Varietal Focus ~ ICONS



Lance Cutler

The first Varietal Focus appeared in *WineBusiness Monthly*'s (WBM) February 2011 edition, and the concept of focusing on the approaches of nine different winemakers from three diverse regions in their handling of a single varietal was a challenge to bring to print. The goal was for each winemaker to state their stylistic goals, reveal in exacting detail what they did in both the vineyard and winery to achieve those goals, and then assess how well they accomplished what they set out to do by reviewing the tasting comments from all the participating winemakers.

The Varietal Focus series became a cornerstone feature. Over the years, major varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, were considered alongside more esoteric grapes, such as Mourvèdre, Gamay Noir and Nebbiolo. The famous California regions—Napa, Sonoma and the Central Coast—were included, but so were established regions, like Oregon, Washington and New York. Even British Columbia, Canada and Argentina participated in Varietal Focus stories.

For the 30th Varietal Focus story, I proposed something special: we invite nine iconic wineries to participate in a reflective conversation about how winemaking has evolved in California's top wine-producing regions over the last 15 years. For this story, we selected Pinot Noir producers from Sonoma

County, Cabernet Sauvignon specialists from Napa Valley and Syrah aficionados from the Central Coast of California.

I decided to invite winemakers from iconic wineries to participate. I use the term "iconic" in its definition as being widely known and recognized for distinguished excellence. Frankly, I was surprised by how easily these winemakers agreed to participate. There was no hint of trying to keep secrets. Instead, it became clear that each of these winemakers believed the individual vineyards and terroir directed the quality of their wines. As Ted Lemon put it, "Wine should be a reflection of the vineyard and not the cellar."

We ended up with a veritable "Who's Who" list of some of California's most famous wineries. From Sonoma County, Ted Lemon, founder of Littorai Wines, Tom Rocchioli from Rochioli Winery and Jasmine Hirsch, representing Hirsch Vineyards, explained their approaches to Pinot Noir. Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon symbolizes a winemaking pinnacle, and our three wineries contributed to that reputation: Avery Heelan, winemaker at the historic Larkmead Vineyards, Fredrik Johansson and Matt Peterson from Staglin Family Vineyards, and Aron Weinkauf from Spottswoode Winery. Syrah producers Adam Tolmach from The Ojai Vineyard, Chelsea Franchi of Tablas Creek Vineyard and Foxen Vineyard winemaker Bill Wathan explained their approaches.

Rochioli Winery

2023 Little Hill Estate Pinot Noir

14.5% alc., 507 cases, $90



THE ROCHIOLI FAMILY has farmed grapes in the Russian River Valley for more than 87 years. Tom Rochioli grew up watching his father and grandfather farm the land. His family had an Italian work ethic, and everyone had a job to do, even the children. In 1959, Tom's father and grandfather planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. The Cabernet did not do well and was pulled out in the 1970s. The Sauvignon Blanc sold for years, as a blending grape, before becoming a desirable wine variety. Considered to be among the oldest Sauvignon Blanc vines in California, those same vines are still in production today.

By 1968, Tom's father began planting Pinot Noir on their Fenton Acres property with clones imported from France even though little was known here about the variety at the time. He thought the soil and microclimates in this spot of the Russian River Valley were special and could produce world class wines, so he took a chance with Pinot Noir and later planted Chardonnay as well. In the early 1970s, the grapes were sold to Davis Bynum Winery, and the family started producing wine sold under their Fenton Acres label. When Pinot Noir gained popularity in the 1980s, Williams Selyem Winery, among other prominent vintners, sought out the high-quality Rochioli Pinot Noir grapes for their wines.

After graduating from college and working for a major financial institution, Tom returned to the family farm with a new idea. He knew the grapes were good and that other wineries were making great wine with his grapes. He decided to make his own wine under the Rochioli name. In 1983, the family changed the property name from Fenton Acres to Rochioli Vineyard, and Tom took over as business manager then, soon after, became winemaker.

The family released their first estate wine, the 1985 Rochioli Pinot Noir, in 1987, and Wine Spectator named it as the finest Pinot Noir in America. Tom took his wife to France and visited Burgundy's most famous estates. He learned that by keeping grapes from different parts of the vineyard separated during the winemaking process, those different lots could produce remarkable, different, beautiful wines. Their approach involved little tampering with the winemaking process. That experience shaped his philosophy; and up until today, Tom Rochioli produces several iterations of terroir-driven wines built upon the foundation of his unique, superb fruit.

According to the winemaker:

"We want to produce a classic Russian River Pinot Noir that is rich but elegant, neither ripe nor lean, with refined tannins and firm acidity. This vineyard gives us wines that are fruit-forward, dark and bold with black fruit and subtle tannins, along with full, bright acid.

"Little Hill Vineyard was planted in 1985 through 2014. It consists of Arbuckle soil at 110 to 160 feet elevation. Vines are planted in 5 x 8-foot spacings on 101-14 rootstock. We perform thoughtful thinning, lowering the crop to five to six pounds per vine, as well as minimal leaf removal. We farm traditionally using monitored irrigation, meaning we water at veraison and monitor soil moisture, waiting until the vines are screaming for water. Picking is determined by visual and statistical information. I look for even coloring throughout the cluster and stem ripening. We run basic tests, but mostly I rely on my experience in the vineyard. When it looks right, I pick it.

"Grapes are pre-sorted and hand-picked at night. They go through a sorting table and are destemmed but not crushed. No SO_2 is added unless we have problems with the grapes. Using a forklift, the grapes get dumped into three-ton, open-top, square stainless-steel fermenters. We cold soak for four days at 55°F. We rarely need to add acid, but based on YAN we will add Fermaid K. We inoculate with RC212/001 yeast because it consistently finishes fermentation and we like the character it gives our wines. We punch down twice daily. Maximum fermentation temperature is 86°F.

"We press lightly when dry, (-1.8° Brix) and do not separate press fractions from free run juice. The juice goes to a tank, is inoculated for malolactic and racked to barrel immediately because we don't want the lees to settle. We do not stir lees. For this wine, we used 100% French oak with 50% new oak. The wine is racked in March and then again at bottling. We do not filter the wine. Bottles are sealed with natural cork and aged for eight months before release."

Tasting Notes:

Rochioli: It has dark berry, briary character, spice and some floral character. It is a darker fruit wine and ripe. Very full on the palate with cleansing acidity and soft tannins. It also has a kind of berry, cherry character and a touch of oak that is well integrated.

Others: I get Santa Rosa plum just on the edge of ripeness. The spice note is there. Beautiful integration of oak. Tannins are present, but they are enveloping, meaning there are no angles. Cleansing acidity on the wine. It has sweet fruit but remains fresh. There is energy and shape in the mouth which I really love. Elegantly done on the oak. Nose of red cherry juice with a distinctive clove-scented orange element. Delicate, poised and elegant. Nice subtle cherry cola with lovely elegance. This is heavy on primary fruit with vanilla oak and more extraction than I would expect. Concentrated fruit, well extracted with balance and some barrel notes. I really like this; it is powerful without being heavy. The length and acidity are enjoyable, and I love the balance.

Littorai Wines

2023 The Pivot Vineyard Pinot Noir

13.5% alc., 420 cases, $105



TED LEMON EARNED his enology degree from the Universitè de Dijon in 1981 and is the first American to ever be hired as winemaker and vineyard manager for an estate in Burgundy, Domaine Guy Roulot in Meursault. He worked for multiple prestigious estates in Burgundy before returning to the United States. Ted consulted for several prominent wineries in California, Oregon and Washington while working as a winemaker in Napa Valley, where met his wife Heidi, who also worked at several estates in Napa prior to co-founding Littorai Wines.

