

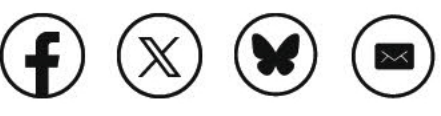
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# This winery is one of Napa Valley’s best-kept secrets

By **Esther Mobley**, Senior Wine Critic  
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The White Rock Vineyards labels feature an image of the property as it appeared in the 1870s.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

It’s hard to believe that any noteworthy winery could go undetected in modern-day [Napa Valley](#), where marketing budgets are high and many estates are world-famous.

But there is a small class of wineries that have consistently produced excellent wine, the kind of wine whose taste can lodge into your memory and stay with you for a lifetime, and yet have always remained something of a secret. By chance or by choice, they never entered the zeitgeist.



The Vandendriessche family, from left: winemaker Christopher, proprietors Henry and Claire and vineyard manager Michael.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

One of the best-kept secrets is White Rock Vineyards, tucked away in the valley’s eastern foothills above the Silverado Trail. Here, the Vandendriessche family has produced quietly extraordinary wines for nearly five decades. They’re a true family operation, farming organically, preserving a historic property and charging eminently reasonable prices by Napa standards.

The red wines are herbal and savory, their whites elegant and minerally. Stylistically, they’re aligned with other long-overlooked Napa wines, like [Corison](#), [Diamond Creek](#) and Mayacamas, that have recently reached widespread renown after decades of toiling in obscurity. Maybe it’s the wines’ — and the family’s — understated nature that has allowed White Rock to evade the spotlight for so long. But I think it’s about time that the word got out.

Despite its relatively low profile, White Rock is historically significant: It’s one of Napa Valley’s original wineries. In 1870, Dr. John Pettingill, whose many vocations included dentistry and horse breeding, purchased land in the lower slopes of the Vaca Mountains. He planted Zinfandel and [Riesling](#), and quarried the compressed volcanic ash that he discovered in the soils to build himself a winery. He named it after that ash: White Rock.



The exterior of Henri and Claire Vandendriessche's home, which was the original White Rock winery built in 1870.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

The winery that Pettingill constructed became Henri and Claire Vandendriessche's house when they bought the property in 1977. France-born Henri had moved to California to study economics at UC Berkeley and fell in love with Claire, a Napa native. "We knew we wanted to live in the country, and we knew that Napa was waiting for us," Henri told me on an afternoon in May as we sat under a coastal live oak in the middle of the vineyard. "So Claire and I set out to find land with our meager means."

Napa's western mountains were too pricey for their budget, as was Carneros. The eastern foothills were more affordable, but were considered "dry and rocky and unplantable," said Henri. It took them three years of searching, but when they found the 64-acre parcel — shaped like a bowl, almost like its own little valley — on a winding back road near Soda Canyon, they knew.



Breccia, a type of white volcanic rock, is found throughout this vineyard. It is rare to find such a concentration of it in Napa Valley.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

Rocky, yes, but unplantable, no. The Vandendriessches learned that the soils here were loaded with a soft, crumbly volcanic rock called breccia. Veins of it run through various parts of Napa Valley (and Sonoma County's Chalk Hill region has a lot of it), but it's rare in Napa to find the accumulation that's at White Rock. The soil's low nutrient levels cause the vines to struggle, resulting in small berries and concentrated flavors.

The Vandendriessches planted the Napa standards of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and other red Bordeaux grapes. In 1987, they used a coal mining machine to bore into the hillside for subterranean caves, one in a wave of new cave construction that was underway in Napa Valley at the time. Henri and Claire's sons, Michael and Christopher, started working for the family business early; as teenagers, the brothers planted an entire new section of the vineyard. After attending school and working other jobs, they both returned to White Rock full time: Michael as vineyard manager in 1996, Christopher as winemaker in 1999.

Christopher was fresh off a stint as the assistant winemaker at Luna Vineyards, where his boss was John Kongsgaard, famous for his [indulgent, dense Chardonnays](#). "I came out of the Kongsgaard school of winemaking," Christopher said. "We were definitely making big, robust wines on the edge of extraction. I felt back then that that was the truest way of expressing the terroir, to get as much as possible out of the grapes."



