



## ANOTHER SIDE OF NAPA

California's most famous wine region has developed a reputation for a certain type of glossy, high-end, points-chasing winemaking—a place, indeed, where terroir is all but irrelevant. But as Adam Lechmere discovers, the valley is also home to a number of adventurous winemakers working to a very different agenda. You just need to look a little harder to find them

**N**apa? It's the least interesting wine region in the world. Nothing ever happens there." The speaker was a London wine merchant, a California specialist, and he was articulating a widespread sentiment. The Napa Valley is ossified. The appellation is rapidly becoming a mono- (or duo-) culture of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. The cost of land prohibits experimentation. (I recently met a woman, a former commodities trader, who paid more than \$1 million for two thirds of an acre [0.27ha] in St Helena.)

Driving the switchbacks of Pritchard Hill, that rocky eminence above Lake Hennessy, you might think you've wandered into a theme park, so shiny is the tarmac and so manicured the sagebrush-covered hills. There are estates up here where \$5,000-a-day consultants produce finely crafted wines that bear no more relation to the soil than do the electric gates that purr open on your arrival. One long-term resident said of a neighbor, "Oh, they make their wines for Parker." Of course they do. There's little point spending a million dollars on your tasting room if you're not going to get 96+ for your wine.

### A terroir-obsessed new generation

Pritchard Hill has been cultivated for at least a century and a half. Donn Chappellet bought his estate from the Pritchard family in the 1960s, convinced that its thin volcanic soils would produce fine Cabernets. He found records of vineyards dating back to the 1860s. It has always attracted talent (Chappellet was followed by Bob and Zelma Long, then head winemaker at Mondavi, now a world-renowned figure) and serious money; the second wave of arrivals included Colgin, Bryant, Dalla Valle.

Lately Tim Mondavi has built his Continuum winery; other new colonists include Brand, whose wines are made by Philippe Melka (the heir of Michel Rolland), and Ovid, whose talented young winemaker Austin Peterson is an example of the terroir-obsessed new generation.

On one level, Ovid is a perfect example of Napa excess: 300 acres (120ha) of prime land acquired by a multimillionaire (the medical software pioneer Mark Nelson), celebrity architects brought in to design a gorgeous, panoramic tasting room, copies of the eponymous poet's works scattered among antique gewgaws and expensively distressed woodwork. But spend time with Peterson, and you understand why he's up there. He doesn't have much time for Roman verse—he might have read some Ovid in fifth grade, he guesses—but he becomes lyrical as he contemplates one of the car-sized rocks they tore out of the vineyard. "The stress this soil induces on the vines is a beautiful thing to see."

Peterson sums up his approach as "maximizing the ability of the vine to work with minimum intervention... I'm driving for freshness, focus, and precision, length and energy. A 100-point wine is not the mission," he adds, as if the question were an irrelevance. He considers Cabernet Franc "the signature of Pritchard Hill. It's spectacular—the red soil and rock makes it shine." Later, in that over-the-top tasting lounge, I marvel at the delicacy and precision of his wines.

### Indisputably Napa, unashamedly Europe-facing

It's a short drive from Ovid to Sage Canyon Road, where the Nichelini family has been making wine since the 1890s, but you might be in another constellation altogether. Sage Canyon takes

This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit [www.worldoffinewine.com](http://www.worldoffinewine.com) or call +44 20 3096 2606



you into Chiles Valley, one of Napa's lesser-known appellations. Over the decades, Nichelini's old wooden buildings have achieved a Hobbit-like oneness with the hillside; peering down the sun-dappled slope, it's hard to say where winery ends and woodland begins. Family members wear badges identifying which generation they belong to: Aimée Sunseri, the current winemaker, is fifth generation and 37 years old. The point, though, is not the longevity of the clan but the modernity of the wines. Sunseri is blessed by the climate. There can be 9–11°F (5–6°C) difference between high Chiles Valley and Napa Valley floor, and summer nighttime temperatures drop by 36°F (20°C). “Bud-break is about a week later. When we're picking, we have to wait for the acidity to drop.”

