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tastingpanel
MAGAZINE

APRIL/MAY 2021 • \$6.95

ANA MARÍA ROMERO MENA
BEGAN HER CAREER IN WINE,
WHICH INFORMS HER WORK AS
MIJENTA'S MAESTRA TEQUILERA.

ART
AND
Soul

MIJENTA
TEQUILA
CAPTURES THE
POETRY OF AGAVE



Wine nut? Butternut

92 POINTS

Award of Excellence

The Tasting Panel Magazine, March 2021 | 2018 Vintage



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Butter Yourself Up.

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Published seven times a year ISSN# 2153-0122 and USPS 0476-430.

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Subscription Rate: \$36 one year; \$60 two years; single copy \$10
For all subscriptions, email: subscriptions@tastingpanelmag.com

Periodicals postage paid at Van Nuys and at additional mailing offices.
Devoted to the interests and welfare of United States
restaurant and retail store licensees, wholesalers,
importers, and manufacturers in the beverage industry.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
The Tasting Panel Magazine
6345 Balboa Blvd; Ste 111, Encino, California 91316
818-201-3950



[www.Facebook.com/TastingPanelMagazine](https://www.facebook.com/TastingPanelMagazine)
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Turning Points

PHOTO: JENNIFER OLSON



“Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”
The old Zen saying is a reminder that reaching your destination doesn’t mean ending your journey—and it’s one worth heeding as we begin to put the worst of 2020 behind us. How are we putting the profound lessons of that fateful year into humble, tangible, effective practice?

Variations on the theme abound in this issue. On page 22, Paris Vasser explores the considerable work that remains to be done in achieving greater racial equity in the beverage industry, a year since the deaths of first Breonna Taylor and then George Floyd sparked a painful but critical national conversation about systemic discrimination—which will surely echo in the conversation we’ve yet to have at any appreciable level about discrimination against the disability community (page 40). On page 26, Erik Segelbaum examines the suspension of tariffs on alcohol imports from the European Union—and concludes that the ultimate battle for relief begins now, post-victory. And of course, there practically isn’t a page to follow that doesn’t touch on what the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine and the overall decline in infection rates means for restaurateurs, retailers, producers, distributors, and importers alike. But what it all boils down to, in one sense or another, is: chop wood, carry water.

The difference, of course—at least according to the proverb—is that we might now be approaching our daily, most seemingly mundane tasks with a mindfulness and appreciation for our work we didn’t have before. May this issue be an inspiration in that regard. **LV**

*What it all boils down to,
in one sense or another, is:
chop wood, carry water.*

Keeping It

CLEAN

**THE WONDERFUL WINE
CO. WEARS ITS VALUES
ON ITS LABELS**

A vivid still life captures
the brand's vibe.



"The Wonderful Wine Co. aims to cut through the pretense and inaccessibility of the wellness industry," says co-founder and COO Brian Smith.

your wine keeping secrets from you? Consumers are often surprised to learn that their favorite sip may contain more than fermented grapes, but it's true: From animal byproducts to chemical stabilizers, wine producers are not legally required to disclose additives. The Wonderful Wine Co., by contrast, strives to achieve the ideal of "clean wine," challenging the status quo by touting what is—and isn't—in its wines right on the label.

With no legal definition, the term "clean wine" causes heated debate in industry circles. But for sommelier Brian Smith, co-founder and COO of The Wonderful Wine Co., the concept is radically simple. "We wanted to craft transparent products that people could feel good about reaching for," he says. Through both its winemaking and labeling practices, "The Wonderful Wine Co. aims to cut through the

pretense and inaccessibility of the wellness industry by focusing on balance instead of deprivation and highlighting the magic of being alive."

It's only natural that wellness devotees with a preference for organic foods and sustainable products would crave wines that match their health-conscious lifestyles. Of course, wine is not a health food or diet drink, but the Wonderful Wine Co. team is adamant that it can be produced in a healthier manner, starting with sustainably farmed and certified-organic grapes. Furthermore, while acknowledging that many of the more than 70 ingredients that are legally allowed as additives are harmless, they believe that excluding as many as possible aligns with their "clean wine" credo. For example, animal byproducts such as egg whites and fish bladders are commonly used to filter wines, but for



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WONDERFUL WINE CO.



With their whimsical sense of humor, The Wonderful Wine Co.'s marketing campaigns aim straight for the hearts of Generations X through Z.

vegan wine lovers, they're problematic. So the company removes any impurities with a type of clay called bentonite (which is then filtered out); beyond that, the only additives it uses are yeast, cellulose gum, and organic tartaric acid, plus minimal sulfites.

The Wonderful Wine Co.'s growing portfolio of vegan-friendly wines currently includes five offerings that reflect the relatively light-bodied, fruit-forward house style. From California come the **2019 Chardonnay**, made with organically farmed, hand-harvested grapes from the cool-climate Redwood Valley AVA; the **2019 Malvasia Bianca**, which macerated on the skins for 30 days to extract vibrant color and flavor before fermentation in stainless steel; and the **2018 Cabernet Sauvignon**, which is sourced from the Ukiah Valley and shows as fruity with a subtly sweet spice on the nose derived from a short period of aging in French oak. In addition, the **2019 Rosé**, sourced from vineyards along the French Mediterranean, is fermented and aged in stainless steel, while the **2019 Syrah** hails from dry-farmed high-altitude vineyards in Spain. The handpicked

grapes are fermented in concrete tanks. When it comes to bottling, the brand's grape-to-glass sustainability model helps to further diminish its carbon footprint. Its lightweight glass vessels



Cheeky slogans adorn The Wonderful Wine Co.'s labels.

not only require 20% less energy and 12% less water to produce than standard bottles but also reduce carbon emissions throughout production and transport by 26%. Meanwhile, did you know that the vast majority of wine cap-

sules aren't recyclable? For this reason, there are no capsules on the bottles, which The Wonderful Wine Co. ships to customers in 100% recyclable and 95% compostable boxes composed of 70% recycled materials. On top of all that, the price is right: All bottles, which are available for purchase at select retailers nationwide as well as at wonderful.winc.com, are under \$20. With delivery available to most states, the company has shipped to more than 75,000 households since launching in 2020.

Although it's serious about living up to its definition of clean wine, The Wonderful Wine Co. is also all about having fun: Take its colorful labels, which are adorned with whimsical descriptions like "Tastes like dolphin rides and being promoted to head astronaut" and "Tastes like lightning bolts, nudie swims, and transcending time and space." But while the cheeky design may cause giggles, the brand's commitment to sustainability and transparency is the ultimate takeaway, offering drinkers assurance that there's nothing shady lurking behind those happy-go-lucky labels. That's pretty wonderful! [V](#)

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Kuleana Rum Works grows its own sugarcane on Hawaii's Big Island.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KULEANA RUMWORKS

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Giant stone wheels called *tahonas* are used to crush piñas at Sombra's distillery in Oaxaca.

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experience

SWEET UTOPIA

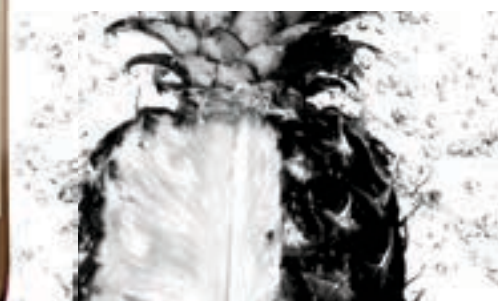
the sweet collection

new release



*notes of blackberry,
raspberry & vanilla*

*notes of pineapple,
peach & honey*



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Breakthru Unveils Aspect Fine Wine Strategy

Leading North American distributor Breakthru Beverage Group recently announced the launch of Aspect, a uniform, cohesive portfolio solution for the rapidly growing fine wine space. Aspect will employ an enhanced go-to-market approach with a heightened focus on education, account segmentation, data, and insights to better service Breakthru's supplier and customer partners. Overseeing Breakthru's Aspect Fine Wine strategy as senior director is Daren Cliff, a certified Specialist of Wine and 20-year wine-industry veteran.

"Wine has long been an area of expertise for Breakthru, and with the launch of Aspect, we're looking to expand to even greater influence in this space," says Breakthru Beverage Group president/CEO Greg Baird.

Aspect—a name derived from the angle at which a vineyard is planted and the role it plays in producing quality wine—will provide customers with the in-depth training and product knowledge of a specialty distributor while leveraging Breakthru's commercial technology, logistics, and operational capabilities. To meet the brand-building expectations they've set, the Aspect team will be required to maintain advanced accreditations through regular training and education and work closely with customers to train staff, support events, and drive engagement.

My Wine Hat Offers a New Go-To Accessory for Enophiles

Designer and JCB Collection ambassador Renee Hanson has combined her passion for travel, wine, and fashion with the creation of My Wine Hat, a brand she conceived in November 2020 while visiting a boutique winery. She realized that half of the guests in the tasting room, including herself, had on a hat—and although she has been wearing them while tasting wine and traveling around the world for the past 20 years, she'd somehow missed that other enthusiastic enophiles seem to harbor a similar love for the accessory.

On that particular day, a couple asked her where she bought the hot-pink fedora she was wearing. It didn't have a tag, so Hanson playfully responded, "It's my wine-drinking hat." The amused couple noted that they wanted a wine-drinking hat of their own, and the conversation starter soon evolved into an idea for a new business venture: "If wine lovers are already wearing hats," Hanson wondered, "why isn't anyone manufacturing and marketing a high-quality, industry-specific hat directly to the wine community?"

Set to launch in June, My Wine Hat will feature 12 custom-designed styles based on top wine regions from around the globe, exemplifying the elegant connection between wine and fashion. A portion of each sale will be donated to the Chaîne Foundation, which advances the mission of the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs gastronomic society—of which Hanson is a member—through scholarships, philanthropy, and education. With the exception of three straw models, the hats are made with 100% Australian wool, are lined with satin, and feature an adjustable hidden head band. All of the designs are currently marketed toward women, but future releases—including a black wool fedora designed to represent the Douro—will be sized for men and women.

Preorder for My Wine Hat's retail launch will be available through mywinehat.com in late April. For more information, follow the brand on Instagram [@mywinedrinkinghat](https://www.instagram.com/mywinedrinkinghat).



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- MERIDITH MAY , MARCH 2021

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Barbaresco Producer Dante Rivetti Dies at 86



Italian producer Dante Rivetti, well known for his Bricco di Neive and Micca crus of Barbaresco, passed away on March 17 at age 86. Rivetti began working with his father in the historic family winery in the 1950s; by the 1970s he had given it his own name, converting it from mainly Moscato production to artisanal production of Nebbiolo, Dolcetto, Barbera, and Arneis. Long a champion of the Langhe area of Piedmont, Rivetti

was known for his meticulous work in the vineyard, pruning and harvesting strictly by hand and practicing chemical-free farming and sustainable agriculture.

He is survived by his wife, Luciana; son, Ivan; and daughters Katia and Mara.

Jordan Plants Pollinator Sanctuaries

Jordan Vineyard & Winery has announced a multiyear planting program to turn acres of non-native grassland into preserved habitat for vital pollinators, including the at-risk Western Monarch butterfly, native bees, and other insects. In collaboration with Pollinator Partnership, the world's largest nonprofit dedicated exclusively to the protection and promotion of pollinators and their ecosystems, Jordan is restoring habitat across four sites on its sustainably certified estate this year, with plans to expand the program over the next two to three years. This project at the 1,200-acre Jordan Estate, located on the fall migratory route of the Western monarchs, will result in the largest dedicated pollinator habitat of all Bee Friendly Farming–certified vineyards nationwide, according to Pollinator Partnership.

Over the course of a year, Brent Young, director of agricultural operations at Jordan, worked with Pollinator Partnership staff to identify optimal sites and materials for the pollinator sanctuaries, with a special emphasis on finding locations for milkweed, which Monarch caterpillars feed on exclusively. Additional plants were selected based on terrain, sun exposure, proximity to watersheds, and, most importantly, which pollinators each habitat would ultimately support, including native bees, honeybees, hummingbirds, and butterflies.

Guests will be able to see the sanctuaries firsthand when the winery reopens for a series of Vineyard Hikes in honor of Earth Week, April 22–25. Tickets for the 4-mile hike, which includes a seated picnic lunch of charcuterie and salad from the chef's garden with wine pairings, can be purchased at jordanwinery.com/events for \$110 per person. The Estate Tour & Tasting, a moveable feast for the senses from May through October that transverses the ranch, also passes these pollinator habitats.

Infinium Spirits Announces Relocation of Corporate Headquarters to San Diego

Infinium Spirits recently announced the relocation of its corporate headquarters to San Diego in the heart of the Gaslamp Quarter. Formerly based in Orange County, the company anticipates opening the doors to its new headquarters as soon as public health orders allow, ensuring employee safety.

Infinium Spirits' rapidly expanding portfolio includes Templeton Rye, the official whiskey of the San Diego Padres; Skrewball Peanut Butter Whiskey, the official whiskey of the San Diego Gulls; Seagram's Vodka; Corralejo Tequila; and Crystal Head Vodka. With these and many other brands, Infinium Spirits saw U.S. sales grow 65% in 2020 per IRI data, making it the fastest-growing top-20 U.S. spirits company in the IRI ranking.

Chris Underwood, CEO of Infinium Spirits' parent company, Young's Holdings, Inc., says, "My family and I have been San Diego residents for 17 years now. I love this city. We are building Infinium's future in and with San Diego . . . and I could not be more excited to bring our spirits business here."

SGWS Promotes Steve Lee to Senior Vice President, General Manager-Northern California



Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits recently announced

that it has promoted Steve Lee to senior vice president, general manager for Northern California. In this role, Lee will be responsible for leading broad sales activities for the region, including formulating overall strategy and establishing policies for the

market. Lee—who will report directly to Steve Harden, executive vice president and general manager for the state—is filling the role of Jim Andrus, who retired in December 2020. [L](#)



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Coming in From the Cold

THE D.C. HOSPITALITY COMMUNITY FINDS SOME MUCH-NEEDED CAUSES FOR CELEBRATION AS WINTER WINDS DOWN

Like so many of us since the pandemic began, I've been ordering in from places around my neighborhood on those evenings when I just don't feel like pulling out the pots and pans. Of course, a birthday especially warrants relinquishing one's kitchen duties (while enjoying copious amounts of bubbly guilt-free). On mine, I opted for delivery from the new outpost of Italian restaurant Stellina in the Shirlington area of Arlington, Virginia, where chef-owner Matteo Venini's menu focuses on neo-Neapolitan pizzas, panini, and other Italian street food as well as handmade pastas. I ordered way too much, as one does when celebrating another trip around

Unlike the D.C. original, the new location contains a market selling sauces, fresh pasta, cured meats, and gourmet ingredients to go, but one thing it lacks is a bar. Venini's partner, Antonio Matarazzo, told me guests can instead sip batched and bottled cocktails served tableside with glassware and custom ice. I'm definitely planning an outing to the old friends' Amalfi Coast-inspired dining room or heated patio for a Negroni served with an orange peel suspended within the cube—but until then, Stellina's dinner to go made for a *buon compleanno a me*.

Meanwhile, other D.C. and Virginia operators got creative with promotions

Stellina's wood-fired, thin-crust Amatriciana pizza comes topped with sliced guanciale.

ing items from local Black-owned businesses like Georgetown Butcher, brewery Soul Mega, and Southern food kitchen Puddin'. And modern Mid-Atlantic restaurant Shilling Canning Company—which partnered with Moët Hennessy USA to open a branded wine shop on the premises—marked Women's History Month by hosting a virtual book-club meeting with co-owner Sara Quinteros-Shilling; team members from Veuve Clicquot, Smoke Tree, and Terrazas de los Andes; and yours truly serving as moderator. The selected title? *The Widow Clicquot*, a biography of the badass Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin, who single-handedly built a Champagne empire—and did it with style. It was a fitting toast to the start of a spring bubbling over with possibilities. **W**

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PHOTO: REY LOPEZ



PHOTO: REY LOPEZ



Fried artichokes at the new outpost of Stellina in the Shirlington area of Arlington, VA.

the sun. Fried artichokes came with an herbed mayo for dipping; tender gnocchi was tossed in a buttery sauce with porcini mushrooms, diced sunchoke, pecorino, and sage; and wood-fired, thin-crust Amatriciana pizza got a hit of meaty richness from thin slices of guanciale. Venini also thoughtfully sent adorable jars of tiramisu and rum cake with my order.

PHOTO: NINA MAY



Feast by Nina May's Valentine's Day cooking kit for couples included orange prawn salad.

to counter the slow business of late winter (even in normal times). Chef Colin McClimans and the team at Feast by Nina May created a Valentine's Day box designed for couples to cook orange prawn salad, honey-glazed duck breast, and red-velvet lava cake safely at home with assistance via Instagram videos. Pizza Paradiso celebrated Black History Month with specials featur-



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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.

Are You Open Yet?

IN AN INCREASING NUMBER OF LOCALES, THE ANSWER IS "YES"

In December, my wife, Melanie, and I packed our masks to spend the winter traveling through two regions we wanted to get better acquainted with: the southeastern United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We couldn't have had a happier experience, not least from a culinary standpoint. Here are a few restaurants that left us feeling safe and thankful for the opportunity to dine out.

Upon arriving on the island of St. John after our first flight in months, we had a lovely meal at 1864 The Restaurant in Cruz Bay, where businesses were adhering to CDC guidelines for restricted (50%) seating capacity and mandatory mask wearing. The attentive staff were doing their part to make sure we all felt comfortable with our experience, and the food was excellent. "Tourist dollars are our lifeblood, and two [Category] 5 hurricanes in 2018 followed by the 2020 lockdown nearly killed us," manager Glennon Travis told us. "Once flights opened back up last fall, our industry knew we'd have to be extra careful. No-compromise masking rules and limited seating is the one sure way to help our guests feel safe."

Back on the mainland, our next stop was Florida, which we crisscrossed to visit both coasts. A highlight of the journey was a lunch stop at Local Catch in Santa Rosa Beach, just east of Destin on the Florida Panhandle. Owned by chef Adam Yellin and partner Jimmy Hasser, Local Catch is a go-to for visitors and residents alike, serving creative seafood-based dishes with a New Orleans accent—a stylistic nod to Yellin's hometown. "Though Florida's policies on the pandemic have been a bit tricky to navigate," said Yellin, "through ten years of service, we've built a solid foundation and gained our clients' respect." Despite the state's lack of a mandate, it's his view that "masking up internally so our patrons feel comfortable . . . has allowed us to keep



Neighborhood restaurant Katie's in New Orleans, LA.

going and honor their dining wishes."

Heading west, we arrived in New Orleans just after Mardi Gras to find that restaurants all over the city were open for in-person dining and takeout. While enjoying an al fresco dinner at Mid-City neighborhood restaurant Katie's, we struck up a conversation with chef-owner Scot Craig, who opened up about the struggles the city had faced during the pandemic and his efforts to make ends meet for his establishment and employees. "People remember Katrina and think of how bad it was, but COVID was much, much worse because literally everyone was affected," he said. "The first thing



PHOTOS: DAVID RANSOM

Chef Adam Yellin of Local Catch in Santa Rosa Beach, FL.



Oysters and Bordeaux Blanc at 1864 The Restaurant in Cruz Bay, U.S. Virgin Islands.

I did was re-gear my entire staff for takeout and delivery, and we set up assembly lines in the dining room and everyone did their part to get the food out. Now we're at 50% in-person dining plus takeout—and everyone kept their jobs." **LT**

◆ — THE MOST — ◆
ANTICIPATED SUMMER
CALLS FOR THE MOST
AWARDED TEQUILA*





Perfecting the Pivot

DALLAS-BASED RESTAURATEUR AND BAR OWNER **BRADLEY ANDERSON** REFLECTS ON HOW HARDSHIPS BECAME OPPORTUNITIES

With spring comes hope, and finally—could it be true?—there’s some light at the end of the proverbial tunnel for bars, restaurants, and other businesses attempting to recover from an extremely difficult year. To learn a little bit about how entrepreneurs in North Texas are doing, I checked in with Dallas restaurateur and bar owner Bradley Anderson, who oversees four concepts with his brother, Brooks, and their partner, chef Nathan Tate.

All four—Boulevardier, RapsCALLION, Veritas Wine Room, and Hillside Tavern—have reopened for both carryout and dine-in service, but despite the March 2 reversal of the statewide mask mandate and occupancy limits, Anderson said they’ll still require masks and social distancing while observing reduced capacity recommendations for the time being. “For the first time in what seems like an eternity, we feel optimistic about our restaurants’ futures. Instead of sweating bullets, we’re now talking about growth and how to strengthen our businesses,” added Anderson, who recalled the moment in mid-March 2020 when his team realized how rocky the following months could be.

“We were hosting a wine dinner with Dennis Cakebread at our modern Southwest bistro, RapsCALLION, when we received news around the second or third course that the NBA had decided to cancel the season’s remaining games,” Anderson said. “There we were, surrounded by our best regulars all eating and drinking like royalty, when the dark reality slowly settled over us that COVID would undoubtedly play a major role for the remainder of 2020.”

While the initial government shutdown obliterated cash flow, the bills kept coming. To meet debt obligations and payroll commitments, the team sold off their deep wine inventory at Boulevardier and turned their attention



PHOTO © JESSICA CHEN

Restaurateurs Brooks and Bradley Anderson toast the future at Veritas Wine Room in Dallas, TX. “For the first time in what seems like an eternity, we feel optimistic,” says Bradley.

to Veritas Wine Room. “Pre-COVID, Veritas was mostly an on-premise bar business,” said Anderson, “but we had a secret weapon: our retail permit. That led us to realize that with every hardship comes opportunity. We set up a website to promote our retail offerings via curbside pickup and delivery, and then in May, we hosted our first virtual tasting with [Paso Robles winery] DAOU Vineyards. We suddenly realized that in the virtual world of wine there are no geographical limitations.” Since then, the team has hosted dozens of virtual tastings with prominent wine-makers throughout the world.

Meanwhile, at RapsCALLION and Hillside Tavern, Tate focused on providing delicious meals to customers craving comfort more than ever. “At

RapsCALLION, we offered custom ‘Survival Kits’ that included dry-aged meats and fresh vegetables, and at Hillside Tavern we worked to fine-tune our to-go model” by streamlining online ordering, menu options, and packaging, Anderson explained.

I was curious: As extroverts who built their businesses around the concept of community, what have they missed most? “Human contact,” Anderson said. “A hug, a handshake, literally breaking bread together over a leisurely, multicourse meal. Our restaurants and wine bar have always been about the friendships, the conversations, and the memories created over a beautiful meal and lots of satisfying wine. It’s exciting to start imagining that again.” **VZ**



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BY PARIS VASSER

Laying the Foundation

MARCIA JONES OF URBAN CONNOISSEURS PAVES THE WAY FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS OF BLACK WINE PROFESSIONALS

A year ago, people around the world opened their eyes to see the reality of what it means to be Black in America. As corporations of all kinds released statements and social media feeds were dominated by black squares, the wine industry also took a hard look at itself. But while many vintners, sommeliers, and wine educators were focusing a magnifying glass on deep-rooted issues of structural discrimination for the first time, Marcia Jones was continuing to promote the growth of generations of Black winemakers as part of an effort she'd started nearly a decade ago.

A former event planner, Jones is the lead changemaker behind Urban Connoisseurs, an organization she founded in 2012 to support Black wine professionals by providing consultation in sales and marketing, mentorship, and more for the businesses of up-and-comers and veterans alike. Her passion for the industry was ignited years earlier by a trip to Napa with her sisters and a memorable tasting in the home of Mac McDonald, winemaker-owner of Sonoma County's Vision Cellars. These experiences transformed Jones from a curious wine drinker into a bona fide crusader with a myriad of wine-related projects under her belt, including the upcoming documentary *Journey Between the Vines: The Black Winemakers' Story*. The film is the first of its kind to spotlight the journeys of Black winemakers in the industry, and though it's been stalled by the pandemic, Jones has launched a JBV Rhône-style blend whose proceeds will go toward its production; crafted by six winemakers featured in the film, the wine is currently available for purchase at urbanconnoisseurs.com.

