

Napa Valley's big little disruptor

In the perfectly ordered landscape of Napa Valley, the quirky Tank Garage winery is shaking up the status quo

Ruma Singh

During a summer visit to Napa Valley, California, earlier this year, after I had tasted superbly structured Cabernets and technically perfect white wines over four action-packed days, I wanted something different.

I wanted a little disruption.

That is when I recalled that chef-sommelier-writer Alan Tardi had mentioned, during a webinar, the Tank Garage winery in Napa's Calistoga as noteworthy for its highly-rated, low-intervention wines from a range of little-known grapes. It sounded like just what I was looking for.

Tank Garage, I soon discovered, was Napa's coolest winery and tasting room, repurposed from a 1930s-era garage and petrol station, complete with bright green gas tanks. Visitors often mistake it for a petrol station.

In Napa's small, tight-knit super-premium winemaking community, Tank Garage is something of an oddball. If the Napa playbook is all about glass-wrapped tasting rooms offering superbly structured Cabernets, Tank Garage is about limited-production blends sourced from a handful of California vineyards; just 25,000 cases of wine annually spread over 25-30 unique one-off labels which are never repeated, no matter how successful.

The tasting room is also one-of-a-kind. The décor, with music and dim lighting, reflects a distinctly retro vibe: A bright red Indian motorbike that belonged to the erstwhile garage owner and daredevil racer Eddie Bratton occupies a corner, while several repurposed gas can guitars (yes, they play music!) line the walls, along with Prohibition-era black and white photographs.

The glasses are expensive stemless Gabriel-Glas and the service crew, all ripped jeans and tattoos, is armed with serious wine qualifications. There is no dark suit or tastevin in sight.

Devon, my host and a certified sommelier

who uses only one name, greets me warmly and brings a fistful of bottles to the table. The names (F*ck yeah, Hippy Sippy, Out of the Closet) and the custom-designed labels (Heavy Metal Life, a non-vintage red blend, features a label of a heavily tattooed hand by Los Angeles star tattoo artist Shawn Barber) capture my attention as much as the wine. Red, white, pink, sparkling pét-nat—there were a plethora of styles to savour. "We are all about flexibility," explains Devon. "So we don't have an attachment to a specific style."

This is what makes Tank Garage unique. In a premium wine region that plays by the book, it's the ultimate disruptor. "We follow no blueprint," general manager and marketing head Ed Feuchuk reiterates over Zoom a week later.

Tank Garage wines are priced way below Napa's often stratospheric levels, typically \$38-75 (around ₹3,000-6,500) a bottle, with rosés starting at \$22. "The prices reflect our cost," explains Feuchuk. "While we make small batches, the market may not be ready for a \$300 Trousseau Gris, however rare. Our effort is to make the wines affordable and approachable."

Their wines are sold via the tasting room or the website, to listed members only. "We don't want to get into distribution, we would rather control our own destiny," adds Feuchuk.

Started in 2014, Tank Garage is Canadian-born founder-owner James Harden's "garage project". Harden also owns the James Cole winery, a traditional Napa winery. "With Tank Garage, James wanted to explore themes, messaging—he has been a counter-culture rebel," says Feuchuk. It makes sense then that *Never Dream Alone* is the motto, spotted everywhere from the winery facade to the wine labels. Their winemaker, Bertus van Zyl, is also the James Cole winemaker, but at Tank he enjoys wearing a different set of fun hats.

THE TASTING

Devon starts by pouring me a white Zinfandel only because I say it is not my favourite style. I sip hesitantly but Trailer Park Pretty is bone dry and perfectly balanced, far from the cloying sweetness I expect. "We go where the fruit takes us, sourcing from exceptional vineyards all over the state," she says.

The next wine is a style I like—a textural skin-contact white called Occhiali da Sole 2021 from the noted 10-acre Fanauch-Wood Road Vineyard in the Russian River Valley. Lip-smackingly savoury with a vein of minerality, this was a rare 100% Trousseau Gris, a grape seldom found out-



(top) Winemaker Bertus van Zyl; and the Tank Garage team creates something brand new each harvest.

side France's Jura. I instantly want to buy a bottle. This is followed by another winner, a white wine made by carbonic maceration: La Loba 2021, a blend of Chenin Blanc with Petit Manseng, Bianchetta Trevigiana and 1% orange Muscat sourced from the El Dorado County vineyards; all lemon curd and soft floral notes of jasmine. The label, by Argentine artist Florencia Belcastro (known as Flora), depicts the Loba or she-wolf as a line-drawn bloodied animal-woman.