Ted and Heidi began Littorai with little capital, resorting exclusively to purchased grapes. They grew slowly, finding vineyards of promise and finally purchased an estate of their own. Littorai pioneered single vineyard designates with Charles Heintz Chardonnay, as well as Savoy, Roman, Cerise and Wendling Pinot Noirs. They have the longest running contract with Hirsch Vineyards on the Sonoma Coast and own or lease properties, like B.A. Theriot Vineyard, The Haven, The Pivot, One Acre and The Return.

Ted and Heidi have a philosophy about winemaking and are unwavering in their pursuit of it: "Wine should be a reflection of the vineyard and not the cellar. There are no substitutes for low yields and careful site and vine selection. All additives, such as cultured yeasts, cultured bacteria, acidification, enzymes, etc., are not appropriate to the greatest expression of terroir. We do not make wine for competitions, ratings or trends. We believe that the words 'elegance' and 'finesse' are wholly compatible with the notions of concentration and complexity. Our Littorai aesthetic is one of finesse, balance and length."

According to the winemaker:

"The Littorai style is understated, little new oak influence, vibrant acidity and aromas. Those attributes do not preclude depth and concentration. The concepts of depth and concentration should be concordant with producing wines of balance and harmony. From that starting point, we simply want to allow the site to express itself. The Pivot Vineyard tends to have lesser ripe fruit tones: cassis, rhubarb, pomegranate, Pacific blackberry. The palate is vibrant with acidity, which would be buried if we picked at higher sugars.

"The Pivot Vineyard consists of Gold Ridge loam over marine origin sandstone. The elevation is 550 feet. Dijon 667, 114, 777, Swan, Calera and proprietary clones are planted on 3309 and 420A rootstock, incorporating six feet by one meter spacing. When making the wine, all the clones are co-fermented, as a field blend, with the various clones adding to the wine's complexity. Vines are dry farmed using organic materials and Biodynamic methods, but we are not certified. We have used no commercial fertilizer of any kind for 20 years. We no longer cultivate the land, using sheep grazing and homemade compost for soil health instead. We have bilateral canes, no spurs, and perform minimal leaf removal but do drop green fruit. Production averages three tons per acre. We monitor pH carefully, looking for that magic moment when the clusters are ripe but have not begun any process of dehydration. Ripe, but only just. It's usually 100 days from full bloom.

"We pick into quarter-ton bins and bring them to the winery where we use two sorting tables. We determine how much whole cluster we will use and destem the rest, adding 30 to 50ppm SO_2 at the destemmer. The grapes go into open-top wooden or stainless-steel tanks, and we chill them to 55°F if not already at that temperature from the night picking. We allow the temperature to rise naturally on its own when native yeast takes over. We make no nutrient additions nor acid additions. We use manual punch downs three times daily during active fermentation, reducing the amount of punch downs as the fermentation nears 0° Brix. Fermentation temperatures are between 80°F to 88°F.

"We press at or after dryness, removing the press juice from the blend. Juice settles in tank until primary finishes then goes to barrel, and we proportionally add back the lees to each barrel. Native malolactic occurs in 100% French oak barrels with 20% new oak. The wine ages in barrel for 16 months with no rackings, except to bottle. Wine is bottled unfiltered, sealed with natural cork and rests for six to nine months before release."

Tasting Notes:

Lemon: More dark fruit and blackberry than normal. A bit of spice from the whole cluster. I get a combination of acidity and tannins more influenced by whole cluster that give a bit more edge to them. I see that signature in this wine.

Others: I get rustic spiciness, maybe from stems. It's rich without being fat with a cleansing freshness. A lot of savory notes on both the nose and the palate. There is some wet stone minerality. Delicate body at this point but will put on weight as it ages and become plusher, yet it is already long and persistent. Strawberry preserves on the nose with fresh thyme. My favorite palate with mountain berries bursting with energy and tension that is fresh and pure. Intense aromatics, like strawberry and pomegranate. Very dynamic with herbal edges, linear and crunchy. It's on the leaner fruit spectrum with rhubarb and good dynamic expression.

Hirsch Vineyards

2023 East Ridge Pinot Noir

12.7% alc., 465 cases, $95



IN THE 1960S, JASMINE HIRSCH'S father David studied at Columbia University under Lionel Trilling. By the 1970s, he was a garment maker, developing a taste for the wines of Burgundy during frequent jaunts to France. In 1978, David found a 1,100-acre sheep ranch on a coastal ridge in Sonoma County five miles up a dirt road. He planted his first vines in 1980, and by 1994 prominent wineries, like Littorai, Faila, Kistler and Williams Seylem, were making indelible vineyard-designated wines from Hirsch Vineyards.

After 22 years of planting more vineyards and growing top-quality grapes, David and his wife Marie built a winery on the property. The purpose of the winery was to taste each of the 60 farming parcels to better understand the nature of each parcel's unique soil and climate, the conditions of vintage and the consequences of farming decisions. The winemaking would serve to direct how he treated the site.

Jasmine was born in California, attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and worked in finance for six years, living in Prague, Amsterdam and New York. She returned to the family vineyard in 2008 to handle sales and customer relations for the recently opened Hirsch Winery. She came to love the vineyards and winery, taking on the mantle of general manager in 2015 and assuming duties as winemaker in 2019.

According to the winemaker:

"The soils of our mountain ridgetops are shallow and low vigor. Millenia of erosion have left little topsoil. Sunlight at this elevation is cool yet intense, thickening the skin of the berries. Winters are wet; summers are dry. These elements produce wines with profound mountain character: heightened fruit intensity, notable structure and an elegant wildness. Because of the complexity of our geology and the year-to-year variability of the climate, we resist recipes in favor of principles: we instead look to the soils, the fruit and the vintage for direction. We are here to justify the existence of the fruit and site, not vice versa; patience is not a virtue, it's a necessity.

"We started transitioning to Biodynamic in 2011; and as of 2014, all vineyards are farmed under Biodynamic practices. Cover crops, compost applications and careful water management support biodiversity and vine health. The philosophy is to work with the site's natural fragmentation, treating each small block according to its specific needs. The Hirsch philosophy is all about site expression of the individual parcels rather than winemaker intervention.

"The vineyard is our style. Balance, ageability and site specificity are our holy grails. This site gives us good ripeness with almost angry tannins. It tends toward concentrated yet bright and big tannic structure. Aging brings out the fruit and turns the tannins plush.

"The soil in the East Ridge section of Hirsch Vineyards is a clay and rock mix. Elevation for the East Ridge is 1,350 feet. There are two vine spacings: 6 x 10 feet and 3½ x 6 feet. The clones are Pommard-Wadenswill, Swan and Calera planted on a variety of rootstocks, starting with AXR-1 followed by 3309, SO4 and 101-14. Irrigation varies, depending on the block and vintage conditions.

"We use VSP trellising. The vineyard employs minimal tilling, and we build the soil with more compost, which helps the vines. We drop fruit early to maintain low yields. In 2023 this block yielded 2.3 tons per acre.

"There are some diseased vines in East Ridge that struggle to ripen, so tannins are more prominent. We pick looking for physiological ripeness while preserving natural acidity. We track pH, TA and Brix, but rely more on experience, taste and sight clues. We look for berry release from clusters, pulp separation from seeds and skins, and color release from skins in our test samples.

"We pick into half-ton bins and cluster-sort. Fruit is destemmed, and we use no whole cluster. We will add 50ppm SO_2. Grapes are forklifted to open-top, stainless-steel tanks. We cold soak for three to five days at 45°F to 55°F. Native yeast carries the ferment, and we do not use nutrients nor acid additions. We punch down twice daily, up to three times during peak fermentation, backing off as fermentation ends. Pump-overs are added sometimes as well. Peak fermentation temperature is in the 75°F to 82°F range.