With Black History Month behind us, industry leaders are nevertheless working to keep its lessons in the conversation while encouraging ongoing support for BIPOC profession-



PHOTO COURTESY OF WOMEN OF THE VINE

als. For Jones, fulfilling that mission means answering a pressing question: "How do we impact the next generation?" Her own answer began to take shape in 2019 in the form of the Black Winemakers Scholarship Fund, which was established after Jones partnered with the United Negro College Fund to assist those aiming to pursue a career in wine. Last year, after securing additional support from Association of African American Vintners president Phil Long, the fund went live, and within 24 hours more than 20 students had applied. The first pair of \$5,000 scholarships were awarded this March, and Jones confirmed that funds will be offered annually; the wine industry at large, meanwhile, can support the fund through donations via Urban Connoisseurs' website.

The scholarship shined a light on a

/// THERE IS DIVERSITY ALREADY HERE [IN THE INDUSTRY]—AND IT'S MAYBE NOT AT THE SCALE THAT IT COULD BE, BUT IT'S DEFINITELY GROWING. . . . DON'T JUST MAKE THE ASSUMPTION THAT EVERY WINE OUT THERE IS [MADE] BY A WHITE MALE."

debilitating misconception that diverse voices are not interested in wine, to which Jones responds that although "this is an industry that we are trying to push diversity into, there is diversity already here—and it's maybe not at the scale that it could be, but it's definitely growing. . . . Don't just make the assumption that every wine out there is [made] by a white male." Emphasizing that the goal is not to take away from the success of anyone due to race, Jones clarifies, "We're just saying, level that field." **LV**

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BY JANET FLETCHER



PHOTO: JANET FLETCHER / PLANET CHEESE

Springing to Light

ENLIVEN YOUR SEASONAL CHEESE BOARD WITH THESE TART AND AIRY PICKS

The first fresh, zippy white wines and rosés from the 2020 vintage are now making their debut, bringing their bright, citrusy flavors to the table. Crisp, steely, and refreshing, with little or no oak, these lively wines make great companions for the types of cheeses that appeal most in spring—young, tart, light cheeses for the apéritif hour or for pairing with salads and seasonal ingredients such as asparagus and fava beans.

If you're opening a white or rosé before dinner to get the appetite going, consider one or more of these gems for your cheese board:

Mystic Cheese Melinda Mae

(Connecticut): Cheesemaker Brian Civitello spent five years making cheese all over Italy before launching his own creamery with a friend. Civitello describes Melinda Mae as robiola-like, but in truth it's unlike anything else. Shaped into a thick 4-pound square and aged for a month, it's as soft and squishy as a pillow. The aroma suggests white mushrooms, sour cream,

and cultured butter, and the finish is bright and tangy. Pair with fava beans on bruschetta or melt atop polenta.

Meredith Dairy Marinated Sheep & Goat Cheese (Australia):

Marinated cheeses are huge in Australia, and Meredith Dairy is number one in that category. No wonder. This cheese (pictured above) is a crowd-pleaser: pudgy cubes bathing in oil seasoned with fresh thyme, black pepper, and garlic. The texture is super-creamy thanks to the extra-rich sheep's milk. Serve in spring and summer salads, and don't toss a drop of the flavorful oil—use it in salad dressings or drizzle on toast or steamed vegetables.

Calabro Hand-Dipped Ricotta

(Connecticut): This creamery specializes in fresh Italian-style cheeses, and its cow's milk ricotta is sublime. Look for the version hand-packed in a perforated tin: It's much fluffier and more delicate than the tub-packed Calabro ricotta. Serve with salumi, olives,

and sundried tomatoes, or spread on crostini and top with sauteed leeks or green garlic.

Tomales Farmstead Creamery Kenne

(California): This young, 6-ounce goat's milk square has a soft, edible rind and, when ripe, a creamy layer just underneath. The texture is firmer at the center but not chalky, and the inviting aroma hints at crème fraîche and mushrooms. A family-run enterprise, Tomales manages both goats and sheep on a scenic property in Marin County and welcomes visitors in normal times.

Green Dirt Farm Fresh Sheep Cheese

(Missouri): This luscious tub-packed product is cream cheese for the gods: Think fresh chèvre but lighter and more lemony, with a clean, cultured-milk tang. Spread on toast and top with smoked salmon or trout, or slather on Danish rye with spring radishes. The creamery makes several flavored versions, but I'll take the plain. **LV**

the Women Behind

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The End of the Beginning

THE SUSPENSION OF TARIFFS ON EU PRODUCTS SPARKS HOPE FOR THE WINE INDUSTRY

Sound the trumpets! Fire the cannons! Dance in the streets! There's good reason for celebration in the wake of the March 5 statement by the United States and the European Union mutually agreeing to a four-month suspension on all tariffs related to the World Trade Organization Large Civil Aircraft Dispute (aka the Airbus-Boeing dispute). This means EU wine, spirits, and food products are now tariff free. Hooray!

I found the last sentence of the joint statement to be particularly poignant: "These steps signal the determination of both sides to embark on a fresh start in the relationship." Make no mistake, this is overwhelmingly fantastic news. However, said relationship has been badly damaged by intentionally spiteful, inappropriate, and abusive actions designed to inflict hurt on both sides. If this were a marriage, most counselors would agree there is likely no coming back from how much things have deteriorated. Fortunately, the U.S. and the EU need one another as political allies and economic partners, which means they are fully expected to work

through these issues as they embark on a path toward free and fair trade.

It also bears mentioning that the relief, while much needed, has come far too late, as restaurants, retailers, distributors, and importers have for the past year had to bear the financial burden of the tariffs even as they were battling with the economic impacts of COVID-19. Like the vaccine breakthrough, the suspension of these tariffs is a significant and critical milestone. But now, just as the logistics of getting those vaccines distributed signal a long road to recovery ahead, so too the wine and hospitality industries can only just begin to take steps toward the resumption of more profitable operations.

So now that we've reached the end of the beginning, what's next? First, Congress needs to swiftly enact a set of economic recovery policies targeted at the Americans most devastated by the tariffs. Due to federal alcohol laws and the three-tier system, roughly 85% of every dollar spent on EU wine is revenue generated by American companies that remains in the U.S. These are the companies that have borne the financial burden of diminished business and, in some cases, been forced to shutter altogether. As we enter into this

recovery period, it is vital that Congress approves the refunding of all tariffs paid by American companies for alcohol that was on the water at any stage of tariff announcements, initial or expanded, from October 2019 to present.

Second, an economic stimulus bill specifically for entities that import or sell EU alcohol needs to be passed in order to help right the ship. The American government owes this to our industry, having deemed us essential enough to continue operating throughout the pandemic but not enough to protect us from ruin as we bore the cost of a trade dispute that had nothing to do with us.

You can help by contacting your congressional representatives, senators, and governors and asking them to refund the tariffs and create a stimulus plan to support our industry. There is no question our outlook is much improved, but it will take a concerted effort from all of us to truly put this issue and its fallout in our rearview mirrors. As one of the strongest industries—and communities—in the world, we can make this happen. **W**



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Island Innovators

KULEANA RUM WORKS POSITIONS HAWAII AS A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE CATEGORY

by Jonathan Cristaldi

Before he became CEO of Hawaii-based Kuleana Rum Works, Steve Jefferson had no plans to join the spirits industry. He was working as a tech reporter in San Francisco, California, until the late 1990s, when he bought a sailboat with his then-girlfriend, Jackie, in order to ride out the impending dot-com crash upon gentler waves; the young couple sailed to Hawaii, where they both grew up, to start a business building houses. But seafaring life called them back in 2006, so they sold their last two houses and bought another boat to sail the Caribbean.

Soon enough, while visiting Martinique, they had a life-changing encounter with rum agricole. Because the pure spirit is distilled from fresh-pressed sugarcane juice, Jefferson and Jackie, now his wife, immediately thought of Hawaii, where sugarcane was the most important crop—so why weren't distillers making rum agricole there? Determined to find out, they sold the boat in 2007 and gradually began to pursue their dream of offering a world-class rum from Hawaii.

American rums typically contain additives like caramel coloring or sweeteners, but Jefferson and his new partners, Chris Schlarb and Charlie Sander, wanted to establish a high quality threshold for their brand from the outset. While perfecting their recipe and process, they were introduced to then-Stanford University Ph.D. candidate Noa Kekuewa Lincoln, a native Hawaiian whose studies on the Leeward Kohala Field System—an ancient agricultural complex—led to the discovery that the first settlers of Hawaii had cultivated 40 sugarcane varieties,

PHOTO COURTESY OF KULEANA RUM WORKS



called kō, from just two varieties they'd transported in their canoes. After obtaining Lincoln's cuttings, Jefferson leased 2 acres of land on the Big Island's Kohala volcano and, by 2014, had planted 2,000 sugarcane plants.

As the group sought to raise \$10 million to build a distillery and buy a 45-acre farm, their fundraising pitch deck caught the attention of David Perkins, founder of Utah-based High West Distillery, who signed on almost immediately as an investor, director, and advisor. "David is regarded as one of the best blenders in the spirits industry and helped us build a program that would allow us to [take advantage of] what we saw as great opportunities," says Jefferson.

In 2018, Kuleana opened its distillery, the first facility of its kind on the Big Island. In addition to its flagship Hawaiian Rum Agricole, a white rum prime for mixology that's made from the fresh-pressed juice of hand-cut kō stalks grown on its farm, the brand currently offers Nanea—a blend of three rums aged two, three, and four

years that are sourced from around the world—and Huihui, a light, molasses-based Papua New Guinea rum blended with the Hawaiian Rum Agricole as well as a rum agricole from Martinique.

In addition to promoting these products in the distillery's 3,000-square-foot Rum Shack, the brand partnered with the Four Seasons Resort Hualālai to showcase its spirits (including an exclusive Hualālai edition). "Focusing on hyperlocal ingredients, Kuleana rums produced with sugarcane from our island are a welcome addition to our portfolio," says Brigeth Brookins, the resort's director of food and beverage, adding that they have "allowed us to create flavor profiles to . . . complement the local flavors of our signature drinks, like the Big Island-inspired Alaula Daiquiri" (see recipe above).

Kuleana's next releases will be a Cognac barrel-aged version of the Hawaiian Rum Agricole and a complex multi-rum blend. Ultimately, says Jefferson, the goal is to prove that rum is "a world-class spirit." **IT**

For more information, contact Kuleana VP of sales Matt Korpela at matt@kuleanarum.com.

ALAULA DAIQUIRI

- 2 oz. Kuleana Huihui Rum
 - ¾ oz. fresh lime juice
 - ½ oz. orgeat
 - ½ oz. ube (purple yam) syrup
- Shake with ice and strain into a coupe. Garnish with a lime wheel and an edible flower.



PHOTO: ALI GOLLESTANI

PHOTO COURTESY OF KULEANA RUM WORKS

At its 45-acre farm on Hawaii's Big Island, Kuleana Rum Works grows its own sugarcane.



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Free and Easy (Drinkin')

WEED CELLARS' NEW GENERAL MANAGER OF BEER PLANTS THE SEEDS OF SUCCESS

by Jessie Birschbach

Hunter Sasser Oetinger set out to save the world, but after two years in the Peace Corps, she decided that the best way for her to make a difference was in the private sector. After graduating with an MBA from Stanford University, she was hired as a national events manager at Sierra Nevada Brewing Company and eventually promoted to director of marketing.

Now Oetinger is the new general manager of beer at Weed Cellars—and she plans on applying her near-decade of experience at one of the world's most respected breweries to overseeing production of the two styles of beer the company currently offers. It's a big job: The almost two-year-old Weed Cellars is unique in the market as purportedly the only alcohol brand in the world that produces wine, beer, and spirits—none of which, despite the name, is infused with cannabis. All that could raise questions among the consumers Oetinger aims to reach. However, the answers lie in what unites the brand's disparate portfolio: its philosophy. "There's this idea around Weed being a little bit irreverent and free spirited, which I think ties into that American ethos of forging our own paths and pioneering," she says. Applying that concept to beer means showing "no pretense but brew[ing] to a really high standard. We're here to make great beer that's accessible to all beer drinkers."

And so far, that's just what they've done. Brewed in Texas, Weed's biggest market, Weed Light is a crisp, clean, traditional light lager; Weed Golden Ale is just as quaffable while

offering a little more malt and hop character. As neither the brand nor its beers have been around for very long, Oetinger says, it's her job to help instill a company culture that will ultimately maximize consumer awareness, using an approach similar to the one she experienced at Sierra Nevada. That means upholding principles of not only quality and consistency but also of community. Acknowledging freely that "we're sort of building the plane as it's flying right now," Oetinger points out that the brand has already begun to give back: "Chief marketing officer Natasha Swords has done a stellar job of working closely with charitable organizations like, for instance, the Gary Sinise Foundation." The logo of the nonprofit organization—which offers a variety of programs and events for wounded military veterans—is clearly featured on every Weed Light box, whose own American flag motif reflects the perfect fit of the partnership with respect to the brand's demographics.

As for whether Weed plans to expand its lineup in the near future, Oetinger won't say much. But given its cheeky name, perhaps a resinous, hop-forward style is inevitable. **VZ**

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEED CELLARS



Hunter Sasser Oetinger is the new general manager of beer for Weed Cellars.



Weed Light Lager

ABV: 4%

IBU: 14

SRM: 2–5

INGREDIENTS: Pilsner malt, rice, corn, and Hallertau hops

TASTING NOTE: A crisp and dry light American lager with a fresh, sweet corn note that finishes in a soft, refreshing hops bitterness. Crushable!



Weed Golden Ale

ABV: 4.7%

IBU: 18

SRM: 2–5

INGREDIENTS: Pilsner malt; rice malt; corn; and Hallertau, Cluster, and Herzbrucher hops

TASTING NOTE: A golden ale that's balanced yet light on the palate.

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Turning the Tide

NEW REGULATIONS ARE SHAKING UP THE GLOBAL WHISKY INDUSTRY

Take a bottle of single malt Scotch or straight bourbon: As you might reasonably expect, it will contain fully matured whisk(e)y from Scotland or the U.S., respectively, because the buyer is protected by government regulation that ensures these products live up exactly to what their labels promise.

Now take a bottle of Japanese whisky, often handsomely labeled with kanji script or some other visual reference to Japanese culture. You'd be entitled by the packaging to assume that it came from Japan. But even as Japanese whisky has become fashionable and its prices have risen accordingly, its producers may be hiding an inconvenient truth behind their labels: The bottles themselves may not contain a single drop of spirit distilled in Japan. Even more surprisingly, that's perfectly legal.

The fact is that the country's current regulations permit distillate to be imported from anywhere in the world, blended, and then re-exported as "Japanese whisky." Much of it is Scotch; as Scotch Whisky Association statistics reveal, bulk sales from Scotland to Japan increased fourfold between 2013 and 2018, concurrent with the boom in the Japanese whisky category. It's not a coincidence, so concern has been growing among Japan's producers and its better-informed media.

Eventually, many felt, the practice would be exposed and cause a consumer backlash. So finally, in February,

the Japan Spirits & Liqueurs Makers Association announced tighter requirements for Japanese whisky. The rules don't have legal standing, but they will apply to all of the association's members, including major industry players such as Nikka and Suntory.

The devil is, as ever, in the detail, but one condition is crucial and unambiguous: To be labeled as such, a Japanese

whisky that are defined as 'Japanese whisky' according to the labeling standards and those that do not meet all the criteria." The announcement led to the surprising revelation that the highly regarded Nikka from the Barrel—honored in 2018 by *Whisky Advocate* as its "Whisky of the Year"—falls foul of the new regulations, as it reputedly contains more than a dash of Ben Nevis, a



PHOTOS: JOHN CURLEY

Suntory's Toki, Yamazaki, Hakushu, and Hibiki brands are properly labeled under the new guidelines.

whisky's "saccharification, fermentation, and distillation must be carried out at a distillery in Japan." Furthermore, the resulting new-make spirit can be no higher than 95% ABV (190 proof); must be aged for a minimum of three years in wooden casks no bigger than 700 litres; and must be bottled with a minimum ABV of 40% (80 proof).

Though producers have until March 2024 to fully comply, at least one major company has clarified its position, with Nikka issuing the following statement: "We have decided to provide further information for individual products on our website to clearly distinguish between products in Nikka Whisky's lineup, which contains both whiskies

Scotch label also owned by Nikka.

How this drama will play out is far from clear. But for many of Scotland's single malt distilleries, already reeling from the toxic combination of Brexit, COVID-19, and the U.S. tariffs, it's a further blow. However, if—as seems probable—the Japanese government adopts the regulations, the U.S. Tax and Trade Bureau will likely abide by them, thus blocking imports that don't comply.

As Warren Buffett memorably observed, "It's only when the tide goes out that you learn who has been swimming naked." What this big, industry-shaking wave has revealed is remarkable. **LT**

93
POINTS

THE
tastingpanel
MAGAZINE

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& fun, like a Benziger
family dinner."*



CHRIS BENZIGER



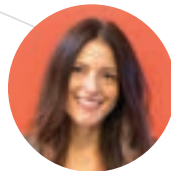
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Nicole Winzey

WSET LEVEL 1, EVENTS PLANNER



by Michelle M. Metter

PHOTO: IGNACIO PEREZ@IENRIQUEFOTO



Based in San Francisco, Nicole “Nic” Winzey is leveraging her experience as a professional event organizer to break into the wine industry; she recently received the opportunity to stage with SommCon to aid in the production of its spring Virtual Summit. We caught up with Winzey to learn more about her pursuits.

Q Tell us a bit about your career path—what drew you to the wine industry?

I used to be self-conscious of my seemingly nonlinear career trajectory, but looking back on it now, it connects beautifully. I started in experiential marketing and loved it, but found it difficult to achieve upward mobility. I worked my way through admin, digital marketing, project management, and ultimately back to creating events, which is one of my passions. One of the first team-building events I planned was a wine tasting in Sonoma. That day kicked off my love for wine and the endless knowledge and community that comes with it. I feel like I’ve been working toward a wine career for many years.


Q As pandemic-related regulations begin to loosen, what are you most looking forward to professionally?

I’m most looking forward to applying my skills and talents to the wine industry, which would be new for me. For the past few years I’ve curated events in the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, focusing on supplier diversity and inclusive event practices. Over the past year, I’ve seen the wine sector open up [to underrepresented minorities] with organizations like Wine Unify, of which I am an alumna, and Hue Society, providing access to education, mentorship, and other resources. I am excited to find my lane in a sector I’m fascinated with [but] hadn’t realized I could be a part of [until now].

Q How has the past year impacted your career goals?

I started out 2020 finally at a point where I could work full time for my events business. [Then suddenly] live events, of course, were not safe, so all of my contracts were canceled by April. I’m grateful that I was in a good mental space to pause and think about harmony in my life and get clarity on what I really wanted to do. This past year provided an opportunity for me to connect with like-minded people all over the country and in other parts of the world in a way I could not have imagined. On the one hand, my initial career plans stopped in their tracks. [On the other], I realized possibilities were endless for partnerships and imagining a completely new way forward.

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

Only ten minutes?! I’m drinking Domaine Carneros Ultra Brut with Ina Garten. She personifies grace, and she’s sharp, so I think we could get through a thoughtful conversation quickly! 



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 the virtual Spring Summit is available for viewing on demand at sommconusa.com.

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An aerial view of Fern Creek Vineyard in Oregon's Willamette Valley. This is Guarachi's newest project site, soon to be situated in its own sub-AVA called Mount Pisgah.

This Land Is His Land

ALEX GUARACHI'S WINES CONTINUE TO IMPROVE AS HE TAKES OWNERSHIP OF VINEYARDS **by Meredith May**

Importer and distributor Alex Guarachi has had decades of experience overseeing a portfolio of wines from Argentina, Chile, and Spain, but his own eponymous label, Guarachi Family Wines, wasn't founded until 2007, when Paul Hobbs and Julian Gonzalez began consulting with him on the production of Napa and Sonoma wines. "At that time, I was purchasing fruit from other growers," Guarachi explains. "[With] our first vintage [of] Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, we got some amazing ratings. Unfortunately, the following year, the same fruit was not available because the growers kept it for themselves." As Mark Twain thoughtfully quipped, "Buy land, they're not making it anymore."

It was then that Guarachi realized that the only way to control his own destiny while maintaining excellent quality year after year was by becoming a vineyard owner. "This was the opportunity for allowing us to keep great consistency [and] learn about the vineyard, varietals, clones, and more," he says.

Looking to elevated sites in Atlas Peak, Guarachi redeveloped two-thirds of a beautiful and prestigious vineyard called Meadowrock in 2015. It was there that Gonzalez planted new Cabernet Sauvignon clones and rootstock to achieve the very best results from the land. "We're blessed to have picked three amazing farms that have produced exceptional-quality wines," says Guarachi, alluding as well to the Sun Chase and Fern Creek vineyards in Sonoma's Petaluma Gap and Oregon's Willamette Valley, respectively.

I recently tasted through some of Guarachi Family Wines' latest vintages. They're expressive, fragrant, and big-hearted—see tasting notes at right. **V**

Guarachi Family Wines 2018 Chardonnay, Sun Chase Vineyard, Petaluma Gap, Sonoma Coast (\$50)

Reaching an elevation of 1,400 feet, Sun Chase is the highest vineyard in the Petaluma Gap, with a cool maritime climate. Aromas of apple tart, chamomile, and lemon butter show the effects of 11 months of French oak aging. The mouthfeel is rich without overt decadence; pineapple cake and honey coat the palate. Minerality comes in midway, allowing for a crisper finish. **93**

Guarachi Family Wines 2018 Pinot Noir, Sun Chase Vineyard, Petaluma Gap, Sonoma Coast (\$75)

Gonzalez added 28% Swan clone fruit to the 777 that entirely made up earlier vintages. Contributing more acidity, it also shows in this wine's minerality and high-toned fruit. Scents of spiced clove, cranberry, and rhubarb lead to a dream of white-peppered blackberry, plum, and jasmine. Rose and gardenia pay tribute to a fantastic vineyard. **95**



Guarachi Family Wines 2018 Pinot Noir, Fern Creek Vineyard, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$39)

Aromas of wet leaves atop a garden of roses and sage show earthy grace in Guarachi's first Oregon Pinot Noir, grown on Laurelwood soil in the Chehalem Mountain AVA. Wild strawberries are sweetened by lush boysenberries in brown sugar. Cocoa and violets are exquisite on the finish. **95**



Guarachi Family Wines 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Meadowrock Estate, Napa Valley (\$95)

Above the fog line of Atlas Peak, the windy 32-acre Meadowrock Vineyard sits on rocky volcanic soils. Aged 22 months in French oak and coming in at 14.8% ABV, this wine takes a majestic stance. Regal but not austere, it generates immense flavors of blue and black fruit; a brightness arises along with wound-up tannins ready to unfold on the palate, which opens to minerality, sweet tobacco, slate, and a parade of dried flowers. **97**

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Hard Seltzer Branches Out

WITH **PASSION TREE**, GEN Z CRACKS THE RTD CODE **by Allyson Reedy**

Garrett Olsen, Andy Kuklock, and Jake Ryder can't really remember drinking before hard seltzer. By the time they went to college, it was already the party drink of choice, and when it exploded in popularity during 2019's "Summer of White Claw," well, that was just a regular summer to them.

So who better to craft a new line of hard seltzers than three coveted members of hard seltzer's key demographic? Keeping in mind what they perceived to be missing from the category, the young 20-somethings set out to create their ideal product with their Passion Tree brand. "We are our target market, so we know our market best," Kuklock says.

