



Sommelier **INDIA**
THE WINE MAGAZINE

SPRING 2024 ₹300

THE SOURCE

New Premium
collection from Sula
page 34

WILLAMETTE VALLEY

The holy grail for Pinot lovers
page 46

**THE ART OF
THE WINE LIST**

Secrets of a great wine
list unravelled
page 13

VISIT

CHELTENHEM

For its colonial past
and Indian restaurants
page 74

NAPA VALLEY

Change is the Constant

page 26

NAPA VALLEY

Change is the Constant

Within a few decades of the history-making Judgement of Paris, Napa Valley established itself as one of the world's premium wine regions. Ruma Singh visited a few Napa wineries that highlight the region's development and versatility

In a world filled with ancient and historic wine regions, Napa Valley, the heartland of premium California winemaking, may be considered something of a Johnny-come-lately. The first mention of vines in Napa appeared only in the 1700s, and referred to wild vines. European vines appeared only in the 1800s with the immigrants who brought them along when they came to prospect for gold in California's Gold Rush. *Vitis vinifera* soon found a natural home in Napa and, through the efforts of pioneers like Charles Krug, George Latour, Andre Tchischcheff and others, modern Napa established and grew, interrupted only by the phylloxera scourge and Prohibition before hitting its stride again.

Geographically, Napa Valley is blessed with multiple positive aspects, but it only really made it to the headlines with the historic Judgement of Paris in 1976, when the hitherto unknown wines of the region beat the top names in French winemaking. This gave the necessary impetus to the region's

winemakers to up their ante and harness Napa's bounty – diverse, ancient soils (from sedimentary to volcanic, with everything in between, allowing almost any grape to grow); ideal topography (the valley is nestled in the protection of two mountain ranges) and a dry Mediterranean climate, ideal for premium viticulture.

In a few short decades Napa established itself as a region capable of making technically superb wines and grew exponentially. The overarching Napa Valley AVA (American Viticultural Area) was established in 1981 and soon 16 nested AVAs were added, each one producing wines with unique characteristics that reflect their terroir. This was aided by the spotlight on what soon became Napa's cult wine. Screaming Eagle launched its first vintage in 1992 at \$75 a bottle. Today, the official price has several more zeros added to it and the wines are virtually impossible to get!

On a recent visit to Napa Valley, I visited several wineries. Here is a cross-section that represents Napa versatility as it exists today.

Staglin Family Vineyard

Family-owned, classic style. Rutherford AVA



Family and friends around the Staglin dinner table. Bottom: A bottle of Stagliano Sangiovese, named after Garen Staglin's father, Pasquale Stagliano

Napa is proud of the fact that 95% of its wineries are family-owned. Among these is Staglin, a highly-regarded 24-hectare, certified organic estate owned by the Staglin family. Before Shari and Garen Staglin bought the property in 1985, it belonged to the Latour family, owners of Napa's Beaulieu Vineyards, and was run by legendary viticulturist Andre Tchelistcheff. Situated on the western slopes of the Mayacamas mountains in Napa's premium Rutherford AVA, Staglin has the perfect terroir for Napa's top grape, Cabernet Sauvignon.

Staglin is famous for its small production but big heart, as seen in its Music Festival for Brain Health held post-harvest every year. This year's festival saw country superstar and multiple Grammy nominee, Martina McBride headlining a day-long event of music, wine, and gourmet food with over 70 wineries pouring their wines for the all-day event, including Screaming Eagle, Harlan Estate, Colgin, Bryant Family, Continuum, Scarecrow and many more. The food for the event

was by Chef Ken Frank of La Toque, hospitality director Jaime Orozco told me as we toured the estate that includes a modern underground 27,000-foot winery.

The vineyards are dotted with fruit orchards. I ate a juicy fig, sun-warmed and straight off the tree, and learned that Staglin makes approximately 5,000 cases annually, focusing on Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon under two labels – Salus and Staglin.

"We also produce an estate-grown Sangiovese, a rare Sangiovese rosé and a Bordeaux blend, INEO. The rosé is a tiny production, and available only at the estate," says Orozco. Garen Staglin's father was Pasquale Stagliano, hence the name Stagliano on the Sangiovese and Rosato di Sangiovese bottles. The noted David Abreu has been their viticulturist since 1985.

With a name that commands respect for its quality, Staglin's reputation keeps it at the top of Napa's best-regarded estates.