"We press once we get to negative Brix for a couple of days, often using a five-day extended maceration where we assess tannin texture to determine when to press. We combine free run and press fractions from our gentle basket press. We settle in a tank overnight before racking to barrels for native malolactic fermentation. We do not stir lees. We use a mix of French and eastern European barrels with 30% new oak. Wine is racked only for bottling after 16 to 18 months' aging in barrel. We crossflow-filter, bottle with natural cork and allow for nine to 12 months' bottle age before release."

Tasting Notes:

Hirsch: High tone fruit quality, characteristic of the vintage. Some sage with sour cherries and pomegranate juice. Mild oak expression on nose. Very aromatic with a lot of retro-nasal aromatics. Relatively high acid with a long finish.

Others: I agree with the pomegranate, but there is a brooding power that wants to be somebody. Charming but powerful. Classic notes of sage and savory notes, making the wine less fruit-driven, with a hint of the citrus lurking in the underbrush. The tannin signature is firm and angular, typical Sonoma Coast. The nose is like sugar flowers with a toasted warmth that carries through to the palate. Cherry compote with a touch of warm brioche that makes for a comforting Pinot Noir.

Spottswoode Winery

2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon

13.7% alc., 3,800 cases. $285



SPOTTSWOODE IS A CLASSIC multi-generational dream turned reality story. Spottswoode Estate was established and first planted with grapes in 1882. The property was named Spottswoode by its third owner, Mrs. Albert Spotts, in 1910. Mary Weber Novak and Jack Novak acquired the property with its long-established pre-Prohibition vineyard in 1972. When Jack Novak died suddenly at the age of 44 from a heart attack, Mary Novak took over the estate, selling its grapes to local vintners. By 1982, she hired Tony Soter as winemaker and released the first Spottswoode Cabernet Sauvignon. The wines were immediately successful, garnering three successive years on the *Wine Spectator*'s Top 100 lists.

In 1987, daughter Beth Novak joined the winery, where she is currently president and CEO. Her sister Lindy came on board in 1992 to take on marketing duties. Over time, they established Spottswoode as one of Napa Valley's most respected wine estates. Robert Parker of The Wine Advocate named them, "One of Napa Valley's First-Growth Wines and Vineyards." With Tony Soter's help, as well as that of Pam Starr and Rosemary Cakebread, Beth Novak oversaw the replanting of the estate, pioneering California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) Organic Certification in 1992, and the building of the Spottswoode estate winery later in 1999.

"Our family has a four-decade relationship with this land that now spans three generations," Beth Novak explained. "I had the pleasure of working alongside my mom for 29 years and helping her build Spottswoode into the incredible estate vineyard and winery that it is today. When you own a family winery like ours, the cellar is like a photo album; each vintage is a picture in our family's life and a testament for our love of this place."

In addition to its recognition as one of the greatest estates in Napa Valley, Spottswoode has received kudos for being one of the first and most dedicated exponents of green business practices. The winery has received Organic (CCOF), Biodynamic Demeter and Regenerative Organic certifications. Spottswoode earned Napa Green Vineyard and Winery certifications, became Gold Members of IWCA (International Wineries for Climate Action) and is the first Napa Valley winery to achieve B Corp Certification. Novak summed it up, "We believe in caring for the earth, our employees, and community, and therefore we have pursued all of these certifications."

Aron Weinkauf joined Spottswoode as assistant winemaker in 2006. He was named vineyard manager in 2009, and by 2011 he took over as winemaker. He insists that the certifications are not just about environment and social responsibility, but they also help produce quality wine.

Importantly, they build resilience into their system, allowing for soil health and fertility and vines that can manage the extremes now experienced due to climate change.

According to the winemaker:

"Our style is not to be overripe or over-extracted, but rather to focus on the elegance and the style that are dictated by the vines for that specific year. We hope the work we do in the vineyard will show through with balance and perfect ripeness. We seek a wine that is complex, dense and structured, but fresh and balanced. We don't want it to be too heavy or overly textural. We cherish aromatics, energy and length. We seek grace, balance and beauty in a wine enjoyable in its youth, as well as with age.

"Our soil is bale, clay loam and rocky. The elevation is 240 feet, and vine spacings are 6 x 8 feet for the older vines and 5 x 7 feet for the younger ones. We always seek diversity in our rootstock and clones, especially as they interact with our different soils. We have 110R, 1103P, 5C, 3309 and 470A rootstocks, among others. Our clones include our own Spottswoode clone, Eisele, and 337. In addition, we use Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot in this blend. We plant cover crops, which are mowed. We perform minimal canopy work, maybe some shoot tipping. Crop size averages 3.2 tons per acre.



"For picking decisions, we watch numbers, mostly tracking the falling acid. We taste, looking at how the skins break up when chewed. We try to pick before there's any dimpling on the grapes. In short, we like to pick when the grapes sing. Grapes are hand-picked into macro bins. We destem, optical-sort, add 10 to 15ppm SO_2 and then must-pump to closed stainless-steel tanks. Grapes sit for about three days with no operating cooling. We use both native and commercial yeasts for our fermentations. If we need to add acid, we'll do that at the start of fermentation. Based on YAN measurements, we might add nutrients as needed. We pump-over twice a day and keep fermentation temperatures in the 80°F to 86°F range. Fermentations generally last 21 days. We press at dryness to a tank, separating free run and press fractions.

"Native malolactic usually starts in the tank before we rack to barrels, but we will inoculate those barrels having difficulties. Sometimes we will stir lees because we find the lees act as an awesome, delicate fining tool. Our barrels are 90% French and 10% Hungarian, 60% of which is new. The wine ages in barrel for 20 months, getting racked in June of each year. The wine is sterile filtered, sealed with natural corks and aged in bottle for one year before release."

Tasting Notes:

Weinkauf: I'm happy with the extraction and balance of structure, especially in a warm vintage.

The hot vintage prevented the level refinement of florals that I like to see, but I still find it beautiful. Nice balance of density, texture and structure. It is supple and giving. Feels like a wine that will continue to be pleasant, enjoyable and giving for multiple years.

Others: Very pretty for Cabernet with sweet berry and richness, making a youthful delicious wine. Elegant spice with good freshness and a nice floral note. Balanced with elegant tannins and a chocolate quality on the retro nasal. There is ripe fruit balanced by fresh herbal notes and a menthol, anise character. Some of the best balance of any 2022 I've tasted to date. It has a crunchy red quality to it, with a well-integrated herbal character. If this was a dancer, it would be a tap dancer, light on its feet and high-speed tapping. Soft, gentle attack, but lacks sparkle and energy. Fresh, subtle fruit of blackberry leather, full of soft well integrated tannins. Love this wine. Starts with cola on the nose, leading to blueberry pie. Intensely structured on the palate right from the start all the way through. Every element of this wine is perfectly positioned and perfectly proportioned. Fresh and light while still being grounded and present.



Larkmead Vineyards

2021 Solari Estate Cabernet Sauvignon

14.7% alc., 1,202 cases. $200



THE HISTORIC LARKMEAD ESTATE, which was originally founded in 1895, consists of 115 acres in Calistoga at the northern end of Napa Valley. Larry and Polly Solari purchased Larkmead in 1948. Their daughter, Kate Solari, spent her childhood growing up in a very different Napa Valley, one that was rural with orchards, cattle ranches and empty fields. The grapes from Larkmead Vineyard were farmed and sold to various wineries. When Kate Solari married her husband, Cam Baker, they took it upon themselves to completely replant the historic vineyard as their first project. They designated individual vineyard blocks based on soil type and then matched varieties, rootstocks and clonal selections to thrive in each block.

By 2005, with the replanting completed, they opened the first phase of their state-of-the-art winery, which they expanded upon with the completion of a new barrel hall, gallery and hospitality space. The Solari-Baker family has been committed to caring for the land by farming organically, finally receiving their official CCOF status in 2023. They achieved the Napa Green Winery certification in 2011 and the Napa Green Land certification in 2017, sitting at the highest gold level of Napa Green certification.