To fine-tune their ideas, the trio recruited 50 participants and conducted a taste test of existing brands that helped them identify three key ways to make Passion Tree stand out. First was flavor variety. With the same fruits already overrepresented in the market, they decided they'd mix things up with tropical flavors like passion fruit and guava. Next, they opted for light carbonation levels to ensure drinkers wouldn't feel bloated or otherwise uncomfortable. And finally, when friends reported that they often added extra alcohol to their seltzers because the ABV was so low, the entrepreneurs set Passion Tree's alcohol content at 5.5%. "It's not an extreme amount,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PASSION TREE

Andy Kuklock, Garrett Olsen, and Jake Ryder are the founders of Passion Tree seltzer.

but you can drink a few and still feel pretty good [without being] absolutely hammered," Olsen says.

Fired up about their concept, Olsen attempted to make it himself in his studio apartment in Miami. As you might expect, it didn't go so well. "I'm over here trying to press guavas we bought at the store," he says, recalling his attempts to ferment in 5-gallon cylinders. "It was an utter disaster. We ended up using a company to formulate our product."

With the pros crafting their seltzer to spec, the trio turned to packaging and marketing, drawing on their own experience of what resonates with

their generation to create a simple, colorful, beachy design built around a palm-tree logo. Passion Tree worked with Texas-based distributor Favorite Brands LLC to launch in the Lone Star market in March; with plans to expand nationwide soon after, it's set to bring the tropics to seltzer fans all over.

In the meantime, Olsen, Kuklock, and Ryder are focusing on another, well, passion: giving back. They're planting a tree for every case sold in partnership with Trees for the Future, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing regenerative agriculture to family farms in developing nations. **17**



Tasting Notes

Passion Tree Guava Hard Seltzer This expression offers up aromas from your tropical paradise fantasies: plumeria, a salty sea breeze, summer plum, and sweet berries. The authentic guava flavors are accented by a floral bouquet of hibiscus, rose petals, and gardenia. **91**—*Meridith May*

Passion Tree Passion Fruit Hard Seltzer The citrusy nose hits a home run with scents of tangerine, lemon blossom, and caramel. A sunshine-in-the-glass effect illuminates the passion-fruit base with vivid notes of coconut, lychee, and candied red apple. **90**—*M.M.*



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Throwing the Doors Wide Open

SOMMELIER **YANNICK BENJAMIN** TALKS ADVOCACY IN HOSPITALITY

by **Stefanie Schwalb**

For New York City's hospitality pros and wine lovers alike, the annual Wine on Wheels (WoW) Grand Tasting and Auction to benefit nonprofit organization Wheeling Forward is an experience to look forward to every April—demonstrating the ways in which a community can come together to help support and empower people with disabilities.

Spring 2020 just wasn't the same without WoW (and unfortunately, this spring won't be either). What's worse, Wheeling Forward co-founder Yannick Benjamin was supposed to celebrate the opening of his new restaurant, Contento, last year. But then, of course, along came COVID-19.

While pivoting has become necessary for us all during the pandemic, Benjamin—who currently serves as the head sommelier at the University Club of New York—has remained true to his life's work while moving forward with renewed purpose. Although Contento won't open until late spring at the earliest, one thing is certain: With the approach to hospitality he's implementing there, Benjamin is poised to lead the way on making a difference for people living with disabilities and other marginalized communities. Contento, he explains, will offer enrichment programs in food and wine as well as internships tailored to these groups in particular, who often “simply don't have the access to those kinds of conversations and topics—and I think that's really important.”

To that end, he's turning WoW into its own 501(c)(3). While it will continue to host fundraising events for Wheeling Forward, it will also “take on a different role in the sense that we want to have more of an impact on the hospitality industry, going into restaurants and educating the staff on proper etiquette when they're dealing with someone's disability—whether they're deaf, blind,

in a wheelchair, or have any kind of cognitive disabilities,” Benjamin says. “It's no restaurant's fault, but I think we need to take that responsibility, go in there, and show the staff what are the do's and don'ts and how they can properly offer services and help someone without being condescending.”

to necessarily hire somebody with a disability but perhaps take them on as an intern.”

In fact, if its pilot program at Contento is successful, WoW will expand its reach to larger companies that, frankly, should already be on board with its mission. “We have to

PHOTO: MIKHAIL LIPYANSKIY



“
Our philosophy is simple: Make sure you leave the doors open behind you, so you won't be the last.”

—Yannick Benjamin

He adds that the WoW staff knows food is political—and the rest of us have to collectively face this reality. Financial barriers mean many in marginalized communities are unable to procure healthy food or prepare simple meals for themselves, and Benjamin notes the importance of focusing on both access and education to help people “get to that point. We also [want to] let people see that they may have an opportunity to work in the hospitality industry by providing them with the resources to [do so and by] building more relationships with hospitality companies. They don't have

make sure that we actually get a couple of people through it first as interns at Contento,” Benjamin notes. “They'll learn some skill sets and what it's like to build a business. Just learning food and wine—that's not enough. [The assumption that it is is] what we're doing wrong as an industry.” Rather, he continues, “We want people to be fully prepared and build resumes. Then eventually they can get a full-time job, and we can use them as examples for other hospitality companies to learn from. Our philosophy is simple: Make sure you leave the doors open behind you, so you won't be the last.” **LD**

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Negroni, Meet the New-groni

THE ICONIC COCKTAIL CONTINUES TO EVOLVE
WITH **CAMPARI** AT ITS CORE **by Eric Marsh**

As with most cocktails, the provenance of the Negroni is a little nebulous, but it has long been believed that the drink originated in 1919 at Caffè Casoni in Florence, Italy, where a patron by the surname of Negroni was in need of a drink stronger than his usual Americano. He asked his bartender to use gin in place of soda water, and as the new libation stayed in rotation at the café, its popularity grew.

A straightforward classic, the Negroni is traditionally made with equal parts Campari, gin, and sweet vermouth; in Italy, it's garnished with an orange slice, while an orange twist is used in the States. The quality of ingredients makes all the difference, but paramount to many purists is that Campari is included.

The Negroni's long-lost cousin, the Boulevardier, replaces gin with bourbon or rye. It traces its origins to American writer Erskine Gwynne, who moved to Paris in the 1920s and founded a magazine called, yes, *The Boulevardier*. American bartenders were also expatriating to Europe during that time; as Campari brand ambassador Daniel Warrilow explains, "A lot was happening around the world in 1919, and in America we were just about to launch into Prohibition, which not only decimated the alcohol industry but also gave our bartenders no opportunity to work. So they left . . . and went to other parts of the world," where they began to experiment with ingredients that were less readily available back home—Campari among them. "That's when you start to see the Negroni shift into different variations—in the 1920s, when bartenders from America, who were well versed in cocktails, started changing the drink around," Warrilow adds.

Nearly a century later, that tradition was reignited in the U.S., as the cocktail revolution of the 2000s returned the Negroni—along with Manhattans and Old Fashioneds—to the spotlight. Around the same time, Warrilow says, bartenders began to experiment with mezcal to create what is now commonly referred to as the Oaxacan Negroni (recipe at right), which quickly became what he calls the "modern American bartender's Negroni," inspiring variations of its own: Take the Spicy Negroni with Ancho Reyes chile liqueur or, for those averse to mezcal's smoky, funky profile, the nuanced, tequila-based Rosita.

While there are many red bitters on the market, none are as distinctive as Campari. With its rich history, virtually unaltered recipe, and memorably herbaceous and bitter flavor profile, it serves as the staple ingredient of the Negroni in its many variations, from the original stirred at Caffè Casoni to contemporary adaptations on cocktail menus across the globe. **W**



Oaxacan Negroni

- 1 part Montelobos Espadín Mezcal
- 1 part Campari
- 1 part Cinzano Rosso sweet vermouth

Stir and strain over fresh ice into a rocks glass. Garnish with a grapefruit peel.



Spicy Negroni

- 1 part Campari
- 1 part Ancho Reyes
- 1 part Montelobos Espadín Mezcal

Stir ingredients in a mixing glass with ice and strain into a rocks glass with a large ice cube. Garnish with an orange twist.



Rosita

- 1 part Campari
- ½ part Cinzano Rosso sweet vermouth
- 1½ parts Espolòn Tequila Reposado
- ½ part Cinzano Extra Dry vermouth
- 1 dash aromatic bitters

Stir ingredients in a mixing glass with ice and strain over fresh ice into a rocks glass. Garnish with a lemon peel.



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Inside the BUBBLE

WHAT CAN THE HARD SELTZER CRAZE TEACH THE WINE INDUSTRY?

On a recent weekend I set up a tasting but did not invite my usual group to join. This was not to be a double-blind or even blind event, and my goal was not to focus on the subtleties found in the fine wines that my companions and I are lucky enough to enjoy regularly. Rather, it was to get my first taste—and perhaps some understanding—of a beverage that has been beeping away on my radar for some time now: hard seltzer.

We winemakers first felt the squeeze as craft beer moved into the market, taking up precious space on the date-night dinner table. Now brewers are also looking over their shoulders as the popularity of alcohol-spiked spritzers continues to explode: The category tripled in size in 2019, growing more than 202% from the previous year to top \$1.3 billion in sales, according to CNBC journalist Tom Huddleston Jr. I felt my first shudder of real fear last summer, when a sophisticated wine-drinking friend told me that his 21-year-old daughter had taken to hard seltzer. Here is a young woman I'd like to see embarking on the great life adventure called wine.



PHOTO: DEVIN BERKO

If she's not starting down that path despite all her previous exposure, then who else can be expected to?

Though White Claw dominates the category, with an estimated 60% market share, there are countless other brands. Every company from Corona to Smirnoff has something on the shelves, and we are also seeing interesting labels from small startups. What they all have in common—and what distinguishes them from 1980s-era predecessors such as Shandy Bass—is marketing: They are being pitched (not for nothing without reference to gender) as lower-calorie, lower-alcohol, and lower-sugar alternatives to traditional categories. We often say in this business that consumers talk dry but drink sweet—and these brands are responding with their fizzy, fruity, and fun products, offering a much easier segue from soda pop to the grown-up world of alcohol than beer or wine ever could.

“Know thy enemy,” I told myself as I pulled various cans from the fridge. I was also genuinely curious to see what these drinks had to offer. Here is my quick summation: White Claw's variety pack showed intense if mostly artificial notes of candy and fruit on the nose, but surprisingly, there was next to zero follow-up on the palate. Barefoot Moscato Spritzer carried its pungent peach aroma onto the palate, where it was too sweet and monotonous to make me want more. High Noon's Sun Sips, however, were a definite step up. Thanks to fortification with vodka rather than high-proof ethanol, they avoided the bitterness of many of their competitors. The grapefruit expression in particular was refreshing and true to its natural fruit flavoring. I was starting to lose my skepticism.

The most interesting of the cans I tried comes, not surprisingly, from a producer based in Los Angeles, always ahead of the curve when it comes to wellness trends: Pulp Culture. Despite its disconcerting name, Hustle, it hit smack in the center of the Venn diagram for modern wellness trends, promising only six ingredients—apple, passion fruit, strawberry, ginger, turmeric, and lion's mane—along with live probiotic cultures and “botanical adaptogens” in a 99-calorie, zero-sugar



IN THE END,
I COULD EASILY
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NAMELY
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AFTERNOONS
BY THE POOL.



servicing. I felt almost virtuous as I cracked it open.

Hustle reaches 4.9% alcohol through what it bills as “wild” fermentation as opposed to the addition of hard liquor, and you can tell: It's got a yeasty finish that reminded me of the ginger beer I used to ferment as a child. In fact, I'd classify it more as a kombucha that really means business. I found myself finishing the can.

In the end, I could easily see that there's a time and a place for many of these drinks—namely summer afternoons by the pool. It also became quickly obvious that comparing hard seltzers and their ilk to fine wine is like comparing apples to carburetors. In that sense, we winemakers have nothing to fear. Sure, wine is less predictable and frankly more demanding than any of these drinks, not to mention higher in calories per ounce and more expensive (albeit a much better value from a cost-of-goods perspective). But as any wine lover knows, the rewards that it offers are beyond compare. **LZ**



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(Digital) Space Exploration



SG PROOF

IS A PRIME MOVER IN BRANDING
AND SALES PLATFORMS

by Meredith May

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTHERN GLAZER'S WINE & SPIRITS



Southern Glazer's chief commercial officer John Wittig has over three decades of experience in the alcohol-beverage industry and is the man behind the company's new digital sales platform, SG Proof.

Nothing can replace the human connection; a year of solitude has underlined that truism for all of us as we continue to rely on Zoom meetings to break us out of our bubbles. It also holds true for businesses: Customer service is among the most valuable commodities for any successful company. Unable to deal with clients or patrons face to face, they have had to learn to compensate for the lack of personal contact.

It's a difficult lesson in re-establishing communication. New sales modes and tools have emerged from the pandemic that couldn't have been conceived of just a decade ago; without them, our industry would surely be in an even darker, bleaker state.

As the nation's largest distributor, Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits is known for its emphasis on building strong relationships with accounts; now it has stepped up its efforts to reach buyers directly through a platform it calls SG Proof. I recently interviewed John Wittig, chief commercial officer for Southern Glazer's, who walked me through its creation as a means to further the company's stellar reputation for strategic route-to-market excellence.

MERIDITH MAY: What is your elevator pitch for Proof?

JOHN WITTIG: SG Proof is a proprietary, multidimensional digital platform that encompasses Southern Glazer's CRM [Customer Relationship Management] platform, consisting of the following:

- Proof Sales, which provides data and insights for our frontline consultants
- Proof Commerce, our B2B site designed for our customer base of more than 275,000 customers
- Proof Marketing, [which] provides our suppliers with the opportunity to brand-build with our retailers
- Proof Service, designed to serve our retailers in a new, efficient, digital way

MM: Is SGWS a pioneer in this format?

JW: "Pioneer" would be a powerful statement, and out of respect for those who have come before us in the digital space, I would rather categorize us as an aggressive first-mover within this space in the beverage-alcohol industry. I can confidently say [that] we have a one-of-a-kind website that takes into

consideration quality content, pricing, recommendations, and a customer-service aspect that does not exist on any other platform.

MM: Does Proof replace the in-person sales call?

JW: It's just the opposite. We need our sales consultants and their relationships, in conjunction with SG Proof, to leverage and improve our business. We like to say the winning formula is Relationships + Technology = Incremental Business for SGWS. This is not an "either/or" proposition; it's an "and/or," leveraging all the tools we have available.

MM: How can brands stand out in this environment?

JW: [The answer is] twofold. First, we have built the Proof Commerce site so that we can leverage brand-building activities linked to our respective suppliers' national brand plans. We want to provide an effective vehicle where our supplier community can have their brands speak to the retailer in this case. Secondly, if a supplier so chooses, they can work with our Proof Marketing team to enhance their brand presence. It can be done numerous ways, including through content ads, banner boosts, recommendations, brand imaging, and winemaker videos.

MM: How does SGWS sample the customer, or is that up to individual suppliers?

JW: Not much has changed in terms of how we sample our customers, with the exception of the role the pandemic has played in this way of working. We are hopeful that our teams and respective suppliers will soon be able to move to a regular cadence of live samplings with our customers. The biggest change is that our teams now have all the data insights at their fingertips, by account and by respective geography, which allows them to present to our retailers the financial benefit of purchasing a particular item.

MM: Does the supplier need feet on the ground more than ever to back up Proof?

JW: It certainly does not hurt, but it's not



One segment of the platform is Proof Commerce, which can leverage brand-building activities linked to suppliers' national brand plans.

required. From our experience going through the pandemic, we've seen that our retailers, with all their daily challenges, appreciate having a contactless experience with our portfolio. The savvy retailers set up their favorites tab in Proof Commerce, and then their SGWS or supplier representative sets up a meeting to hear more regarding innovation items, new distribution, featured items, et cetera.

MM: How can a national trade publication like *The Tasting Panel* help to promote Proof?

JW: By doing just this! And thank you! Exposing our retail community to the values the SG Proof Platform provides to their business in terms of content and efficiency is a great step in assisting us. We are now serving more than 100,000 customers since the launch of Proof in 2019, and we aim to continue growing that number to ensure we're helping all our customers thrive beyond the current pandemic conditions. If any of your subscribers would like to learn more about Proof, they can contact their local sales consultant or visit shop.sgproof.com to sign up. 

TAKING INVENTORY YOUR BUSINESS, YOUR VOICES

As a retailer,
how much can or
do you influence
your customers'
purchases?

PHOTO: JACOB EUBANK



Raymond Dickinson

OWNER, BRIX BOTTLE SHOP, KALISPELL, MT

I've been in the wholesale business for so many years, but in transitioning to the retail level I've actually been able to get to know my customer base. Both I and my associate, Jacob Eubank, definitely have more of an Old World palate; we handpick everything here and, on top of that, we hand-sell everything. I wouldn't say we influence customers so much as guide them: I try to be partial to my own palate but guide them in a way that reflects their palate and knowledge level.

In the beginning, we had descriptor cards with little blurbs for every wine, but what we found is that pretty much every customer who comes through the door engages with us [directly], and the silent salesperson on the shelf became sort of redundant. So when people who want to learn about wine first come in and say, "I've had this kind of wine before and this is what I like," we typically walk them past the domestic [section] and toward France or Italy. Nothing against domestic wines, but [the likelihood is that novices] just haven't been exposed to the [Old World] yet, and we try to steer them in different ways. If they like Cab Franc, we can turn them on to Cab Franc from the Loire Valley, from Saumur. It opens them up to the possibility of, wow, you can have the same varietal from different places and get such different wines—and then we can have a conversation about terroir.

I think that, for a lot of people who are just starting out, it's nice to have that dialogue; it's nice to build that relationship. One thing I've learned over time about this business that has really appealed to me is that it's built on relationships. I actually teach wine education here at the college; I teach both intro and advanced-level classes, and I definitely have a lot of new students who turn into good customers. The more honest you are with your customers, the more transparent you are, the more confident they are going to feel about [trusting] what you do.

With the pandemic and people staying at home, we had people calling us and saying, "Can you just pick out a mixed case for me?" It was really fun for them because they had no idea what they were getting. We'd give them stuff we knew they liked, but we'd also try to push the boundaries a little. But you definitely have to get to know people [for that to work]. You can't just listen to the first few taglines.



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Chad Michael George

FOUNDER OF PROOF PRODUCTIONS, DENVER, CO, AND PARTNER AT PINEY WINE & SPIRITS, KITTREDGE, CO

It's definitely been fun and honestly a breath of fresh air to explore the retail side of things [as a former restaurateur/beverage director]. Most people come in and either know exactly what they want and make it happen, or they genuinely need and want our help; the minority is that person in between who thinks they know they want but then winds up asking questions. [By

contrast,] you find a massive range of guest [interaction] in restaurants. At [my previous restaurant] The Way Back, we had a reputation for knowing what we were talking about across the board, from cuisine to wine to spirits to cocktails, and for the most part our guests were super-open to our suggestions. That's definitely an earned reputation: If I go to a place where I

know the staff, and I know that they know their wine, I'm much more likely to put myself in their hands than if I don't know them at all.

In the current situation at Piney, the people who want help are definitely the wine drinkers more than anyone. There are a few reasons for that, but the main one is that we've intentionally curated a wine program to support small producers and labels [customers] don't necessarily recognize. I don't have 19 Crimes or Apothic, but I will have something comparable in about the same price range. And in the short time we've been open, I haven't had a single person walk out without buying something after asking for advice, and often they've come back to purchase it again.

A lot of people who don't know much about wine think it's really easy for us to be arrogant or talk over their heads. But I ask them, "What do you usually drink—what did you come in here thinking you wanted to buy? Can you give me a price range?" And with those two questions answered, that's usually going to give me at least a half a dozen bottles right there that I have the opportunity to sell them on with confidence. You've got to inspire confidence that it's going to be a good choice.

Also, as a retail person, I intentionally put items next to other items [on the shelves] that I think people would want. For instance, Svedka—they sell a ton of it in Colorado, and people in the mountain towns love it. So I put other brands at a similar price that I think are better, like WÓDKA and Monopolowa, next to it in hopes that people will ask about them. I don't use shelf talkers; it's a really small store, so it's really easy to have those conversations and maybe talk people into something they wouldn't have tried otherwise. **IT**

Taking Inventory is a survey of sommeliers, retailers, managers, and other on- and off-premise buyers from around the country covering all aspects of the beverage business. If you would like to be featured in a future issue, reach out to rtobias@tastingpanelmag.com.

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10 Ways the Pandemic Impacted Adult Beverage Consumption

During ECRM's On and Off Premise Adult Beverage Program, VP of Content, Joseph Tarnowski, interviewed more than a dozen buyers to learn how their consumers have altered their adult beverage consumption over the past year, and what their businesses have done to address these changes.

Cans, Cans, Cans: RTD growth accelerates

Canned wine and cocktails have exploded in popularity at both on-premise and off premise locations during the pandemic. At retail, they are easy for shoppers to carry and store in the fridge, and many grocers now offer a wide variety. For on premise operators, cans are perfect for curbside pickup and delivery, and convenient for outdoor dining guests, as well, as they are easy to serve.

Premiumization gets even more premium

As consumers are eating and entertaining more at home, they are taking some of the money they have saved from not dining out and using it to buy higher-quality drinks – both from retailers as well as on-premise operators.

Bigger is better when it comes to off premise

Along with higher-ticket items, retail consumers are buying in bulk to avoid having to make multiple trips to the store, including cases of beer, wine, canned adult beverages, and 3-liter bag-in-box wines.



To-go cocktails

Restaurants started offering batch cocktails to handle the demand for takeout and delivery. They also got creative with their marketing around this packaging, including branded stickers on the plastic cups and other packaging, and including to-go cocktail menus with deliveries.

Suggestive selling

To take advantage of the ability to sell to-go cocktails, restaurants have begun to incorporate suggestive selling to their order-taking processes, training their staff to recommend a cocktail as an add-on when a customer orders a meal.

Party Kits for the home mixologists

This trend spans both on and off premise but has been particularly popular with off premise locations that have tied in some sort of cocktail prep education into the mix, such as live mixology lessons during virtual happy hours.

On-premise exclusive beverages

The challenge with restaurants having to rely heavily on takeout and delivery is that consumers know they can get many adult beverage products for less cost at the local grocery, drug or wine & spirits store. To address this, many have focused on sourcing products that can't easily be found at local retailers.

Ramping up curbside pickup

Many fine dining establishments that don't offer takeout options were caught flat-footed by the pandemic and will be working in curbside pickup into their strategies in the foreseeable future.

A serious look at ghost kitchens

With delivery becoming such a mainstay of restaurants during the pandemic, many are exploring the viability of launching ghost kitchens to leverage the available capacity of their existing kitchens, which has increased at many restaurants due to indoor dining restrictions.

Non-booze booze continues to grow

Many consumers are alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages as a way to keep the party going in a responsible way – without having to drink a boring glass of water in between.



Join us virtually this August for live, 1-on-1 appointments between buyers & suppliers. Contact Sarah Davidson, SVP Food & Beverage at 440-542-3033 or SDavidson@ECRM.MarketGate.com

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

95 Angwin Estate Vineyards 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$125) Juicy and lush, with bright plum, black cherry, and spice. Silky and ripe, tangy and exuberant; long and balanced, expressive and stylish.

93 Artesa 2018 Estate Pinot Noir, Los Carneros, Napa Valley (\$45) Rich ruby color and a fresh cherry nose. Smooth, tangy, and charming, with ripe, sweet cherry; deep and lovely.

92 Artesa 2018 Estate Chardonnay, Los Carneros, Napa Valley (\$38) Lush with sumptuous, concentrated notes of pear and citrus; creamy with a firm core of crisp acidity as well as good balance and length.

92 Black Kite Cellars 2018 Chardonnay, Gap's Crown Vineyard, Sonoma Coast (\$64) Velvety, rich, and deep, with flavors of citrus, pineapple, vanilla, and sweet new oak. Turns out this famed Pinot vineyard has other charms to offer.





95 **Leverage Wines 2017 Trajectory, Paso Robles (\$56)** The lush blackberry nose gives way to a smooth and generous palate of ripe berry fruit. Silky and rich, with excellent acid structure; long and balanced. 50% Grenache, 35% Syrah, and 15% Mourvèdre.