Next, the F*ck Yeah 2021 red (the language on the labels is as colourful as that frequently heard around the tasting room)

is a Sangiovese blend with Barbera, Negrette and Cabernet Sauvignon, an homage to the Italian winemakers who "showed their middle fingers to tradition" to create the superstar Super-Tuscan in the 1980s. The Skateland Pét Nat sparkling rosé 2022 blends Barbera with Chardonnay, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cinsault and Falanghina to create a party of fresh red berry flavours on the palate.

I am in vinous heaven.

ODDBALL GRAPES

The grapes used for Tank Garage wines are blends of rare grapes grown in small quantities, far removed from the Napa script. "At first, we made what we knew best—Bordeaux blends, Pinot Noir," says Feuchuk. "The longer we have been in the business, the easier it has been to experiment, even connect with the occasional weird and oddball grape." For instance, even their winemaking team had not heard of the grape Cabernet Pfeffer when they came across it "but we decided to make a 100% version called Temple of Flora in 2019 and it was delicious—cracked black pepper and dark cherry—a very small batch which sold out fast," says Feuchuk. "Last year, we vinified 46 grape varieties for our wines." A new project is with the Charbono grape from an 80-year-old vineyard.

They take pride in spearheading the movement to introduce little-known varieties in California. Some varieties are so rare that they have had to apply to have them added to the US regulatory body Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau's list of approved varietal names. "We did this with Greco Bianco and Treixadura. Aside from these, other unique varieties include Trousseau Gris, Terrold-ego, Ruché, Fiano, Négrette, French Colombar, Alicante Bouschet, Valdigué...I can keep going."

There is no chance of a repeat or another vintage of a favourite. The team is adamant about creating something brand

new each harvest. It does, however, make variations on the most favoured styles. For instance, a skin-contact white wine, a pét-nat, a Barbera-based blend feature among the favourites. "Our dogma is not to be dogmatic," says Feuchuk.

Tank Garage also supports charities, setting aside profits from a percentage of its sales for its philanthropic arm, Tank Cares. They have raised \$100,000 since 2019—for California wildfires, women's rights, the Ukrainian refugee crisis, etc.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Thinking of 30 brand new names and styles of wine must be a challenge, I think out loud. Feuchuk shrugs: "Sometimes a really great idea just pops into someone's mind. When we were considering making a skin contact wine, the name Skin Flick (euphemism for a porn film) just came up, as an homage to the 1970s and 1980s era. The label became a film strip." The wine was a skin-fermented blend of white grapes from vineyards in the Sierra Foothills. "At other times, we taste the wine and that inspires a name. A Gamay wine made by the ripasso method and partial carbonic maceration was super juicy, so we named it Juicy."

One of their biggest successes is Middle Finger 2019, described on the website as a "cult" blend of 95% Barbera, 3% Primitivo and 2% Graciano. The label features a gold sculpture of a hand, middle finger held aloft "to the doubters and non-believers in life" by Italian artist Alessandro Paglia. It sold out in under four hours.

There are plans to expand their successful Calistoga model to different regions or locations. Feuchuk says, "I don't know what we will do next but it won't be boring." He goes on to reference musician David Bowie. "Bowie did not stay *Ziggy Stardust*. He changed and evolved. That is what made him great."

Ruma Singh is a Bengaluru-based wine and travel writer.

Underground Budapest: dungeons and Dracula

There's a whole new subterranean world to explore in Hungary's capital city, from caves to the Pinball Museum

Joanna Lobo

It's popcorn unlike anything I have seen. White, round and cold to the touch. It is abundant, a veritable concession stand's worth of popcorn. Except, there's no movie on display here. Real life is proving more picturesque and entertaining.

I am below the ground, in the 12 degrees Celsius climes of the Szemlő-hegyi Cave. These majestic caves are a natural treasure in Budapest, known especially for their unique limestone formations, over 40 million years old, commonly called popcorn or cauliflower. These, I learn during a 40-minute underground tour, were created by the upward movement of hot thermal water.

It's eerie underground, with the sound of dripping water breaking the silence. We walk in single file behind our guide, marvelling at the white crystals of gypsum, popcorn formations and calcite plates. I breathe in deeply. There's no dust or pollen here, which makes this cave a favourite for those suffering from respiratory illnesses. In fact, patients often come here for speleotherapy.