Avery Heelan grew up in New England and earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Northeastern University. After several visits to Napa Valley with her parents, she found herself in the master's program at UC Davis where she earned her degree in agricultural and environmental chemistry with a specialization in viticulture and enology. Heelan made wine in Western Australia and Meursault before returning to California to work at Screaming Eagle and, eventually, Larkmead Vineyards, where she was promoted to winemaker in 2021.

According to the winemaker:

"Our grapes are farmed and vinified separately and then blended into wines that honor the site's diversity. Our goal is to make a wine of balance and elegance, Cabernet that embodies both strength and restraint, with depth that unfolds slowly rather than declaring itself all at once. The goal is always harmony: fruit, floral and savory notes in perfect conversation. Our Solari Cabernet Sauvignon should be evocative and textural, an experience that engages all of the senses. Ultimately, I am crafting a wine that will endure. It should offer pleasure upon release but evolve gracefully for decades, revealing new dimensions of character and nuance over time.

"This vineyard has been here since 1895; but after many years of replanting, most of the vines are 25 to 28 years old. The soil is Cortina gravel with some bale loam. The elevation is 300 feet. Vine spacing is 6 x 8 feet, and we have multiple Cabernet Sauvignon clones: 337, 7, Olmo, 15, 4 and 169. Our rootstock is a combination of 3309, 101-14 and 110R. We have irrigation but have reduced water usage dramatically over the past five years.

"Our vineyard team farms the estate with a hands-on, block-by-block approach. We use cover crops and composting to maintain soil health with minimal tilling, and we avoid herbicides and neonicotinoids entirely. Each growing season begins with thoughtful canopy management to balance vigor and sunlight exposure and reduce mildew pressure while protecting the fruit from afternoon heat. We have changed to incorporating a moderate California sprawl where the canes flop over, protecting the fruit zone and giving us longer hang time and better color development.

"While we track grape chemistry, harvest decisions are entirely driven by taste and texture. We look for a point when the fruit shows both purity and energy, freshness and depth. We wait for the pulp to soften and separate from the skins. We like to pick before any dimpling, and we like to see good color, when we spit, after chewing the berries.

"Grapes are picked at night, cluster-sorted, destemmed and then berry-sorted before getting pumped to closed stainless-steel tanks. We add 30 to 40ppm SO_2 at the destemmer. We cold soak at 45°F for three to five days. We'll warm the juice to 60°F before using both native and commercial yeast (usually FX10 because we like the violet character it gives the wine) to carry out fermentation. We add organic nutrients at inoculation and again at $^1/_3$ drop in Brix. We pump-over up to three times a day, one full volume each, tapering off later in maceration. Fermentation temperatures are kept at 80°F to 84°F.

"We press based on taste and tannic sensation, usually 25 to 30 days post-crush. We use free run only, settling in a tank overnight and then racking to barrel, where each barrel is individually inoculated for malolactic fermentation or allowed to go native. We use 100% French oak with 71% new oak. We rack in the spring and then again to bottle, leaving the wine in tank for one month before bottling. The wine ages in barrels for 20 months. Wine is filtered, sealed with natural cork and then rests for one year before release."

Tasting Notes:

Heelan: I love the fresh florals and violets. There is a nice herbal element with hints of cedar and mocha. On the palate there is nice freshness balanced by mid-palate tension. There is a juicy core of freshness and acidity. The tannins have good resolve but have a lot of aging potential left.

Others: Warm florals with earth and spice. Wine is supple, upright with energy, and the tannins are there but elegant. Very young, raw and tight with black fruit. Love the warm fruit, dry herb spectrum with the freshness of fruit along with the balance, making this pretty and drinkable. Cedar, cigar box with good richness with lingering tannins. Wonderfully expressive classic Napa Cabernet with dark fruit and good energy and lift on the nose. Savory with a bit of vegetal sweetness. Rich with some black olive character, very structured with a bit of alcohol at the end. Super juicy and meaty, like a dry aged ribeye. Black cherry, including the pit, lends a hardness to the wine that melts in the finish. Black fruits with some minty herbal notes and toasty oak, along with coffee and chocolate.

Staglin Family Vineyard

2018 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon

14.9% alc., 2,300 cases $385



STAGLIN FAMILY VINEYARD hits every point for achieving icon status: it has history, quality and a story. The vineyards, which date all the way back to 1864, fell into disrepair during Prohibition. Almost 100 years later, in 1963, the Sullivan family purchased the property. The Sullivans had marriage ties to the owners of Beaulieu Vineyards (BV), so the vineyard replanting in 1964 was supervised by none other than Andre Tchelistcheff.

Garen and Shari Staglin purchased the estate in 1985 with the plan of farming grapes and selling them to local wineries. They hired David Abreu to be their vineyard manager and began replanting the vineyard once again with guidance from Tchelistcheff. Their plan of selling the grapes went well, but soon Shari decided they should produce a wine of their own from their vineyard. They started out by renting space at other wineries which convinced them that they needed their own facility. In 2002, they completed a 24,000-square-foot underground production facility to handle the grapes from their 50-acre, certified organic vineyard.

Always dedicated to producing excellent wines, the Staglins have worked with consultant Michel Rolland and some of Napa Valley's most accomplished winemakers: Cathy Corison, Celia Welch, Bob Levy, Luc Morlet and Andy Erickson. Fredrik Johansson took over winemaking duties in 2007 and remains director of winemaking while Matt Peterson is the current winemaker.

The key to understanding the wines of Staglin Family Vineyard can be found in the word "family." The entire family works together, shares a vision and works towards making that vision a reality. Garen and Shari Staglin are co-owners. Shari takes on CEO responsibilities, and their daughter Shannon, who started at the winery as a harvest intern, has been president for decades. When their son Brandon was 18, he experienced an acute schizophrenic psychotic break. The lack of information and support the family encountered led to their creating a bold philanthropic effort dedicated to advancing the science surrounding brain illness and injury.

They founded One Mind, a non-profit that funds brain health research. The first fundraising event, Music Festival for Brain Health, has turned into an annual event. In the last 35 years, causes the Staglins have chaired or donations from their wines have generated more than $1 billion. This money funds research into biological mental illness, identifying biomarkers that help with early detection and innovative treatments for schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression. With all the time and effort spent on philanthropy, their focus remains on producing top-quality wines, which explains the Staglin Family Vineyard's motto: "Great wine for great causes."

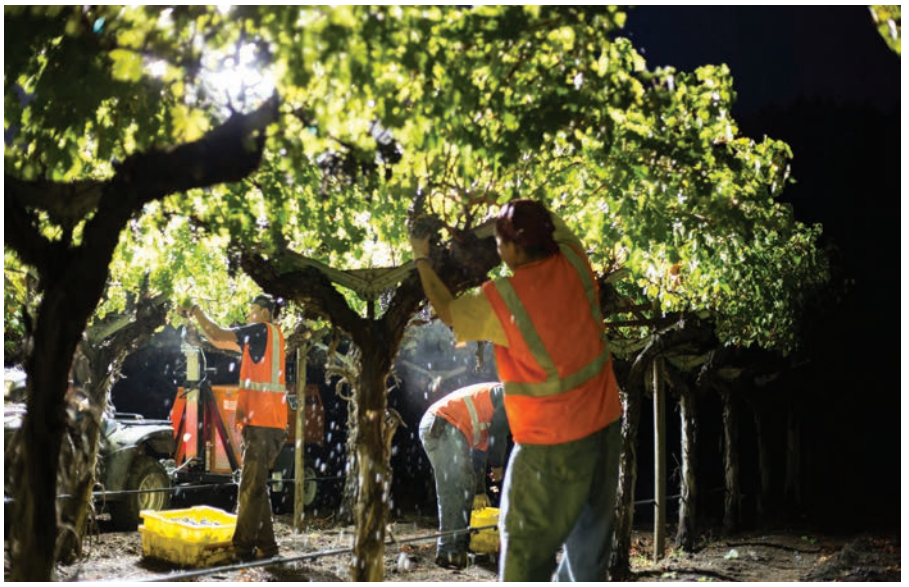
According to the winemaker:

"Our aim is to capture the essence of this place. Its natural inclination leans more towards prettiness and elegance over power and structure. We want the wine to be supple and generous. We look for aromatic complexity, great balance, detail and layers, energy and liveliness, texture, supple tannins and persistence/length. Flavors skew dark red with olive notes, and we don't shy away from the traditional varietal expression of herbaceousness.