97 **Blue Farm 2018 King Ridge Vineyard Estate Farmed Pinot Noir, Fort Ross-Seaview (\$85)** Pale yet vibrant ruby color and a cherry nose that persists on the palate with deep yet elegant fruit intensity, racy acidity, and gossamer-like texture. Long and amazing.



97 **Blue Farm 2018 Riverbed Estate Farmed Pinot Noir, Carneros (\$95)** Smooth, ripe, and pure, with notes of black cherry and a firm acid structure. Luscious, deep, and mind-blowing.



96 **Blue Farm 2018 Laceroni Vineyard Estate Farmed Chardonnay, Russian River Valley (\$70)** Stunning depth of fruit and racy acidity; elegant and luscious, with a silky texture, amazing core structure, and lasting finish. Exquisite.



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BLUE REVIEWS

94 C. Elizabeth 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Game Farm Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$150) Velvety and deep, with ripe and juicy notes of black raspberry and plum; lush yet properly structured and balanced.

94 Dutton-Goldfield 2018 Zinfandel, Dutton Ranch, Morelli Lane Vineyard, Russian River Valley (\$50) Deep garnet color and a ripe berry nose. Bright, tangy, and smooth, with lovely balance and rich notes of blackberry, pomegranate, and spice.

92 Dutton-Goldfield 2018 Riesling, Chileno Valley Vineyard, Petaluma Gap (\$30) Dry and juicy, with tangy acidity joining notes of lime and vanilla. Crisp and balanced; long, fresh, and bracing.

93 Hamilton Russell Oregon 2019 Zena Crown Pinot Noir, Eola-Amity Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$86) Pale ruby color and aromas of vanilla and cherry. Silky and fresh, with lovely cherry notes and good acidity; tangy and long, elegant and balanced. Hamilton Russell's foray into Oregon seems to be a success.

VINEYARD BRANDS

92 J. McClelland Cellars 2018 Merlot, Yountville, Napa Valley (\$35) Smooth and bright with firm acidity. Mellow and juicy, with tangy notes of plum and fine balance; long and delicious. A portion of Cabernet Franc was added for spice and complexity.

92 Frank Family Vineyards 2018 Zinfandel, Napa Valley (\$38) Smooth, rich, and spicy; dense and ripe with deep, concentrated berry notes. Juicy, lush yet balanced, and long.

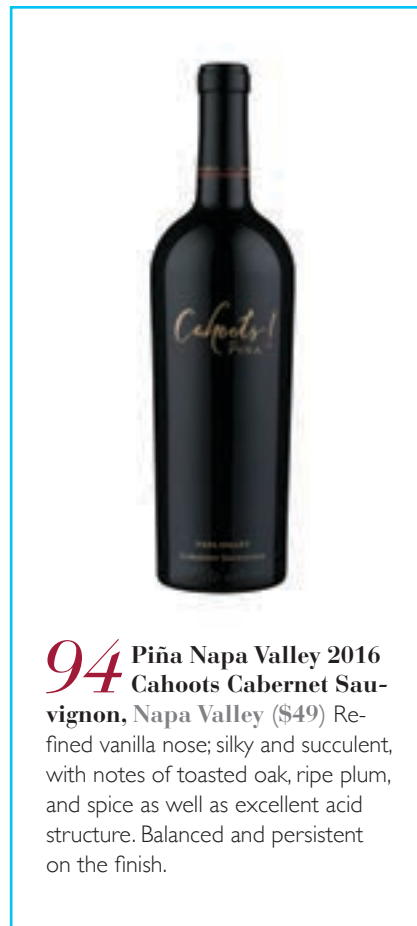
94 Landmark Vineyards 2018 Lorenzo Chardonnay, Russian River Valley (\$55) Lush and creamy, with ripe tropical fruit and toasty flavors of vanilla and oak. Smooth and rich, generous and dazzling, this white strikes just the right balance.

95 Landmark Vineyards 2018 Escolle Road Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands (\$60) Vibrant ruby color and fragrant aromas; balanced and elegant. The juicy palate shows lovely berry notes and well-integrated acidity.

92 McGrail Vineyards NV Timeless Cabernet Sauvignon, Livermore Valley (\$48) Deep garnet color and aromas of succulent plum and berries. Clean and balanced yet ripe and spicy, with a velvety texture and intense flavors.

93 McGrail Vineyards 2017 Patriot Cabernet Sauvignon, Livermore Valley (\$48) Spice appears on the nose and palate, the latter of which shows its finesse through notes of toasty oak, vanilla, and berries within a silky texture. Smooth, long, and classic; deep and dense but quite elegant.

94 O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$100) Exceptionally generous and rich, with velvety texture and concentration. Elegant and layered with fine balance and savory style; complex, sophisticated, and long.



94 Piña Napa Valley 2016 Cahoots Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$49) Refined vanilla nose; silky and succulent, with notes of toasted oak, ripe plum, and spice as well as excellent acid structure. Balanced and persistent on the finish.

92 Piña Cellars 2019 Low Vineyard Chardonnay, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley (\$34) Smooth and lush, with ripe tropical fruit, light toast, and gobs of vanilla. Silky texture and good acidity.



94 Sullivan Rutherford Estate 2017 Coeur de Vigne Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$90) Rich yet sleek and elegant with plum and blackberry as well as good depth and balance. This delivers exactly what you want from a top-quality Napa Cab.



IMPORTED

95 Alta Vista 2017 Single Vineyard Albaneve Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (\$50) Grown at 3,600 feet above sea level in the Uco Valley, this killer wine is concentrated and generous yet balanced, not to mention bursting with dark fruit. It demonstrates the enormous potential of Malbec.

KOBRAND

94 Attilio Ghisolfi 2016 Bussia, Barolo, Italy (\$70) Garnet color and a floral nose. Racy and crisp, juicy and pure, with lively berry fruit and a silky texture; elegant and long.

QUINTESSENTIAL



95 Champagne Delamotte Brut, France (\$66) A luscious and generous effort with depth and fine acidity. Anything but austere yet balanced and elegant; fresh, stylish, and long.

VINEYARD BRANDS

97 Attilio Ghisolfi 2016 Bussia Bricco Visette, Barolo, Italy (\$90) Every once in a while, along comes a wine that leaves you speechless. This is one of those rare triumphs: silky, juicy, and perfectly balanced, with notes of cherry, pomegranate, and wild strawberry. Elegant and layered, it's a Barolo to drink now or to cellar for many years.

QUINTESSENTIAL

92 Boekenhoutskloof 2017 Sémillon, Franschhoek, South Africa (\$49) Smooth and herbal, with a lush, mellow style that's slightly sweet yet well balanced. Yes, it's like Sauvignon Blanc, but it has a softer, more complex character.

VINEYARD BRANDS



93 Domaine J.A. Ferret 2018 Pouilly-Fuissé, France (\$48) Crisp, mineral driven, smooth, and juicy, with bright acidity and a long, fresh finish—classic.

KOBRAND

96 Kay Brothers 2017 Amery Vineyard Block 6 Shiraz, McLaren Vale, Australia (\$120) The aromatic nose paves the way for profound flavors of toasted oak, spice, and intensely rich blackberry. An outstanding Shiraz from 126-year-old vines, it's well worth the price.

QUINTESSENTIAL

92 Nicolas Feuillatte Réserve Exclusive Brut Champagne, Chouilly, France (\$39) Light golden color and aromas of fresh pear. A charming wine with moderate but firm bubbles and expressive pear and apricot notes. Crisp, tangy, and lively; balanced, juicy, and long.

STE. MICHELLE WINE ESTATES



94 Paxton 2017 Baterista Single Shiraz, McLaren Vale, Australia (\$70) A testament to McLaren Vale and winemaker Kate Goodman, this remarkable achievement combines the depth and complexity of Syrah with a bright, balanced style and rich notes of blackberry. Velvety, supple, and layered; long and intense. Biodynamic.

95 Stark-Condé 2017 Oude Nektar, Jonkershoek Valley, Stellenbosch, South Africa (\$80) Deep, dark garnet hue and a lush and earthy nose. Silky, juicy, and rich, with plum and earth; a lovely wine with intensity and balance.

VINEYARD BRANDS



95 Champagne Taittinger Brut La Française, France (\$50) Bright and lively, this is one of my favorite nonvintage Bruts. Crisp and balanced, with smooth, exuberant, Chardonnay-driven style; racy, elegant, and totally charming; long and memorable.

KOBRAND

100 Taylor Fladgate 1970 Very Old Single Harvest Porto, Douro, Portugal (\$300) This may be my most exceptional tasting experience of the year: a 50-year-old warhorse that dances like a newborn colt. Fresh and juicy, with complexity and layers of flavor, including bright, pure, orange marmalade-scented fruit; dried fig; toasty, mature rancio; and vanilla. Sweet but racy, with pronounced refinement. You have to kiss a lot of frogs in this business, but this is one of those experiences that makes it all worthwhile.

KOBRAND

95 Tenuta Scerscé 2016 Infinito Nebbiolo, Sforzato di Valtellina DOCG, Italy (\$60) A stunning rendition of Nebbiolo with a medium ruby color. Rich and deep yet silky and elegant, refined and lovely.

DALLA TERRA

BLUE REVIEWS

VALUE

92 **Alta Vista 2019 Atemporal, Albaneve Estate, Mendoza, Argentina** (\$22) Mostly Malbec with meaningful contributions from Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Juicy, fresh, and stylish, with notes of plum and berry and a lasting finish.

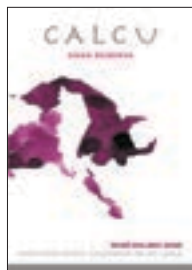
KOBRAND

92 **Alta Vista 2019 Estate Cabernet Franc, Mendoza, Argentina** (\$18) Grown in high-elevation vineyards in the foothills of the Andes, this wine is an impressive rendition of an often problematic variety. Smooth, ripe, and concentrated; velvety, balanced, and long.

KOBRAND

92 **Billy D. Wines 2019 Mountain Barbera, Sierra Foothills** (\$13/500-mL) Bright garnet color; smooth, fresh, charming, and bursting with blackberry. ☺

90 **Calcu 2020 Gran Reserva Rosé, Colchagua Valley, Chile** (\$13) A blend of 90% Malbec and 10% Petit Verdot with a soft herbal nose. Bright, fresh, and racy; dry and crisp yet juicy. ☺



GLOBAL VINEYARD IMPORTERS

92 **McGrail Vineyards 2020 Kylie Ryan Rosé, Livermore Valley** (\$25) Bright pink with a lovely nose of strawberry and rhubarb that carries through the palate, where it's complemented by bright acidity and spice. Long and balanced, it's a rosé with real flavor. ☺

91 **Michael Mondavi Family 2018 Kaleidoscope Petite Sirah, California** (\$14) Deeply opaque color and a rich vanilla nose. Smooth, sweet, and rich, with dense blueberry; succulent, lush, and long. A good value.



93 **Paxton 2019 MV Shiraz, McLaren Vale, Australia** (\$20) A lighter style of Shiraz with lots of lively appeal. Fresh, bright, and juicy; crisp and balanced, with a smooth backdrop. Biodynamic. ☺

93 **Poggio del Moro 2016 Rosso Toscana IGT, Italy** (\$20) A rich, velvety, lush blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot with a deep garnet color as well as depth and finesse. Very impressive, especially at this price.

GRAPEJUICE GROUP

91 **Ramble 2019 Valdiguié Rosé, Buddha's Dharma Vineyard, Mendocino** (\$22) Light, soft, and mellow yet long and complex. Creamy, elegant, and refined, with juicy berry notes.

92 **Ramble 2019 Chenin Blanc, Buddha's Dharma Vineyard, Mendocino** (\$24) Smooth and round, with good acidity, spice, and lush aromatics; long and charming. It's about time this great variety is attracting attention.

91 **Cantina di Venosa Verbo 2020 Aglianico del Vulture, Italy** (\$20) Dark garnet color. Deep, rich, and intense, with flavors of raspberry jam and crisp acidity; smooth, ripe, and long.

GRAPEJUICE GROUP

90 **Cantina di Venosa Verbo 2020 Rosato Basilicata, Italy** (\$20) 100% Aglianico. Juicy, tangy notes of ripe fruit and nice depth of flavor; smooth, bright, and dry, with a lengthy finish.

GRAPEJUICE GROUP

90 **Sonoma-Cutrer 2020 Rosé of Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley** (\$25) Incredibly pale pink hue. Dry, crisp, and juicy, with tangy, fresh notes of strawberry. Silky, clean, and long, with balance and style. ☺



90 **Cantina di Venosa Verbo 2020 Malvasia Basilicata, Italy** (\$20) Aromas of grapefruit and orange rind give way to a lush, spicy, and smooth palate with a hint of sweetness. Creamy, mellow, and ripe.

GRAPEJUICE GROUP



93 **Matchbook 2018 The Arsonist Red Blend, California** (\$22) Opaque garnet color and rich aromas of plum. Chewy, velvety, and intense, with notes of chocolate, mocha, and spice; dense and balanced. Mostly Petit Verdot with Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon.

SPIRITS



95 Crystal Head Onyx Agave Vodka, USA (\$55)

Deep, rich nose and a smooth and sumptuous texture. The clean yet intense palate displays an obvious note of agave. Elegant, seamless, and concentrated, it's clearly another triumph for this brand.

DIAGEO AMERICAS

95 Pierre Almas Mezcal Espadín Joven, Mexico (\$63)

A clear spirit with an earthy agave nose. Rich and ripe yet spicy and toasty, with a long, silky finish and just a hint of smokiness.

DIAGEO AMERICAS

95 Booker's 2020-03 Pigskin Batch Bourbon, USA (\$90)

When watered, this powerful spirit shows its smooth, sweet, elegant side. Lovely, creamy, and spicy, with notes of honey, molasses, and caramel; fresh yet complex and long.



91 AMASS Dry Gin, USA (\$55)

Soft herbal nose and a smooth, mellow, peppery palate of citrus and spice; long and bracing. Features 29 botanicals.

TANTEO SPIRITS

95 Conniption Barrel Aged Series Gin, USA (\$45)

This North Carolina distillery makes very good gin, opting this time to age it in used barrels from High West Distillery. The result is a complex spirit with a light amber color that adds a layer of toasted oak to the coriander and caraway of the original gin—pretty terrific.

96 Villon Cognac Liqueur, France (\$33)

This blend of VSOP Cognac with brandy and spices is a very interesting new product from France. The end result is sweet, but not too sweet, with notes of hazelnut, chocolate, and molasses mingling with dried fruit, vanilla, and spices. It is, in a word, fantastic, either on the rocks or in a cocktail. Don't miss this one.

VILLON

96 Aberlour A'bunadh Speyside Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$95)

So luscious and rich it's almost Port-like, this remarkable creation shows extraordinary depth of flavor defined by molasses, honey, chocolate, and much more within a creamy texture.

PERNOD RICARD

94 The Balvenie Caribbean Cask 14 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$70)

Smooth, slightly sweet, rich, and balanced; elegant, silky, and classic. Toasty and long, with considerable vanilla, soft spices, and honey as well as floral notes—undoubtedly showing some of the flavor characteristics of the aged rum that previously occupied the barrels in which this spirit rested.

WILLIAM GRANT & SONS



95 Ron Abuelo Two Oaks XII Años Aged Rum, Panama (\$60)

Deep mahogany color and a smooth molasses nose. Aged for 12 years, it's sweet and creamy, with deep, layered flavors of clove, allspice, cinnamon, and toasted oak. Exquisite and complex, balanced and long.

TOTAL BEVERAGE SOLUTION

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



WINE



Lujuria 2020 Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (\$10)

From its inky black-purple hue to its aromas of sandalwood and blackberry preserves, this Malbec shows incredible promise. Fleshy, chewy, and utterly juicy, it exudes confidence with dark chocolate-covered violets and sweet summer plum. **90**

GRUPO PEÑAFLORES



Estate 2020 Chardonnay 234, DO Somontano, Spain (\$13)

The nose begins with a pineapple-melon sweetness and carries forward a pleasant floral bouquet. Notes of orange marmalade and a thread of minerality keep the palate clean and fresh. **91**



District Series 2019 Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$14)

This is an impressive Chardonnay for the price, especially considering that it hails from a prestigious AVA. Vivacious aromas of white flowers, honeyed pears, and guava lead to a perky and energetic palate. Notes of lemon and lime express salinity and the zest of herbes de Provence before the creamy finish of vanilla. **91**



PRECISION WINE COMPANY



Trivento 2019 Maximum Red Blend Reserve, Mendoza, Argentina (\$11)

The official wine of Major League Soccer; this 50/50 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec with a low ABV of 13.7% is easy-drinking and juicy, with notes of blackberry pie, orange peel, dark cocoa, and heather. Chewy tannins and a tart middle embrace the fine acid structure, making for a superb food-pairing partner. **90**



FETZER VINEYARDS



Worthy of a smooch.



French-style double bizou.



Wildly infatuated.



Seriously smitten.



Head over heels in love.



The Infamous Goose 2020 Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$16) The nose of this linear and bright white exudes a complex perfume of gooseberry, star fruit, and chapparal. Crisp flavors of grapefruit and kiwi are clean and dotted with tarragon and dill. **91**

KOBRAND



Benziger Family Winery 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$20) An exceptionally juicy, dark-fruited beauty with a stellar mouthfeel defined by dried lavender, dark chocolate, and black plum. Sweet tobacco contributes savoriness to tilled soil as soy sauce converges with salty minerality on the sleek finish. **93**

THE WINE GROUP



Biltmore Estate 2019 American Series Sauvignon Blanc, California (\$17) This stainless steel-fermented Sauv Blanc with a touch of Pinot Grigio is made with grapes sourced from California growers, but it's produced at the winery's North Carolina property. Peach, honeysuckle, and marshmallow establish the creamy foundation of the bright-as-sunshine white with fine acidity. **90**



Carneros Highway 2019 Chardonnay, Carneros, Sonoma County (\$20) Fruit from five Sonoma vineyards farmed by the prestigious Sangiacomo family is sourced to make this stunning white, whose modern style showcases body and brightness against restrained oak. Lemon curd, creamed corn, daffodil, and vanilla are highlights, and a chord of minerality keeps it lean and lively. **92**

HIGHWAY 12 VINEYARDS AND WINERY



Wente Vineyards 2019 Estate Grown Louis Mel Sauvignon Blanc, Livermore Valley (\$18) Cold fermented in stainless steel, this crisp white is anchored by aromatics and flavors of citrus, from lime to grapefruit, with complementary hints of Asian pear and chamomile. Minerality rings all the bells and whistles within the lean profile, which finishes with floral notes, white tea, and cantaloupe. **92**



Tribute 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$20) This red would be a winner in any by-the-glass program: It overdelivers and then some. A tart and sweet fragrance of blackberry lingers while a fine acid structure lifts the fruit with a wash of lavender and chapparal. Supple tannins support the fruity and floral profile through the clean, round finish. **92**

THE WINE GROUP



R. Bryce Wines 2018 Pinot Noir, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$18) A bright spark of acidity amplifies dark cherry while lightening up tobacco and savory notes of forest floor. A harmony of clove, cocoa, and white pepper sets the rhythm for the wine's juicy, energetic character. Aged seven months in oak. **92**

MILLER FAMILY WINE COMPANY



Murrieta's Well 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Livermore Valley (\$19)

Louis Mel, the estate vineyard that provides this charmer of a Sauvignon Blanc, harbors descendants of the original Château d'Yquem cuttings planted by the site's namesake in the late 1800s. Its well-drained, gravelly soils yield an exquisite 76% Sauv Blanc with Malvasia Bianca, Muscat Canelli, Chardonnay, and Viognier. Notes of tangerine and honeysuckle appear on the nose and palate, the latter of which is voluptuous on the front end before salinity arises midway; surrounded by green apple with a touch of white pear, it lingers within a wave of minerality. **94**

WENTE FAMILY ESTATES



Wente Vineyards 2019 Riva Ranch Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco, Monterey County (\$22) What we love about this iconic estate-grown white is its round, rather voluptuous body. Less rich than in former vintages, it offers lovely notes of lemon blossom and pineapple as well as striking acidity that's further enlivened by tarragon, sage, white pepper, and a thread of oyster-shell minerality. A small percentage of Gewürztraminer was added to the wine, which fermented in French and American oak (90%) and stainless steel (10%). **93**



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 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**



Elizabeth Rose 2019 Chardonnay, Napa Valley (\$24) Vineyards from Yountville provide the fruit for this aromatic white, whose scents of fresh peach lead to a steely, clean, and lemon-kissed palate. Stone fruit is lightly salted with a thin line of minerality. **90**
NAPA WINE COMPANY



Schug 2019 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$25) A balanced caress of creamy vanilla, lemon brioche, and fine acidity keeps this wine on its tiptoes. Aged in stainless steel, it's crisp and clean on the palate, and minimal use of new oak allows for its vibrant nature to shine through in sensational notes of white peach and tangerine. **93**



Schug 2019 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$30) Here exists a delicate balance of earth and wild cherry. Sassafras enters on a cedar stage while nutmeg and underbrush take a savory bow. **92**



Rombauer 2018 Zinfandel, California (\$35) Matching a prestigious name with an American heritage variety, this plummy, jammy wine features fruit sourced throughout California from vineyards as old as 100 years. Notes of wild strawberry and chaparral make for an extroverted, generous flavor profile; vanilla and cedar chime in on the finish. **91**



Château des Jacques 2018 Morgon, Côte du Py, Beaujolais, France (\$40) Côte du Py is a 13-acre vineyard planted on granite and schist on the slopes of an extinct volcano. This cru Beaujolais offers savory notes of balsamic, stewed blackberry, and grilled meat. A dark element of red cherry adorns dark chocolate and roasted coffee. **94**



Château des Jacques 2018 Moulin-à-Vent Clos du Grand Carquelin, Beaujolais, France (\$40) This special parcel is planted on sand and clay atop bedrock. The presence of manganese in the soil brings out an inky color as well as a mineral profile in the wines. Moulin-à-Vent is recognized as the Beaujolais cru that most emulates Burgundian character; and here the Gamay grape shows heady notes of plum preserves and dried violets with a streak of fennel and fern. The result is chewy, deep, and brooding. **93**

KOBRAND



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**

KOBRAND



Maquis 2014 Viola Carménère, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$50) This variety is at its best here, setting forth a generous, energetic flow of white pepper; Italian herbs, and jammy blackberry notes doused with chocolate and licorice. With some Cab Franc blended in, it is a seasoned showpiece—big, rich, and built with earth and iron. **94**

GLOBAL VINEYARD IMPORTERS



Amulet Estate 2018 Mad Hatter, Napa Valley (\$50) This chewy, dense, and opulent Bordeaux blend of 66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% old-vine Petite Sirah, 10% Merlot, and some Cab Franc and Petit Verdot hails from what was formerly known as the Tuck Beckstoffer Estate. Violets and fruit shine through the multidimensional and exciting flavor profile, which takes a deep dive into savory Worcestershire sauce and black olive as floral notes persist throughout. Teeth-coating, chalky plum-skin tannins lend structural tension.



