIFY THE SUBJECT OF SPANISH WINE FOR THE U.S. MARKET

Mucho Más translates simply to “much more,” a phrase that could initially make you wonder what you might be getting yourself into. But this new line from Félix Solís Avantis is worth approaching unreservedly, as the wines are more subtle and precise in flavor than you might expect from the name—never mind the suggested retail price: \$9. They make the case that Félix Solís is a leader in creating a dynamic future for Spanish wines that are delicious yet accessible.

Take the user-friendly, straight-to-the-point label: It’s designed not to overwhelm consumers new to the category but rather to keep them laser-focused on the wine in a way that makes Spain feel familiar. In other words, its sleek simplicity conveys the essence of the liquid inside. The red is a modern-style blend of Tempranillo sourced from northern Spain and the Toro DO with Garnacha from northern Spain and Syrah from Castilla-La Mancha. With a lush and full texture, it offers black-fruit aromas

rounded out by flavors of vanilla bean. Unlike its appellation counterparts, this wine sees only four months in second-use American barrels; the result is just a touch of oak, which balances the earthy character of the grapes.

The white expression, meanwhile, features Verdejo, a grape that’s not often seen outside its native Spain but that deserves much more attention for its apricot aromas and green, grassy flavors. These qualities make it a prime candidate for blending with Spanish-grown Sauvignon Blanc; the wine also contains some Chardonnay that has seen three months of barrel aging, along with significant bâtonnage, to soften the sharp fruit tones of the other varieties and add a creamy texture.



With high tones of bright peach and base notes of tropical fruits and vanilla, the blend is sourced from multiple regions of Spain; working outside the stiff regulations of individual DOs allows the Félix Solís team to choose the grapes with the best qualities for their purposes.

Not only is Mucho Más a match for any domestic blend in terms of approachability, it’s also accessible from a packaging standpoint: The

company has prioritized eco-friendly initiatives such as 3-liter bag-in-boxes, in which the red blend retails for a mere \$18 (the white blend is not yet available in the U.S.). Not only does it give consumers access to a quaffable and food-friendly wine laced with the nuances of Spain at an affordable price, the alternative packaging will make sharing a glass with friends and family easier and more economical—once we can safely enjoy their company again, that is. **LZ**



LIA JONES



SERENA HARKEY



CHRIS TANGHE, MS



KAT THOMAS



MATTHEW CRAFTON

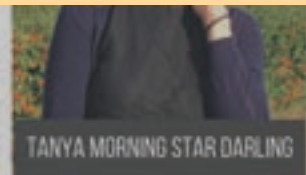


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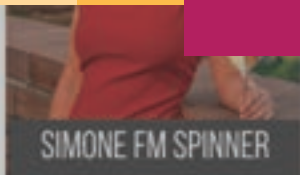
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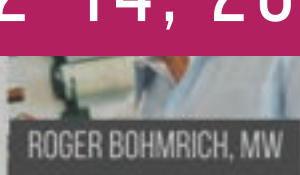
TANYA MORNING STAR DARLING



SIMONE FM SPINNER



ALAN TARDI



ROGER BOHRICH, MW



BOBBIE BURGESS



LAURA WILLIAMSON, MS



STEPHANIE LOVE



STACIE HUNT



TOSHIO UENO, MSS



JULIA CONEY

Save the date for SommCon's Spring Virtual Summit this March featuring exciting new classes and educators, critical topics related to the business of wine, networking and career building opportunities, and more. Our full schedule and list of speakers can be found on our website below!

WWW.SOMMCONUSA.COM

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 supplementing the traditional rating system with 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.



Essay 2020 Chenin Blanc/Viognier/Roussanne, South Africa

(\$10) Essay is a play on S.A., the abbreviation for South Africa. Dry-farmed Chenin Blanc and Viognier from Agter-Paarl and Roussanne from Stellenbosch show notes of steely lemon ice, minerality, and fine acidity. Underlying notes of lanolin and yellow flowers end with a smack of salinity. **89**



VINEYARD BRANDS



Cono Sur Organic 2019 Pinot Noir, Chile

(\$12) Clove and nutmeg keep holiday memories fresh on the palate of this wine, which aged in oak and stainless steel. Dried fruit, cherry preserves, and a dash of cinnamon are well integrated with toasty oak. The great palate feel and good acidity keep things intriguing. **90**



FETZER VINEYARDS



Pomelo Wine Co. 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, California

(\$12) Named for a citrus fruit of Malaysian origin, Pomelo has crafted this well-defined white wine with vivid—if not tart—aromas and flavors of lemon and grapefruit. Lime sorbet enters before the clean, crisp finish primes the palate for the next sip. **89**



TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



WOW Factor!



The Specialist 2018 Zinfandel, Lodi

(\$18) Picking grapes late in the season, winemaker Jim Roblee has succeeded in impressing us with this most elegant old-vine Zinfandel that showcases the remarkable assets of both the variety and the region. The bright and well-structured red leaves jamminess behind with its vivid fruit and enters into a category that connects Old World refinement with California’s sunshine-in-a-glass effect. Tart pomegranate is softened by vanilla, cedar, and just-ripened cherry while deep plum notes show outstanding depth. It’s a Zin that stands out from the crowd. **93**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Franciscan 2018 Chardonnay, Monterey/Napa Counties (\$15) Sleek aromas of mandarin and lemon meet toffee toastiness. Chamomile creates a textural sensation on the creamy finish. **89**

CONSTELLATION BRANDS



Barboursville Vineyards Prosecco DOC, Italy (\$17) Lemon-lime and tart apple spark this wine's bright and breezy bubbles. Notes of honeyed pear and white flowers plus a hint of dill are released by the effervescence. **90**



1821 FINE WINE & SPIRITS



Pomelo Wine Co. 2019 Rosé, California (\$12) Scents of melon and raspberry inspire, while the taste of just-squeezed pink grapefruit—zest and all—brings a lighthearted, pleasant personality to the fore. **89**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Bonterra 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$16) Made with organic grapes and coming in at 13.8% ABV, this Cabernet-dominant blend (79%) with Petite Sirah, Merlot, Syrah, and other grapes is a balanced, fruity red that shines from within. The majority of fruit came from Bonterra's home of Mendocino County, and some of the vine sources are as old as 50 years. Dusty cocoa tannins and a dollop of licorice are the frills on ripe blueberry notes. Plush plum integrates with graham cracker and a spiced bouquet of lilacs. **91**



FETZER VINEYARDS



Goose Ridge Vineyards 2019 g3 Chardonnay, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$15) Toasty, nutty, and creamy, with notes of spiced apple tart and lemon cookies. An echo of chai and lime on the finish is delightful. **90**



Be Human 2018 Red Blend, Columbia Valley, Washington (\$17) This blend of 44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 37% Merlot, 16% Malbec, and 3% Cabernet Franc aged for 18 months in (20% new) American oak. A fruit-forward nose of blackberry jam with coffee leads to a rich and silky palate; impressive acid structure weaves through mulberry and vanilla. **92**



Hopes End 2018 Red Blend, South Australia (\$13) Hopes End portends delight from the very beginning: At first sip, this lush and deliciously dark splash of boysenberry jam melded with vanilla offers ripeness and weight on the palate. Milk chocolate glaze extends through this generous blend of 49% Shiraz, 30% Grenache, 14% Malbec, and 7% Petit Verdot, leveraging fine acidity and structure with its delightful texture through the finish—or, better yet, the End. **90**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Down the AISLE



Schild Estate 2017 Narrow Road Shiraz Cabernet, Barossa Valley, South Australia (\$50) Housed in a uniquely squat bottle, each individually numbered, this single-vineyard blend wowed us from its gorgeous red and blue fruits to its spiced garden of heather, beets, and iron-kissed earthiness. The bright acidity gets better with each sip. **95**



Craggy Range 2020 Sauvignon Blanc, Te Muna Road Vineyard, Martinborough, New Zealand (\$27) Following zingy aromas of sage and pine nuts steeped in lemongrass, acidity and minerality brighten this wine and sharpen its focus. Thyme and rosemary sync up with notes of vanilla that come off a bit leesy—delightfully so. The label is simple and elegant. **92**



Frey Vineyards 2019 Chateau Frey Red Wine Blend, Mendocino (\$20) Looking like a fancy bottle of Bordeaux, this blend of 78% Cabernet Sauvignon and 22% Malbec labeled as a “Grand Vin de Redwood Valley” is from the country’s first organic and Biodynamic winery. Dark chocolate and caramel greet the nose before textural and dusty coffee-flavored tannins make an introduction on the black cherry-toned palate. Notes of licorice, soy sauce, and black olive keep it savory. **90**



KOBRAND



Meiomi 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon, Monterey/Sonoma/Santa Barbara Counties (\$25) Licorice and spearmint meld with dark chocolate and blackberry, creating a creamy, generously luxurious texture. Jammy raspberry and espresso linger while soy sauce integrates with oak on the finish. Round tannins make it all the more pleasurable. **92**

CONSTELLATION BRANDS



St Huberts The Stag 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$18) Although this 82% Cabernet Sauvignon with small amounts of Petit Verdot, Malbec, Petite Sirah, and Shiraz is rich and intensely concentrated, its soft, curvaceous mouthfeel; supple tannins; fine acidity; and moderate ABV (13.9%) create a well-proportioned profile with food-pairing superpowers. Following high-toned notes of cherry and raspberry and black-tea tannins, leather, clove, and oak converge on the savory finish. **91** [V](#)

TREASURY WINE ESTATES



Zinfandelic 2017 Old Vine Zinfandel, Sierra Foothills (\$19) With a label that reminds us of the Cow Palace’s rock concert posters from the 1960s, this sumptuous red comes through with a surge of flavor; as showy notes of ripe black and blue fruit are highlighted by bright acidity and plush tannins. Though it’s crafted from vines that date back to the 19th century, the psychedelic design is truly a nod to the flower power era. **91**

WINE SPOTS CELLARS



“E”

IS FOR

Excellence

(and So Is No “E”)

HOWEVER YOU SPELL IT, THE
WHISK(E)Y CATEGORY HAS
EARNED ITS GLOBAL RENOWN

From Texas and Tennessee to Ireland and Scotland all the way to Japan, the whole world loves its whisk(e)y. The category has something for everyone, after all, representing not only geographical range but also a wider assortment of ingredients, production methods, and styles than perhaps any other.