"The Staglin Family Vineyard is primarily Perkins gravelly loam and bale clay loam. In many locations the soil is deep, lending a generous quality to the wine. Elevation is 150 to 275 feet. Originally planted in 1864, all the vineyards have been replanted since 1960. To an extent, these vines represent the history of recent Napa Valley vineyard development philosophies. We have many vine spacings: 6 x 4 feet unilateral cordon, 6 x 4 feet double Guyot, 10 x 6 feet bilateral cordon and 10 x 6 feet quadrilateral cane, all in various VSP and modified VSP configurations. Clones include Staglin, Martha's, 337, 4, 191 and Heritage. Rootstocks are 110R, 3309C, 420A and 101-14. We have a double-poly drip system to use when conditions warrant. We have been certified organic with CCOF since 2005. Production varies by block, vine age, rootstock and pruning system from 1.75 to 3.5 tons per acre.

"We will do whatever we deem necessary in the vineyard to achieve optimal results and maturity in a given vintage. Canopy management is a constant, central component of our work. We'll leaf, tie every shoot into place on multiple wires in the trellis, hedge where and when needed, and sometimes generate laterals to increase leaf area and shade. We variably drop fruit in each block to achieve vine balance. We'll use shade cloth, mostly on the morning side when necessary. While we track all chemistry, we pick based primarily on mouthfeel and taste. We want mature fruit flavors with restrained herbal notes but no pyrazine elements. The skins should be softening but not yet dimpled and, when chewed, should reveal inviting tannins that build and persist without aggressive grip.

"We pick into 30-pound yellow lug boxes, perform cluster inspection over a vibrating shaker table, destem and optically sort, discharging the fruit onto a belted berry table for final visual selection with human eyes. Sorted grapes fall through a set of rollers for varied fracturing of skins, depending on clones, maturity and other factors, and get forklifted and tipped into fermenters. We use a variety of fermenters, including foudres, stainless steel, concrete and some barrel fermentations. We cold-soak one to three days at times, mostly to homogenize the tank for good samples for analysis and starting chemistry. SO_2 additions depend on fruit and harvest conditions and are usually between 25 and 55ppm. Generally, we don't make acid additions. We will add nutrients, depending on YAN, using 2B FermControl BIO, Laffort Nutristart ORG or Nutristart.



"Yeast usage varies, often starting with a non-saccharomyces strain for bioprotection or early/complex extraction in the juice phase. Sometimes we let fermentation start spontaneously and then inoculate with various *Saccharomyces* strains, including a culture of our own isolated yeast from a 2012 fermentation. We use pump-overs predominantly, with the occasional délestage. At peak ferment, we aim for five volumes per day, and for most of the ferment we pump-over five times a day with at least one going through an open sump and screen. We aggressively incorporate oxygen during primary fermentation; and when performing extended macerations, we sparge the headspace with argon gas or introduce dry ice onto the cap. We keep temperatures in the high 80°s with the goal for each tank to peak in the low 90°s.

"We determine when to press based primarily on tannins and structure in the wine. Secondary characteristics are layers of flavor and gravitas of the wine. We lean towards density, palate weight and fruitiness for shorter macerations. For longer macerations it is more about structure, depth of flavor and length. We typically make a cut during pressing and keep the cuts separate. Wine sits in tank overnight then gets racked to barrel. Most barrels incorporate native malolactic, but some lots might get inoculated. Extended maceration lots often finish ML in tank. We occasionally stir lees during the first year of aging.

"We used 100% French oak barrels with 89% new for this vintage, but it is our selection of coopers, forests and toast levels that are more important than the percentage of new barrels. We racked three times during the 21 months of barrel aging. The wine was bottled unfiltered, sealed with 54mm Amorim NDtech natural corks and rested in bottle for 14 months before release."

Tasting Notes:

Johansson: I get dark red fruit on the front with some mint and herbs in there. There is balanced, complicated dark red fruit character on the palate. Some forest elements. The tannins are consolidated and compact in the middle of my mouth and soft on the edges with nice persistence on the palate.

Others: Dark and textural, menthol and black fruit on the back end. It's a big wine, ripe and extracted but nicely balanced. The oak is contributing a confectionary spice, with a lot of blue fruit character, along with a nice mint component. Dark, dense and brooding with intense aromatics of black currant, mint and camphor. Intense and concentrated palate with velvety tannins and a long finish. Chewy and dense on the nose and palate. On the palate I get salted sweet cream butter with dry sage. Sweet, ripe fruit on the palate, like plum coulis, tempered by a eucalyptus lift. Wow, 2018 and it is just starting to show off, true Napa royalty.

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Tablas Creek Vineyard

2022 Syrah

13.5% alc., 630 cases, $55

TABLAS CREEK CAME OUT of a partnership that united two historic wine families and two different continents. Tablas Creek co-founder Robert Haas met the Perrins of Château de Beaucastel and convinced family patriarch, Jacques Perrin, to appoint his Vineyard Brands company the Perrins' exclusive American importer. He worked closely with Jacques' sons Jean-Pierre and Francois Perrin, establishing Beaucastel as one of the international wine community's leading estates. They spent two decades working together to promote French wines. They became friends and had many discussions, convincing themselves that Rhône grape varieties would thrive in California's Mediterranean climate.

Beginning a search in 1985, they discovered a property with a climate that mirrored the Rhône in Paso Robles. The area had similar shallow, rocky limestone soils and was blessed with hot sunny days and cool nights which allowed for fully mature grapes that retained their acidity, and there was enough rainfall in the winter to allow the vineyards to be dry farmed. In 1989, they purchased a 120-acre parcel that was 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean on the west side of Paso Robles. They named it Tablas Creek Vineyard.

To make sure they could work with the finest grapes, they imported multiple varieties, clones and rootstock. All material underwent a USDA-mandated three-year indexing process to ensure the vines were virus free. Tablas Creek built their own nursery complex where the vines were multiplied, grafted onto rootstocks and prepared for planting in the vineyard. At its peak, the on-site nursery produced over 200,000 bench-grafted vines for planting in Tablas Creek's own vineyard and for sale to interested growers each year. Estate planting began in 1994, and by 2020 they had 115 acres under vine. Tablas Creek debuted their inaugural wines in 1997.

Chelsea Franchi grew up in the Sierra Foothills of Northern California and attended Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo to study agricultural business and wine and viticulture. While working on her degree, she served in Tablas Creek's tasting room. Upon graduation in 2008, she started her production career as a "cellar rat" under the guidance of winemaker Neil Collins. In 2025, after 18 harvests at Tablas Creek, she was named director of winemaking.



According to the winemaker:

"We are not trying to make a wine that smells or tastes like what we want. We're making a wine that the property can produce. Year in and year out, our property produces a Syrah that carries meaty, chewy, floral characteristics balanced by energetic acidity. The Syrah often shows black fruit and savory elements with flavors of blackberries, ironlike minerals and serious tannins at the end. We make this wine to age for 10 to 20 years.