The Vandendriessche family has always farmed organically but did not complete certification until this year. The 64-acre property is shaped like a bowl, almost like its own little valley.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

But as Christopher learned the White Rock vineyard more deeply, he began to feel that this site’s terroir could be best revealed by a lighter winemaking touch. “White Rock’s grapes don’t need to be overextracted to have an expression that’s unique,” he said. Gradually, he has taken to fermenting the wines at cooler temperatures in an effort to draw out less oomph.

“Each wine for me is like finding a piece of driftwood on the beach, and I’m trying to figure out how to make it into a piece of art,” he said. “It’s its own strange form, and my job is to do as little as possible.”

The wines are “understated, which is really endearing to the people who love them,” said Kelli White, the author of “Napa Valley, Then and Now” and director of education at the Wine Center at Meadowood, “but also potentially means they get left behind in certain critical roundups.”



The caves at White Rock were dug in 1987 using a coal mining machine.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

Unfailingly, the White Rock wines “are really ageworthy,” White said. “They never did the chasing-high-alcohol thing. They never did the 200% new oak thing.” They also never chased the \$300 Cabernet thing: White Rock’s Claret is \$65, and its estate Chardonnay \$45, much lower than Napa wines of comparable quality.

That ageworthiness comes largely from the breccia, which imbues White Rock’s red wines with a formidable tannin. Christopher embraces that rusticity, rather than trying to melt it into the silky, soft tannins that are a signature of [Napa’s modern-day Cabernet style](#). He also ages the wines for much longer than is typical before selling: at least three years for the whites, and up to five years for the reds. Rather than send them to a warehouse where he can’t fully control the ambiance, Christopher installed sparkling-wine cages in corners of the caves, in which he (now with the help of assistant winemaker Libby Foulk) tightly stacks hundreds of bottles, then labels them by hand when he’s ready to sell them.

When I joined the Chronicle in 2015, White Rock was one of the first Napa wineries I visited in my new role; another winemaker had tipped me off to it. It looked so different from the other glitzy estates I was seeing, so much more modest and earnest. Just a family, a few employees and a cave. I appreciated that the wines seemed like an expression of that restraint. “Herbs, eucalyptus, dusty cocoa, black tea. LOVE,” I wrote in my notebook of a 2011 Cabernet. That visit informed several stories I wrote, including one about the [pyrazine controversy](#) in Napa, but I never wrote a dedicated story about White Rock. I guess I couldn’t find a news hook.

Two years later, there was all too much of a news hook. In October 2017, the [Atlas fire tore through White Rock](#), and the family fled quickly. When they returned, they found that Henri and Claire’s house — the winery that Dr. Pettingill had built — had partially burned, and a large section of the cave was rubble. The fire destroyed 800 cases of library wine in the cave, as well as 8,000 bottles in the original barrel cellar at the house.