Barley, rye, corn, or wheat? Single malts or blends? Aging in new American white oak barrels or used Sherry or Port casks, perhaps? The options are near-endless.

Here, we explore just a few sterling examples of whisk(e)y’s diversity, be it a Salt Lake City rye, a farmhouse Scotch from the Isle of Skye, or a small-batch blend produced in Hyōgo Prefecture. So sit back with your bottle of choice and savor each sip of—and story behind—this special spirit.

A Newcomer Makes Waves:

TORABHAIG

The Torabhaig distillery is located on Scotland's Isle of Skye, long renowned for its whisky connections—though, remarkably, Torabhaig is only the second legal whisky distillery on the island, joining storied single malt producer Talisker. The impending inaugural launch of its single malt whisky is therefore a significant milestone in the evolving 21st-century story of Scotch, one eagerly anticipated by enthusiasts, collectors, and malt mavens alike.

Built in a painstakingly restored 18th-century Highland farmhouse, Torabhaig benefits not just from an outstandingly beautiful location but from the adjacent Allt Breacach burn (a term for a small stream) that provides the distillery with pure spring water. Following a four-year construction process supervised by leading conservation architects and completed by a team of artisan craftsmen skilled in historic-building restoration, two custom-made traditional copper pot stills began working in January 2017—and now the first single malt whisky from this exceptional distillery is ready.

The initial design was in the hands of a group of consultant brewers, distillers, and maltsters who between them brought more than 200 years of whisky-making experience to the project. They in turn have slowly passed their expertise and hard-won knowledge to a new distilling team of nine young and talented individuals; largely drawn from the island's small population, they're driven by a relentless curiosity and a focus at every stage on outstanding quality. Whisky making on this scale is a hands-on process, and they must be highly experienced in all aspects of production to understand the subtle changes that occur as the wash ferments and the vapor runs from the stills. Their responsibilities go beyond checking charts and numbers: Distilling for connoisseurs is a science, to be sure, but it's an art as well.

Their work will define the brand's style for years to come, as the plan



is for all nine of them to make their own version of Torabhaig whisky during their journeyman years; these expressions will be released as special editions once they mature.

The restoration, development, and opening of Torabhaig has only been possible due to the commitment and resources of its parent company, Mossburn Distillers & Blenders,

also noted for its work as an independent bottler (see facing page).

“By opening the second licensed single malt Scotch whisky distillery on the Isle of Skye, we have from the start been mindful of the legacy we are leaving,” says Neil Mathieson, CEO of Mossburn. “It was never enough to make ‘just another whisky.’ We have created a characterful whisky with real depth and complexity [as well as] an elegance and refinement that belies the extremely high phenol levels in the barley. It is a distinctive take on peat, and it is the first expression of our distillery's signature style, a flavor profile we call Well-Tempered Peat, which we hope will help define the future of Torabhaig.” —Ian Buxton



PHOTO COURTESY OF TORABHAIG

A Symbol of Prestige:

ISLAY MIST

From leading blender MacDuff International, Islay Mist combines the fire and smoke of the legendary Laphroaig distillery with a gentle hint of Speyside and a sweet, almost seductive tone that's guaranteed to please the most discerning connoisseur.

Now approaching its 100th anniversary, it is the world's only blended Scotch permitted to use the word Islay in its name. "It's a jewel," says leading whisky writer Dave Broom—and international competition judges agree. In the past two years alone, Islay Mist has received gold medals from the International Spirits Challenge, the Women's Wine & Spirits Awards, and the prestigious International Wine & Spirits Competition (and, may we mention, a 93-point rating from *The Tasting Panel*).

The label was first created in the 1920s to mark the 21st birthday of the son of the Laird of Islay, whose guests, it was feared, might find Islay's peaty single malts too assertive. (This aristocratic connection explains the presence on the label of the Great Seal of Islay, a symbol long used by what is today the most storied of Scotland's whisky-producing islands.) Infusing subtle notes of peat smoke with even gentler flavors of citrus, cinnamon, and sweet heather honey, Islay Mist is available in a range of expressions, including its 8 Year Old, which is exclusive to the North American market. This versatile blend works well as a sipping whisky but is equally at home on the rocks or as the base of classic cocktails such as an Old Fashioned, Rob Roy, or gingery Penicillin. —*Ian Buxton*



PHOTO COURTESY OF ISLAY MIST

A True Rarity:

MOSSBURN DISTILLERS & BLENDEERS



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSBURN DISTILLERS & BLENDEERS

There are many independent whisky bottlers, but few are as deeply engaged in their craft, as intellectually curious, as personally demanding, and as driven by a spirit of intrigue as Mossburn Distillers & Blenders.

Though the company is a relatively new one, its vastly experienced team are not simply bottlers but blenders, whisky makers, and even distillery builders; the latter is demonstrated by its Torabhaig distillery in Skye, which opened in 2017 in a historic farmhouse after a painstaking and expensive restoration and has since produced an outstanding new single malt.

Exhibiting the team's combined 30 years of experience in Scotch whisky, the first bottling under the Mossburn name was released in 2017 as part of a range of independently bottled classic single malts. The Mossburn Signature Casks line, meanwhile, aims to reveal the unique characteristics of Scotland's whisky-making regions; it currently comprises Island and Speyside blends of single malt whiskies. The detailed packaging offers the enthusiast remarkable levels of information on the casks employed in the final blend, which were formulated to enhance the characteristics Mossburn's master blender seeks in both regional styles. This typifies the brand's commendable commitment to transparency as well as quality.

Its Vintage Casks range, meanwhile, showcases single malt expressions from distilleries such as Linkwood, Inchgower, and Mannochemore. Though relatively little known, these are some of Scotland's most interesting and distinguished malt distilleries, and the aged casks have been specially selected from Mossburn's private stocks. Demanding drinkers will enjoy exploring the depths of the collection as they savor these rare and unusual drams.

—*Ian Buxton*





Born of Tradition, Made by Hand:

BENROMACH SPEYSIDE SINGLE MALT SCOTCH WHISKY

Small but mighty, this family-owned distillery was established in 1898 just north of Forres, Scotland. Gaelic for “shaggy mountain,” Benromach sources its water from the Chapelton springs in the Romach Hills about 2 miles from the distillery. The producer is known for its traditional Speyside Scotch whisky made from lightly peated Scottish barley, producing a spirit with a delicate, smoky character in addition to the honeyed, fruity notes you’d expect from the style.

Besides yeast, barley, and water, the distillery team names “human touch” as a key ingredient in their production process. Every reading and sample taken is done by hand; during distillation, the wash still is settled manually to control the temperature and prevent overflow; and cutting the spirit is also left to the skill of the distillers. The whiskey is then hand-filled into Sherry or bourbon first-fill casks and matured to soften both its texture and flavor. Finally, each cask is weighed and laid to rest in a traditional dunnage warehouse.

With new packaging rolling out later this year, Benromach’s portfolio currently includes its 10 Year Old Scotch Whisky, 15 Year Old Scotch Whisky, Cask Strength Vintage Scotch Whisky, 21 Year Old Scotch Whisky, Contrasts: Organic Scotch Whisky, Contrasts: Peat Smoke Scotch Whisky, and Single Cask Scotch Whisky.



Benromach 15 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$60) This 86-proofer hails from Speyside. A breath of peat on the nose is brightened and sweetened by peach and toffee cream. The palate is whetted by a spark of orange peel, cream soda, and tobacco leaf. Jasmine and ginger intersect with a walnut dryness and a thread of salinity. Green herbs and cocoa pancake batter are rich and soft on the finish. **95**
—*Meridith May*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RED DOOR

“Peggy” the handmade copper pot peeks through in the background at Red Door, a distillery within a distillery at Benromach.

A Gin for Single Malt Sippers:

RED DOOR

Handcrafted at the Benromach distillery, Red Door Highland Gin is a full-bodied expression made with botanicals typical of the London Dry style, including juniper berries, citrus peel, coriander seeds, and angelica root, as well as Scottish botanicals like pearls of heather, sea buckthorn, and rowan berries, giving the finished product a unique Highland flair.

Distilled in a handmade copper pot nicknamed Peggy, the gin is produced through a method known as vapor infusion distillation, which slowly steams the basket of botanicals. This process ensures that the character of each ingredient is infused into the spirit, creating an incredibly balanced gin. Red Door produces a Highland Gin with Winter Botanicals in addition to its flagship expression.