"Sitting at an elevation of 1,400 feet, our vineyard has calcareous clay and limestone soil. Vine spacing is predominantly 8 x 3 feet and 8 x 4 feet. Our clones are all proprietary derived from France. Tablas A, C, D, E and F are all planted on 1103P, 3309C and 140 RU rootstock. Parts are irrigated while others are dry farmed. Our farming is certified organic, biodynamic and regenerative organic. We rotate cover crops and have, on average, about 100 sheep that consume that crop. We have tilled in the past but are experimenting with no-till. We cane prune, pull leaves and drop fruit. We average about 2.5 tons per acre. To pick, we monitor pH, TA and Brix, and use our experience on each of the different Syrah blocks to make the decision. We prefer to pick before we see flaccid skins or any raisining. Typically, grapes come in at 23° Brix with a 3.5 to 3.8 pH.

"We pick individual lots separately and blend the lots after fermentation. Grapes are hand harvested and brought to the winery by tractor, where they are hand-sorted. Depending on the lot, we'll make the choice to either destem, incorporate whole cluster or add stems. We add 40ppm SO_2 24 hours after fruit goes into the fermenters and then cold soak for one to two days, waiting for native yeast to get started. We use no nutrients, but this Syrah received 0-1.75 g/L tartaric acid, after processing, depending on the lot. In those tanks where we can control temperature, we ferment between 72°F and 78°F, looking for a long, slow ferment.

"We press when density dips below .999 or 14 days, whichever takes longer, separating free run from press juice. The juice goes directly to barrel where native malolactic takes place. We do not stir lees. For this wine, we used 100% French oak barrels with 10% of those being new Biodynamic French oak barrels. We rack for spring/summer blending and before bottling. Wine ages in barrel for 17 months. We bottle unfiltered, using natural cork and bottle age for six months before release."

Tasting Notes:

Franchi: I get the florality of candied violets. It's fresh with crushed boysenberry, both on the nose and palate. There is a subtle power, but it is still alive. It is the freshness that is most appealing.

Others: Nice mineral notes on the nose with fresh fruit and lighter body. Medium-bodied and light on the palate with less tannin than others. Nice mineral quality. More reserved style. Lovely stoney quality. A linear wine with dry firm tannins on the finish and lingering acid, which leaves a fresh finish. I get a lot of red fruit, like cherries and strawberries, all nicely structured with integrated tannins. Tannins are there but almost melt in your mouth, beautiful wine. Purple fruit, some matchstick on the palate and a long, lengthy finish. Lots of primary fruit but a lighter style of Syrah. Mid-weight, medium body with beautiful red fruit. Restrained fruit with rusticity to the tannins. An appealing delicate floral and peppery note with an undertone of earth. It's a bit Pinot-like in texture, and lively and nice because of it.

Foxen Vineyard

2022 Tinaquaic Vineyards Syrah Heritage Collection

13.5% alc., 50 cases, $60



BILL WATHEN WAS BORN and raised in San Luis Obispo, and graduated from Cal Poly University with a degree in fruit science and vineyard management. Out of college, he farmed vineyards for Louie Lucas. Wathan left for a job as vineyard manager for Chalone Vineyard where Dick Graff showed him Old World-style French winemaking techniques. After four years at Chalone, Wathen decided he was ready to try things on his own. He returned to Santa Barbara County and partnered with his old friend Dick Dorè to make Foxen's first wine on Doré's Rancho Tinaquaic. They planted a vineyard at Tinaquaic while making wine from grapes they purchased at Rancho Sisquoc until the vineyard came into production.

Foxen is named in memory of Doré's great-great-grandfather, William Benjamin Foxen, who was an English sea captain. Foxen came to Santa Barbara in the early 1800s, and in 1837 he purchased Rancho Tinaquaic, a Mexican land grant that totaled nearly 9,000 acres. Captain Foxen adopted the distinctive "anchor" as his cattle brand, and Foxen Winery still uses it on their label today.

Foxen's first vintage was in 1985, made in the old blacksmith shop on the ranch, which served as Foxen's winery and tasting room for more than 20 years. Foxen completed a new solar-powered winery in 2009. Throughout the years, Bill Wathen has clung to a simple winemaking philosophy: "Respect the vine and let the wines make themselves with little or no intervention."

Successfully running a business for 40 years with a friend is no small accomplishment. When asked how they managed to make things work at Foxen, Wathen explained, "We each realized that we had certain abilities that the other didn't. I kept Dick off the crush pad, and he kept me away from sales. It all worked out. Now, my kids are taking over production, and Jenny Doré's daughter is VP of sales. So, it is still a family-run operation, and hopefully, it will continue."

According to the winemaker:

"The Syrah from Rancho Tinaquaic always has elegant deep aromas of dark berry and violets. We try to keep the palate light on its feet while still delivering a long finish, crisp with acid.

"Elevation is 800 feet. Our soil here is Arnold sandy loam, and the vines planted in 1989 are . The clone is Durrell (from Shiraz FPS 08.) Vines are spaced in 4 x 8-foot intervals. We dry farm and are certified sustainable. Our goal is to be certified organic, but there is substantial mildew pressure that we must deal with first. We might plant winter cover crops of barley, followed by spring cover crops of legumes or oats. We mow and till those crops into the soil. Vines are cordon pruned. We shoot thin, perform leaf removal on the morning side, and remove laterals to increase air movement and help with mildew. We green drop and sometimes do shoulder removal. We average 1.5 tons per acre. We track numbers for picking but definitely like to pick before dimpling starts. Typical numbers are between 23° to 24° Brix with 3.5 pH and .5 to .55 TA.

"Grapes are hand-picked in early morning to bins. They are whole berry-destemmed and then sorted on a sorting table. We add 25ppm SO_2 at the crush pad. Grapes go by forklift to small open-top stainless-steel tanks, along with 15% whole cluster. They sit for two days before inoculation with Laffort RX60 yeast. We test YAN and, if necessary, will add yeast derivative nutrient at inoculation and again at $^1/_3$ Brix depletion. We punch down one to two times daily, with fermentation temperatures reaching low 80°F.

"We press at negative Brix, usually after 15 to 20 days on the skins. We separate press from free run initially, but often blend back all or a portion. The wine settles in a tank where we inoculate for ML, which occurs in a 500-liter, neutral French oak puncheon. We do not stir lees. The wine ages in that puncheon for 20 months, getting racked in spring following vintage and again at bottling. The wine is bottled unfined and unfiltered, sealed with natural cork and gets two to three years bottle age before release.

Tasting Notes:

Wathen: Mostly dark fruit of boysenberry and blackberry with a bit of white pepper and a bit of the reductive meatiness that is true to the vineyard. It is floral as well with hints of violets. It is a lighter version of Syrah on the palate. This is a lower acid wine because of the vintage.

Others: More about herbal and spice tones than primal fruit. Lively palate with good acidity. Elegant tannins. Soft palate with fruit and oak sweetness. Lighter than the Ojai, with some meaty character, fresher in the mouth and more fruit driven. The nose is super warm and rich, well spiced. On the palate there is a good energetic acidity that gives way to nice chewy fruit that goes on forever. There is a warm vanilla bean spice towards the end. Big, meaty, extracted and ripe. Love the texture, weight, extraction and depth, and comes across with lots of balance. Nice herbaceous quality balance with ripe fruit. Lovely fruit core is nicely extracted and well balanced. I like the length and tannins. Loamy, meaty, spicy, cranberry aroma that is lovely and complex. Full bodied, dense flavors that remain fresh and lively to the end. This will age super well.