Antinori Napa Valley

Famed owner, from Tuscany. Atlas Peak AVA

Put together 26 generations of winemaking history with a (relatively) new, high-potential wine region and what do you get? A match made in heaven. When patriarch Piero Antinori first visited Napa in 1986, he fell in love with its Cabernet Sauvignon and was quick to invest in a 1,210-acre estate on prime mountain land. He is said to regard Antinori Napa as his second home after Tuscany.

“He believed that having vineyards planted at high elevation (up to 1800 feet) on the rocky volcanic soils of the eastern mountains of Napa Valley were critical for successfully growing Cabernet Sauvignon,” says estate manager Glenn Salva, “Today 64% of our 550 acres of vineyards are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon. We gambled by purchasing land in a relatively unknown area of Napa Valley, high in the eastern mountains, known today as the Atlas Peak AVA.”

Antinori Napa offers what is arguably one of the most stunning vistas Napa has to offer. Overlooking a bowl-shaped valley in an amphitheatre-like setting, the estate boasts a rare 30,000 feet underground cellar built as a three-year project in 1987, which houses its wine and is the location for tastings.

The Antinori Napa portfolio is deliberately limited to just a handful of labels. Their A26 Chardonnay (named after the three Antinori daughters of the current 26th generation) is elegant, showing depth, complexity and purity of fruit. The Chardonnay is grown in Foss Valley, with its alluvial soils and a sink of cold air during the growing season – perfect for Chardonnay which comprises approximately 25% of Antinori Napa. “The Chardonnay is a discovery for us. This is not why we came to Napa Valley.”

Rapidly growing in reputation is the Townsend Cabernet Sauvignon which reflects Piero Antinori’s vision and perseverance, explains Salva. The grapes are from the best vineyard parcels, with a touch of Cabernet Franc added for fragrance. Proficio is named for the Antinori family crest which reads Te Duce Proficio (“Following your guidance, I flourish”). Released first in 2019 after 30 years of research into mountain viticulture, only 150 cases are made, selling



Marla Carroll, winemaker at Antinori Napa Valley winery

for \$300 a bottle, a red blend of Cabernet Sauvignon with a 70:30 proportion of Cabernet Franc.

But the wine in the Antinori portfolio that generated the greatest excitement for me was the Cabernet Franc. The 2019 vintage was a stellar expression of Napa’s experiments with the grape with an eye to the future. It was elegant yet had soft and juicy red fruit with a delicious freshness typical of the grape’s expressions and without the muscularity that Cabernet Sauvignon brings.

The Antinori emphasis on research in the vineyards and the cellars continues in Napa: experiments with new clones; new techniques in the vineyards and new approaches to fermentation, trying different types of oak for barrels, their sizes and age, and varying length of aging.

“Today we are managing over one million grapevines on the estate,” adds Salva, who has been with the estate from 1986. “We don’t want Antinori Napa to produce Italian wines. It must have Napa’s own authenticity enriched by generations of experience. We have the quality, the culture, the knowledge, and the place to produce something different.”

Antinori Napa Valley winery located on the eastern mountains of the Atlas Peak AVA



Promise Wines

Boutique, rising star. Pritchard Hill

When Steve McPherson swapped a thriving career in showbiz to turn wine producer, he was fulfilling a promise made to his wife Jennifer hence the name Promise Wines. As a showbiz mogul, McPherson was credited with turning around the fortunes of ABC Entertainment where he was once president and associated with the development of some of ABC’s most successful shows, including “Lost, Desperate Housewives”, and “Grey’s Anatomy”. But wine was always a passion, with his growing years spent in France watching his father learn about the nuances of wine from Steven Spurrier at L’Academie du Vin in Paris.

“Promise is truly the physical manifestation of a deeply personal dream,” he says of the promise he made his wife on his wedding day to produce wine, a common love for both. “While I am proud of the work I did earlier and I still love movies and TV, my new life has made me a better husband, father and friend.”

The McPhersons are hands-on decision makers on the estate, and despite Promise’s fast-growing reputation for making outstanding wines it is run much like a family homestead. Small is beautiful here: their production started in 2004 with just 48 cases of wine and has gradually scaled up to just 1200 cases over four labels, all named after emotions. A Napa Valley Bordeaux-style blend is named “the gratitude”, a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir is called “the love”, and a Pinot Noir rosé is named “the joy”. At the top is their flagship Promise Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, 16 vintages strong this year.

The wines are sold out almost immediately on release to a much sought-after membership list that includes several high-profile celebrities, whose names they are reluctant to divulge.