Y. Rousseau 2018 Pépé Merlot, Napa Valley (\$54)

Fruit from the Mount Veeder and Stags Leap AVAs bring this 97% Merlot and 3% Cab Sauvignon to liquid life. Barrel aged for 18 months in 50% new French oak, it's a big, expressive red that stays savory thanks to notes of dark-chocolate espresso, black olive, pencil shavings, and sandalwood, but it finishes with bright enthusiasm. **93**



Ponzi Vineyards 2018 Aurora Chardonnay, Chehalem Mountains, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$65) Benefiting from an ideal growing season, this single-vineyard cuvée proves to be a stunner. The grapes were grown on vines planted 31 years ago in Chehalem Mountain's iconic Laurelwood soil. The mouthfeel excites with honey-soaked pears and papaya as the leesy creaminess of buttery lemon cake establishes a rhythmic cadence with melon and minerality. **95**



Two Birds 2019 Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County (\$50) This big style of Pinot Noir is full of depth, starting with resonant scents of cherry, cinnamon, underbrush, and red licorice. Saffras, caramel apple, and café latte sweeten the mid-palate before the lengthy finish. **95**

WESTLIFE IMPORTS



Spot Dog 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$100) No "ruff" edges here! This gorgeous 100% Cabernet Sauvignon hails from a vineyard in the Yountville AVA and exudes deep scents of bright cherry that lead to a carpet of melting chocolate and violets. Luxe tannins are painted by licorice and a dollop of saddle leather. Aged 18 months in 75% new French oak, this curvaceous red gets better with each sip. **97**

WESTLIFE IMPORTS



MacRostie Winery 2018 Clockwise Cabernet Sauvignon, Yountville, Napa Valley (\$68)

This single-clone Cab hails from a 140-year-old vineyard and was aged 22 months in 50% new French oak. Clockwise is a new label for MacRostie, which is expanding its legacy of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay thanks to the vision of winemaker Heidi Bridenhagen, working alongside proprietor/winemaker Steve MacRostie. Cassis and blackberry are rolled in licorice, creating a luxurious mouthfeel, and as high-toned and tart flavors of spiced pomegranate grab the back of the tongue, a note of savory tobacco leaf lingers. The experience suggests that Clockwise will surely stand the test of time. **94**





Beau Vigne 2018 Juliet Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$100) Spicier than her Romeo, Juliet is a savory beauty romanced by a sonnet of cigar leaf, black pepper, and sandalwood. Plumy notes cling to dry, chalky tannins, delivering a complex mouthfeel as notes of soy sauce and dark cherry paint the palate. **97**

APPELLATION TRADING COMPANY



Beau Vigne 2018 Romeo Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$100) Intense dark chocolate-covered cherry and roasted coffee glide in on a sleek mouthfeel with seductive notes of blackberry and licorice. In its youth, this broad-shouldered yet balanced red is cloaked in dark violet flowers that bloom as it opens up. **97**

APPELLATION TRADING COMPANY



Dutton Estate Winery 2018 Thomas Road Pinot Noir, Dutton Ranch, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$68) Thomas Road is a single-clone vineyard in the northeast section of the Green Valley sub-AVA—one of the 80 sites that Dutton Ranch farms in the Russian River Valley. Earth and spiced cinnamon greet the nose of this big and personable wine with a whiff of cranberry. An immediate release of tart fruit accompanied by fresh herbs inspires a flow of juicy dark cherry, date, cocoa, and sandalwood. Sweetness derived from the ripeness of the red fruit is complemented by pitch-perfect acidity before the dusky finish of tobacco and wet soil. **95**



Calera 2017 Pinot Noir, Mills Vineyard, Mt. Harlan AVA, Central Coast (\$75)

The fruit for this wine came from vines planted on their own rootstock in 1984 in the Gabilan Mountains, 25 miles east of Monterey Bay. Deep notes of black cherry and black tea resonate on the nose and palate, demonstrating an earthy character. Sandalwood and sweet tobacco join in at the mid-palate with an on-point acid structure, and on the finish, tart pomegranate is seasoned with white pepper and mushroom. **94**

THE DUCKHORN PORTFOLIO



Castello di Albola 2016 Santa Caterina Gran Selezione Chianti Classico DOCG, Tuscany, Italy (\$80) This 100% Sangiovese is grown 1,800 feet above sea level on soils rich in rocky clay. With an ABV of 13.5%, it aged 14 months in barriques and large Slovenian oak barrels before spending an additional 18 months in bottle to result in seamlessly graceful flavors of blueberry, ripe cherry, and heather. Linear acidity makes its way through spiced rhubarb and black pepper as coffee notes are surrounded by cigar leaf. Floral accents persist on the nose and palate. **94**

1821 FINE WINE & SPIRITS



Grieve Family Winery 2018 Double Eagle Red, Napa Valley (\$89)

Winemaker Philippe Melka composed this powerful and elegant blend of 91% Cabernet Sauvignon and 9% Petit Verdot, which aged 18 months in 67% new French oak. It's tightly wound in its youth, with chalky tannins, black pepper, and spiced cedar defining its textured entry. On the palate, the fruit ripens and becomes more balanced as it's joined by melt-in-your-mouth chocolate. **94**



Lorenzi Estate 2016 Double Down Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Temecula Valley (\$95)

Aged 42 months in 100% new French oak and another eight months in bottle, this Cab-based blend sees the addition of some Petit Verdot, Malbec, and Merlot. Concentrated but not dense, it's a beauty made for cellaring—yet it drinks well now, showing masterful aromatics of blue flowers and ripe plum. Dark-cherry liqueur envelops the mid-palate, lingering with melted dark chocolate. Once again, Lorenzi has put Temecula on the front burner. **95**



Ponzi Vineyards 2018 Avellana Pinot Noir, Chehalem Mountains, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$105) A seven-day post-fermentation maceration, 20 months of aging in 50% new French oak, and five months of bottle aging yield a single-vineyard Pinot Noir with body, spice, and sass. Savory with hints of black pepper and clove, it features a concentrated and sumptuous palate of dark blue fruit. **96**



Goldeneye 2017 Ten Degrees Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, Mendocino County

(\$130) Winemaker Katey Larwood understands the distinctiveness of the Anderson Valley when it comes to crafting world-class Pinot Noir. For this wine, she selects what she calls “the most complete and compelling estate lots,” taking a deep dive into black cherry, plum, and just-tilled earth. The vineyard’s proximity to famed California redwoods allows us to imagine its true forest-floor nature. Licorice, dark chocolate, and brush pave the road to the finish. **96**

THE DUCKHORN PORTFOLIO



Amulet Estate 2018 Oakville Ranch Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

(\$175) Located in the Vaca Mountains, this rugged certified-organic vineyard sits on eroded, iron-rich volcanic sandstone at an elevation of 1,400 feet; it’s cooled by afternoon breezes from the San Pablo Bay, protecting its vines from high daytime temperatures. Tannins are dusted with dried violets and bittersweet dark chocolate, and the defined structure speaks to the wine’s power and finesse. While blue floral tones flood the senses, the palate evolves into a plushness of blueberry, plum, and sage. **96**



Far Niente 2018 Estate Bottled Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley

(\$200) The fruit was sourced from the gravelly volcanic-loam soil of the estate’s Martin Stelling Vineyard. Teeth-grabbing cocoa tannins wrap around a firm body that emanates deep, dark fruit from start to finish. Aged in 70% new French oak for 20 months, the wine morphs into bright, expressive, velvety layers. **98**



SPIRITS



Heimat New York Nectarine Handcrafted Liqueur, USA

(\$28/375-mL) Heimat founder Ute Londrigan’s grandmother used to grow fresh fruit in her backyard in Germany a generation ago, and now Londrigan continues the tradition in New York as he works with local farmers to craft his brand. At 38 proof, this expression offers authentic citrus notes highlighted by chamomile, pastry dough, and allspice within a lush mouthfeel. **92**



Heimat New York Rhubarb Handcrafted Liqueur, USA

(\$28/375-mL) Ripe fruit is sourced from Long Island to make this liqueur, which includes no additives, colors, or preservatives; production occurs only once a year, when the fruit is in season. Herbal notes, a likely partner for rhubarb, emerge from the smooth, unctuous, 64-proof liquid; its dense nectar is rich and sultry, with hints of cinnamon and ginger. **91**



Puncher’s Chance Kentucky Straight Bourbon, USA

(\$35) Combining four-, five-, and six-year-old Kentucky straight bourbon, this 90-proofer strikes the nose with opulent aromas of apricot and maple oatmeal. Biscuit and caramel-covered red apple pummel the delectable entry as speckles of black pepper sock it to lush stone fruit. This is a knockout with finesse. **95**



WOLF SPIRIT DISTILLERY



Rod & Hammer’s SLO Stills Distiller’s Reserve Rye Whiskey, USA

(\$60) Aged over a year in new American white oak, this 80-proof rye first manifests its uniqueness through its warm and enthralling aromas of chestnut and molasses. Apricot, leather, black tea, and tobacco weigh in on the mid-palate, making for a luxe mouthfeel. Spice and roasted coffee liqueur emphasize the whiskey’s depth of character. The vanilla-kissed finish of orange blossom convinces us that this distiller from California’s Central Coast is one to watch. **96**



Weed Cellars Vodka, USA **(\$30)** The nose features indulgent aromas of cocoa and pastis with a hint of red berry. The palate swiftly communicates its energy through ripe berries, sweet fig, white flowers, and vanilla bean. A dash of black pepper and a cooling note of delicate spearmint leave a lasting impression on the finish. **93**



E. Cuarenta Tequila Reposado, Mexico **(\$55)** This spirit made with highland and lowland agave delivers engaging aromas of salted caramel and breathtaking flavors of jasmine and ginger that whet the palate. Fresh agave comes through vividly despite the oak aging, and lime zest and brown-sugared peach make a sumptuous impression on the finish. **95**

ESS SPIRITS



Kuiper Belt 8 Year Old Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey, USA

(\$85) Named for a region of the solar system that contains asteroids, comets, and other objects made largely of ice, this 90-proofer is certainly out of this world. The juice is sourced from Heaven Hill Distillery and bottled by Frank-Lin Distillers. Heady aromas of maple, walnut, and sandalwood join precise flavors of peach seasoned with black pepper, and a mineral component threads through the nectar-like mouthfeel. Brisk on the finish, cigar leaf is reined in by a swath of honeyed stone fruit. **95** **W**

ESS SPIRITS



The Avatars of TERROIR

DESIGNATED VINEYARDS
ARE THE ULTIMATE
MICROREGIONS

As the title of the most recent webinar in our Geographical Digest series (presented by sister publication *The SOMM Journal* in partnership with *National Geographic* and *SommCon*), "Remarkable Single Vineyards" pretty much says it all. The fruit these special sites yield can be so precious that the winemakers who work with it deem it worthy of showcasing all by itself; the following bottles are just a few fine examples.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARGIANO



Diora 2018 La Grande Lumière Chardonnay, San Bernabe Vineyard, Monterey (\$40) The first vintage from Diora to include the San Bernabe Vineyard (which has also given its name to an AVA) on the label, this white was barrel aged sur lie for ten months in 100% new French oak. It's fresh, lithe, and vibrant, with a buttery, nutty mouthfeel. Notes of tangerine, mango, vanilla, and peach work in tandem with high-toned acidity before rosemary-seasoned green apple appears on the finish. **94**

TRANSCENDENT WINES

Diora 2018 La Grande Majesté Pinot Noir, San Bernabe Vineyard, Monterey (\$40) The fruit for this wine is sourced from the highest-elevation plot on the site. Planted on Lockwood shaly loam soils, the small-berried grapes create a plush wine blessed with a core of chocolate, strawberry, and cherry and an earthy soul. Dotted with cinnamon and orange peel throughout, it finishes with herbal notes tinged with cranberry and spice. **95**

TRANSCENDENT WINES

Concha y Toro 2017 Gravas del Maipo Cabernet Sauvignon, DO Puente Alto, Maipo Valley, Chile (\$70) This wine is named for the result of thousands of years of erosion in the Maipo River basin: an abundance of gravel in the subsoils of the Puente Alto Vineyard, which rises over 2,000 feet in elevation at the base of the Andes, near the river's northern bank. The wine delivers generous swirls of blackberry and dried violets in a rush of streamlined luxury. Sturdy tannins are met by a measured graphite character that reflects the grace of the terroir. **97**



FETZER VINEYARDS

Stags' Leap 2017 The Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$115) Cabernet Sauvignon from this century-old 240-acre estate in the Stags Leap District is planted on well-drained volcanic soil. Glossy tannins and a velvety texture accentuate the wine's poise as violets and sweet earth bathe in black-fruit creaminess. **96**

TREASURY WINE ESTATES



Alta Vista 2015 Single Vineyard Temis Malbec, El Cepillo, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina (\$48) In 2001, Alta Vista became the first winery in Argentina to use a single-vineyard designation. The coldest of Alta Vista's estate properties, experiencing a constant breeze, the Temis vineyard was planted in 1938; its age is a key factor in this wine's notable complexity. Dark fruit, great structure, fine acidity, and stark minerality are all inherent components of the well-balanced palate. Concentrated notes of boysenberry are meaty and ripe. **95**

KOBRAND

Ancient Peaks 2017 Pearl Collection Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Margarita Ranch, Paso Robles (\$70) The inaugural release of this small-production Cab is sourced from specially cultivated blocks in the estate-owned Margarita Vineyard. Aged in 100% new French oak, it incorporates 5% Petit Verdot for added color and dimension. Ancient seabed soils on the property lend a chalkiness to the wine along with a sensation of slate in a velvet-lined coat of fennel and black olive. Concentrated notes of blackberry wash up against a spiced finish of dark chocolate and cedar. **95**

Alta Vista 2014 Single Vineyard Alizarine Malbec, Las Compueratas, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina (\$48) This cool-climate vineyard sits at an elevation of over 3,000 feet, where silty clay-loam soils meet a layer of boulders that go 3–6 feet deep. Chalky tannins lend an edge to the floral aromas and flavors, including dried violets, at the forefront of this elegant red. Iron and beets are captured on a mid-palate that further emphasizes its distinctly high-acid structure. Ripe blueberry and plum notes keep pace on the finish. Aged 12 months in new French oak and an additional six months in barrel. **93**

KOBRAND

Alta Vista 2015 Single Vineyard Serenade Malbec, Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina (\$48) At 3,000 feet above sea level, this vineyard undergoes extreme diurnal temperature changes, but the arid climate never experiences frost. Contrasting the grip of the Alizarine Malbec, this well-built expression is creamy and plush yet elegant. Blackberry preserves are sumptuous with underlying chaparral and roasted coffee. Gamey notes distinguish the bold finish. **95**

KOBRAND



Argiano 2015 Vigna del Suolo Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, Tuscany, Italy (\$200) What Argiano considers its "best expression" comes from the oldest cru on the estate; planted on limestone soil in 1965, it's organically farmed today. This 100% Sangiovese aged 30 months in French and Slavonian oak, followed by an additional ten months in bottle. It shows grace in the form of supple tannins, defined minerality, and good acidity throughout. Cherry notes are lilting and ethereal, while notes of dried lavender appear on the finish. **97** *LV*

LUX WINES

ART AND Soul

MIJENTA TEQUILA CAPTURES
THE POETRY OF AGAVE



Mijenta co-founder Juan Coronado with
maestra tequilera Ana María Romero
Mena and their Reposado tequila.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIJENTA

by Leri Moffatt

IN HER WORK making tequila in the highlands of Jalisco, Mexico, Ana María Romero Mena brings together many of the passions that feed her heart and soul. “I love the history of tequila and the sciences that surround the processes. . . . All these things invigorate my senses and make me reflect,” she says. As the maestra tequilera for Mijenta, a super-premium brand that recently released both a jaunty, peppery Blanco and a gorgeous, silky Reposado to the market, she oversees all aspects of production—or, in Spanish, *elaboración*. Leave it to a Romance language to bring just the right amount of poetry to a craft that owes as much to the land and Mother Nature as it does to human and technical intervention.

It was in the mid-1990s that Romero Mena—whose career at the time centered on wine education and marketing—began to cultivate her interest in the spirit, exploring its interplay of terroir, raw materials, distillation, and aging even as she continued to teach wine seminars to enthusiasts and judge wines in Mexico’s up-and-coming Valle de Guadalupe region. Then, at an event in Parras, one of her clients asked her for a tequila tasting, and it was so well received that industry officials in attendance offered to support her endeavors to further her education. “They organized a trip so I could experience some of the most important tequila houses,” she says. “At first, what captured my imagination was the beauty of the agave *campos* [fields] and the sight of the jimadores cutting the agave . . . simply lovely. And as I visited with each tequilero, hearing about their philosophies and visions for their tequila and learning about tequila’s cultural heritage and its legacy, I decided to commit myself to knowing all its facets. That’s how this romance began.”

Over the next few years, Romero Mena visited and interviewed as many tequila producers as she could, ultimately tasting more



“My first love was wine, without a doubt.

It trained my mind and developed my senses. To discover notes of fruit or aging were formative experiences, and wine was a demanding teacher. **Allowing the senses to reveal the history of wine—or tequila—is fascinating.**”

—Mijenta maestra tequilera Ana María Romero Mena



than 750 brands and making detailed notes on their flavors, aromas, and personalities. She designed an aroma and flavor wheel, similar to those you've seen for wine and whiskey, which is now used industrywide by students of tequila as a training tool. Shortly thereafter, she became certified as one of the first official *Catadores de Tequila*, an advanced-level designation for tasting experts.

In 2007, Romero Mena wrote her first book, *Los Aromas del Tequila: El Arte de la Cata (The Aromas of Tequila: The Art of Tasting)*, which identifies 600 aromas and explores how each develops over time; she's currently finishing a second book—untitled as yet—to share the knowledge and experiences she's gained in the years since. "My first love was wine, without a doubt," she says. "It trained my mind and developed my senses. To discover notes of fruit or aging were formative



Mijenta co-founder Elise Som.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIJENTA

PHOTO: FOTOGRAFISKA



Mijenta co-founder Mike Dolan.

experiences, and wine was a demanding teacher. Allowing the senses to reveal the history of wine—or tequila—is fascinating."

Her own sensory training started early in life. "When I was a child growing up in Mexico City, I loved going to the market with my grandmother or my mother," she says. "It was a festival of colors, aromas, and flavors, and I would try to identify and describe them. Many years later, when I had my first glass of Merlot and discovered its aromas of strawberries and dried cherries, I remembered those days and how much fun it is to describe the intangible with words."

In 2018, when former Bacardi Limited CEO Mike Dolan began assembling a global team of all-stars to build the Mijenta brand on the pillars of quality, community, and sustainability, he was introduced to Romero Mena by their now-partner Juan Coronado. As

Dolan and Romero Mena visited agave campos in what's known as the Golden Triangle of tequila production east of Guadalajara, searching for like-minded vendors and suppliers, they began to form the core of Mijenta's philosophy. "Mijenta is for me an expression of the region's mountainous soils and of respect for this land and its people," says Romero Mena. "It also represents a new way of thinking about tequila; it's not for getting drunk but for enjoying with food and with friends."

Also a Mijenta co-founder is Elise Som, a sustainable designer and environmental consultant with degrees from Parsons School of Design and Harvard University who believes that the attention the brand team is paying to the land and its caretakers shows that they are "approaching agriculture in a different way." For example, the *agaveros* who farm the fields are incentivized to allow the plants to reach

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIJENTA



Mijenta's labels are made from a mixture of spent agave fiber and recycled jute.



Romero Mena credits her wine background for her exceptional palate (she was one of the first Catadores de Tequila ever to be certified).



The jimadores who harvest agave plants often pass their skills from generation to generation.

full maturity before harvest, thereby maximizing sugar content and creating a lush, fuller tequila. The jimadores—who often pass their skills from generation to generation—typically begin their intensely physical work at daybreak, wielding their *coas* (long, machete-like knives) with dexterity as they cut the spiny leaves from the sugar-filled heart; Romero Mena encourages them to take the time to make precise cuts, as too much chlorophyll in the *piñas* can add unwanted green notes to highlands tequila, which is prized for its citrus and honey profile. Some plants are even allowed to bloom, their asparagus-like *quiotes* (flower stalks) thrusting 30 feet or higher before flowering in a display so spellbinding it's been the subject of artists for centuries. This might seem counterproductive at first consideration, as a flowering agave can't be harvested for tequila; all the sugar goes to support the blossoms, and the plant soon dies. Yet those flower clusters attract pollinators like bees, bats, and butterflies, which benefit not only the agaves but also other local crops.

Mijenta focuses on material conservation as well, making its labels and packing materials from a mixture of spent agave fiber and recycled jute from coffee-bean bags. And it also strives to make a positive impact on its community, whether by sourcing its bottles from a Guadalajara manufacturer or providing health and education benefits to improve the living condi-

tions of its workers beyond fair wages.

"Part of understanding a beverage like wine or tequila is getting to know its creators," says Romero Mena. "I have memories of eating lunch with the jimadores, sharing not only bread but also knowledge as the herbal aroma of the recently cut field perfumed the air. I've watched the agaves mature as tiny new leaves sprout from the hard soils around them with the promise of new life. To see the *quiotes* flower is a promise, the essence of tequila." In capturing that essence, she again reveals the poetry inherent in her native language. "Each agave field is different—the color of the earth, the composition of the mountains and trees in the background," she explains. "I've walked in the fields as the sun comes up, outlined by inky blue skies still full of stars, hearing the wind rustle the

leaves and the music of the coas as the jimadores begin their work. In June, huge white butterflies prowl the leaves, and the gleams of the fireflies look like twinkling lights. . . . These are images that fill the heart."

With a copita of Mijenta Reposado or Blanco in hand, you can easily imagine yourself looking out onto a green field of regal agave, leaves spiraling upward in graceful rosettes framed by low-slung mountains. A sip reveals a multitude of flavors and aromas—subtle whispers of time and patience, of hard work and community, of legends and mysticism—that connect you to Mexico. That's just as it should be, according to Romero Mena: "We want to celebrate our culture and to inspire people to visit these lands. I hope that when you taste our tequila, you will be transported." **LT**

Mijenta Reposado Tequila (\$70)

This expression invests in the senses with aromas of gardenia, ginger, and green tea. Lime and patchouli deliver a flush of flavor at first sip. Stunning agave notes are coated with caramel apple that generously spreads, incorporating a flow of exotic florals. **99** —*Meridith May*



Kingpiñas

A SURVEY OF LEADING BRANDS IN THE AGAVE SPIRITS CATEGORY

introduction by Justin Elliott

Crazy as it sounds, all the chaos and uncertainty of the past year don't seem to have put a dent in medium-term industry trends: All the developments we were predicting prior to the pandemic are not only happening but doing so even faster than we anticipated. Case in point: the exponential ascendancy of tequila.

It's been a fascinating time to watch the agave spirits industry. On the one hand, a broad segment of consumers under lockdown quite expectedly gravitated toward well-established "comfort" brands, many of which saw high double-digit growth (a truly bonkers increase for producers at this scale). On the other, we're witnessing a steady stream of new brands in the market—many of which are conspicuously backed by celebrities. Either way, it's apparent that tequila and mezcal are approaching the territory of lifestyle categories. Vodka and even Cognac might conjure recollections of memorable nights in VIP booths at the club, and bourbon might transport you to some dude ranch of the mind, but agave spirits are being positioned as the drinks for the here and the now, the all day and every day; there's a brand for everyone to see themselves in.



There's an incredible wealth of variety even within the aforementioned subset of celebrity tequilas. Cincoro, owned in part by Michael Jordan, favors a truly opulent profile befitting its price tag, particularly for the aged expressions (approximately \$90 for the Reposado on up to \$1,600 for the Extra Añejo). By contrast, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson built his brand, Teremana, to be "the tequila of the people," designed for everyday use in cocktails with an equally accessible price point (around \$30 for the Blanco and \$33 for the Reposado). Despite their considerable differences, both saw hugely successful launches in 2020,

"El T," as it's affectionately known, has a couple of Extra Añejos, but another brand is making even more noise in the rapidly growing subcategory. An upstart company with a long heritage, La Adelita was created with an eye toward meticulous production from the estate-grown agave of Hacienda la Capilla, a highland distillery that's been in the co-owner's family for generations; the facility has produced several other brands as well as fulfilled contract orders for distillate, all while quietly reserving the spirit distilled from its best estate-grown agaves for itself. Its Extra Añejo—a blend of three-, four-, and five-year

on *carta blanca*-style rums, Bacardi Superior being the most famous example. Essentially, it offers all the benefits of oak aging—oxidative mellowing, concentration, lovely flavors like vanilla and complex baking spices, et cetera—without the wood tannins that can often unbalance a cocktail.