The Ojai Vineyard

2023 Bien Nacido Syrah
14% alc., 130 cases, $39





ADAM TOLMACH GRADUATED from UC Davis with a degree in viticulture and enology in 1976. After trying his hand at growing sweet corn and melons on a property purchased by his grandfather in Ojai in 1933, he opted to get work at Zaca Mesa Winery in the hopes of securing a career that provided a living wage. Zaca Mesa is where he met Jim Clendenen, and the two of them decided to start their own winery in 1982. It was called Au Bon Climat and fashioned wines (mostly Pinot Noir) using Burgundian techniques.

By 1991, Tolmach had sold his stake in Au Bon Climat and was focusing on his own winery. The Ojai Vineyard was started on that same property purchased by his grandfather. Inspired by his experiences working a harvest in Burgundy in 1981, he concluded that even with primitive tools, a thoughtful winemaker could produce magnificent wine. He saw first-hand that you did not need major investment and fancy equipment, and that most great estates were small, family affairs.

Tolmach has described his personal Ojai Vineyard progression in the wine business as having three distinct phases. The first two phases included planting his own Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc while also purchasing fruit, familiarizing himself with varieties and various growing and winemaking styles, then taking more control over the variables. He rewrote his grape contracts to purchase by the acre instead of by the ton. While costing more money, it allowed him to reduce crop size, thus achieving more intense flavors. He was also determined to make wine more naturally, with minimal SO2, no pumps, and no filtering or fining. These wines were big, ripe, boisterous and delicious.

His third phase of development saw him move from sustainable to organic farming. He developed a real appreciation for ripe fruit versus over-ripe fruit, finding the ripe fruit more aromatic and better balanced. He learned to prefer grapes grown in cool climates because they had more balance and better expressed individual terroirs. He also determined to back off on the amount of new oak used.

Tolmach guaranteed independence by refusing to take on investors or partners. That allowed him to experiment and pursue his interests with different varieties and vineyards. It also forced him to keep the winery small. He insisted that, "For me, the joy in the process is about exploring the quality of the wine we can make. I love wine. I love grapes, and I couldn't imagine being handcuffed to a decision because someone else needs a return on their investment."

According to the winemaker:

"The wines we make today are a culmination of four decades' pursuing excellence with the fruit grown in our region. We believe a history like ours is an asset only insofar as it is defined by evolution. Craft is not an overnight sensation: it is the step-by-step progress that comes from intuition and experience.

"For me, climate is the most important influence in style for Syrah. When it comes to Syrah, my love and model is Northern Rhône, cool climate iterations that tend toward peppery, animal qualities with spirited floral notes as opposed to fruit-dominant warm climate Syrah.

"Bien Nacido Vineyard is in a very cool location. Often, we don't harvest until late October or early November. The soil is primarily alluvial at an elevation of 500 feet. The vine spacing is 9½ x 6 feet, and it is planted exclusively to Estrella clone on 5C rootstock. The vineyard is minimally irrigated as needed and is farmed meticulously as non-certified organic. We use a vertical trellis, narrow canopy and a fair amount of leaf pulling in the fruit zone.

"A lot of time is spent directing the fairly vigorous shoots vertically and early on to guarantee evenly spaced shoots and no congestion. I am shooting for alcohols in the 13 to 14.5% range. I track dropping acidity levels and watch for flavor change, trying to avoid raisin or prune character. I prefer to pick when some of the fruit has just started to shrivel.

"Grapes are picked into half-ton bins at night and delivered to the winery where they are destemmed but not crushed. Grapes are forklifted to open-top, stainless-steel tanks. No must pump is used. We no longer add SO_2 before fermentation. Instead, we incorporate non-*Saccharomyces* yeast at destemming. No acid was added, but Bien Nacido is always low in nitrogen, so we use Fermaid O. We add our cultivated native yeast quickly so fermentation begins before we see VA buildup. We no longer go after maximum extraction,



looking for a wine that is lighter on its feet, so cap management consists of pumping-over once a day for a short period of time. Fermentation usually lasts 10 to 14 days with maximum temperatures around 90°F.

"We press based on experience with the vineyard watching the tannin build up, along with the flavor and feel of the wine. We find that the wine seems more complete by combining free run and press juice. The wine settles in a tank before being racked to 100% French oak barrels with 15 to 20% new oak. We only stir lees if either primary or secondary fermentation is reluctant to finish. Wine ages in barrel for 18 to 22 months, getting racked in late July to early August when we add 15ppm SO_2 and then again at bottling time. The wine is bottled unfiltered and unfined. We use natural corks that have been individually checked by humans and machines. Typically, this Syrah gets one year of bottle age before release."

Tasting Notes:

Tolmach: The rich low register savoriness of this Syrah lurks beneath high-toned botanicals, with scents of violets, rose and fresh mint emanating from the glass. Warm, mushroom-like with a touch of oak. Plum, ripe expansive exotic flavors that come across as rich, yet saved by pleasantly dry tannins and tangy acidity. There are primal layers of olive, bresaola and leather. On the palate, luscious dark fruits unfurl with a deep meatiness that is framed by fine spicy tannin.

Others: Jammy character with smoke and bacon, with medium body and hard tannins. Green peppercorns, cola and red licorice. Supple attack with low tannin build and lots of concentration. Powerful primary Syrah expression, balanced with pleasant savory, gamey notes. The palate is quite ripe with dense, slight compote character and high acid. I love the coffee ground element coming up from the glass, along with chocolate covered cherry aromas. The palate bursts with blue and black fresh fruit with good tension on the palate, like a tightwire of acidity, but the whole thing is cloaked in opulent, rich fruit. More extracted, bigger, with fruity character on the finish that adds a layer of umami and complexity. Big, extracted with the power of Syrah and a nuance of reduction.



IT MADE NO DIFFERENCE what the varietal, these winemakers achieved iconic status by following the same principles. First, they had a vision and philosophy attached directly to expressing vineyard and terroir as clearly as possible. They never strayed from those principles, but they did allow them to evolve based upon their experience. All showed perseverance and longevity, some already moving into generational continuation of their businesses. Respectful stewardship of the land was essential, so organic, regenerative and biodynamic farming was the rule, whether certified or not. Finally, there was a dedication to excellence. It was not enough to be good; the wines had to be great, and they were.

As much as I enjoy being a winemaker, I take just as much pleasure in being a wine drinker. The nine wines included in this Varietal Focus are great examples of true excellence. Tasting these wines was a delight, and tasting them in the company of incredible, dedicated winemakers was an extravagance that was well worth the effort. **WBM**