Nearby, the Pálvölgyi cave proves to be a more strenuous trek but still rewarding, rich in dripstone formations nicknamed Beehive and Organ Pipes, shining calcium-crystals, even fossil imprints.

In my week in Hungary's capital, I discovered that the best attractions are subterranean. While the popular Pest side of the Danube river is flat, Buda is filled with labyrinths and bunkers, and Buda hill, with caves like Szemlő-hegyi.

On the first day itself, I unknowingly travel on what is a unique part of Budapest's history. The underground yellow line (or M1) is picturesque—small wooden and yellow carriages and decorated stations. Locally, it is the "small underground". Historically, it is the first underground line in Europe. It's a picturesque way to travel along the city's heritage and popular Andrásy Avenue.

In Budapest, even public transport is magical.

As is its Jewish Quarter.

Once a Jewish ghetto, today it is party central, owing to ruin pubs where dilapidated, forgotten buildings into thriving bars and party places. But it's the basements that are intriguing. Some are thrift stores, where faux leather and sparkly tiaras lie with warm jackets and polka-dot dresses. Some are restaurants. And, some are restaurants with attached museums dedicated to *pálinka*.

The fruit brandy *pálinka* is Hungary's national drink. The museum dedicated to



(left) The Arcade Museum; and the church inside a cave.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOANNA LOBO

it is just one room with history printed on boards, some old photographs, and pots used to store the spirit. It is inadequate but there's a free drink at the end and I pick up some valuable tips. *Pálinka* is drunk at room temperature, ideally a few minutes after pouring, in a tulip-shaped glass. It is strong and leaves a burn down the throat. I sip on it, enjoying its warmth; it's bleak and rainy outside.

It's evening and the Jewish Quarter is alive with activity. I follow a small picture of a lamp, down a flight of stairs and into a cavernous basement bar. Lámpás is advertised as a cheap place to drink. It's a dive

bar, dark, with exposed pipes, and narrow passages leading to seating spots. The menu is limited—this isn't the place for cocktails and Instagram reels, and there's no food. It's a place meant for nursing a glass of beer or really cheap house wine and being unwelcome gate-crashers at a birthday party.

Perhaps my favourite underground space is the Pinball Museum, or Flipper museum, a 400 sq. m space dedicated to... arcade games, over 130 of them! Exposed brick walls, flashing lights and bleeps and chimes welcome me. Though a museum, it is actually a nostalgic playground, with



games dating back to the early 20th century. The bulk of these are pinball games, with superheroes and action heroes, cartoon characters and storybook villains. Super Mario is there, as are Pink Panther, Rocky Balboa and even the Rolling Stones. I try my hand at almost every pinball machine, fulfilling childhood fantasies. I also play air handball, basketball, swipe fruit at *Fruit Ninja*, and watch people "play" legendary rock numbers.

Four hours later, as I leave reluctantly, a life-size Darth Vader bids me adieu. If this is the dark side, count me in.

In Buda Castle, I hear about Count

Dracula or, rather, his inspiration, the sadistic Vlad the Impaler. The labyrinthine network of tunnels under Buda Castle were once torture chambers and a prison, which held the infamous Vlad in the 15th century. It is believed that his time turned him into the monster who loved torturing his enemies. One legend says Vlad died in prison and his body is buried there.

Away from the chilling stories and tales of Castle Hill, I head to another popular hill dominating the Buda side of the river. Gellért Hill is where I test my stamina with a trek, soak in the greenery, and enjoy breathtaking views of Pest. And once I have had my fill, I make my way to a church to give thanks for all that beauty.

On Gellért Hill, I find a church that is ideal for prayer. There's no decoration or glamour here. Instead, there's a replica of the miraculous Black Madonna. And, it is in a cave.

St Ivan's Cave, Sziklatemplom, or simply Cave Church, was the home of a hermit monk before being taken over by Pauline Monks. It was walled up with concrete during Communist rule but reopened in 1991. It's a faux cave but still impressive. I follow a tunnel-like corridor that leads to the deeper, man-made section of the functional church. The place is cool and peaceful, calling for quiet reflection.

It's a reminder of how, in Budapest, some of the best experiences are down under.

Joanna Lobo is a Goa-based journalist.