Perhaps the most important category—and for that matter industry—trend of all, however, is the growing thirst for sustainability, transparency, and novelty among an ever-more sophisticated consumer audience. Many producers, both new and established, are working hard to burnish their sustainability bona fides

by upcycling spent agave fibers into everything from surfboards to drinking straws to bricks for home construction, as mezcal brand Sombra (see page 78) has been doing at its Oaxacan *palenque* (distillery) for some time. Many are also acknowledging their obligation to solve the problems caused by monoculture farming, especially as demand continues to outpace availability. Patrón, long a behemoth brand that aficionados cast a suspicious eye toward (rather unfairly, it turns out), has had great success in promoting its efforts at transparency over the past several years, earning a verification from the Tequila Matchmaker database's industrywide registry of

additive-free tequilas.

Meanwhile, even as the tequila industry works to sort out a bright future for itself despite such challenges, it is to Oaxaca, the beating heart of mezcal country, that many novelty seekers are headed next. With unique microclimates for growing dozens of species of agave and incredible artisanal methods by which to process them, the mezcal segment has rapidly moved from the Next Big Thing to the Now Big Thing; as it continues to grow, its producers would be wise to learn from the hard lessons endured by their counterparts in the tequila sector. No other spirits show the level of terroir that agave spirits tend to when made well, and it is incumbent upon all of us to reward those who want to protect that terroir so that we may enjoy their labors for many years to come.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTHERN GLAZER'S WINE & SPIRITS



Justin Elliott is director of mixology—Texas for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits.

with Teremana garnering the title for the biggest debut in the history of the spirits industry after shipping 400,000 cases in its first 12 months.

Yet one of the category's most impressive feats is that, even as it's jam-packed with slickly marketed, contract-distilled labels, it reserves room for the oldest of old-school brands to be part of the conversation. El Tesoro is one such gem, made largely the same way today—from agaves cooked in brick ovens, crushed under giant stone wheels called *tahonas*, and distilled to proof in copper pots—as when it was established at La Alteña 84 years ago. Even the Blanco is richly textured and packed with notes of green olive, peppercorn, and Mexican oregano.

barrels—will soon be joined by two limited releases, a 6 Year Old and an 8 Year Old, for one of the deepest extra añejo lineups offered by any brand on the market (it's rare to produce more than one or two).

Another trend within the añejo space where you can expect to see even more action concerns cristalino. These tequilas have been well received by consumers over the past several years, and though they're not without controversy among purists, they do offer a fascinating new profile whether for sipping or for use in cocktails. In fact, though it's relatively new in tequila production, the technique of charcoal filtering spirits after the aging process has been used for well over a century

A Crystal-Clear Future: CASA KOMOS BRANDS GROUP



Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino touts its Mediterranean as well as Mexican inspiration.

At just two years old, Casa Komos Brands Group (CKBG) has already begun to make its mark on the agave spirits category by positioning itself at the forefront of, well, pretty much every emerging trend therein. Whereas most tequila brands lead with a blanco, CKBG's flagship expression is Tequila Komos Añejo Cristalino, a charcoal-filtered version of the barrel-aged style around which media buzz has only recently started to build. But buyers are hearing it: According to CKBG/Tequila Komos president Sean Hartnell, the ultra-luxury product has been "moving really fast" since its launch last fall. "In five weeks, we achieved 1,000 accounts. We sold out our first load of inventory within six weeks, ahead of our projections"—and its second and third shipments are already accounted for too.

And that's just the beginning. In May, the company will begin expanding distribution in conjunction with the debut of its Reposado Rosa, representing another new sensation in the category: rosé tequila. Add in its RTD label, Superbird—whose first

release is a Paloma cocktail based on 100% Blue Weber agave tequila and packaged in a can designed by a tattoo artist—and it's obvious the brand is playing to win in the innovation space.

That's not to say that founders Richard Betts and Joe Marchese aren't mindful of the rich heritage of tequila but rather that, thanks in large part to Betts' background in winemaking, "Komos is coming in with a different story to tell," as Hartnell puts it. The Cristalino, for instance—which he likens to the cuvée of a Champagne house as the stylistic core of the CKBG portfolio—is traditionally made from a blend of highland and lowland agave, roasted in volcanic-stone ovens, and fermented with native yeast. From there, however, it's aged in French oak casks previously used for white wine; purified through charcoal; tumbled in clay amphorae; and finally bottled in opaque vitrified-porcelain vessels that not only speak to Mexican craftsmanship but also protect the liquid from the deleterious effects of light. The Rosa, for its part, obtains its blush hue from aging in ex-red wine barrels



▲
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**
—Meridith May

sourced from Napa and Sonoma.

And CKBG isn't about to stop there: Over the next few quarters, it plans to release an Extra Añejo at an SRP of \$300 as well as to add new packaging formats and extend the Superbird line. After all, says Hartnell, "Our distributors are clamoring for more"; like the RTD category, "the ultra-luxury segment is doing extremely well, and the energy with the brand is significant." It doesn't hurt, he adds, that CKBG is billing itself as the kind of aspirational lifestyle brand "you can enjoy all day long" at the beach or on a rooftop deck "and transition to an evening at the club"—a particularly rosy prospect in the wake of such a gray year.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA KOMOS BEVERAGE GROUP



THREE CLEAN INGREDIENTS: VOLLEY

Husband-and-wife duo Christopher Wirth and Camila Soriano are on a mission—a bubbly, buzzy mission—to revolutionize the seltzer world in the name of transparency, organic ingredients, and clean drinking. And they’ve packaged that revolution into a canned tequila seltzer called Volley.

“The idea for Volley really came about after we felt frustrated and tricked by the food industry,” Soriano says. “Surprisingly, ‘natural’ doesn’t mean anything in the food space—the term is completely unregulated! We wanted to build a brand that people who care about what they are putting in their bodies could trust, so we needed to go beyond ‘natural.’”

To them, that meant using just three ingredients—100% blue agave tequila, sparkling water, and organic juices—in their spiked seltzers, which come in Zesty Lime, Spicy Ginger, Sharp Grapefruit, and Tropical Mango flavors. They’re as fresh and authentic as you can get in a can, which is why the brand’s new packaging, launching this summer, features a protective aluminum-foil tamper seal similar to that used by San Pellegrino. What’s more, because real ingredients (such as pulp and organic juice) settle, Wirth and Soriano have printed a gentle reminder on the can to flip it before cracking it open. “It’s a special step that allows you to enjoy the full flavor in there exactly how we intended,” Soriano says. “We’re proud of the ritual that exists around consuming a Volley.”

They’re also proud of the work it took to perfect Volley’s flavor profile without the crutches of artificial ingredients and preservatives. Even for Wirth and Soriano—who have plenty of experience in the natural food and beverage sector, having developed and taken more than 70 products to market over the past eight years—the decision not to take any recipe shortcuts made their process more complicated, as even something as seemingly straightforward as tequila production can have dirty little secrets of its own. It was extremely important to them to use 100% blue agave tequila, a term whose use is heavily regulated, because anything below that threshold can technically be made from up to 49% alternative sugars, including high-fructose corn syrup. And that just wouldn’t align with their clean-drinking mission.

“Volley at its core is a brand you can trust,” Wirth says. “Every ingredient used is explicitly written on the front and the back of our can. When you don’t cut any corners on quality, we believe the consumer can taste the difference. We’re giving the consumer the opportunity to enjoy a guilt-free sip.” —Allyson Reedy



Volley Sharp Grapefruit Tequila Seltzer (\$15/4-pack) You can taste the agave through the zesty splash of grapefruit that defines this Paloma-esque seltzer. The citrus lingers on the palate long after the last sip. **90**—*M.M.*

Volley Spicy Ginger Tequila Seltzer We flipped for the zippy character of this energetic burst of effervescence. Citrus notes edge through, adding a pleasant, tart sweetness. **91**—*M.M.*

Volley Zesty Lime Tequila Seltzer Refreshing and cooling on the palate. Authentic lime notes unmask a delicate agave flavor. **91**—*M.M.*

Volley Tropical Mango Tequila Seltzer Almost unctuous, the mango notes in this sparkling water are so well integrated that they’re nectar-like. Lime juice adds a tang. While the tequila is barely discernible here, that doesn’t detract from the overall splendid profile. **90**—*M.M.*



Shining a Light on Oaxaca: SOMBRA MEZCAL



Sombra Mezcal Joven, Oaxaca, Mexico (\$39) This 90-proof mezcal made with 100% Maguey Espadín shows aromas of smoky vanilla, bergamot, and clay. The peppered notes on entry dive into lime and earth, and tobacco leaf is deeply embedded in chocolate and sandalwood. The new glass packaging—which resembles a *vaso veladora*, a traditional Mexican cup that holds prayer candles—is a deep shade of smoky gray, which represents the name Sombra, Spanish for “shadow.” Its reduced weight makes it more eco-friendly. **95** —*M.M.*

Sombra uses distillation byproducts to produce bricks for the construction of homes in its community.

In Mexico, mezcal and religion intersect in the *vaso veladora* (candle glass). Originally, these little votive glasses were used to hold prayer candles in Oaxacan churches, but at some point a believer borrowed one and—mistakenly, we’re sure—decided to sip mezcal out of it. Employing the *vaso veladora* for this other spirited purpose caught on, and for as long as anyone alive can remember, it has been the traditional vessel for mezcal. Now as common in bars as in churches in Oaxaca, the simple pleated glass was the inspiration for mezcal brand Sombra’s beautiful new bottle.

“We wanted to reflect a contemporary expression of our history and traditions,” Daniel Mandelbaum, marketing vice president for Sombra’s parent company, Davos Brands, says of the new packaging, which launched in late 2020. “The result is respectful of Oaxacan traditions and Mexican design, where purpose, function, and beauty are all part of the execution.” The bottle’s light-grey color is also symbolic; *sombra* means “shadow” in Spanish, and mezcal is, of course, known for its signature smoky flavor.

What’s more, its manufacture reflects Sombra’s eco-friendly ethos: It’s made with less glass than regular bottles for a lighter weight, which in turn makes for more efficient shipping using fewer materials, thereby helping to reduce

carbon emissions—a priority for the brand since it debuted in 2006. As one of the few mezcal producers that owns and operates its own *palenque*, or distillery, Sombra takes responsibility for its methodology. “Each step of Sombra’s production, from fermentation to distillation, has been reimagined to reduce its environmental impact while respecting long-standing mezcal tradition,” Mandelbaum says. “Sustainability, both in a social and ecological context, is in our DNA.” Efforts to that end include working only with farmers who abide by ecologically sound practices; planting five times the number of agaves they harvest; using leftover agave fibers and vinasse (distillation byproducts) to make adobe bricks for local houses; installing solar panels on the distillery roof; and donating 1% of revenues to nonprofits working toward reversing climate change and supporting healthy food systems.

Meanwhile, Sombra has a new expression to showcase in its updated packaging: Sombra Mezcal Reposé, which hit the market this spring as the first mezcal to be aged in Bordeaux wine barrels. Upon arrival from the historic Château Léoville Poyferré, the barrels are filled with Sombra’s award-winning Espadín mezcal, which then rests in the oak for four to six months—just long enough to obtain



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SOMBRA

Sombra’s new bottle design pays homage to the traditional glassware used for mezcal in Oaxaca.

what Mandelbaum calls its “French rosé look” without losing its delicate botanical balance.

The result, he adds, “is a refined spirit with a beautiful color and flavor.” Boasting a lush, fruity nose; subtle palate of spice and blackberries; and smooth, clean finish, Sombra Reposé is probably best sipped out of a *vaso veladora*. But swigging it straight out of its candle glass-inspired bottle works, too. —*Allyson Reedy*

Reigning Supreme: EL REY

In the indigenous language of Náhuatl, Cascahuín translates to “hill of light,” befitting its namesake rise in the Jalisco town of El Arenal. The 70-square-mile municipality is called the gateway to the blue-agave region, with red soil so rich in minerals it actually attracts lightning during monsoon season. This terroir also lends character to the spirits of the Cascahuín Distillery that produces El Rey Tequila, according to the brand’s general manager, principal, and art director Nick Navarro, who notes that “the rich lowland soil gives El Rey an earthy, herbal, and floral profile.”

Produced in small batches, El Rey’s twice-distilled Silver, Reposado, and Añejo expressions are crafted from piñas steam cooked for 72 hours in a traditional masonry oven called an *horno de mampostería*. Receiving scores from *The Tasting Panel* of 95, 93, and 95, respectively, the results have won awards in every competition the brand has entered, including

gold medals at the 2017 San Francisco World Spirits Competition; the 2017 San Diego Spirits Festival (where it also won a gold for package design); the 2018 Monterey Bay Tequila & Cuisine festival; and the 2019 *Tequila Aficionado* Brands of Promise event. But its most distinctive contribution to the agave category may be its line of naturally flavored Hibiscus (93 points), Pineapple Coconut (93 points), and Strawberry (92 points) Silver tequilas, which can easily be enjoyed over ice but also shine in Tequila Mules or Tajín-rimmed Margaritas.

Navarro says that he’s increasingly seeing consumers turn to tequila not only for use in cocktails but as a spirit to be savored and appreciated straight. “Tequila has historically gotten an undeservedly bad rep,” he points out.

“But consumers these days are becoming savvier . . . and are appreciating boutique brands over [those that are] mass-produced.”

In addition to driving innovation within the category, El Rey is focused on sustainability efforts. Cascahuín Distillery was one of the first three facilities of its kind to participate in the Bat Friendly Tequila initiative; 5% of its agaves are left to flower to provide food for the bats, preserving an endangered species that’s essential to the regional ecosystem.

The overarching philosophy of the brand is straightforward, Navarro says: “We use honest, traditional methods to produce a spirit that is exceptionally smooth and richly nuanced while retaining the rich agave flavor.”

—Kelly Magyarics



PHOTO COURTESY OF EL REY



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILESTONE BRANDS

Bringing the (Sweet) Heat:

DULCE VIDA

On an organic farm near Arandas in Jalisco, Mexico's Los Altos region, Dulce Vida Tequila is committed to sourcing the best, most sustainably grown agaves at the peak of their maturity. At the nearby distillery, waste from the production process is composted and milled to return as a nutrient-rich soil supplement for local farmers. Such attention to the environment and to the concept of community sets the brand apart from many of its competitors, but it's Dulce Vida's lineup of flavor-infused tequilas that, at 66 calories and 2.4 carbs per serving, has caught fire among consumers—even in the midst of a pandemic.

"As with nearly everything in society, COVID has affected how people use and serve distilled spirits," says Marc Carson, vice president of marketing for Milestone Brands, who notes that "the move toward ease-of-serve for both less handling and cost consistency has increased interest in bottled infusions—especially high-quality, natural products like Dulce Vida's." What's more, he notes, consumers these days "have become more aware of their health and pay more

attention to their overall well-being, so our low-calorie, low-carb tequilas perfectly align with these trends." Though the niche that flavored tequilas currently occupy in the category is fairly small, especially compared to that of vodka or whiskey, it's quickly growing thanks to Dulce Vida, whose three infusions—Grapefruit, Lime, and Pineapple Jalapeño—"were the prime movers in this space and have ushered in [the] new subcategory," according to Carson.

In keeping with the high standards for the production of its 100% USDA certified—organic, 80-proof, 64-calorie and zero-carb Blanco, Reposado, and Añejo tequilas, the brand achieves authentic flavored versions "by using real fruit in the infusion process," Carson explains. "Dulce Vida Pineapple Jalapeño infuses [our Blanco] with natural pineapple juice and jalapeño essence, thereby creating a 70-proof tequila that is perfect for any number of signature cocktails."

Even by itself, its sweet-spicy profile is one consumers are excited by, he adds. "The adage of 'what grows together, goes together' holds very

SKINNY PIÑA MARGARITA

- 1½ oz. Dulce Vida Pineapple Jalapeño
 - 4 oz. Topo Chico (or other sparkling water or club soda)
 - Squeeze of fresh lime
- Pour ingredients over ice in a tall glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge.

true for this combination, with both pineapples and jalapeños originating in warmer climates," Carson explains. "Not to mention, the sweet-heat profile has gained significant popularity across the U.S. with the increase [in] accessibility of various styles of barbecue and multicultural cuisine."

In this respect, too, the pandemic has played a role, he points out, "accelerating consumers' interest in cooking and cocktail making—so memorable and exciting flavors are important." So is user-friendliness, he adds, and the bright flavors in Dulce Vida's infusions do all of the heavy lifting for aspiring home mixologists setting out to make something delicious. After all, he says, "Pineapple Jalapeño is perfect just served as a chilled shot." —*Rachel Burkons*

Dulce Vida Pineapple Jalapeño, Mexico (\$23)

This 70-proofer is surprisingly complex. With brisk herbal aromas of freshly sliced jalapeño joining an authentic pineapple perfume, you might ready yourself for a foray into picante territory. But its "bite" is balanced: The palate's not too spicy, and though the ripeness of the pineapple is evident, it's not too sweet either, complemented by side notes of chamomile and lemon tea. We're impressed! **93** —*M.M.*

MILESTONE BRANDS

Fit for Gods and Warriors:

PASOTE TEQUILA

Known to be some of the bravest and most ferocious fighters in history, Aztec warriors would celebrate their victories by drinking *pulque*—a predecessor to tequila made from fermented agave sap. They also drank the beverage during rituals and offered it sacrificially to their gods.

It is to these warriors and deities that Pasote Tequila pays tribute through its package design, which was recently refreshed. Depicted on its Blanco is the image of the sun god Tonatiuh, on its Reposado the Jaguar Warrior, and on its Añejo the Eagle Warrior—all now printed neatly on the labels rather than screen printed on the glass. As president August Sebastiani notes, the refresh “elevates the look and feel of the package [in keeping] with the quality of the product inside the bottle” while still “celebrating the robust history of Aztec culture.”

As for the liquid itself, Pasote’s master tequilero utilizes natural ingredients, including 100% estate-grown blue agave, rainwater, and natural spring water while eschewing the use of chemicals, colorings, and flavorings. “Before baking,” Sebastiani adds, “the green hearts are taken out of each agave, eliminating a vegetal taste and offering more sweetness.” The result? Clean, pure, handcrafted tequilas of divine quality. —Eric Marsh



Pasote Tequila Blanco, Mexico (\$49) An aromatic adventure of celery root, salt, and lime, the latter of which perks up the nose immediately. Slick on the palate, the salinity morphs into a savory white-pepper note joined by clean, ripe tones of agave, jicama, and citrus. The prickly finish on the tongue is sensational. **93** —M.M.

Pasote Tequila Reposado, Mexico (\$59) The delicate, fragrant nature of honey-kissed white flowers is a seductive introduction to the pinch of white-peppered pineapple and pink grapefruit at first sip. The finish is silky and the perfume lingers. **92** —M.M.

Pasote Tequila Añejo, Mexico (\$69) The common thread of salty-peppery aromas combines with sandalwood and cigar leaf for a heady experience before you even taste the spirit. The deep and unctuous flavor profile billows texturally, lending a lightness to the palate. Pungent and unmasked, the agave shines with a slightly austere edge on the finish. **94** —M.M.

Pasote Tequila Extra Añejo, Mexico (\$190) Packaged in an elegant box, this labor-intensive tequila is made with agave that has been baked, crushed, and then fermented with native yeast in copper pot stills. Aged 48 months in ex-bourbon oak, it features an exquisite nose of salted mango, caramel, orange oil, and roasted agave. The intense perfume persists on the palate with flavors of jasmine, white-peppered Tahitian vanilla, and tropical fruit. The vibrant, lithe mouthfeel is almost weightless; oak is just an echo, and the orange-creamsicle finish is heady and long. **97** —M.M.

3 BADGE BEVERAGE



Espanita's versatility makes it prime for experimentation in cocktails.

A Versatile Bar Superstar: **ESPAÑITA ARTISANAL TEQUILA**

Rarely do you find a tequila that drinks as well on the rocks as it does in a cocktail—and it can seem near impossible to find a *craft* tequila of such versatility at an accessible price point. But Espanita Artisanal Tequila founder Marina Wilson set out to make exactly that.

“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,” says Wilson. Using her background in spirits imports, she identified a demographic of consumers in need of a spirit that fit their budget. “If you look at the younger generation . . . 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,” she adds. (Espanita retails for

\$28–\$35 per bottle, depending on the age expression.)

Of course, if you’re going to refer to your brand as artisanal, you must be transparent about how it’s made and, in the case of tequila, how it adheres to a very old tradition—and Espanita meets the standard. Its team in Arandas, Jalisco, starts by hand-selecting 12-year-old blue agaves grown in the highlands, which are then roasted for up to 72 hours in *hornos* (traditional Mexican stone ovens). This caramelizes the plants’ sugars, which Espanita’s proprietary yeasts feed upon during a seven-day fermentation period. As Wilson explains, the process “adds fruit and roasted-agave flavors to [the] tequila and increases the intensity of the toasted sugar, with its characteristic delectable sweetness reminiscent of syrupy candy, to the palate and finish.”

Small batches of the fermented juice are then slowly double distilled in alembic pot stills, a process that removes impurities while preserving flavoring components to ultimately result in a velvety mouthfeel. While Espanita’s Blanco is ready for bottling at that point, its Reposado and Añejo expressions go on to age in ex-bourbon casks constructed of American white oak, imparting additional layers of nuanced flavors.

Complex profile notwithstanding, agave remains at both the core and fore of Espanita’s expressions. “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 explains. “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

Cocktail Cartel co-founder Eddie Fuentes mixes up his *Curruca de Oriente* cocktail (see recipe at right) with *Espanita Blanco*.



mixed. . . It's that prominent agave flavor and the fragrant, distinct aroma that make it so great in cocktails."

To get the word out about *Espanita*, the brand's team enlisted the help of Grammy Award-winning international superstar Pitbull, who serves as its global brand ambassador. In addition to being a tequila aficionado, education advocate, and motivational speaker, he's also known for his suave sense of style—and *Espanita*'s bottles serve as quite the distinctive accessories in promotional photos: The vessels are embossed and branded with celestial images that, like the liquid therein, are deeply entrenched in the indigenous lore of Mexico.

Espanita Blanco features a half moon, which as an early phase of the lunar cycle represents growth, possibility, and the freshness of the unaged expression, while the *Reposado* bottle bears an image of the sun—the celestial body that gives life to those blue agave fields. Finally, the 18-month-aged *Añejo* pictures the sun and moon together, bringing the symbolism full circle. All three expressions also feature additional production details on their labels in a display of the brand's commitment to transparency. They're sure to attract curious consumers—whether avid sippers, mixers, or both. —*Allyson Reedy and Eric Marsh* [LD](#)



CURRUCA DE ORIENTE

Created by Eddie Fuentes, co-founder, Cocktail Cartel, Miami, FL

- ▮ 2 parts *Espanita Blanco*
- ▮ 1 part fresh lime juice
- ▮ 1 part yellow bell pepper juice* or ½ 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.



Espanita Tequila Blanco, Mexico

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** —*M.M.*



Espanita Tequila Reposado, Mexico

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, Mexico

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.*



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Jamie Foxx for Stand Up To Cancer. Photo By G L Askew II



**EXACT
SCIENCES**

IBERIAN TRIUMVIRATE

A LOOK AT THREE COMPANIES RULING THE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE EXPORT MARKET

For years, U.S. somms and retailers have been extolling the wines of Spain and Portugal as the best values in the Old (if not the entire) World. If it seems these days that consumers are finally listening, that might be thanks as much to the companies on these pages as anyone. All major players in their home countries, they've invested considerable resources in spreading the Iberian word stateside. Here's the story of their success.