Such words from a Napa winemaker might ring alarm bells, but Sunseri celebrates freshness. Her Semillons and Muscadelles are delicate and perfumed but with a fine acid spine. The whites are aged on the lees with gentle *bâtonnage* (“I don't want it super-creamy”). The reds, including a Zinfandel from vines planted in 1929, generally get a three-to-five-day cold soak and a very gentle pressing. They are accomplished, balanced wines with bright acidity and textured tannins. I ask Sunseri what she thinks of the In Pursuit of Balance movement, the (subsequently disbanded) group of winemakers, led by Jasmine Hirsch and Rajat Parr, that were dedicated to bringing back restraint in California Pinot and Chardonnay. She's never heard of them.

I didn't ask Jacky and Jim Young of Young Inglewood about IPOB, but considering their label art is a silhouette of a tightrope walker, I imagine balance is high on their agenda. The Youngs farm historic vineland that now abuts the urban sprawl of St Helena. “It's amazing soil,” Jim says. “It was

**“We have the luxury of total control to shape the wines in the vineyard. Every vintage, I am totally immersed in the vineyard. That's the real power”**  
—Sam Kaplan, Arkenstone

first planted in the 1870s, part of the alluvial fan that comes down from the Mayacamas. The gravel goes down 20ft [6m]—it's perfect for Cabernet Franc.” He extols the patchwork of terroirs in this part of the valley. “We have great Cabernet land, and other places only grow Merlot. Then, a few yards away, it's clumpy clay soil. The alluvial fan weaves in and out, the way a beach is formed.”

Steve Matthiasson (a stalwart of IPOB, as it happens) advises, and the Youngs' son Scott makes the wine in a well-designed urban-looking winery full of small open-top fermenters. (The walls are covered in modern art.) There's a “Right Bank Blend” as they call it, a Cabernet Franc/Merlot, of which I noted “dark chocolate + bitterness and salinity.” It has a power that is indisputably Napa, though the Youngs claim to be

Previous spread: Aimée Sunseri, the capable fifth-generation winemaker at Nichelini. Above: Jim Young with winemaker son Scott and daughter Mary at Young Inglewood.

Photography by Gabrielle Lurie



unashamedly Europe-facing. “I know we're in California,” Jacky says, “but we're influenced by a history of drinking European wines. That is our inspiration.”

### The advantage of high prices

Napa's relationship with France is complicated. The greatest wines from the valley are Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux blends. There are French (frequently Bordeaux) winemakers behind every hill. Yet there's a wariness; remember how Robert Parker lambasted Tim Mondavi for his “notions of Euro-elegance.” During the past couple of decades, it became politic to keep your effete European ideas to yourself, even if you weren't chasing high scores from *The Wine Advocate* or *Wine Spectator*. But there's always been a stratum of Napa winemakers who pepper their conversation with references to the old country.

John and Tracey Skupny of Lang & Reed, for example, are inspired by the Loire but not beholden to it. “We chose the path of Cabernet Franc and Chenin,” Tracey says. They look to Chinon and Bourgueil, “but we can't pretend to make Loire wines here.” They produce wines of exceptional purity—“voluptuous still with structure,” my late-night notes say—sourcing grapes from more than 40 vineyards.

When they started, the Skupnys sourced from Napa, but over the years Napa Cabernet Franc has become more and more expensive (it's now over \$6,000 a ton, more or less the same as Cabernet Sauvignon), and they have looked farther

Above: Christopher Vandendriessche (left) and family sharing a picnic on their estate bordering Stags Leap District, which his father Henry (opposite) planted in the 1970s.

Photography courtesy of White Rock Vineyards

afield, mainly to Lake County, where they rate the Cabernet Franc highly. Skupny blames “the rise of the Napa Valley über-blends, which put more pressure on all the Bordeaux varieties, since many of the players were new to the business, and money was often not the sole business concern.”

As grape prices shot up along with land values, so of course did bottle prices. Napa prices are now among the highest in the world, from entry level to cult. While this can make exporting difficult and cements the region's reputation for unattainable wines, being forced to sell at premium rates has its upside.

White Rock Vineyards sits on 36 acres (14.5ha) of compressed volcanic ash (as you bump along the tree-hung lane, the only indication you've reached the estate is a mighty white rock in place of a sign) on the borders of Stags Leap District. There, winemaker Christopher Vandendriessche puts most of his energies into understanding the land his father Henry planted in the 1970s; he reduces yields, drops fruit, “takes ripeness down a notch,” as he puts it. “That's the advantage of high prices. If you're selling your wine for \$50 a bottle, you can afford to put \$19.50 back into the vineyard.”