Red Door Highland Gin, Scotland (\$40) At 90 proof, this lovely liquid from Scotland’s Benromach Distillery tells of a romance between juniper, sage, lavender, and lime, which are bathed in a creamy base of fennel and peppered rose petals before a finish of bitter orange. **94** —*M.M.*

The Best of Both Worlds: **HINCH IRISH WHISKEY**

Located on the Killaney Estate just south of Belfast in County Down, Hinch Distillery’s style is a nod to both Scotland and Ireland’s whisk(e)y-making heritage: In fact, its expressions are made utilizing both Scottish and Irish distillation methods. The distillery, which is the only facility of its kind in Belfast, is set to open a visitor center in April or May, COVID-19 restrictions permitting.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HINCH IRISH WHISKEY

Hinch Distillery’s head distiller, Aaron Flaherty.

Hinch sources its water from the Silent Valley Reservoir; located in the Mourne Mountains, the highest range in Northern Ireland, it’s one of the purest resources in the country. The brand’s Small Batch Irish Whiskey, Double Wood Irish Whiskey, Sherry Cast Finish Irish Whiskey, Peated Single Malt Irish Whiskey, and Single Pot Still Irish Whiskey, all triple distilled, will soon be available nationwide.



Hinch Small Batch Irish Whiskey, Ireland (\$33) Aged in small-batch bourbon casks, this 86-proof spirit sends up high-toned aromas of caramel apple, heather, tangerine, and lime. A parade of chamomile flowers is followed by a band of bright citrus and white pepper, while a tropical trio of papaya, coconut, and banana is washed with mellowed black tea. **94** —*M.M.*

Benromach Speyside Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Red Door Highland Gin, and Hinch Irish Whiskey are family-owned craft brands distributed by Chopin Imports.



Pacific Tradition:

HATOZAKI

Right now, Japanese whiskies are some of the most fashionable and highly demanded on the global market, with rare old single malts fetching record prices at auction.

Hatozaki is another attention-grabbing example of the category, housed in a striking bottle whose label bears dramatic kanji script and the illustration of a pagoda-like structure representing the ancient lighthouse that

gave the whisky its name. The brand hails from the Kaikyo Distillery, which has been producing saké and shochu since 1856; it was acquired by Mossburn Distillers & Blenders in 2016, with whose support the original owners, the Yonezawa family, installed new pot stills from the renowned Forsyths company to begin making whisky. As Kaikyo's *toji* (the Japanese term for master brewer or distiller), Kimio Yonezawa remains in charge of production, eschewing caramel coloring to show his work's true hue.

The recipe for Hatozaki Finest, an intriguing blend of both Japanese and foreign distilled malt and grain whiskies, remains a closely guarded secret, though its complex flavor profile clearly owes much to the spirit's

careful aging in many different cask types, including Sherry, bourbon, and Mizunara oak barrels, some of which are up to 12 years old. Its light body, cereal notes, and slightly sweet palate make it ideal for use as a Highball ingredient.

It is complemented by the premium Hatozaki Small Batch, a blend of 100% malt whiskies aged in the same mix of specially imported casks to impart a rich profile of sweet cereals and malty dried fruit, followed by a light touch of smoke and honey on the finish. —*Ian Buxton*



That Independent Irish Spirit:

WEST CORK DISTILLERS

With the capacity to produce 4.5 million liters of whiskey annually, West Cork Distillers seems surprisingly large for a craft brand—especially one that wasn't established until 2003, after co-founders John O'Connell, Denis McCarthy, and Ger McCarthy decided while out at the pub to start making whiskey together, ultimately setting up shop in the back room of Denis' house. Here, then, is a real rags-to-riches tale of cask-strength success—and given that the company's namesake region of Ireland isn't long on employment opportunities, it has also been great news for the local community at large.

When the trio set up their distilling operation, the Irish whiskey category was dominated by a few global players, so launching an independent brand made very little economic sense.

But their industrious approach proved visionary as they began to see rapid growth; today they operate on a 12.5-acre site in Skibbereen to produce some 13 expressions (as well as three gins and a vodka). Admirably, the founders' stated aim has always been to make Irish whiskey widely accessible—and they're fulfilling that goal with retail prices that are relatively modest by category standards.

West Cork is continually adding new expressions to its portfolio (including the Stout Cask Matured Irish Whiskey, reviewed below), but its core lineup comprises its 8 Year Small Batch Single Malt, awarded 94 points by *The Tasting Panel*; Blended Bourbon Cask, which garnered 98 points; and the smoky and sweet Blended Black Cask, which matures in heavily charred bourbon casks for six months. —*Ian Buxton*

West Cork Stout Cask Matured Irish Whiskey, Ireland (\$32)

Joining its Irish IPA Cask Matured Blended Whiskey, this new release is a 75/25 blend of grain and malt Irish whiskey that's triple distilled, aged in first-fill bourbon casks for four years, and then blended for an additional six months in casks that previously held Ireland's beloved Blacks of Kinsale Stout. It's a luxury sipper that shows aromas of saffras and chocolate before a palate of oatmeal, maple, and white-peppered papaya along with floral notes, ginger, and coffee. **93** —*M.M.*



West Cork Distillers co-founders John O'Connell, Denis McCarthy, and Ger McCarthy.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST CORK DISTILLERS

MS WALKER

Michter's
flagship Shively
Distillery in
Louisville, KY.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICTHER'S

My (New) Kentucky Home:

MICTHER'S

Full-bodied, rich, and flavorful: That's how president Joseph J. Magliocco describes the house style of Michter's. "Our whiskeys have great mouthfeel, and they warm the drinker but don't burn," he says.

The company's four core expressions—Kentucky Straight Rye, Kentucky Straight Bourbon, Unblended American Whiskey, and Sour Mash Whiskey—are dubbed US*1 to pay homage to its legacy as America's first whiskey company. Founded in 1753 by Swiss Mennonite farmers John and Michael Shenk, who began distilling rye near Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, the operation was first known as Shenk's and was later renamed Bomberger's. It changed hands several times before it was purchased, sold, and repurchased by Louis Forman, who, along with his master distiller Charles Everett Beam, crafted a pot-still sour mash whiskey that he named Michter's in honor of his sons Michael and Peter.

The Pennsylvania distillery declared bankruptcy in 1989, and in the 1990s Magliocco, along with his brothers and former Wild Turkey president Dick Newman, started working in three phases to resurrect the brand. First, they went to taste at various Kentucky distilleries and selected a style of straight rye and straight bourbon that they liked.

Next, they began producing whiskey at another Kentucky facility that had extra capacity, using their own mash bill, yeast, and entry proof—a scenario Magliocco compares to "a chef who was cooking with his own recipes in someone else's restaurant kitchen before he could afford his own."

By 2012, the company had acquired the resources to build and open a distillery in the Shively section of Louisville with two small stills (a 46-foot copper column still and 250-gallon pot still doubler would come later). In 2015, once they were confident that the distillate produced there met their standards, Michter's entered the final stage: making all of its own whiskey.

Today it oversees two other Kentucky operations: a 145-acre farm for growing estate grain in Springfield and a second distillery in Fort Nelson, which features the legendary pot still system and cypress wood fermenters from the original Pennsylvania Michter's. Led by master distiller Dan McKee and master of maturation Andrea Wilson, the meticulous production process includes aging in barrels made from wood staves cured outdoors from 18 to over 60 months, which serves to reduce tannins and enhance flavor in the finished product. Toasting the barrels before charring them, meanwhile, caramelizes and concentrates the wood sugars—a step that proves essential for crafting a smooth, full-bodied whiskey.

Michter's also employs two relatively uncommon industry practices. One, the entry proof for its rye and

bourbon is 103 proof rather than the typical 125, resulting in a smaller yield with richer character. Two, it uses heat cycling, which causes the whiskey in the rickhouse barrels to expand and contract, forcing the liquid to interact with the wood more frequently. This makes for a larger annual angel's share, which adds a great deal of expense but ensures complexity.

Magliocco believes the future of the American whiskey market is bright—and hopes that Michter's will play an integral part in it. As he puts it simply, "[Our] goal is to make the greatest American whiskey."

—Kelly Magyarics

Michter's 10 Year Single Barrel Kentucky Rye Whiskey, USA (\$160)

This 92.8-proofer offers refined yet amplified scents and flavors of peach nectar, walnut, and honeyed pineapple. Subtle rye notes peek out from orange cream and vanilla wafer. Dark tea, charcoal, and nutmeg develop before a prickly sensation on the finish is assuaged by the luxurious mouthfeel. **99** —*M.M.*

Michter's 10 Year Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, USA (\$130)

This expression's power and punch are mellowed by the signature Michter's filtration process. The heady strength of cedar closet and rancio is tempered by a soft, rich, and viscous mouthfeel with flavors of chocolate-covered peaches. Mustard seed, burnt orange peel, and flambéed marshmallow edge in on the finish. **95** —*M.M.*

Blazing Down the Bourbon Trail: **RABBIT HOLE**

In keeping with its exponential growth since its founding in 2012, Rabbit Hole Distillery completed construction on its first state-of-the-art rickhouse in Campellsburg, Kentucky, in 2019; the 15,000-square-foot building provides enough space to age up to 15,000 barrels of award-winning bourbon and rye. But it wasn't enough: Experiencing even more growth in 2020, Rabbit Hole founder/whiskey maker Kaveh Zamanian and his team built a second rickhouse on the same tract of land to house 20,000 barrels, and they plan to complete yet another structure, this one with the capacity for 25,000 barrels, by the end of 2021.