Promise buys grapes from carefully handpicked producers, even as it readies its own estate vineyards on a 100-acre estate on Pritchard Hill adjoining the Bryant Family. This is also where a new winery is planned.

The flagship Promise Cabernet Sauvignon is a carefully selected



Steve McPherson pictured with his wife, Jennifer

blend of mountain-grown fruit (from Pritchard Hill and Stagecoach vineyards) and valley floor (Oakville) (see box). “We think this is a perfect combination of what world-class Cabernet Sauvignon can be, both bring out different elements of the grape. Our rosé and Pinot are both from Sonoma. I have a love affair with Burgundy which is reflected in our Burgundy-influenced Pinot Noir. Our rosé is a homage to the spectacular rosés from the south of France,” he adds, admitting that his abiding admiration for France has influenced his winemaking style.

McPherson follows his passions as he expands his portfolio, unusually adding a champagne and a bourbon to it in 2023. “This will be the inaugural release of a Promise Grand Cru Champagne from Le Mesnil sur Oger in the famed Côte des Blancs of France. We have been fortunate to work with Stéphane Renault, a brilliant young winemaker.”

In the new year, they will release a single barrel of their 12-year-old Family Reserve Kentucky Bourbon. The bourbon is in homage to Steve’s great-grandfather, Walter Henry McPherson, who would make whiskey at the back of his blacksmith’s shop in Kentucky for family and friends. “The single barrel whiskey is earmarked only for longstanding Promise members,” adds McPherson.

“Every year our organic garden provides an overflowing bounty for homemade jams, pickles, and just plain good eating.”

As with many top Napa producers, sustainability is key to their mission: they practice organic viticulture and have also adopted elements of biodynamic viticulture. With the focus on excellence, it is little wonder that the Promise motto is also the McPhersons’ catchphrase: “Always drink the good stuff first.”





Château Montelena

Historic, classic Napa. Calistoga AVA

It is impossible to mention Napa without mentioning Château Montelena. The producer leapt into the limelight in 1976 when its 1973 Chardonnay defeated the best of Old-World Burgundy in the historic Judgement of Paris tasting. Understandably, Montelena and the Barrett family names are inextricably linked with the rise of Napa's wine fortunes, and their Chardonnay occupies pride of place in the US National Register of Historic Places. Today, crowds of fans continue to be drawn to the iconic stone-faced Château Montelena which found instant fame after the movie, *Bottle Shock*.

Whipping around the vineyards in a buggy on a warm July afternoon, it is clear to see that Bo Barrett, named CEO after his father the late Jim Barrett, is keeping things moving. Jim bought Montelena in 1972. Today the vineyards are being replanted, with parcels of gnarled old vines alongside strong, youthful ones. With vineyards going up to 370m, the estate boasts of a diverse range of soils and mesoclimates which permit optimal ripening and produce perfectly structured wines.

Montelena is proud of its history, but refuses to rest on its laurels. Bo Barrett has declared that he is not interested in 'replicating wines year on year'. This statement refers to their philosophy of crafting wines that express the growing conditions of the year, and embracing the differences of each vintage. "Rather than trying to make the same wine from year to year, we simply strive to make the BEST

wine that we possibly can in each year," I was informed by my host.

At Montelena, sustainability is not a goal or target, but a philosophy woven inextricably into its identity. "From the beginning, our owners recognized the benefits of farming responsibly and conserving natural resources in the pursuit of creating age-worthy wine." Montelena has also embraced new age technology with AI-driven tech, 100% solar energy powered, in its pursuit of making excellent wine. Every decision, from rootstock, clonal selection, row spacing or row orientation has been carefully optimized based on new data.

Château Montelena makes approximately 35,000 to 40,000 cases per year, produced across all their wines, with six core wines in their portfolio currently. Interestingly, while Montelena won for its Chardonnay, it is their Cabernet that they have always cherished. Today, their flagship wines include their Estate Cabernet Sauvignon and Estate Zinfandel, along with top sellers Napa Valley Cabernet, Napa Valley Chardonnay, Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc and their Potter Valley Riesling.

Conscious of their historic status, each year they hold back five to 10% of their Estate Cabernet and Chardonnay production for their popular library tastings (including their premium Cellarmaster Tasting for members), periodically making small quantities of older vintages available to the public. While Matt Crafton is Montelena's winemaker, Bo Barrett, remains a very hands-on CEO; during my visit, bottling was underway at the winery and he was personally overseeing operations.