SONOMA COUNTY

	Littorai Wines	J. Rochioli Vineyard & Winery	Hirsch Vineyards
Wine	**2023 The Pivot Vineyard Pinot Noir**	**2023 Little Hill Estate Pinot Noir**	**2023 East Ridge Pinot Noir**
Blend	100% Pinot Noir	100% Pinot Noir	100% Pinot Noir
Case Production	420	507	465 cases
Price	$105	$90	$95
Winemaker	Ted Lemon	Tom Rochioli	Jasmine Hirsch
Style Goals	Understated, little new oak influence, vibrant acidity and aromas. The concepts of depth and concentration should be concordant with producing wines of balance and harmony.	Classic Russian River Pinot Noir that is rich but elegant, neither ripe nor lean, with refined tannins and firm acidity	Wines with profound mountain character: heightened fruit intensity, notable structure and an elegant wildness
VINEYARD DATA			
Vineyard	Pivot Vineyard	Little Hill Vineyard	East Ridge
Appellation	Sonoma Coast	Russian River Valley	Fort Ross-Seaview, West Sonoma Coast
Clones	Dijon 667. 114, 777, Swann, Calera and proprietary clone	Not stated	Pommard-Wadenswill, Swan and Calera
Farming Methods	Dry-farmed; organic materials and Biodynamic methods	Conventionally, with monitored irrigation	Biodynamic practices
Harvest Practices	Night pick to quarter-ton bins	Hand-picked at night	Into half-ton bins
WINEMAKING DATA			
When to Pick	Clusters are ripe, but only just; Usually 100 days from full bloom	Even coloring through cluster; ripe stems	Looking for physiological ripeness while preserving natural acidity
Sorting	Two tables	Vineyard sorted; additional sorting table	Cluster-sorted
SO_2	30-50 ppm	None	50 ppm
Destemmed?	23% whole cluster	De-stemmed, not crushed	No
Cold Soak	Chill to 55°F, then gradually warm as native yeast takes over	Four days at 55°F	3-5 days at 45°F to 55°F
Yeast	Native	RC212/001	Native
Fermentation Temperature	80°F to 88°F	86°F	75°F to 82°F
Fermentation Technique	Manual punch-downs three times daily during active fermentation, then slow reduction	Punch-down twice daily	Punch-down twice daily, up to 3 times during peak fermentation
Press Regimen	Separate press juice	Lightly when dry, do not separate fractions	Combine free run and press juice from gentle basket press
Nutrients	None	Fermaid K	None
Acid addition	None	None	None
Malolactic	Native in barrel	Inoculated	Native
Oak Program	100% French oak; 25% new	100% French; 50% new	French and European oak; 30% new
Barrel-aging	16 months	Not stated	16-18 months
Filtration	Unfiltered	Racked to barrel	Cross-flow
Closure	Natural cork	Natural cork	Natural cork
Bottle-aging	6-9 months	8 months	9-12 months

NAPA VALLEY			
	Larkmead Vineyards	**Staglin Family Vineyard**	**Spottswoode Winery**
Wine	**2021 Solari Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**	**2018 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**	**2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**
Blend	100% Cabernet Sauvignon	87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petit Verdot	89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot
Case Production	1,202	2,300	3,800
Price	$200	$385	$285
Winemaker	Avery Heelan	Matt Peterson	Aron Weinkauf
Style Goals	Make a wine of balance and elegance, Cabernet that embodies both strength and restraint, with depth that unfolds slowly rather than declaring itself all at once. The goal is always harmony.	Capture the essence of this place. Its natural inclination leans more towards prettiness and elegance over power and structure	Our style is not to be overripe or over-extracted, but rather to focus on the elegance and the style that are dictated by the vines for that specific year
VINEYARD DATA			
Vineyard	Estate Vineyard	Staglin Family Vineyard	Estate Vineyard
Appellation	Napa Valley	Rutherford, Napa Valley	St. Helena, Napa Valley
Clones	337, 7, Olmo, 15, 4 and 169	Staglin, Martha's, 337, 4, 191 and Heritage	Spottswoode clone, Eisele, and 337
Farming Methods	Cover crops and composting to maintain soil health with minimal tilling; avoid herbicides and neonicotinoids entirely	Whatever we deem necessary in the vineyard to achieve optimal results and maturity in a given vintage	Organically farmed
Harvest Practices	At night	Into 30 lb-yellow lug boxes	Hand-picked into macro bins
WINEMAKING DATA			
When to Pick	Taste and texture; fruit shows both purity and energy; pulp softens and separates from skins	Based on mouthfeel and taste; Mature fruit flavors with restrained herbal notes, no pyrazine elements	Watch numbers, tracking falling acid; before any dimpling
Sorting	Cluster-sorted	Vibrating shaker table plus optically sorted	Optical sort
SO_2	30-40 ppm	25-55 ppm	10-15 ppm
Destemmed?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cold Soak	3-5 days at 45°F	1-3 days	3 days
Yeast	Native and commercial, usually FX10	Variety of native, *Saccharomyces* and non-*Saccharomyces* strains	Native and commercial yeast
Fermentation Temperature	80°F to 84°F	High 80s, with peak in low 90s	80°F - 86°F
Fermentation Technique	Pump-over up to 3x daily, tapering off later	Pump-over 5 times daily	Pump-over twice daily
Press Regimen	Based on taste and tannic sensation; use free run only	Keep cuts separate	Separate factions
Nutrients	Organic nutrients at inoculation	2B FermControl BIO, Laffort Nutristart ORG or Nutristart	None
Acid addition	None	Usually none	If needed
Malolactic	Native and inoculated, if needed	Mostly native, but some extended maceration lots inoculated	Native, but will inoculate as needed
Oak Program	100% French; 71% new	100% French oak; 89% new	90% French, 10% Hungarian; 60% new
Barrel-aging	20 months	21 months	20 months
Filtration	Filtered	Unfiltered	Sterile-filtered
Closure	Natural cork	54 mm Amorim Ndtech natural cork	Natural cork
Bottle-aging	1 year	14 months	1 year

CENTRAL COAST

	The Ojai Vineyard	Tablas Creek Vineyard	Foxen Vineyard
Wine	**2023 Bien Nacido Syrah**	**2022 Syrah**	**2022 Tinaquaic Vineyards Syrah Heritage Collection**
Blend	100% Syrah	100% Syrah	100% Syrah
Case Production	122 cases	630	50 cases
Price	$75	$55	$60
Winemaker	Adam Tolmach	Chelsea Franchi	Bill Wathen
Style Goals	The wines we make today are a culmination of four decades' pursuing excellence with the fruit grown in our region.	Year in and year out, our property produces a Syrah that carries meaty, chewy, floral characteristics balanced by energetic acidity. We make this wine to age for 10 to 20 years.	Respect the vine and let the wines make themselves with little or no intervention.
VINEYARD DATA			
Vineyard	Bien Nacido Vineyard	Tablas Creek Vineyard	Tinaquaic Vineyards
Appellation	Santa Maria Valley	Adelaida District Paso Robles	Santa Maria Valley
Clones	Estrella	Tablas A, C, D, E and F	Durrell (from Shiraz FPS 08)
Farming Methods	Minimally irrigated; Organic practices	Mostly dry-farmed, certified Organic, Biodynamic and Regenerative Organic	Dry-farm; Certified sustainable
Harvest Practices	Night-pick into half-ton bins	Pick individual lots separately; Hand-harvested	Hand-picked in early morning
WINEMAKING DATA			
When to Pick	Track dropping acidity levels and watch for flavor change, trying to avoid raisin or prune character	23° Brix with a 3.5 to 3.8 pH, before any raisining	23° to 24° Brix with 3.5 pH and .5 to .55 TA; before dimpling starts
Sorting	N/A	Hand-sorted	Hand-sorted
SO_2	None	40 ppm	25 ppm
Destemmed?	Destemmed, but not crushed	Mix of de-stemmed fruit, whole-cluster or stems added back	Whole-berry destemmed
Cold Soak	None	1-2 days	2 days
Yeast	Cultivated native yeast	Native	Laffort RX60
Fermentation Temperature	Max 90°F	72°F and 78°F	Low 80°s
Fermentation Technique	Pump-over once a day for short time	N/A	Punch-down 1-2 times daily
Press Regimen	Combine free run and press juice	When density dips below .999 or 14 days, whichever takes longer; Separating free run from press juice	Negative Brix, usually after 15-20 days on skins
Nutrients	Fermaid O	None	Will add yeast derivative nutrient at inoculation and 1/3 Brix depletion if needed
Acid addition	None	0-1.75 g/L tartaric acid, after processing, based on lot	None
Malolactic	Only stir if reluctant to finish	Native	Inoculated, no lees stirring
Oak Program	100% French oak; 15-20% new	100% French oak; 10% new Biodynamic	500 L neutral French oak puncheon
Barrel-aging	18-22 months	17 months	20 months
Filtration	Unfiltered and unfined	Unfiltered	Unfiltered and unfined
Closure	Natural cork	Natural cork	Natural cork
Bottle-aging	1 year	6 months	2-3 years