Zamanian stresses the importance of its rickhouses' all-steel architecture. "We believe that we have created the next evolution of the rickhouse," he says. "Unlike wood,

steel is infinitely recyclable as well as sustainable, made with more than 80% scrap. It is also fire retardant, offers a lower risk of collapse, and eliminates harmful chemicals that are commonly used to mitigate pest and varmint in wooden rickhouses." Seems like a fittingly hardy material for a brand that doesn't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Indeed, even amid the pandemic, its momentum hasn't slowed. "Rabbit Hole is one of the fastest-growing spirit brands in the U.S.," says chief marketing officer Michael Motamedi, noting that it saw "a 148% increase in depletions" during the 2020-2021 fiscal year.

Rabbit Hole also began construction on three new 8,000-gallon fermentation tanks at its distillery in nearby Louisville in January. It plans to have them completed by April;




once they're in place alongside its already existing tanks, it will be able to yield 25% more whiskey a year.

The brand's core portfolio consists of four whiskeys: Rabbit Hole Cavehill Kentucky Straight Bourbon, a four-grain mash whiskey; Rabbit Hole Heigold Kentucky Straight Bourbon, a high-rye bourbon; Dareringer Straight Bourbon, which is finished in PX Sherry casks; and Boxergrail Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RABBIT HOLE

Rabbit Hole's rickhouse in Campellsburg, KY.





While his heart and soul go into every drop of liquid he creates, the Founder's Collection showcases "an even deeper expression of our creativity as a brand."

Rabbit Hole founder and whiskey maker Kaveh Zamanian.

Additionally, the brand launched its Founder's Collection last year with Rabbit Hole Boxergrail Founder's Collection Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey. Zamanian says that while his heart and soul go into every drop of liquid he creates, the Founder's Collection showcases "an even deeper expression of our creativity as a brand." For the series, Zamanian hand-selected "honey barrels" that he felt embodied perfection; to evince the whiskey's true essence, he bottled it at cask strength, and to represent its exquisiteness, he packaged it in a glass bottle with Rabbit Hole's embossed logo, gold foil lettering, and a teal neck label highlighting the individual bottle number.

With only 1,315 bottles released in 2020, you might be hard-pressed

to procure one at this juncture, but rest assured that the 2021 Founder's Collection is forthcoming. Here's what we know about it so far: Rabbit Hole will release new expressions twice annually—in the spring to coincide with the Kentucky Derby and in the fall to commemorate National Bourbon Heritage Month. The May 2021 release is a 15-year-old Kentucky Straight Bourbon aged for an additional year in Japanese Mizunara oak casks; production is limited to 1,403 bottles, so it might be wise to jump on a call with your distributor ASAP to secure an allocation.

Given that Zamanian's family crest and motto, "Amare et Opus" ("Love and Work"), is stamped on every label, it makes sense that he involves the people he loves in his company: His nephew, cousin, and cousin's wife all

work alongside him in various positions at the distillery. With his family at its center, Rabbit Hole reached the milestone of national distribution last year and has plans to expand to the international market this year.

And while it's increasing production and expanding distribution, it's also growing prestigiously in the local community: In 2019, the brand became a member of the Kentucky Distillers Association's Kentucky Bourbon Trail, quickly advancing its rank to heritage member—the organization's highest level of membership—in 2020. As such, Zamanian will have a board seat alongside the largest bourbon producers in the world, helping to steer the future of the iconic industry. Clearly, he's driven—and he knows how to drive. —Eric Marsh

A Tale of Two Traditions: **BALCONES DISTILLING**

Balcones' Lineage expression represents the continuance of a family line—namely the central Texas-based distillery's portfolio of Texas Single Malt whiskies—so it's only fitting that it involves a series of advantageous marriages. Released last year, Lineage Texas Single Malt Whisky (\$40) exemplifies the innovative brand's mission to seamlessly meld traditional Scotch-production methods with a distinctly American approach to the evolving single malt category stateside, largely through its aging regimens. Made with Scottish Golden Promise and Texas-grown malted barley, both of which mature in new and refill oak barrels, it features a proof and price that are lower than its portfolio counterparts, infusing a new level of accessibility into Balcones' offerings.

Head distiller Jared Himstedt notes that with the Texas Single Malt lineup centered on "intense, bold, and robust whiskies" exceeding 100 proof, his team wanted to produce something different to reflect their own diverse interests: "We wanted to add [something] on to our single malt line that was still as complex and balanced and well put together"—not to mention aged for three years instead of the standard two—"and at the same time addressed some of the barriers that keep people from . . . exploring not only the Balcones line but the bigger picture of American single malt. Most of our stuff is \$60-plus and that's pretty consistent [with the category]. . . . I [wanted] to have something a little more approachable" to entice those newcomers. Accolades like its placement on *Whisky Advocate's* 2020 "Top 20" list don't hurt, either, especially considering that it's the first

American single malt to receive this distinction.

Lineage can largely credit its soft and caramelized profile of subtle oak, manuka honey, and chestnuts with a hint of red-wine reduction to the influence of the aforementioned refill barrels, which previously held either Kentucky bourbon or Balcones' own bourbon and rye. "We kept adding more and more of

an added layer on it." Lineage is similarly layered, with sourdough starter, cream soda, mulled cider, and bruised bananas and peaches appearing on the nose alongside tea tree leaves, which can also be detected on the finish with notes of black tea and cinnamon.

Himstedt is no stranger to the larger conversation of American single malt, which he advances through not only his own work but his role as a founding member of the American Single Malt Whisky Commission. For several years, the organization has been lobbying the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau on establishing official



PHOTO: JASON KINDIG

Jared Himstedt is head distiller at Balcones Distilling in Waco, TX.

that to bring the softer grain notes and [the] fruit forward—the wood, tannin, spice, vanilla, all of that—and into a balance where it felt very much like it . . . still represents both grains really well," Himstedt explains. "And now we have this added bonus that we're using both [Scottish and American] traditions and approaches to maturation, because now we have refill barrels and virgin oak. So if our regular single malt was already a conversation about the two traditions, this is the same conversation with

standards and regulations for the category, which Himstedt hopes could be finalized in 2021. "I love that both movements, American single malt and the growth of Texas whisk(e)y, [are] so nascent—it's fun to know that none of us are really stepping on each other's toes," Himstedt says. "And if [someday] we're fighting for market share, that will only be because we've all been really successful. . . . Anything that adds to the conversation is just benefiting the cause." —*Kate Newton*

Shine On, Harvest Moon:

DENTED BRICK DISTILLERY

Celebrating the cultural and agricultural heritage of Utah is core to the mission of Salt Lake City's Dented Brick Distillery. Beyond sourcing local grains and using water from the artesian well on its property, owner Marc Christensen and his partners build their brands around symbols of the state's history and geography—and "Moon's Best Straight Rye Whiskey is an example of where we're trying to go with all of [them]," he says.

In fact, the brand-new release is named for the man who used to own the land on which their facility now sits: pioneering Utah distiller Hugh Moon, whose fingerprints are all over the bottle, so to speak. As Christensen points out, "[Moon's] family crest from England is on the label. He also put a number 8 on all of his bottles—the infinity symbol. No one knows why, but he did it, so we do," along with a replica of his signature.

The whiskey itself features 100% unmalted grain from Cache Valley, "a really good source of rye up at the Utah-Idaho border [about] 80 miles away," according to Christensen. Head distiller Harley Norwood explains that he ages the spirit in "char 2 and char 3 barrels rather than the [more typical] char 4; I think it's creating a softer rye" that will appeal to category newcomers as well as regulars, with aromas of vanilla, chocolate, and pepper leading to a palate of sassafras, nuts, and baking spice. Currently sold only at the distillery, Moon's Best will soon be available on the Utah retail market.



Dented Brick Distillery Moon's Best Straight Rye Whiskey, USA (\$50) A spicy 90-proofer seasoned with orange peel, fragrant peach, clove, and maple. The result is one frisky whiskey. **90** —M.M.

Dented Brick Distillery Hugh Moon White Whiskey, USA (\$22) This 80-proof smooth operator serves as an easygoing foundation for cocktails. With a clean entry and finish, it offers subtle notes of blue fruit and vanilla. **89** —M.M.



Blazing a Trail:

HIGH WEST

High West's distillery in Wanship, UT.

Inspired by its founders' love of the Old West, High West Distillery has embraced a pioneering spirit since it was established in 2006: Its flagship location in Park City, Utah, was the first legal distillery to open in the state since 1870 and is the only ski-in gastro-distillery in the world. Its outpost in Wanship, Utah, meanwhile, is located on a 3,500-acre private retreat in the Wasatch Mountain Range.

It's no less groundbreaking when it comes to the whiskeys it crafts, including the High West Double Rye!, whose label boasts its status as the "spiciest rye whiskey anywhere," as well as the American Prairie Bourbon, which sees a portion of its proceeds donated to the development of the American Prairie Reserve in northeastern Montana.

High West American Prairie Bourbon, USA (\$35) This 92-proof blend of two- to 13-year-old straight bourbon whiskeys from Utah exudes gentle scents of maple and peach that lead to a remarkably approachable taste profile. Subtle yet discernible flavors of dried apricot, brown sugar, pekoe tea, and pecan meld well on the palate with an earthiness that's balanced by airy notes of stone fruit and biscuit on the finish. **93** —M.M.



High West Double Rye!, USA (\$35) Coming in at 92 proof, this blend of straight rye whiskeys ups the category ante with delicate scents of papaya, chamomile, and maple as well as a broad mouthfeel. A burst of stone fruit rings around the palate, where baked apple pie, walnut, cinnamon, and honeyed oatmeal meld with mint and pine—forming a sublime ensemble of richness and spice. **94** —M.M.