Left: The iconic stone-clad Château Montelena. Below: A bottle of the highly prized Montelena Cabernet Sauvignon



Tank Garage Winery

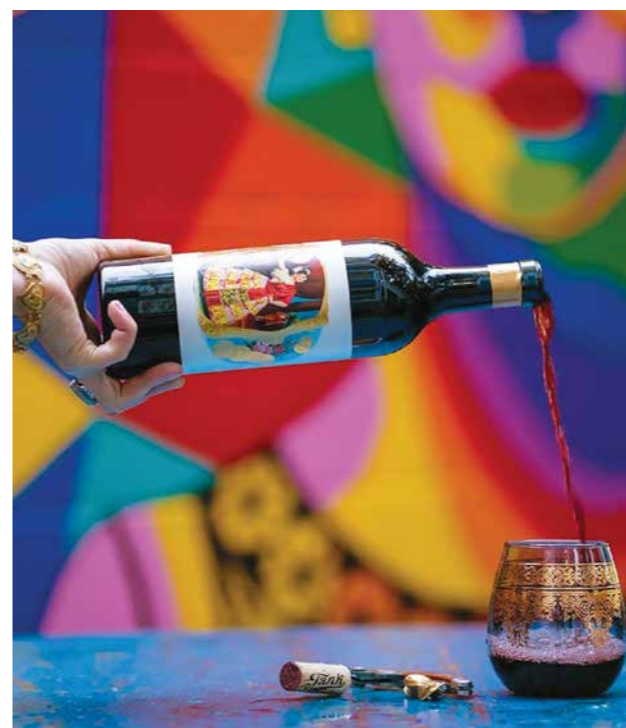
Boutique, loved by Gen Z. Calistoga AVA

Tank Garage may be described as the antithesis of a typical Napa winery. Irreverent in its approach to wine production, everything from its labels to its blends gently shows the middle finger, sometimes literally (they made a wine named Middle Finger) to tradition. Yet this is no amateurish project, as owner James Harder and winemaker Bertus van Zyl skillfully combine technical know-how with out-of-the-box thinking.

Tank Garage does not own vineyards, but sources fruit from renowned parcels around the state. Its limited edition, small-batch, wines are sold out annually, on release. With names like Talk Dirty to Me (a Bordeaux blend), Soft Core (a carbonic red, featuring Valdiguié, Negrette, Grenache), and Hippy Sippy (Chardonnay pét-nat), the wines grab eyeballs and boast of rarely-used grapes (Teroldego, Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet among many others).

Tank Garage has doubled its sales since its launch in 2014, showing that Napa is ready for change. As in the case of many Napa properties, it also places emphasis on sustainability and innovation.

Another bonus: Tank's wines are considered



affordable by Napa standards. No wonder then that millennials, and those tired of the status quo, make a beeline to its unique tasting room in Calistoga, located in a Prohibition-era petrol bunk, an eyebrow-raising location. When I walked in for a tasting on a hot July afternoon, I saw a tasting room unlike any in Napa: funky, cool, and relaxed.

My favourite from the tasting? A skin-contact Trousseau Gris called Occhiali da Sole, from the famed Fanucchi-Wood Road vineyard in the Russian River Valley. Featuring a Hollywood starlet in rose-tinted glasses on the label, the wine is layered, with red fruit and tropical notes overlaid with a textured saline finish.

Tank Garage wines, the antithesis of Napa wines from their labels to their blends, are much sought after by millennials

Cardinale Winery

Family-owned, premium. Oakville AVA

The Jackson family might well be regarded as the ultimate Napa winemaking dynasty. Its multi-generational ownership covers wineries in countries around the world, besides California. At the head is matriarch Barbara Banke, widow of founder Jess Jackson.

While the Jackson family wines cover several properties and make wines at multiple price points, including their popular brand Kendall-Jackson, at the very top of their quality pyramid is Cardinale. Cardinale produces a single wine each vintage – a Cabernet Sauvignon.

Right from its launch in 1982, Cardinale's singular mission was focused on producing the highest-quality Cabernet Sauvignon. The vineyard sources change from year to year to create a distinctive wine that is a blend of multiple sub-appellations in Napa Valley – mountain and valley floor AVAs – resulting in a limited production, powerful and seamless Cabernet Sauvignon that requires patient decanting. The Cabernet is native yeast fermented and bottled unfiltered after being aged in French oak.