Sam Kaplan, winemaker at Howell Mountain's Arkenstone—he moonlights for Pritchard Hill's Nine Suns, and Memento Mori, the new generation of Napa cults—agrees. “We have the luxury of total control to shape the wines in the vineyard. Every vintage I am totally immersed in the vineyard. That's the real power.” Serious financial backing from understanding owners allows experimentation; on Pritchard Hill, Peterson is playing with different rootstocks, row orientation, canopy structure, and training systems before he even gets into the winery, where he says “the whole barrel program is an experiment.”



### Humility in the face of nature

Herman Melville said, “Genius round the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.” Now, of course, a genius is a rare beast (and most winemakers would balk at the description), but I like the idea of a subliminal connection around the wineries of the world. The finest winemakers, from Sicily to Stags Leap, recognize the primacy of the vineyard, and they seek balance in their wine. I’d hesitate to call them humble, but they have a certain humility in the face of nature, and they have more questions than answers.

Jerry Seps, for example, as we stand in November drizzle surveying his hilly patchwork of vineyard above Calistoga, says, “We’re a young region. We’re new in understanding that magical combination of soil and grape. We’re still searching.” Seps founded Storybook Mountain Vineyards in the 1970s, after André Tchelistcheff told him that the red clay on these east-facing hillsides (it may be Calistoga, but it’s 1,200ft [365m] high, and cool) was ideal for Zinfandel, a variety that is now “pushed to the periphery of the valley.” He regards his 40 acres (16ha) of old Zinfandel and Cabernet, separated into 104 different parcels, as an ongoing experiment. “I evaluate at the end of every year and pull one or two acres.” He experiments with rootstock, does massal selection for replacement vines, and tries different spacing, looking, he says, “for finer, more intense skin tannins, better color, more concentration.” How much does he understand the land now, 45 years after he arrived? “I’m where I was at the beginning. It’s a long learning process.”

Down another potholed track (we’re in Oakville now, in the midst of the legendary To Kalon vineyard), Tom Garrett has the same air of inquiry as he discusses the land. His

eyebrows go up as we taste his sandalwood-perfumed 2002 Cabernet Franc. “This is pretty good,” he says. “I haven’t tasted this for a while.” Detert Family Vineyards fits like a piece of jigsaw into To Kalon (Garrett’s grandmother bought the land in the ’50s); it comprises 18 acres (7.3ha) of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, and Chenin Blanc. Garrett sells three quarters of his fruit to Robert Mondavi Winery and has been making his own wine since 2000. Everything starts in the vineyard, he says, but the winemaking occupies him, too. “I’m working on extended maceration on the Cabernet Franc, then a short fermentation. The tannins can be a bit over the top, so I’m trying to get a long tannin chain.” If I were to ask him what stage he’s at in the knowledge stakes, I imagine he’d say the same as Jerry Seps: “It’s a long journey.”

Napa is a winemaker’s Eden. The combination of volcanic and ancient marine influence here has produced the most varied soils in the world—in this 30-mile (48-km) stretch are contained half the world’s soil types. Complex topography, the proximity to the Pacific, the breezes off San Pablo Bay funneled northward, windgaps, and the inversion layer mean an infinite variation of weather patterns. But paradise is easily exploited, and Napa has become a byword for excess. For a long time, it seemed as if the debate about balance, alcohol levels, tannins, fruit, and acidity was irrelevant here. Apart from a handful of honorable exceptions, it was just assumed that “those boys don’t do low” (as the musicologist Julian Cope once said about some Washington headbangers). Humility isn’t a characteristic one readily associates with Napa, but every hillside hides winemakers whose instinct is to respect the land rather than tame it. You just have to look for them. ■

Photography courtesy of Detert Family Vineyards



### Hidden Napa recommendations

#### Storybook Mountain Vineyards Estate Reserve Zinfandel Napa Valley 2005 (100% Zinfandel; 14.9% ABV)

Secondary fruit notes on the nose, luscious spiced plum and sharp, cooked blackcurrant, then lovely raisined notes, dense dark chocolate, violet perfume, tannins with seductive grip releasing juice at finish. Now to 2025.