DESTINED TO DISTILL

*For Jack Daniel's
Master Distiller Chris
Fletcher, Whiskey Is
a Birthright*

BY ERIC "ET" TECOSKY

You can call it fate, kismet, or any word you like, but all signs point to the fact that Chris Fletcher was destined to become the master distiller of Jack Daniel's. He grew up in the tiny town of Lynchburg, Tennessee, where the brand exclusively produces its whiskey, and his grandfather, Frank Bobo, served as master distiller from 1966 to 1989. As a child, he'd go with Frank to work on Sundays, playing around the very site he'd one day oversee. Ironically, though, it wasn't Frank who gave Fletcher his first taste of the flagship Old No. 7: "It was my grandma," Fletcher recalled. "She would rub a little whiskey on my gums when I was teething to ease the pain so I would stop crying and fall asleep."

Of course, his current position was not Fletcher's first job at the distillery. "In college, I had a summer job as a tour guide," he said. "It was a great way to learn about

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK DANIEL'S



Jack Daniel's
master
distiller Chris
Fletcher.

Jack and to meet people from all over the world that loved [it].” It was then that his grandpa started to mentor him on the whiskey-making process. “I was surprised how much chemistry was involved,” Fletcher noted; fortunately, he was well prepared, given that he majored in the subject.

After college, Fletcher got a job at Brown Forman in the R&D department, where he worked on a variety of projects and honed a diverse skill set. When he was offered a role at another distillery, he took it, jumping at the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the industry as a whole.

And then he got an offer he couldn’t refuse. Jack Daniel’s had created an assistant master distiller position, and then—master distiller Jeff Arnett called Fletcher to ask him to return to his old stomping grounds. “The opportunity to work directly for Jeff made it easy to come back—to be part of the team that oversees the quality of Jack Daniel’s and would also help to navigate future innovation was too good to pass up,” Fletcher said.

Speaking of innovation, Fletcher—who was promoted to the role of master distiller last October—mentioned it several times during our conversation, so I asked him why the concept was so important to him. “We have the most capable distillery in the industry in terms of our process,” he replied. “Once the whole grain enters our distillery, no outside source touches any part of the process all the way until the whiskey is put in the bottle.” And while, in Fletcher’s view, “it’s great that so many people in the world know and love Jack Daniel’s Old No. 7, innovation is allowing us to tell our story in a different way. We hold Old No. 7 to the same standards [as], let’s say, barrel-proof rye, but that rye gives us an opportunity to show the whiskey-loving community another side to what we are capable of doing.”

Under normal circumstances,

Fletcher would be spending a fair amount of time on the road for education-related experiences, tastings, and product launches while connecting with bartenders to explore the Jack Daniel’s portfolio in depth. (He’s carrying out those responsibilities virtually during the pandemic.) While



Fletcher outside Jack Daniel’s original office in Lynchburg, TN.

living out of a suitcase from time to time can be tough, there are things about getting back out into the world he’s looking forward to—namely “being able to talk about the process [of] how we make our whiskey. A big brand comes with many assumptions . . . [but] I love to share with people how much we stand behind our process. When people realize we are an open book and nothing is proprietary, it’s unexpected and [they] really respond to that. They appreciate our openness and transparency.” It’s a tenet that comes naturally to the brand. “We want people to know how we make our whiskey—our

yeast, our barrels, our charcoal, the cave spring our water comes from,” Fletcher asserted, not least to clear up common misconceptions: “Most people think that legally we can’t call ourselves bourbon. Actually, the opposite is true. Jack’s nephew had to fight with the U.S. government to

call ourselves Tennessee whiskey. Our process starts the same way a traditional bourbon does. Charcoal mellowing does not impede us from calling ourselves bourbon, but we’ve always felt that that extra special step in our process deserved its own designation.”

And sure enough, according to Fletcher, “The more they know, the more people seem to appreciate what we do. . . . That is how my grandfather made whiskey and how the Motlow family [Daniel’s nephews] taught him and [continuing] down the line.” Fletcher recalled Daniel’s motto—“Every day we make it, we make it the best we can”—noting, “That’s how I feel, and that’s how everyone that touches Jack Daniel’s feels. [So] if

someone says that Jack Daniel’s is the best bourbon in the world, I am not gonna argue with them.”

Becoming master distiller wasn’t the only exciting news that Fletcher experienced this past year. He and his wife, Ashley, welcomed a son, Payne Thomas. That means finding time to sit back and relax can be hard to come by, but when he’s able, how does Fletcher drink Jack Daniel’s?

“On the rocks,” he said, same as his grandpa—and as Frank Sinatra. I think he’s in pretty good company.

Eric “ET” Tecosky is U.S. brand ambassador for Jack Daniel’s.

One Brand, Four Styles:


THE BUSKER IRISH WHISKEY



As millennials mature, so do their tastes—from Two Buck Chuck to Napa Cabs, from wine spritzers to Champagne. On the spirits side, this coveted demographic is graduating from Jäger shots to more subtle, sophisticated sips—and with that in mind, Ireland’s Royal Oak Distillery has introduced a new range of refined Irish whiskeys aimed directly at today’s adventuresome American consumer: The Busker.

Part of the fun for the brand’s target audience will be learning about the various styles of Irish whiskey via its quartet of offerings, all produced at Royal Oak Distillery: Single Grain, Single Pot Still, Single Malt, and a flagship blend called the Triple Cask Triple Smooth, making The Busker the only brand on the market that represents all four of the category’s styles.

The Triple Cask Triple Smooth is dominated by the Single Grain with high percentages of the Single Malt and Single Pot Still; it’s matured and finished in three different casks—bourbon, Sherry, and Marsala—for exceptional smoothness and complexity, making it a fine introduction to Irish whiskey. Their palates thus whetted, adventurers can continue to explore the category via The Busker Single Collection. (The term “single” refers to a whiskey made at a single distillery.) The Busker Single Grain aged in bourbon barrels from the U.S. and rare Marsala casks from Sicily’s celebrated Cantine Florio, while the sweet and creamy Busker Single Malt is distilled in large copper stills and matured in bourbon and Sherry casks. And with its burnished copper color, the Busker Single Pot Still provides a quintessentially Irish drinking experience.

With eye-catching packaging that’s a far cry from more traditional brands, The Busker injects modernity into traditional Irish whiskey and reimagines the American whiskey drinker for a new generation. 

The Busker Single Pot Still Irish Whiskey, Ireland (\$30) This 88.6-proofer engages with warm aromas of chamomile, caramel apple, and apricot. Notes of baked apple pie, rye bread, cigar, hops, and chapparal embrace the palate, which shows ample body and a savory style. **93** —*M.M.*

The Busker Triple Cask Triple Smooth Irish Whiskey, Ireland (\$25) Scents of pekoe tea, apricot, and mandarin orange allure. Smooth indeed, the 80-proof liquid spreads evenly across the palate. A spark of white pepper perks up ripe stone fruit. **92** —*M.M.*

The Busker Single Grain Irish Whiskey, Ireland (\$30) Following a perfume of tangerine, pineapple, and cinnamon, a hint of creaminess flows alongside white-peppered papaya and pineapple. The delicate mouthfeel, tinged with toffee and pine nut, lends an ethereal quality to this 88.6-proof spirit. **94** —*M.M.*

The Busker Irish Whiskey Single Malt, Ireland (\$30) A sumptuous nose and flavor profile distinguish this 88.6-proofer. Soul-stirring aromas of peach cobbler, hyacinth, and vanilla cream lead to lilting flavors of yellow flowers and peaches dotted with salted caramel; a dusky sage component lingers. **95** —*M.M.*

DISARONNO INTERNATIONAL

Discerning Palates

SOMMCON DEBUTS ITS VIRTUAL BUYER'S FORUM

by Michelle Ball

Last fall, SommCon hosted a series of webinars and virtual tastings to continue its mission of cultivating a wine-education platform for sommeliers and trade professionals. It commenced the new year with its first Buyer's Forum, linking buyers from across the country directly with producers and serving as a much-needed source of connection in the midst of the pandemic.

Moderated by Jesse Rodriguez, who has worked as a sommelier for numerous restaurants and hotels since 2000, the virtual event gave representatives from seven wineries the opportunity to share more about their brands with the 60-plus buyers who tuned in to taste the samples they'd received in advance. "I've always seen these wines as places I could find a home for," said Rodriguez, referring to them as ideal candidates for by-the-glass programs, banquet menus, and premium flights. Though the wineries spanned two continents and ranged dramatically in style, they shared one commonality, according to Rodriguez: "I think these wines are textbook [with respect] to what every wine list should have."

A view of the Castello Banfi estate
in Montalcino, Tuscany.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASTELLO BANFI



J. WILKES WINES

PRESENTER: WES HAGEN, WINEMAKER AND BRAND AMBASSADOR

WINES: J. WILKES 2019 PINOT BLANC (\$25) AND J. WILKES 2018 PINOT NOIR (\$30), SANTA MARIA VALLEY



The late Jeff Wilkes, a longtime ambassador of winemaking in the Santa Maria Valley, founded his namesake brand in 2001, focusing on Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir. Over the years, he worked closely with the Miller family—owners of the Bien Nacido and Solomon Hills vineyards—and after Wilkes’ untimely death in 2010, the Millers acquired the brand to continue its founder’s legacy in the AVA. Predominantly comprising sandy soils, the Santa Maria Valley enjoys an extended growing season with cool ocean breezes and an average temperature of only 74 degrees at the height of summer.