The winery has a strong sustainability focus and climate-sensitive approach. Katie Jackson is co-founder of the International Wineries for



Above: Christopher Carpenter, winemaker at Cardinale Winery. Right: Bottle shot of their top wine, Cardinale Cabernet Sauvignon 2019. Bottom: The Cardinale Estate

Climate Action with Miguel A Torres, which has a 10-year climate action plan, "Rooted for Good", with ambitious targets to achieve by 2030. Since 2001, Cardinale's winemaker is the noted Chris Carpenter, whose multi-faceted background in viticulture enables him to grasp the intricacies of both vineyard and winery. A music lover, he is believed to treat the blending of grapes like a conductor blends elements of an orchestra to create a perfect symphony to reflect the characteristics of the vintage. The wine is blended just prior to bottling to show the development of the two years' spent maturing in barrels.

With a very small, high-end production, Cardinale offers limited availability to a members-only list.



Raj Patel wines

Niche, trendy. Downtown Napa



Raj Patel, a boutique wine producer with a niche portfolio

The wine world is now familiar with the story of Raj Patel, the Indian-origin producer whose eponymous wines were selected to be served at the White House gala hosted by US president Joe Biden for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Despite seeing early success, Patel has not cashed in on his instant fame. A boutique producer with a niche portfolio, Patel operates from downtown Napa, working with experienced French oenologist Julien Fayard to produce wine which he sells out of a controlled allocation system to a list of members. He owns no vineyards, but leases specific parcels of vines in noted Napa vineyards which he uses annually for his production.

With wines priced from \$60 (Sauvignon Blanc) to \$170 (Coombsville Cabernet Sauvignon) Patel keeps a steady eye on quality, and delivers it.

SIDE BAR

Understanding Napa terroir – mountain high, valley low

Napa Valley's geography allows it to produce perfectly ripe grapes that produce some of the world's top-rated wines. To understand why, let's look at Napa's unique topography.

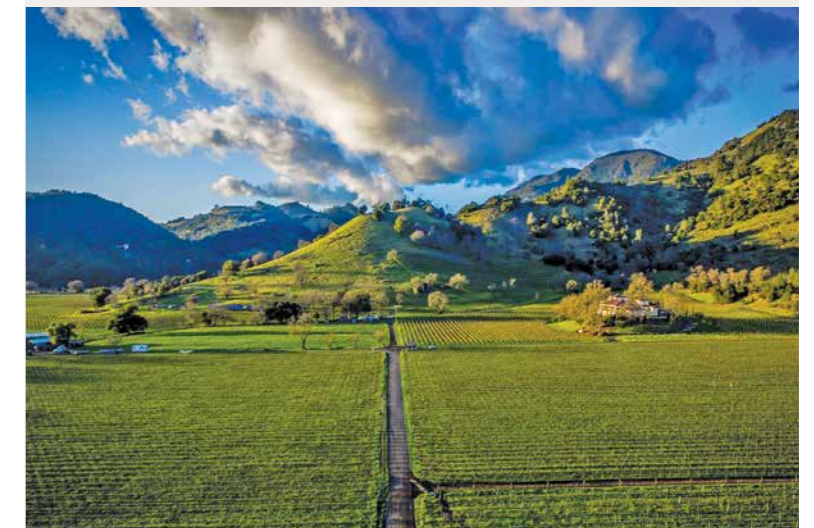
The 16 nested AVAs of Napa Valley may be divided into mountain AVAs and those located on the valley floor, between the two sheltering mountain ranges, the Mayacamas and the Vaca. The fog seen in many images of the region, that sweeps in from gaps in the mountains, creates a layer that lies in a blanket over the valley, allowing the vines above the fog line greater sun exposure and fewer shifts in temperature between day and night than those on the valley floor. This is known as Napa's unique 'inversion layer' effect.

The soils play an important role too: the mountains have thinner, rocky soils, while the valley floor has a diverse range – from alluvial to sedimentary.

Mountain AVAs, that include Atlas Peak, Mount Veeder, Diamond Mountain, Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain, create wine with intense flavours, layered complexity, and age-worthy tannins. At lower elevations, the fruit has a more vivid floral character, a rich mid-palate, and finer tannins.

Wines from the valley floor AVAs (including Calistoga, St Helena, Rutherford, Oakville) tend to be more lush, juicy and are overall rounder, with a fruit-driven profile, a rich mid-palate, and finer, elegant tannins.

Many producers source their grapes from multiple vineyards in the valley, combining mountain-grown grapes with those from the valley, creating a balance and complexity that typifies Napa red wines, especially its famed Cabernet Sauvignon.



Château Montelena vineyard at Napa Valley