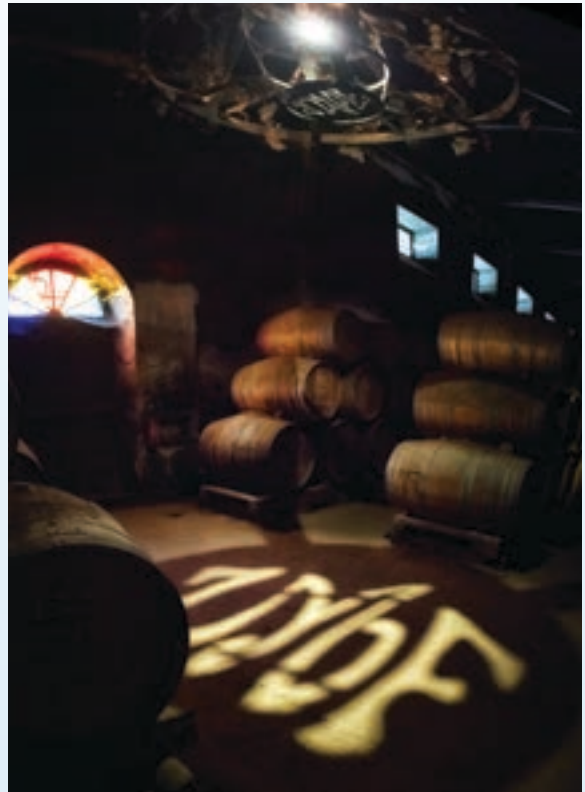
portuguese powerhouse:

M IMPORTS

M Imports, one of the leading importers of fine wines from Portugal in the U.S., has just announced the addition of the José Maria da Fonseca family of brands—including such global players as Lancers and Periquita—to its award-winning portfolio.

Noting that American buyers are likely already quite familiar with these brands, M Imports CEO Mark Macedonio adds that some of its labels have just received a facelift, with new packaging and marketing campaigns aimed at helping it grow its stateside footprint even further. “Now is the time for Portugal,” he says, pointing to their booming online retail sales as proof that “these wines [are] sizzling in interest and growth.” He believes that wholesalers and retailers are open to them because “they represent a great history of winemaking and an incremental sale. Portuguese wines are attracting the next generation of wine aficionados, who are all about quality, story, sense of place, and experimentation.”

The cellar at the José Maria da Fonseca estate in Vila Nogueira de Azeitão.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF M IMPORTS

Fonseca's Quinta das Faias on the Setúbal Peninsula.





The Soares Franco family, proprietors of José Maria da Fonseca.

Macedonio also credits the late Anthony Bourdain with helping to reopen Americans' eyes to Portugal as a destination for food and wine tourism, observing that the region's high quality and value has the potential to transcend generations. "At one time, Lancers Rosé was the number-one imported wine in the USA," Macedonio explains, "and as we look ahead, we see renewed opportunity given that the taste profile and packaging are aligned with today's consumer." José Maria da Fonseca is giving Lancers' iconic amphora-shaped bottle a colorful, attention-grabbing new look to house such expressions as the Rosé—which offers red-berry and tropical-fruit notes with a hint of sweetness on the finish—and Branco White, delivering lemon, lime, and banana flavors with a sweet finish. Both come in 750-milliliter 12-packs and 1.5-liter 6-packs with SRPs of \$10 and \$19, respectively.

As for Periquita, it's not only the oldest brand of table wine in Portugal, created in 1850, but also one of the world's top-selling Portuguese reds, which "consistently rates 90 points and above," says Macedonio. Periquita Red is available in 750-milliliter 12-packs (\$11), while the Reserva will upgrade from 6- to 12-packs with the 2018 vintage (\$18).

Macedonio is equally excited about José Maria da Fonseca Alambre Moscatel de Setúbal, a fortified wine that also comes in 10-year, 20-year, 30-year, and 40-year versions. The 20-Year contains a blend of six vintages, the oldest of which is 1911 (\$70), while the 40-Year is a blend of four vintages ranging from 45 to 120 years old (\$160). "From a mixologist standpoint, these Moscatel de Setúbal wines are fantastic to have in your toolkit," says Macedonio, "and for sommeliers, [they're] a great apéritif or dessert option."

Launching in 2005 with just five wines, M Imports today represents 11 wineries, 14 brands, and 70 SKUs, including stalwarts like Quinta do Portal, Casa da Passarella, and Quinta da Rede, in addition to José Maria da Fonseca. "In the last 15 years, we've had 35 wines land in top-100 or year's best lists [as well as] three top 100 wineries of the year and two winemakers of the year," says Macedonio, adding that they're "all family-owned producers. Although we're on a growth curve, we come from humble beginnings, and we still sell wine one bottle at a time. That's our approach. While our network is national in its scope, each and every bottle and customer counts." For more information, visit mimportusa.com. —Jonathan Cristaldi



José Maria da Fonseca 2018 Periquita, Setúbal Peninsula, Portugal (\$11) This blend of Castelão, Trincadeira, and Aragonez aged in French and American oak for six months to offer up wild strawberry and black plum on a base of chalky tannins, convincing us of its structure and power. Well developed and gracious, with additional notes of slate and earth. **89** —*Meridith May*



José Maria da Fonseca 2017 Periquita Reserva, Setúbal Peninsula, Portugal (\$18) This blend of 56% Castelão, 22% Touriga Nacional, and 22% Touriga Francesa aged for eight months in French and American oak. Plummy aromas with brush and espresso lead to an expressive flavor profile of cherry, cinnamon, cedar, and baked red apple. Balsamic and wet, earthy leaves on the finish are enhanced by Old World acidity. **91** —*M.M.*



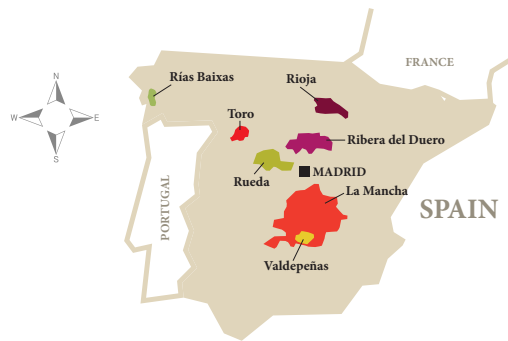
José Maria da Fonseca 2015 Domini, Douro, Portugal (\$19) Savory and woody, this wine shows maturity with flavors of figs and dates. Spiced blue fruit rises on the mid-palate, while an earthy roundness, together with fine acidity, shows on the balanced finish. **90** —*M.M.*



José Maria da Fonseca Alambre 2015 Moscatel de Setúbal DOC, Portugal (\$24) Produced just south of Lisbon, this amber-hued beauty shows restraint in its sweet-treat notes of honeyed orange peel and guava. A balanced 35-proof indulgence. **92** —*M.M.*



José Maria da Fonseca Lancers Rosé, Portugal (\$10) First launched in 1944, this iconic sparkler is animated with notes of watermelon, raspberry, and passion fruit. At only 10% ABV, it tickles our memories while leaving a semisweet imprint on the finish. **89** —*M.M.*



a whirlwind tour of spain:

FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS



In 2021, dreams of safe travel are beginning to seep back into our psyches. But until we can make those bucket lists and itineraries a reality, we can continue whetting our appetites for wanderlust by drinking wines from far-off places.

One such locale is Spain, whose varied terrain the Solís family of Félix Solís Avantis has spent 70 years exploring. They established themselves by producing ripe red wines from their home base of Valdepeñas in the Castilla-La Mancha region before they began shipping to restaurants in Madrid, and since the 2000s, they've expanded to craft dense Tempranillos in Rioja, saline and fresh Albariños in Rías Baixas, and a wide array of regional expressions in between. As a result, they've enabled people from all over the world to explore what Spain has to offer at affordable prices, bringing their passion for their home country to every table graced with a bottle from their portfolio.

When founder Félix Solís Fernández established his namesake wine company in his hometown of Valdepeñas in central Spain, he was also establishing a family legacy that would be further shaped by future generations. Valdepeñas, which translates as "Valley of the Rocks," is also the name of the surrounding DO, and here a concentration of chalk bedrock allows for the retention of water in the hot and arid continental climate. This allows a multitude of varieties to thrive—the indigenous white Airen; a local clone of Tempranillo called Cencibel; and hardy international varieties such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha, Merlot, and Syrah.

Given the technological advancements made over the decades in their wine-making methods, the family can produce an extensive selection of approachable bottlings, including a new red blend of Tempranillo and Syrah and a white blend of Verdejo, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay for the Mucho Más label. Another



The Pagos del Rey winery in the Ribera del Duero DO.



One of Félix Solís Avantis' vineyards in Rioja.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS



Inside the Pagos del Rey Museo del Vino, located in Morales de Toro in the Spanish province of Zamora.

recent red release, FYI, is similarly modern in style and quaffable, with rich and ripe fruit, savory base notes, and bright minerality imparted by the combination of Tempranillo, Grenache, and Cabernet Sauvignon. The facility in Valdepeñas also produces six sparkling wines both white and pink under the Prospero label; like their counterparts in Prosecco, these bright and lively expressions are made via the Charmat method and are built for everyday drinking.



The Viña San Juan line of wines, meanwhile, hails from La Mancha, where the aforementioned native and international varieties also thrive despite the arid climate. The red is a blend of Merlot, Syrah, and Tempranillo, while the white made from Chardonnay, Verdejo, and Viura is rich yet pomaceous.

As the family ventured beyond Valdepeñas and launched new and challenging projects like the Pagos del Rey brand, it was only natural that their forward-thinking and hardworking nature would draw them to other regions poised for global success.



That includes Rioja, an area in northeast Spain that's known for world-class Tempranillo whose characteristics derive in part from its aging regimen in

small American oak barrels. Produced at the Pagos del Rey facility there, the Arnegui line is made with fruit sourced from one of the three subregions, Rioja Alta, which features limestone and clay soils and is higher in altitude than either Rioja Alavesa or Rioja Baja. The red Arnegui is a blend of Tempranillo and Garnacha, which lends freshness to the wine's undertones of black cherry and leather. Its time spent aging in oak imparts subtle notes of dill and vanilla.



Venturing slightly southwest to the upper valley of the Duero River, the family opened another Pagos del Rey winery in the Ribera del Duero DO in the region of Castilla y León in 2002. Vineyards sit at an average of 2,600 feet in elevation and are known for yielding Tinto Fino, the local variant of Tempranillo. The wines it produces tend to be deep in color, with notes of black fruit as well as firm tannins and structure. Exemplifying the style is Félix Solís Avantis' Candado Oriza label, which includes both a Reserva and a Gran Reserva that ages in both American and French oak for 24 months in accordance with the area's strict aging laws.

The company has also begun exploring some up-and-coming areas in Spain's northern DOs, including the white wine region of Rueda, where it has invested in planting not only the indigenous Verdejo but also grapes like

the herbaceous Sauvignon Blanc. The Duero River's tributaries run through the area's gravelly terrain, which contains a high portion of limestone and yields juicy wines with flavors of stone and orchard fruits. The Blume line features a Verdejo with a uniquely refreshing green character and a nutty finish as well as a 100% Sauvignon Blanc and a Verdejo-Viura blend.



Continuing west along the Duero, the Toro region borders Rueda and is known for its structured and rustic reds known affectionately as "bull's blood." Local Tempranillo variant Tinto de Toro grows here in sand and clay soils covered in brown limestone at elevations of 2,000–2,400 feet. Bush training, along with moderate nighttime temperatures, help cool the vines despite the hot climate. Like most wines from the region, Félix Solís Avantis' Sentero bottlings offer ripe flavors of red fruit like strawberry and red currant as well as secondary notes of spicy licorice and meaty undertones.



Finally, in the northwestern province of Galicia on the Atlantic coast—known as "Green Spain" for its abundant vegetation and humid climate—the indigenous Albariño

is king. The grape produces a lush and floral white wine like those from the Pulpo label, with rich honeydew flavors offset by slight salinity.

In the world of Félix Solís Avantis, there's a wine for almost any dish or mood. As they continue their mission of making affordable Spanish wine accessible for everyone, the Solís family also strives to showcase every facet of Spain, transporting consumers to their homeland in the process. —*Rachel DelRocco Terrazas*

the distinction of diversity:

GARCÍA CARRIÓN

The sheer range of García Carrión's portfolio of Spanish wines is astounding, but that's not the only remarkable thing about the company: It's the largest wine producer in Europe and the fourth-largest in the world.

In 1890, as phylloxera ravaged France's vineyards, clever founder Jose García Carrión opted to build a winery in Jumilla with unprecedented capacity. This enabled him to export his wines to France—and over the past 130 years the business has grown to reach an astonishing 156 countries.

García Carrión now boasts estate vineyards and winemaking facilities in ten DO and DOCa zones, such as the historic Viña Arnáiz in Ribera del Duero. Voted "Best Winery in Spain" twice at the Vinity competition, it occupies a 12th-century fortress, where it produces acclaimed red wines from Tinta del País. Importing brands like this and many others to the U.S., García Carrión is helping Americans to enjoy the variety and quality of wine that Spain has to offer—at prices within reach for all.



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** —M.M.



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 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 2016 Tempranillo Reserva, Rioja, Spain (\$13) Crushed peppered cherry defines 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.



Jaime 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. It's a great-value charmer. **90** —M.M.



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

“Talkies” are the little cards appended to retail shelves that educate the consumer through tasting notes and, sometimes, ratings. They are an invaluable tool when there isn’t a knowledgeable employee available and/or the customer is too intimidated to ask for help. For this reason, we are 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.



Opera Prima Mimosa, Spain (\$8/750-mL or \$4/187-mL) This bright-yellow beauty shows authentic flavors of orange and tangerine with a hint of buttercup. The spritz is featherlight. **90**

GARCÍA CARRIÓN



Ménage à Trois Sweet Collection Dolce Sweet Red Blend, California (\$14)

Lightly carbonated but high in energy, this blend of Zinfandel and Syrah imparts a dollop of joy at first sip. Chocolate-covered raspberry leads on both the nose and palate, seeing the addition of red licorice before a finish of cherry and vanilla. It’s a hedonistic adventure that offers a fruity yet well-balanced experience. **90**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Enate 2017 Crianza Tempranillo-Cabernet Sauvignon, DO Somontano, Spain (\$14) With an abundance of playful acidity and a lovely bottle design, this wine evokes both spice and silk. Blue fruit, anise, and chaparral are well integrated with oak. **91**



District Series 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$14) Impressive for the price, this Alexander Valley Cab displays noticeably plush tannins with a dusting of dark chocolate and generous, rich notes of blueberry. A dollop of Cabernet Franc adds a hint of dried heather. **91**

PRECISION WINE COMPANY



Galea Red Sangria, Spain (\$15) Organic Tempranillo, Merlot, and Syrah get jazzed up in this delicious version of red sangria from Barcelona that’s only 7% ABV. Juicy, deep notes of dark cherry emerge from a natural essence of orange and cassis. An earthiness joins cocoa and a hint of ginger on the finish. **92**

THE SPANISH VINEYARDS



Dirt Diva 2018 Red Wine, Paso Robles Highlands District (\$15) The floral band around the cap and the illustrated label design set this wine apart visually. Named in honor of the five generations of female stewards responsible for sustainably farming the Miller family’s Central Coast vineyards, Dirt Diva celebrates strong, hard-working women who nurture nature. The field blend-style wine with 33% Syrah, 29% Valdiguié, 26% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Grenache, and 2% Merlot unleashes a persistent perfume of ripe black and red fruit. Wet soil contributes an earthy component as spiced white plum, green olive, and charcuterie remind us of the south of France. **92**

MILLER FAMILY WINE COMPANY



Highway 12 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$17) Fruit sourced from the length of Highway 12, which runs from Sonoma to Lodi, plays a role in this blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Merlot, which overdelivers on quality for the price. An aromatic trio of cassis, ripe strawberry, and coffee bean impresses as flavors of cocoa, nutmeg, and plum liqueur add depth to the plush body. **92**





Turning Tide 2019 White Blend, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$20) Unctuous notes of white flowers, lemongrass, and minerality are the highlights of this remarkable blend of 64% Chenin Blanc and 36% Grüner Veltliner. Salted pine nut seeks out the tartness of lime and tangerine, creating a flavor profile with verve that culminates in a fresh, bright finish. **91**



Angel's Ink 2018 Pinot Noir, Central Coast (\$25) This red has earned its golden wings! Blueberry in tilled soil and scrumptious notes of coffee and coconut make for an easygoing, fruit-driven sipper. Lively acidity keeps the fruit bright and herbes de Provence contribute cheery, savory complexity on the finish. **91**



WENTE FAMILY ESTATES



Lucky Rock Wine Co. 2019 County Cuvée Pinot Noir, California (\$22) Grapes sourced from three sustainably farmed vineyards in Monterey, San Benito, and Sonoma counties converge in this soft and pretty sipper. Barrel aged for nine months, it shows notes of cherry cola, cigar leaf, and earth in a light and lively frame. **89**



The Lost Chapters 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$25) A winemaking team led by Mitch Cosentino and Paul Scotto has formulated a dense and chewy blend of 87% Cabernet Sauvignon and 13% Merlot with black pepper, mocha, orange peel, and sweet accents of plum. Defined by a dreamy, pillowy mouthfeel and a licorice coating, the wine also has a notably savory side. **91**



SCOTTO CELLARS



Avaline Red Blend, Vin de France (\$24) This delicious blend of Grenache and Syrah from actor Cameron Diaz and partner Katherine Power offers accessibility and freshness prime for food pairing. Joined by Old World acidity and a zing of spiced black cherry, a sprinkling of white-peppered earthiness brings a fine sapidity to the palate. A hint of brown sugar and cinnamon keeps it intriguing. **92**



Elizabeth Rose 2018 Chockablock Red Wine, Napa Valley (\$26) Two estate vineyards in Yountville, Block House and Mill Race, provide the organically farmed Cabernet Sauvignon (55%), Merlot (27%), and Malbec (18%) for this plush, curvaceous red. Aromas of cassis and cocoa offer a preview of the flavor profile. Chocolate notes make an impression alongside ripe boysenberry and undertones of coffee bean and nutmeg. **91**

NAPA WINE COMPANY



The Seventy Five Wine Company 2019 The Sum by Tuck Beckstoffer, California (\$25) A bounty of rich red fruit along with blackberry and rhubarb greet the palate of this fresh and lively blend of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Syrah, and 15% Petite Sirah. A thread of salinity, chapparal, sweet tobacco, and rose petal is framed by red cherry before spiced cinnamon and cedar emerge on the finish. **92**



Chronic Cellars 2019 Suite Petite Petite Sirah, Paso Robles (\$17) Supple tannins and blueberry marked with dark chocolate grace the palate, complementing the fresh perfume of blue fruit that's characteristic of Petite Sirah. Roasted coffee and soy sauce add savoriness. The result is not the teeth-stainer and -gripper one may expect from this variety. **92**



Père Anselme NV La Fiole du Pape Grand Vin de Réserve, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, France (\$36) Joining flavors of cherry leather and a juicy core, notes of violets and dark espresso work in tandem with delicate red fruit and high acidity in this blend of mostly Grenache with some Syrah. The exclusive bottle mimics those stored in caves for decades. **92**

MAISON BROTTE



SWEET SMELL OF

Success

SURVEYING A GARDEN OF WHITES AND PINKS

Exuberant florals and fresh herbs, sweet summer berries and juicy melon, crisp textures and racy acidity: It's springtime in our glasses as well as in our hemisphere. These brands have got just the thing for the season, from aromatic white blends to zingy rosés.



A Brilliant Bouquet:

SCHEID FAMILY WINES

What do you get when you farm 12 certified-sustainable estate vineyards spanning 4,000 acres and four Winkler Regions for nearly the entire length of California's Salinas Valley? For Scheid Family Wines, the answer is a whopping 39 sustainably grown grape varieties. And thanks to the cooler microclimates dotting its Monterey sites, a nice big handful of those are aromatic whites, which are featured in the limited-production Scheid Vineyards label.

Delicately leading the charge (as far as availability on the retail market goes) is the Scheid Vineyards Estate Sauvignon Blanc. This beloved variety is grown in several of Scheid's estate sites around Greenfield where, says VP of winemaking Dave Nagengast, "We get expressive varietal character that differs somewhat from vineyard to vineyard." Nagengast even throws in a bit of Sauvignon Blanc from the warmer San Lucas Vineyard further south "to add some riper tropical fruit to the blend."

The Monterey region is known for its long growing season relative to the rest of California—sometimes two months longer—due to the cooling influence of the Monterey Bay, which encourages slower, more even ripening. The area around Greenfield—where the winery and the Scheid Vineyards' tasting room are also located—is rated a cool Region II; here the team grows Albariño and Grüner Veltliner as well as Sauvignon Blanc, while the aforementioned San Lucas Vineyard, whose eponymous AVA sits in Region III, is also home to Grenache Blanc and Viognier, as these varieties naturally prefer a warmer climate (after all, much of the Northern Rhône is also in Region III).

Further south yet, in the warm Region IV, is Scheid's Hames Valley Vineyard in the Hames Valley AVA. About a quarter of the grapes for the Scheid Vineyards' Odd Lot White come from here, balanced by fruit from Greenfield. Typically the blend consists of Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Roussanne, Muscat Canelli, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, and Riesling.

All of Scheid's grapes are sustainably grown via the Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing program; the aromatic white varieties are then vinified in small lots, undergoing whole-cluster press and cold fermentation (below 55 degrees Fahrenheit) in stainless steel. Nagengast uses a different yeast for each variety "to retain the esters that provide the bright aromatics and flavors," he says. "Our goal is to grow grapes that express the varietal character, make wines that capture those flavors best, and get them to bottle as quickly as possible." For more information, visit scheidfamilywines.com. To purchase the wines mentioned, visit scheidvineyards.com/wines.



Scheid Vineyards 2020 Sauvignon Blanc, Monterey

(\$22) Dreamy scents of lemon blossom, fresh linen, and sweet basil appear on the nose as salted peach and grapefruit zest line the palate. Delicate notes of pineapple and vanilla are accented by bright and engaging acidity. **92**
—*Meridith May*

PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHEID FAMILY WINES

**Scheid's San Lucas
Vineyard, protected by
the Santa Lucia Mountain
Range in Monterey.**



Special Report
WHITES & ROSÉS



Easy, Breezy Riesling and Rosé:

RELAX Wines

The Schmitt family has been making wine in the Mosel region of Germany for over 200 years, and today their company, Schmitt Söhne, is one of the country's largest wine exporters. While most producers from France, Spain, and the U.K. as well as Germany suffered as a result of the tariffs on EU wines imposed last year, Schmitt Söhne brand RELAX Wines experienced a 23% increase in sales over 2019.

Contributing to this growth is the star of the portfolio, RELAX Riesling; offering incredible value, it's the top imported Riesling in the U.S. across all price points, according to the market research company IRI.

Recently introduced to the lineup, RELAX Rosé Bubbles aims to follow in the German noble grape's footsteps. Robyn Manno, U.S. brand manager for RELAX Wines, notes, "The premium sparkling rosé category grew 36% in dollar sales over last year [according to IRI]. RELAX already has great consumer pull; we think the combination of a brand that consumers love, together with this wine's dry, easy-drinking style and the growth of the rosé category as a whole, makes this a strong entry into the market."

RELAX Sparkling Rosé Bubbles, Germany (\$15) This superb sparkler readies the palate with a tickle as its fizz quickly dissipates. Watermelon, strawberry, and ripe raspberry leave a clean, dry sensation on the finish. **90** —*M.M.*



PHOTO COURTESY OF RELAX WINES

Chardonnay's New Narrative:

1000 STORIES

According to 1000 Stories vice president of marketing Rachel Newman, the growth in sales of spirit-barrel-aged (SBA) wine is so explosive that it's outpacing that of top categories like Sauvignon Blanc and rosé. She should know: The 1000 Stories Zinfandel was the first widely known example of this booming style, soon followed by the 1000 Stories Gold Rush Red and Prospectors' Proof Cabernet Sauvignon, all aged in charred barrels that previously held fine bourbon.

In early 2020, 1000 Stories launched the SBA category's first ultra-premium Chardonnay, which—thanks to the ex-bourbon American oak barrels in which it partly ferments as well as finishes—offers a truly distinct bouquet. The nuances of vanilla imparted by the wood lift the Chardonnay's ripe notes of tropical and stone fruit, telling an entirely new story for one of the wine world's most beloved white grapes.