“These wines are made to be vineyard-designated quality at [an] AVA price,” said Wes Hagen, winemaker and brand ambassador for J. Wilkes Wines, who has been working with the brand since 2015. “They’re elegant and crunchy, with great acidity, presence, and verve.” The brand is well known for its Pinot Blanc—“an endangered species in the U.S.,” according to Hagen, who noted that only roughly 300 acres are cultivated in California compared to over 90,000 acres of Chardonnay. “But unlike the white rhino,” he joked, “if you buy Pinot Blanc and put it on by-the-glass [lists], you will be helping [to] save an incredibly important varietal that is mostly planted in Alto Adige and in Alsace.”

The 2019 Pinot Blanc was crafted and matured exclusively in stainless steel to ensure the vibrancy of the fruit. In a similar vein, the 2018 Pinot Noir aged largely in neutral barrels with only 15–20% new French oak, as Hagen believes that higher percentages are often used by winemakers to mask flaws: “I ask myself, ‘What is the deficit of [their] wines that [would] require [new] French oak to give them legitimacy?’”



GEHRICKE WINES

PRESENTER: ALEX BELOZ, WINEMAKER

WINE: GEHRICKE 2017 SONOMA COAST PINOT NOIR (\$29)

Fourth-generation vintner August Sebastiani grew up traipsing through the old backroads of Sonoma, which led him to hidden vineyards and long-neglected properties. The flagship wine label of Sebastiani's 3 Badge Beverage Corporation, Gehricke Wines is a tribute to those adventures and is named after one such road that cuts through northern Sonoma Valley.

The brand aims to explore the diverse subregions of Sonoma County, sourcing fruit exclusively from premium sites. In 2015, it hired winemaker Alex Beloz to elevate the wines to the next level. "For me, Gehricke is really about finding the most exceptional vineyards in Sonoma County and making the best wines [we can] from those vineyards," said Beloz.

The 2017 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir blended fruit from Martin Ranch Winery, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards, and Rogers Creek Vineyard, all of which are all heavily influenced by the Petaluma Gap formation. This break in the coastal mountain range funnels cold Pacific breezes inland, giving the vines respite from the heat during the growing season. "It translates to great intensity of fruit flavors but a lot of acidity in the wines, keeping the freshness," explained Beloz.

The Pinot Noir was 100% destemmed and matured in 20% new oak for 18 months to create a balance of spicy red and dark fruit. Although the wines are crafted to be ready upon release, Beloz noted that they're still ageworthy: "I'm just trying to find the balance between fruit, spice, and longevity."

OAK RIDGE WINERY

PRESENTER: JASON DODGE, WINEMAKER

WINE: OAK RIDGE 2018 OLD SOUL CABERNET SAUVIGNON (\$16)

Originally built as a cooperative in 1934, Oak Ridge is the oldest operating winery in the Lodi region. It's owned by the Maggio family, who farm over 2,500 acres of sustainable vineyards certified in accordance with LODI RULES.

"We're the largest producer and grower of Zinfandel [in Lodi]," said winemaker Jason Dodge as he introduced Old Soul, one of Oak Ridge's brands, to the webinar audience. "In each vineyard there are massive oak trees that are hundreds of years old, and if these trees and these vines could tell stories, they would have a lot to say."

Lodi's warm, sunny days result in fruit with full ripeness and color, while the cool nights help preserve natural acidity. Dodge described the 2018 Old Soul Cabernet Sauvignon as "very ripe and jammy but true to [varietal] type." To round out the firm tannins, the Cabernet was blended with small amounts of Zinfandel and Merlot as well as Petite Sirah for mid-palate structure. It then aged for ten to 12 months in oak—60% American for "flashy oak-lactone character" and 40% French to "bring [out] some earthiness . . . and subtle sweet-oak flavors," said Dodge.



JORDAN WINERY

PRESENTER: MAGGIE KRUSE, WINEMAKER

WINES: JORDAN 2018 CHARDONNAY, RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY (\$35); JORDAN 2016 CABERNET SAUVIGNON, ALEXANDER VALLEY (\$58)

PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN WINERY



PHOTO: KENDALL BUSBY

Jordan Winery was founded by the parents of second-generation owner John Jordan, Tom and Sally, who sought to emulate the great estates of France in Sonoma County.

Wanting to produce a Bordeaux-style wine, they hired acclaimed winemaker André Tchelistcheff, who had crafted their favorite California Cabernet Sauvignon, as a consultant. Tchelistcheff enlisted the help of winemaker Rob Davis for Jordan's inaugural 1976 vintage, and although Davis initially planned on just a three-month stint, he stayed on as winemaker for 43 years. When he retired in 2019, his longtime assistant, Maggie Kruse, was promoted to head winemaker—becoming only the second person to hold the title in the winery's history.

"I really feel fortunate to have learned from Rob, because one thing we're really known for is our consistency from vintage to vintage," said Kruse, who spent 14 years working with Davis. The most significant change since Kruse's tenure with the company has been an effort, led by John Jordan, to establish relationships with growers of higher-quality fruit than was available a generation ago while also utilizing improved viticultural methods such as tighter spacing, more effective canopy management, and better clonal selection on their own estate sites.

The 2018 Chardonnay was sourced from roughly a dozen blocks throughout the Russian River Valley. "There's only one Burgundy, but we're trying to be as Burgundian as possible, so we're all about restraint," said Kruse, who fermented the wine in 50/50 oak and stainless steel and halted malolactic fermentation at 12% conversion in order to ensure bright acidity.

The second wine presented, the 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon, comprised 93% fruit purchased from premium vineyards throughout Alexander Valley along with 7% from the best blocks on Jordan's estate; small amounts of Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec made up 20% of the final blend. "It's been such a treat to work with these different growers and really improve the quality of our wines," said Kruse.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASTELLO BANFI

CASTELLO BANFI

PRESENTER: JGOR MARINI, WINE AMBASSADOR AND REGIONAL MANAGER

WINE: CASTELLO BANFI 2016 MAGNA CUM LAUDE SUPER TUSCAN (\$40)

Award-winning producer Castello Banfi was founded in 1978 by the Mariani family, who purchased an expansive 7,100 acres in Montalcino and planted roughly one-third of them to vine. "The vision of Banfi was to mark the road for pioneering agriculture and winemaking," said wine ambassador and regional manager Jgor Marini. "We base everything on studies and research to produce high-quality, premium wines and, at the same time, respect our environment and promote our territory."

Although the winery is known for its Brunellos, it also produces exceptional Super Tuscan blends. The 2016 Magna Cum Laude, Latin for "with high honors," blends 40% Sangiovese with smaller portions of Cabernet Sauvignon (25%), Merlot (25%), and Syrah (10%); each varietal is vinified and matured separately. Then the final blend—described as "voluptuous, rich, and full-bodied" by Marini—is assembled and aged for six to eight months in large barriques before release.

"[The wine] highlights the elegance and restrained terroir of Montalcino," said Marini, "linking the style of Old World winemaking to modernity with opulent flavors and [a] prolonged finish." With ample berry notes and soft tannins on a full-bodied palate, it's an ideal counterpart to rich meat dishes.



TRIBUTE WINES

PRESENTER: CHRIS BENZIGER, FIRST-GENERATION VINTNER, BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

WINE: TRIBUTE 2017 CABERNET SAUVIGNON (\$20)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY



Benziger Family Winery started with the purchase of a small vineyard that inspired its founders' large family to move from New York to California. "Tribute Wines was created to honor the four decades of my family's wine-making adventure here on Sonoma Mountain," said Chris Benziger, the youngest of the seven Benziger siblings. Together, they built their winery by hand and operated in those early years under rustic conditions that included using their car headlights for lighting due to a lack of electricity.

They entered their first three wines at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair in 1982, where their Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay claimed first and second place. The experience taught them an important lesson, according to Benziger: "It's not the pretty tanks that matter—it's something more intrinsic. It's that family passion of working together, getting great grapes, and making that into a fine wine."



The 2017 Tribute Cabernet Sauvignon carries a California designation, but the fruit is sourced specifically from the Creston District in Paso Robles and the Paicines AVA just west of Monterey. Benziger described the former site as "a beautiful escarpment of decomposed granite" that offers ripe flavors of blackberry and black cherry. The latter, meanwhile, is divided by the San Andreas Fault. "When we dig backhoe pits in this vineyard, it looks like a Vegas dealer shuffled two gigantic tectonic plates together," said Benziger, who called the fruit it yields his "spice rack," adding notes of earth, coffee, and chocolate. Together, the two sources make for a bold, fruit-driven wine at a highly competitive price point.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GARCÍA CARRIÓN

GARCÍA CARRIÓN


PRESENTER: ANE ORTUETA, BRAND AMBASSADOR

WINE: PATA NEGRA 2018 TORO TINTO ROBLE (\$10)

García Carrión, the largest family-owned wine producer in Spain, was founded in 1890 and offers an expansive selection of wines representing every region from Cava to Rioja. Its Pata Negra Toro hails from the Toro DO, located along the Duero River in western Spain. The wines are primarily made from Tinta de Toro, which is genetically quite similar to Tempranillo, albeit with smaller bunches and thicker skins.



Brand ambassador Ane Ortueta referred to the small appellation as the "most precious treasure in Spain" due to its high percentage of old bush vines, many of which predate phylloxera. The growing conditions are extreme: Summers are dry, with hot daytime temperatures that are tempered by large diurnal temperature swings due to the high altitude, which ranges from 2,000 to 2,400 feet. The heat and lack of moisture in Toro's sandy soils cause the vines to grow low to the ground, resulting in concentrated, powerful fruit befitting the label (*toro* is Spanish for "bull").