#### Larkmead LMV Salon Napa Valley 2013 (74% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Cabernet Franc; 14.9% ABV)

Larkmead has a pedigree as illustrious as Inglenook’s or Beringer’s but has only just been revived. Watch this space. Incredibly fresh red-fruit nose, then darker briar fruit on the palate, tobacco, cigar tube, and this lovely hint of fresh linen. The tannins are fine-grained and integrated, good weight, evenly textured. Exceptional. 2019–30.

#### Arkenstone Obsidian Howell Mountain 2014 (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Malbec)

Floral aromas on the nose, then sweet exotically perfumed blackberry on the palate, tannins just under control, a tightrope walk, freshness, intense focus, the impression of tightly reined power belied by generous fruit, the whole delicate and refined. Magnificent. 2020–40.

Photography courtesy of Arkenstone

“I try to fight the opulence,” Christopher Vandendriessche says. This homage to Bordeaux is classic in style. One of the finest expressions of Napa Cabernet I know

#### Round Pond Estate Super Tuscan Napa Valley 2014 (56% Cabernet Sauvignon, 39% Sangiovese, 5% Petit Verdot)

From 360-acre (145ha) Rutherford estate, which sells three quarters of its fruit. Winemaker Muiris Griffin experiments with Nebbiolo and Sangiovese. This prototype “Super,” aged in new French oak, is concentrated and perfumed with black cherry and damson and has a lovely soft mid-palate before powerful tannins kick in, leading to a juicy finish. Complex and sophisticated. 2020–30.

#### White Rock Vineyards Napa Valley Claret Napa Valley 2012 (30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 39% Merlot, 28% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot)

“I try to fight the opulence,” winemaker Christopher Vandendriessche says. This homage to Bordeaux is classic in style, with bright dark fruit, fresh hay, insistent tannins, and fine acidity. Then there is the perfume—coffee, violet, even sandalwood—adding a layer of controlled exoticism. One of the finest expressions of Napa Cabernet I know. 2020–40.

#### Luna Vineyards Nebbiolo Napa Valley 2014 (100% Nebbiolo)

Luna makes a lot of wine but concentrates on Italian varieties and does them very well indeed. This Carneros Nebbiolo has fresh black fruit bolstered by a perfumed, tarry undertone. It’s bright and complex, with fine-grained, dry tannins giving spurts of juice at the finish. Now to 2022.

#### Detert Family Vineyards Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2013 (100% Cabernet Sauvignon)

Sweet black-cherry nose, classic violet perfume, and on the palate minerality and hints of salinity, rich sappy bramble notes, coffee grounds, and fine grainy texture. Complex and savory, with a wonderful life ahead of it. 2019–35.

#### Young Inglewood Chardonnay Napa Valley 2013 (100% Chardonnay; 13% ABV)

From a tiny, historic property in St Helena. Citrus, peach, and litchi on the nose, concentrated juicy fruit set off by bright tingling acidity on the palate, steely and precise. Opulent, balanced, and really very fine. Now to 2022.

#### Lang & Reed Chenin Blanc Napa Valley 2015 (100% Chenin Blanc; 13.6% ABV)

Honeysuckle and floral aromas, then honey-sweet poached pear on the palate, with dry, structured acidity, hints of salinity giving perfect balance releasing welcome refreshing juice. Persistent, charming. Now to 2022.

#### Nichelini Reserve Merlot Napa Valley 2014 (100% Merlot)

Very delicate nose, with rose-petal aromas and a tarry hint. The palate has juicy, lifted fruit, cedar (“old armoire,” as I’ve heard it called), sweet raisin, and lovely balance and weight. The tannins are soft and textured; the acidity is brisk. Very fine Merlot. 2018–23.

#### Ovid Hexameter Napa Valley 2013 (64% Cabernet Franc, 22% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot)

“Cabernet Franc is the signature of Pritchard Hill. It’s spectacular—the red soil and rock makes it shine,” Austin Peterson says. This mighty (and mightily expensive) wine has sun-warm sagebrush aromas, sweet blackcurrant and blackberry, coffee, a fistful of textured tannin and a rush of acidity. Fresh and perfumed. Wonderful. 2020–35.

Opposite: Cabernet Franc vines in Detert’s East Block. Above: Arkenstone’s vineyard on Howell Mountain.