1000 Stories 2019 Bourbon Barrel-Aged Chardonnay, California (\$19)

Fact, not fiction: This Chardonnay (with 5% Viognier) is introduced to charred bourbon barrels for a true tale of love between sumptuous fruit and woody charm. Making its debut as the first white wine from the 1000 Stories label, it contains fruit from throughout California's cool-climate vineyard sites to yield light and airy notes of honeysuckle and lemon tart, which write their own aromatic narrative as they give way to pineapple cream. The wine's floral beauty persists on the palate, with peaches weaving through vanilla pudding as lemon chiffon blossoms on the finish. **91** —*M.M.*



FETZER VINEYARDS



New from Napa:

AVALON SAUVIGNON BLANC

A producer of Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley and Lodi since 1991, Avalon has expanded its portfolio over the years to include Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, a red blend, and, as of 2019, a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc. The inaugural vintage reflects not only the region's moderate climate but a longer growing season compared to years past, which offered ideal conditions for this refreshing variety.

Sporting a newly designed label, Avalon wines are shaped for everyday drinking and crafted with techniques that balance tradition and innovation. Committed to eco-friendly winemaking, the brand has implemented sustainable practices to reduce its environmental impact while also becoming certified sustainable via the California

Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance. Meanwhile, its tagline—"Just Escape. No Excuse Necessary."—seems more relevant than ever as consumers continue to experience wine almost exclusively within the comforts of their home.



Avalon 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$16) The words "flint and steel" are noted on the label of this wine with good reason, given its edgy profile. Lime zest and white grapefruit have their influence, but the textural identity of this thrilling white finds its true match in the nose of caramel, yellow apple, and slate. **93** —*M.M.*

PURPLE BRANDS




Special Report

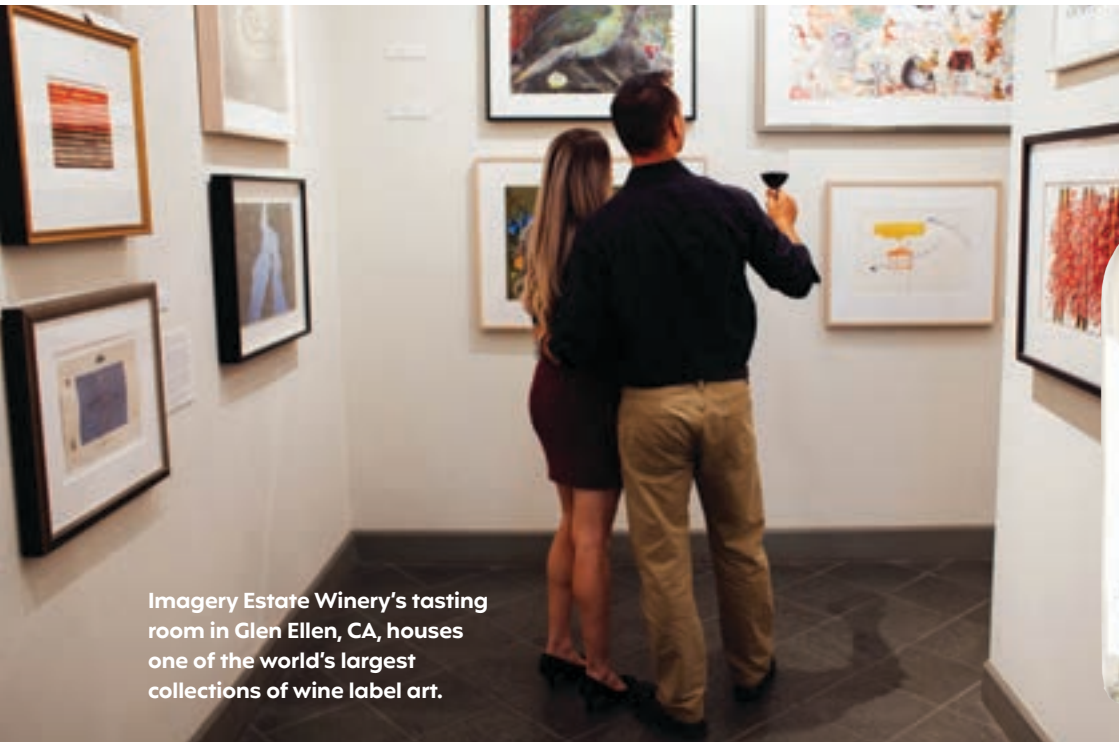
WHITES & ROSÉS

Blending In to Stand Out:

IMAGERY ESTATE WINERY



Jamie Benziger,
second-generation
winemaker for
Imagery Estate
Winery.



Imagery Estate Winery's tasting room in Glen Ellen, CA, houses one of the world's largest collections of wine label art.



Imagery 2020 Sauvignon Blanc, California (\$17)

Honeyed pear and sweet lime perfume the glass with subtle charm as a delicate lineup of tangerine and vanilla cream delight on the crisp and clean palate. The addition of Dry Muscat shows itself in the midst of a floral arrangement of honeysuckle and gardenia. **91** —M.M.

THE WINE GROUP

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IMAGERY ESTATE WINERY

Winemaker Jamie Benziger comes from a family with strong ties to Sonoma winemaking. In 1980, her uncle Mike Benziger—with the support of her grandfather Bruno Benziger—established Benziger Family Winery, and today its Sonoma Mountain estate is distinguished for being Demeter-certified Biodynamic for over 20 years.

In 1986, as the family was just beginning their foray into sustainable viticulture, Jamie's father, winemaker Joe Benziger, was becoming equally inspired by the creative connection between wine and art. That inspiration manifested in the form of the Imagery Series, a collaboration with contemporary painter Bob Nugent, who would design the labels meant to reflect the innovative approach Joe was taking in vinifying what were then esoteric varieties.

That same year, Jamie was born, and throughout her childhood she bore witness to the success of her father's extraordinary wines as the series evolved into Imagery Estate Winery. But Jamie did not remain a mere bystander; in 2015, on her path toward eventually becoming a second-generation winemaker, she joined her father at Imagery, equipped with a degree in business administration (with a concentration in marketing and wine business strategies) from Sonoma State University as well as with experience working at multiple

wineries both domestic and abroad.

In 2017, after two years of mentorship, Joe retired and passed the winemaking baton to Jamie. Later that same year, she released the Imagery Wine Collection, which lives up to the winery's offbeat philosophy by featuring atypical blends. "I truly love to blend," says Jamie. "I have so many varieties I get to work with, so blending can be extremely tough, but it's a challenge I will always embrace. It's the blending that allows Imagery to push [beyond] that status quo."

Two expressions that particularly challenge the norm are the Imagery Wine Collection's Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, both of which are varietal wines with a twist. The former features 7% Dry Muscat, a decision Jamie says "was inspired by a wine my dad was making for our Imagery Estate program called Wow Oui. He always said to me [that] a touch of Muscat really enhances that ripe grapefruit characteristic in Sauvignon Blanc. I was going for a California-style Sauvignon Blanc, and when I blended the Muscat into the Sauvignon Blanc, it was a no-brainer that this was a dynamic duo." The Imagery California Chardonnay, meanwhile, features 5% Chenin Blanc, which "adds brightness, crispness, and an added layer of flavor that elevates the Chardonnay," says Jamie.

Imagery's tasting room in Glen Ellen houses one of the world's largest collections of wine label art, and the labels on the Imagery Wine Collection bottlings are a nod to the aforementioned connection between winemaking and the visual arts, as according to Jamie they represent "an artist's first paint drip down a blank white canvas."

In addition to championing a non-conformist approach to both mediums, Imagery has always looked for vineyards with character. In fact, it's made major investments in Sonoma County's Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak AVA, established in 2011. Here, Imagery's Upper Ridge Vineyard may be experimental in approach, matching its various soil types to uncommon varieties, but it has also played a role in California's viticultural history, as it's part of one of the earliest vineyards established in the area by settlers in the mid-1800s.

Ranging in elevation from 1,600 to 3,000 feet, the lush region encompasses not only vines but woodland, scrubland, madrone, spring-fed ponds, and ferns, prompting Jamie to note that she feels fortunate to work "at one of the most beautiful places in the world." Reflecting on both her life's trajectory and that of the winery, Jamie says that she's looking eagerly to the future: "We are starting to show our age a bit, but for both of us, our best is yet to come!"



Special Report WHITES & ROSÉS

Pink with Envy:

ROSEADE



Roseade was conceived by two defining moments for its founder, Lee Smallman. First was his discovery of the “drink envy” phenomenon, wherein people immediately want any eye-catching beverage they see another person enjoying; the second involved a surplus of rosé at his family’s Mornington Peninsula winery, Chirping Birds. Inspired by the former, he used the latter to conceive something that “just works,” in Smallman’s words: a rosé-lemonade spritzer called Roseade. Throw in cheeky branding that positions it within the holy millennial trifecta of seltzers, RTD cocktails, and the #roséallday phenomenon, and it was no wonder the product was soon making waves in its native Australia.

In 2018, Roseade caught the eye of longtime wine-industry veteran Karl Ziegler all the way across the world in the United States. Ziegler discovered the brand when its Instagram account started following him on the platform, and after looking at its website, he was intrigued. “The combination of ingredients sounded delicious, and the packaging was fun and inviting,” recalls Ziegler, who had recently founded Concurrent Imports, a company focused on a hand-selected lineup of wines from family-owned companies around the globe.

After tasting the product and sharing samples with his industry network, Ziegler knew it was time to bring Roseade stateside—and he sensed, keeping the white-hot RTD category in mind, that its playful branding would best speak to the U.S. consumer if packaged in cans. “We are convinced, after researching and sampling other canned beverages on the market, that there is nothing like Roseade,” says Ziegler. “It creates a category of its own: the refreshment category.” For more information, visit roseadeusa.com. —Rachel Burkons

Roseade Rosé Lemonade (\$17/4-pack) This clean, balanced sipper is as good as it gets for a canned sparkler. With a nod to the dusty, melon-drenched Provence style, it’s perfumed by a lilt of lemon blossom, ensuring it has our vote for one of the best of the blushes! **92** —M.M.



Additional Tasting Notes

In this section, publisher/editor-in-chief Meridith May reviews an array of rosés and aromatic whites that allow for further exploration beyond the featured producers.

ROSÉS

Bodega Argentó Minimalista 2020 Rosé, Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina

(\$9) This glossy blend of 70% Syrah, 20% Malbec, and 10% Pinot Grigio offers a delightful and intense perfume of red cherry and spearmint as well as silky notes of raspberry and watermelon. Salted cashew and a touch of paprika and oregano intrigue the palate. **91**



PACIFIC HIGHWAY WINES & SPIRITS

Domaine Houchart 2020 Côtes de Provence Rosé, France

(\$20) This blend of Grenache, Syrah, Cinsault, and other varieties has all the bells and whistles of a benchmark Provençal rosé: It’s bright, sassy, and spicy, with high-toned notes of watermelon, raspberry, and wet stone. **93**

DAVID MILLIGAN SELECTIONS

Raeburn 2020 Rosé, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County

(\$20) This superb rosé of 74% Pinot Noir, 22% Zinfandel, and 4% Grenache with an incredibly light onion-skin hue held us in a state of ecstasy. The stainless steel-fermented juice offers up scents of lychee, white roses, and raspberry before white-peppered peonies, star fruit, and fig blossom tiptoe across the palate. The result is a crisp, clean beauty fringed with delicate spice and fine acidity. **93**



PURPLE BRANDS

Two Birds 2020 Rosé, Rogue Valley, Oregon (\$25) Composed of 63% Grenache, 26% Syrah, and 11% Mourvèdre, this GSM is seamless, vivid, and taut with strawberry-melon freshness. Tangerine aromas translate to the brisk and salty palate. **93**

WESTLIFE IMPORTS



Santa Ema 2020 Select Terroir Reserva Sauvignon Blanc, Maipo Valley, Chile (\$12) Scents of vanilla pudding, chamomile, and lemon ice grace the nose. The palate is light and vibrant, with tart kiwi and grapefruit paving the way for a clean finish. **90**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY WINES & SPIRITS



Volunteer 2018 Chardonnay, Napa Valley (\$25) Aromas of lemon verbena and vanilla wafer mesmerize. Reined-in richness and keen minerality drive the lean profile and fine acid structure of this sleek and citrus-kissed wine. **92**

MILLER FAMILY WINE COMPANY



DoublePlus Wines 2020 Rosé, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley (\$30) To produce this expressive pink wine, free-run juice is 100% fermented in 75-gallon stainless-steel barrels; the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are sourced from the Orchard 5 Vineyard, planted exclusively to clone 4 on the Oak Knoll District's valley floor. Floral notes from rose to hibiscus abound

on the dry, edgy, and clean palate with raspberry and watermelon. Tart cherry enters on the mid-palate with flavors of wet stone and white pepper. **93**



Bodega Argento Minimalista 2020 Pinot Grigio, Mendoza, Argentina (\$9) On the nose, this stainless steel-fermented floral charmer offers up notes of peach, honeyed pear, and banana that are also reflected on the palate within a nectar-like profile. It's dynamic and mineral driven on the finish. **91**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY WINES & SPIRITS



Saint Clair Family Estate 2019 Origin Series Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$30) From the tip of Dillons Point, a sub-AVA on Marlborough's coast, this wine benefits from the cool climate and free-draining alluvial soils to offer more mineral notes than many New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs.

Grapefruit soaks herbes de Provence while a mouthfeel reminiscent of a salty sea breeze lingers. Flavors of lychee and guava play on a sleek and nervy palate. **94**

E. & J. GALLO



Rodney Strong 2018 Chalk Hill Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$22) A bright wash of caramel apple and lemon verbena ushers in vivid aromatics and flavors. The wine is rich but impeccably balanced, with a wave of toasted marshmallow leading to powdered minerality on the finish. **92**



Nasiakos 2019 Moschofilero, PDO Mantinia Valley, Greece (\$17) The grapes for this wine are estate grown at elevations of up to 1,800 feet. Scents of orange creamsicle and tarragon are mirrored on the crisp and clean palate, joining honeyed pear. **90**

STELLAR IMPORTING COMPANY

WHITES

Ménage à Trois Sweet Collection Moscato Sweet White Blend, California (\$14) This delicious Moscato with a touch of French Colombard and Chenin Blanc adds a new dimension to the category with pizzazz, offering a fizz of pineapple pleasure surrounding honeyed peach, juicy orange, and orange peel. The sweetness is not cloying but fragrant, flavorful, and balanced by fine acidity and a textural finish of bursting bubbles. **90**

TRINCHERO FAMILY ESTATES



Cono Sur 2020 Bicicleta Sauvignon Blanc, Chile (\$12) Following attention-grabbing aromas of Italian herbs and lime, the stark, tart, citrusy profile of this wine is smoothed out by white tea and floral notes as they engage with superb acidity. **90**

FETZER VINEYARDS



DoublePlus Wines 2020 Sauvignon Blanc, Yountville, Napa Valley (\$30) Sauvignon Musque and Muscat add aromatics and character to this barrel-fermented Sauvignon Blanc. Honey and lemon blossom persist on the nose while flavors of pineapple upside-down cake and wet stone take precedence on the palate. Oregano and white pepper meld with vanilla and nutmeg on the finish. **92**

ONWARD AND

TWO **JACK'S BLACK BOOK**
ALUMNI SHARE THEIR
EXPERIENCES ONE YEAR
INTO THE PANDEMIC

Upward

by *Eric Marsh*

The Tasting Panel and Jack Daniel's are the joint publishers of *Jack's Black Book*, an annual publication that features bartenders, bar owners, and other industry professionals from across the country. We like to check in occasionally with *Jack's Black Book* alumni to see what they've been up to; in honor of the forthcoming release of *Jack's Black Book Vol. VI*, which will ship with our June issue, we decided to reach out to Joaquín Simó and Zach Patterson to hear how the past year has unfolded for them and gain perspective from their experiences.

Joaquín Simó

Featured in *Jack's Black Book Vol. III*, Simó is a partner in Pouring Ribbons and Alchemy Consulting in New York City.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK DANIEL'S



Eric Marsh: I understand that Pouring Ribbons is temporarily closed. When did you decide to close and what prompted the decision? Do you plan to reopen?

Joaquín Simó: We closed in mid-March [2020] after the city basically told us that we had to—that there wasn't an option. The reason we had to close is because we're a bar, not a restaurant, and we have no kitchen—and we have, thus far, not been allowed to reopen. . . . We have no idea what [the near future] is going to look like. And we don't know when we would reopen. We are in the .000023% of [bar owners] who have a landlord who has been a human being, so we're fortunate in that regard. We were paying half-rent [for a while, after] receiving some PPE money during the first round . . . but then we ran out of money and just told him, "We can't pay anymore. You can terminate our lease, or you can just accept the fact that we haven't been given any information about when we can reopen, so we can't really plan." That was around October and nothing has changed; he hasn't accepted any rent since.

EM: You're also co-founder of Alchemy Consulting—have you been consulting during the pandemic?

JS: Mostly what I do at Alchemy is work with liquor companies. For that I do flavor development, liquid development, and recipe development. Some of that I've been able to keep doing, and that's been great. But it's because of the importance of that work to my current revenue stream that COVID has me so frightened. One of the more famous symptoms is the loss of smell and taste, so I've been holed up in my apartment, because it honestly freaks me out—that I might lose [those senses] and then be unable to even do that little work. That's been very challenging.

EM: How do you think the bar and restaurant landscape in NYC will change post-pandemic?

JS: I think the immediate effect is that there are going to be far fewer bars and restaurants to choose from. And you'll see higher prices—even if your pour costs are reasonable and you're running a tight ship, bars and restaurants are not very profitable. But we'll see what the new normal looks like. It won't go back to exactly what it was, but what it was wasn't exactly working for a lot of people.

Zach Patterson

Patterson co-owns and -manages the Los Angeles–based Umbrella Hospitality Group, which includes Melrose Umbrella Co., The Corner Door, and Lono Hollywood. Featured in *Jack's Black Book Vol. I*, he recently started a wellness brand, Fun Earth Company.

PHOTO: MONA SHIELD PAYNE



Melrose Umbrella Co. hires local artists and out-of-work bartenders to design the packaging for its to-go cocktails.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MELROSE UMBRELLA CO.

EM: Although Lono has been closed for a year, Melrose Umbrella Co. and The Corner Door are currently open. Did Melrose Umbrella Co. close for a time? And can you talk about how you first pivoted there?

Zach Patterson: Melrose Umbrella Co. was actually only closed for one day. We heard the news and we did as instructed and shut down. At the time we had no takeout program in place. However, my business partner and I had been bottling cocktails—for personal use and trips and gifting—for many years. We even had some design work mocked up for a pitch we had had with an airline to discuss in-flight cocktails. So without hesitation, we went into the bar with our first of many pivots and came out one day later selling cocktails to go. I can proudly say we were the first bar in California to do cocktails to go.

EM: Did you set up any kind of new food programs?

ZP: We designed our new “stay-in-business” model around [takeout], and [in September] we opened a taqueria next door [called] Umbrella taCO.

EM: Were you able to offer outdoor seating?

ZP: Melrose Umbrella Co. [has] a beautiful outdoor patio, although it is only large enough for nine tables at the current health standards. . . . We weighed the pros and cons [of opening it, ultimately deciding that] risking the health of our employees and patrons [wasn't worth it]. Currently phase 1B for the vaccine has begun, and restaurant workers are in that phase, so we will finally be opening our outdoor patio in the next couple weeks.

EM: What other operational issues have you faced this year?

ZP: One of the most challenging is working with delivery apps. Turns out you need them to get food to your guests, but they take 27–29%. And it goes without saying that our federal bailout programs have done very little to help bars and restaurants.

EM: How do you think the bar business in California might change after the pandemic?

ZP: My fingers are crossed that to-go cocktails will stay. I also hope that [municipal governments] will be more tolerant and allow more outdoor dining [through zoning regulations], as they have over the last year with al fresco programs. Not only is it a nice change of pace, it's nice to see people spending more time outside, even if it's just to catch up with a friend [and] grab a quick bite or drink. **LT**



LIA JONES



WES HAGEN



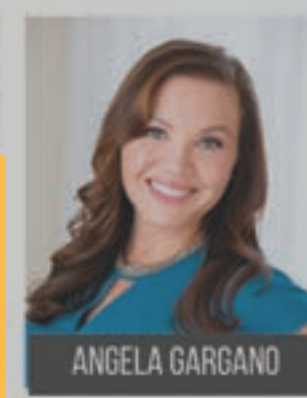
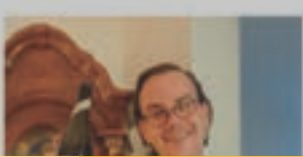
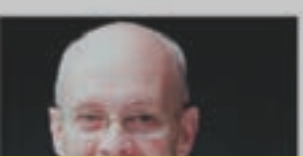
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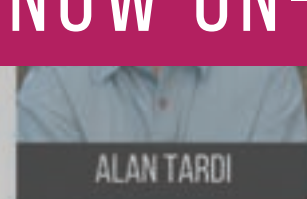
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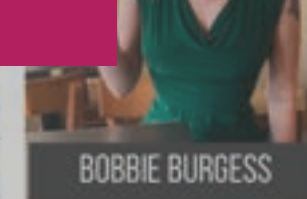
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Eat, Skate, Love

HOSPITALITY WORKERS USE THEIR TIME OFF TO PURSUE NEW PASSIONS

It's no secret that quarantine has affected everyone differently. For those of us in the hospitality industry, the closing of our workplaces in early 2020 meant we suddenly had the usually elusive "luxury" of free time—and with it the unique opportunity to rediscover ourselves. The chance to reflect has led to new beginnings for those who maximized their time in solitude.

Among them is former reality TV star Marissa Hermer (@marissahermer on Instagram), owner of The Draycott in Pacific Palisades and fine-dining restaurant Olivetta in West Hollywood. When the restaurants were shut down, she wanted to maintain her connection to the local community, so both teams "set up [our] YOU GIVE. WE COOK. THEY EAT. give-back program so we can nourish our first responders and front-line workers," she says. Hermer also took up an unexpected new hobby—skateboarding—that she can enjoy with her large family. "It is a miracle I haven't broken my face yet, but it is such a rush to fly down the ramps and a great activity with the kids," she adds. "I'm completely hooked."



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARISSA HERMER

Restaurateur (and amateur skateboarder) Marissa Hermer.

Meanwhile, her colleague Michael Fiorelli (@chefmichaelfiorelli), Olivetta's executive chef, recently returned from



PHOTO: LUCIANNA MCINTOSH

Michael Fiorelli is executive chef at Olivetta in West Hollywood, CA.

a wellness retreat overseas. He has also been exploring his craft with fresh eyes. "As chefs, we spend our days feeding countless numbers of people but can never find the time to cook for ourselves," he says. "COVID has allowed me the time to prepare my own meals, making them both more enjoyable and exponentially better for me. If one good thing comes out of COVID-19, I hope it's that it doesn't take another pandemic for hospitality workers to reclaim their lives." I know many people, myself included, will be grateful to try the new twist he's putting on his dishes.

Other hospitality professionals have dedicated their time toward exploring brand-new interests, including Amanda Black, server at Porta Via in Calabasas, California. "I realized that I didn't have very many hobbies outside of working, so I was intent on finding activities that would bring me joy," she says. "What started off as trying to do a simple gel manicure on myself while nail salons were closed has blossomed into my newfound passion. This has grown into watching countless hours of tutorials [and] doing nails for friends." Black enjoyed it so much, in fact, that she's planning on exploring manicuring as a new career path after she earns her cer-

tification this summer; in the meantime, she's practicing by creating custom press-on nail artwork that she posts on Instagram @freshpressedboutique.

I've had a similarly deep desire to create, so on Cinco de Mayo last year, my boyfriend filmed me making some delicious passion fruit, coconut, and mango Margaritas. We started with an iPhone, and the next thing we knew, we'd worked our way up to a full-on production with professional equipment. We now shoot weekly for our YouTube channel, and I keep a schedule of whom I want to feature as guests and which drinks I want to try next. There is so much left to explore!



Server-turned-manicurist Amanda Black with author Emma Roberts.

Though of course it hasn't been easy for us to keep pushing through the many dark days of this past year, keeping busy has helped. Cheers to everyone staying positive and trying to make the most of their time in quarantine while looking to the light at the end of this tunnel. **LV**

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.



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