The Pata Negra 2018 Toro Tinto Roble matures in French oak for only three months in order to highlight the grapes' character. "The idea with this wine is it shows all the fruit," said Ortueta. 



Mediterranean-Inspired, Mexican-Made

TEQUILA PRODUCER **CASA KOMOS** DARES TO BE DIFFERENT

by Wanda Mann

Challenging long-held traditions can be a risky endeavor, but Casa Komos Beverage Group partner Richard Betts isn't afraid to shake up the status quo. Surveying the tequila landscape, he decided that too many producers were beholden to convention at the expense of innovation. "To be traditional for the sake of doing so is simply to be bound by the past, and there's no growth," he says.

His friend Joe Marchese has long agreed. Sitting on the rooftop of Betts' home in Amsterdam, where Marchese was visiting from New York City, the pair began lamenting the dearth of quality tequila available in Europe as well as the lack of creativity in the category. Inspired to take action, they shook hands, co-founded Casa Komos, and embarked on a journey to bring ultra-luxury label Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino to life.

Betts was no newbie to the world of wine and spirits. Growing up in the Southwestern U.S., he enjoyed drinking tequila regularly before wine captured his attention; in 2003, he became a Master Sommelier. (He has since resigned from the Court, publishing an open letter in 2020 that criticized the organization for what he considered its inadequate response to an "outcry for racial equality and social justice.") Betts then began making wine in Australia, France, Italy's Friuli region, and Napa, but his love for spirits, especially those crafted from agave, never waned. "I think agave spirits are totally unique," he says. "They're uppers,



Casa Komos Beverage Group partner Richard Betts.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASA KOMOS BEVERAGE GROUP

not downers. They make you feel different, and I like to be up.”

With a history that traces back to the Aztecs, tequila holds a revered place in Mexican culture. The Casa Komos team strived to craft a version that respects the spirit’s heritage while reflecting his own background in wine. “We want to take a gentle, slow, and thoughtful approach in crafting Komos, and much of this work is informed by—and borrowed from—Mediterranean winemaking traditions,” explains Betts. In fact, he views the brand as encapsulating a modern Mediterranean lifestyle that ensures “it is as at home on the beach or by a pool as it is anywhere else,” he adds.

The first step is sourcing 100% blue agave from both the highlands and lowlands of Jalisco. As with grapes, Betts believes these raw materials must be treated with the utmost care. “When you approach distilling with a more gentle hand, where you want to take care of each piece more kindly along the way, I think you have the opportunity for more beauty and more nuance—and to also make something that I want to consume,” he explains.

After the piñas are roasted in a traditional volcanic stone oven at a distillery in Tequila that converts the agave’s starch to sugar and builds flavor, they are juiced and fermented with native yeasts for five to six days. The result is akin to an “agave beer,” in Betts’ words, with about 5% alcohol; that low-ABV liquid is then pot-distilled twice in a copper still to create a blanco tequila. Though many producers bottle the spirit as such, the Casa Komos team uses it solely as an essential building block of their final product, which they take to the next level with several innovative techniques.

For instance, most añejo tequilas are aged in highly toasted ex-bourbon or whiskey barrels of American oak, but they rest theirs in white-wine barrels from France. “We can use some of the winemaking tools and pieces to make a tequila both complex and very smooth,” says Betts. He believes that the lighter toast and tighter grain of the French oak better preserves the subtleties of the tequila, which is softened and mellowed by the oxygen that passes through the wood over the course of 12 months. Both the oak and the wine it once contained also influence the



Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino is packaged in porcelain vessels crafted by Mexican artisans.

spirit’s flavor without masking it. “These are only shadings; we’re building a complex thing,” asserts Betts.

Wood aging gives standard añejo its color. Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino, by contrast, achieves transparency through the use of a whiskey-production technique: the Lincoln County Process, whereby it’s tipped through a 6-foot column of charcoal to exit as crystal-clear as a glass of water. In addition to losing its hue, according to Betts, the congeners that can cause headaches and hangovers are also removed: “What’s left is vivid and pure and pretty and easy to drink.” The clear Añejo is then tumbled for 12–24 hours in 400- to 600-liter amphorae that are custom-crafted for Casa Komos in the Republic of Georgia (where they’re lined with beeswax so that no flavor is imparted by the clay). Betts believes this step encourages positive oxygenation to result in a profile that “has more body and gives an impression of sweetness.”

At the end of this unconventional yet meticulous process, Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino is bottled in distinctive

Mediterranean-blue porcelain vessels that are crafted by Tequila-area artisans and feature symbols depicting sun, sea, and salt. Betts expressed the company’s desire to “put [the spirit] in a bottle that’s commensurate with our endeavor in making [it] and also to work with an artist in Mexico to make something nice. And to make something that people will feel good holding and want to upcycle.” Batch and bottle numbers are discreetly printed on the back label of each bottle, which retails for an SRP of \$119 at [komos.com](https://www.komos.com); the brand will achieve distribution in all 50 states by the end of 2021. (See our review on page 65.)

Lest there be any doubt that the Mediterranean was their muse, Betts and Marchese anointed their unusual tequila with the Greek name Komos after the mythological deity who served as cupbearer to Dionysus and whose namesake festivals involved alcohol-fueled revelry. Betts laughingly describes Komos as “kind of an instigator—the guy that got the party started.” A modern-day Komos himself, Betts has instigated a daring new chapter in tequila’s history. **LT**



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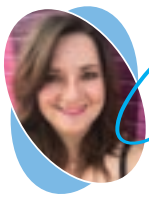
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Seeking Out the Sunshine

ONE YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC, SIX MIAMI ESTABLISHMENTS REFLECT ON HOW THEY'VE WEATHERED THE STORM

This month marks one year since municipal shutdowns made in response to the coronavirus pandemic rocked the hospitality industry nationwide; in Miami, the unprecedented closures began during the busiest part of tourist season, sending restaurant and bar owners into a tailspin as they figured out ways to survive. While Florida's relatively lenient rules permitted them to reopen mid-summer, the ever-changing restrictions and curfews made it difficult for many to adapt. Here's how six Miami operators have been able to stay successful during the crisis, in their own words.

Will Thompson

Co-owner of Jaguar Sun: We closed a little bit before we were told we had to; with all the information coming out around the world,

we knew this was going to be serious. We completely shut down and tried to reopen as a takeout restaurant, which was just the worst, but we were committed to figuring out how to stay connected with our customers and also keep our staff taken

care of. . . . We needed to get outside [seating], so we found a space about 5 miles away and we set up shop there. We got lucky because it's naturally beautiful, so it was easy to create an ambiance. We figured everyone was broke, so we started with something affordable, tacos, but didn't get the emotional response we were looking for. That's when we came up with Sonny's Someday Steakhouse. We knew people weren't going out as often and it suddenly became a special occasion. A steakhouse vibe is our version of fancy.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAGUAR SUN

Jacqueline Pirolo

Managing partner of Macchialina: At the start of the pandemic, we halted ordering and worked with the inventory we had and quickly turned into a retail shop. . . . We created bottled cocktails based on what we had—which was a good amount since we were in season and had been so busy before the shutdown. We also started doing wine boxes with three or four bottles each. It didn't take long to see what worked: The wine boxes and retail bottles of spirits way outsold the to-go cocktails. We partnered with Table 22, which works with restaurants to offer subscription-based packages, so now we have an official wine club subscription. It's still really great to continue having our inside set up as a retail shop. We're seeing a lot of our diners leave the outdoor space and want to take home a bottle or two of whatever they enjoyed at dinner to keep the experience going.



PHOTO: ADAM DELGUIDICE



Karina Iglesias

Owner of Niu Kitchen and Arson: We went into a panic, just like everyone in the beginning, and we decided to close on March 23. I was coming back from a trip in Europe and knew that it was worse than America realized it would be. We reopened as a retail store where we tried to sell our wine. At the time we had over 120 wines on our list. Then we decided to transition into an online bodega. It took a ton of effort from us and our employees, as they were working for tips even though we didn't have nearly as many sales. Our food menu isn't a to-go-friendly menu, so we had to create new things. Once we could reopen, we decided to merge both of our concepts together (they are right down the street from each other, but Arson is a bigger space) and we transitioned Niu into a wine shop called Wine Medium. . . . Once a month we host the shop as a pop-up in outdoor restaurants owned by friends of ours that have welcomed us into their spaces. That really helps.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN BINKIEWICZ



Dan Binkiewicz

Partner and founder of Sweet Liberty: We did a lot of things to attract people, starting with hiring a new creative director, Naren Young. It was in the works pre-COVID but ended up being good timing for reopening. We were seeing a lot of establishments streamline their approach, but when people zig, I like to zag. So we did the opposite and came out swinging hard. We opened with an entirely new [and elaborate] menu created by one of the world's most talented bartenders, [namely Young, with] ten new food items to match the elevated cocktails. There's a Martini section, so naturally we introduced caviar and prawns. We knew that with the curfew, people don't have a lot of time to spend out, so they're making their choices on what the most interesting draw [is]. We're all about affordable luxury, and we simply upped our luxury game.

Amanda Fraga

Beverage director at The Genuine Hospitality Group (Michael's Genuine, Amara at Paraiso, Tigertail + Mary, Harry's Pizzeria): Throughout the pandemic, [our beverage programs] have shed their extra fat, including the wines that never sold and the cocktails that needed too many people to prepare. We had to run through much of the product, especially in the beginning, to help with cash flow, and since then we've strategically purchased new wines and spirits to [create] a fun yet simplified program. We've also seen an increase in beverage consumption overall, which has been interesting—more spirits and less wine. I think it's because wine is a beverage that people are typically more comfortable with drinking at home, and people have been home a lot! So when they're going out to a restaurant, they want to try a different kind of beverage. We don't have the same staffing we had pre-COVID. . . . In fact, oftentimes we have no full-time barback or sommelier. So we're figuring out how to handle the same workload with fewer people.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANDA FRAGA



Brian Griffiths

Owner of Over Under: We've been working on opening [this business] for almost four years, so when it came to opening mid-pandemic, we didn't really have a choice—it was now or never. . . . We were lucky in a way, because that meant we didn't have to downsize. We were able to open with a small crew and grow as we went. We started with a staff of five that included me, our chef, and our GM. . . . It was bare bones, but it worked. It felt like having five different openings with all the changes in rules and regulations [from just takeout to outdoor dining, then limited indoor, and outdoor again]—but with a brand-new place, we've got a lot of flexibility, since no one is set in their routines yet. We're just going with the flow and it's working. 🍷

The FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management in Miami, FL.

FIU
Chaplin School of
Hospitality & Tourism
Management

School SPIRITS

BY LARS LEICHT

Bacardi and Florida International University Take a Grassroots Approach to Shaping the Future of the Beverage Industry

It is always better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, as the old adage goes. In these dark times, Bacardi has done just that through a groundbreaking, one-of-a-kind partnership with Florida International University (FIU), with which it launched a spirits management major last fall that's aimed at preparing the trade for the post-pandemic challenges that lie ahead.

In-depth courses, scholarships, internships, apprenticeships, online mentoring, and roundtable discussions with leading professionals are on tap at the FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management's new Bacardi Center of Excellence (BCE), a classroom dedicated to bridging industry and academia by creating innovative opportunities for operational training, concept development, and education.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FIU CHAPLIN SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY & TOURISM MANAGEMENT

The Chaplin School has four undergraduate and graduate programs in hospitality management, with 15 specialty courses in beverage management, wine, and brewing. The bachelor's degree offers tracks in beverage, culinary, event, hotel/lodging, restaurant/food service and travel/tourism management; the master's program offers tracks in hospitality real estate development, mega events, revenue management, and executive hospitality management as well as a joint degree in international real estate and hospitality management. "The Chaplin School's combination of classroom, online, and experiential learning programs offers the most dynamic and impactful curricula available," says Michael Cheng, dean of the hospitality and tourism management program. "Our talented faculty, staff, alumni, and industry partners are creating a path to success for America's next generation of hospitality leaders."

Blending Expertise

Given their collective influence and acclaim, FIU and Bacardi are a natural pairing. The latter is one of the largest privately held family-owned spirits companies in the world; founded in 1862 in Santiago, Cuba, and originally known for its eponymous white rum, it currently represents over 200 brands, employs 7,000 people, and is distributed in roughly 170 countries. The Chaplin School, meanwhile, is attended by more than 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students and has been ranked among the top 50 hospitality programs internationally by QS World University Rankings.

"Partnering with FIU is an extension of our 159-year legacy of giving back," says Pete Carr, regional president of Bacardi North America. "I've personally joined sessions and interacted with FIU students and found it so rewarding to hear their enthusiasm and excitement for what the future

holds in this industry. I can't wait to see where they end up and am confident they are getting the preparation they need to succeed."

In addition to recruiting students interested in a career in the spirits industry, the program reaches out to beverage professionals and enthusiasts seeking to build their spirits knowledge through a virtual collaborative-learning platform called BacardiTeach, which has already offered microcredentials and badges—comparable to standard university credits, they're meant to stand out on a resume—as well as certifications and advanced learning opportunities to thousands of participants. Another program, called BacardiTalks, provides access to guest lectures with industry luminaries such as James Beard Award nominee Elizabeth Blau, founder and CEO of restaurant development company Blau + Associates, and Drew Nieporent, founder of Myriad Restaurant Group.



Professor Brian Connors leads a seminar at Florida International University's Bacardi Center of Excellence.

Brian Connors is director of the Bacardi Center of Excellence.



Additional speakers are featured weekly on the program's official podcast, "2 Barstools and a Knife."

"The partnership with FIU is about building a talent pipeline for the future of our industry," says Ryan Bibbo, vice president of human resources for Bacardi. "We are big believers in . . . offering hands-on training, and the FIU format offers many opportunities beyond lessons in the classroom, including [making a] connection with business leaders and world-class brand ambassadors."

Envisioning a New Future

Serving as director of the Bacardi Center of Excellence is FIU professor Brian Connors, who's a veteran of both industry and academia: Formerly a professor at Johnson & Wales University as well as a wine educator at Banfi Vintners, he's also worked as a consultant to numerous restaurants, country clubs, cruise lines, and luxury yachts. Channeling this varied experience has enabled him to spearhead curriculum development at BCE as he works with industry leaders to identify



We are asking the brightest minds to reimagine what hospitality should look like in a pandemic.

-BRIAN CONNORS



a range of challenges the program can help address.

The most urgent of those challenges is equipping students with the resources and knowledge necessary to reimagine the hospitality experience for not only the near but the long-term future, as face masks, social distancing, and other protocols related to mitigating the spread of COVID-19 are likely to remain in place well into 2022 and potentially beyond.

“In order to revitalize the industry,” Connors says, “we must envision new concepts and hospitality experiences. We have to go back to the drawing board [and] rethink technology solutions, [customer] experience, [and layout] design along with health and safety measures. We are asking the brightest minds to reimagine what hospitality should look like in a pandemic.”

Participants in the nine-week program for spring 2021, called “Mission: New Normal—Bar Project 2021,” will do just that, learning directly from industry leaders like celebrity chef Andrew Zimmern and sommelier Tahira Habibi, who appeared on *Wine Enthusiast’s* 2020 “40 Under 40 Tastemakers” list, in a mix of group



An FIU student poses with Bacardi's bat logo.

workshops and webinars that will also broach topics such as diversity and inclusion, sustainability, and social responsibility.

“We want to inspire tomorrow’s leaders to think about areas that shape culture and set the foundations for long-term success,” says Heidi Vargas, vice president—on premise for Bacardi

North America. “The learnings will help instill a sense of leading with responsibility. Students get access to industry leaders to learn from, to seek advice, and to really pick their brains on potential paths to success.”

The program will culminate in the inaugural Innovation Challenge competition in which students will be asked to propose concrete solutions to current industry challenges and will have the opportunity to set up a mock establishment at the South Beach Wine & Food Festival based on their ideas. “It gives them an opportunity to show off their creativity, problem-solving skills, and forward thinking,” Vargas says, adding that the competition is her favorite part of the BCE curriculum. “It will be an exciting moment to see them bring to life all they’ve learned by using an entrepreneurial mindset to push boundaries.”

All in all, says Connors, the program resonates with the trade professionals he corresponds with, either to solicit their involvement or to simply share details about it. “The common refrain is, ‘Why didn’t they have that when I was in school?’ They are eager to help and anxious to see the results.”



The walls of the Bacardi Center of Excellence are decorated with a timeline of the company's history and vintage brand memorabilia.

*
Dear

*

Emma

* by Emma Roberts

Grace Under Pressure

HOW TO HANDLE PATRONS WHO HAVE OVERINDULGED

One of the most challenging tasks a restaurant manager faces is dealing with intoxicated guests. When and how do you make the call to cut them off, and when and how do you ask them to leave your premises? These situations are enough to cause sweat-inducing anxiety, but you must remain calm and graceful.

While working as a bar supervisor at

club lounge, where he was promptly removed by hotel security. Making the decision as to whether we would allow him to return was particularly painful, but we chose to do so under certain conditions. Our solution was to grant him only two pours per visit, which we cut in half, serving him 1 ounce at a time. We no longer had any problems.

water and/or a bite of food to fill them up. I'll say something like "I know how you feel" or "I've been there," not only to make myself more relatable but also because it is true. If the guest responds by being argumentative, that's when I will suggest that they should leave and, provided they cooperate, consider revisiting us some other time. I know



No matter how well your team has been trained to prevent overserving, there's always a chance someone will slip through the cracks and get sloppy.

at a luxury hotel in Los Angeles, I became acquainted with one Mr. A, an elderly regular for 50-plus years. He had held numerous family events at the hotel, including his wedding, and was famous across the property for his charisma and charm: Everyone was his friend. Mr. A would buzz around in an electric motor chair, handing out "lucky" \$2 bills to the team. After the loss of his wife, however, he began drinking too much Scotch at the bar. In one especially rough incident, he knocked over a glass table covered with cocktails, spilling them on other guests; he then wheeled himself into the off-limits

At his funeral, we presented Mr. A's family with an engraved bottle of Scotch in his memory.

Unfortunately, not everyone is as understanding as Mr. A was. And no matter how well your team has been trained to prevent overserving, there's always a chance someone will slip through the cracks and get sloppy. But through much trial and error, I have found a technique that works.

First, I'll get eye-level with the drunk guest and show empathy in my behavior and speech. I'll explain that they appear intoxicated and that I am going to stop serving them. Then I'll offer

the kind of customers who raise hell are not the kind I want to keep.

Emotional intelligence is a skill that's learned over years of experience on the job. Your guests are human. So are you. Watch carefully, speak kindly, and hopefully they will return on their best behavior. If not, then onward and upward! **W**

Comments or general life questions? Send Roberts an email at 100proofemma@gmail.com or reach out to her through her YouTube channel, 100 Proof Emma, or Instagram [@100proofemma](https://www.instagram.com/100proofemma).



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