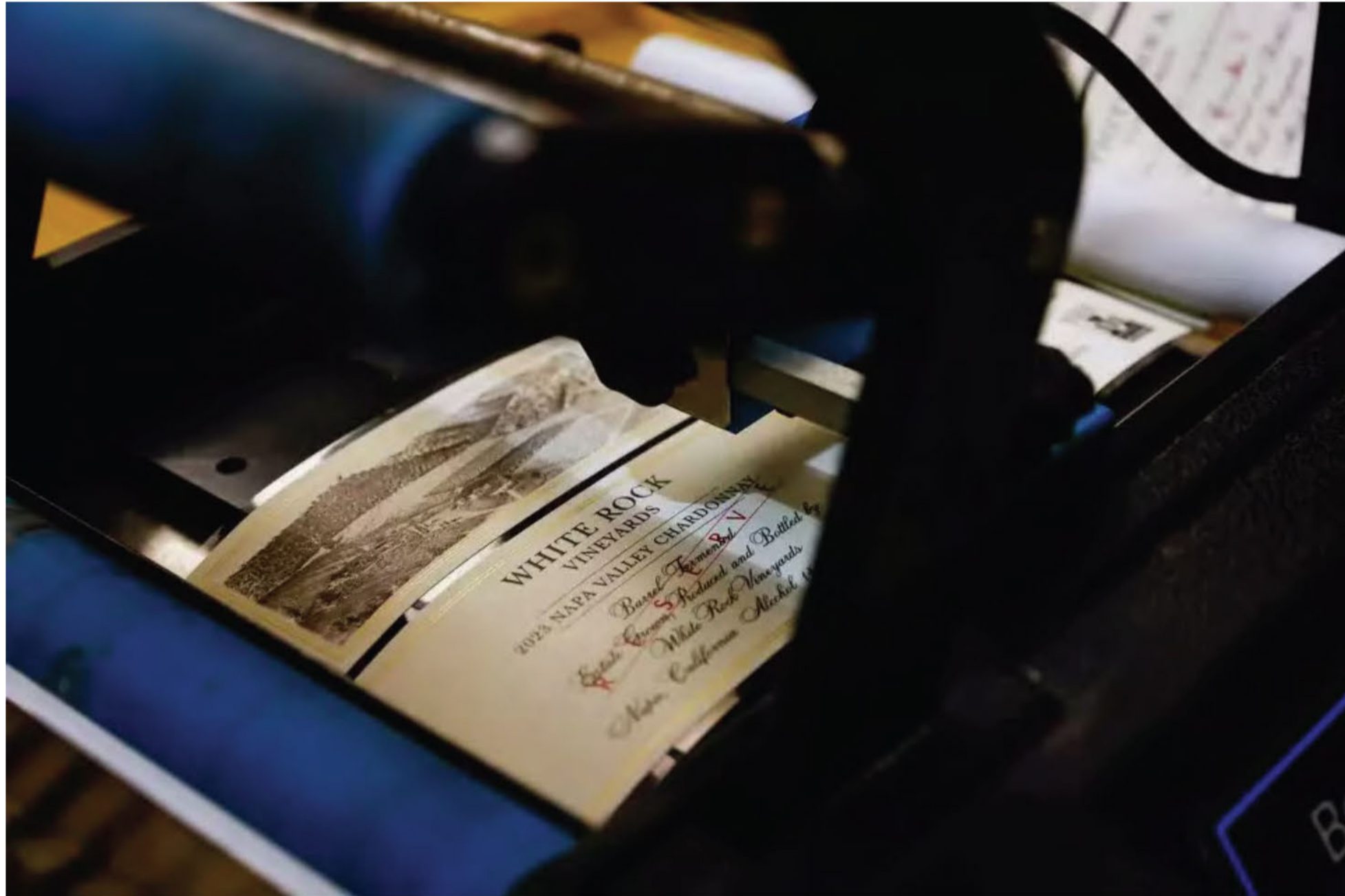
I drove past the evacuation-zone lines to report on the damage. It was heartbreaking to see thousands of charred, broken bottles of wine lying in heaps, and a house reduced to a pile of debris with only a chimney still standing. Over the phone, the family recounted to me their harrowing exit.



Cellar master Nate Delisle labels bottles by hand, something White Rock does for many of its library wine releases.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

When I returned this spring, the Vandendriessches had just broken ground on the portion of the cave that they’re rebuilding. It took them nearly eight years to secure the plans and permits, but by next spring they expect to be finished with the construction, which will include a new tasting room. In the meantime, they’ve been hosting customers in an air-conditioned trailer and at a picnic table underneath the towering live oak in the vineyard. Engineers were able to salvage the original stone siding on Henri and Claire’s house, replacing the mortar block by block and sandblasting to remove blackening.

The intervening years have brought other changes. White Rock’s vineyards achieved organic certification this year. Although it was merely a codification of practices they’d always had in place — the vineyard has never been treated with pesticides or herbicides — an employee with experience in grant writing finally had the bandwidth for the paperwork. The winery, too, is undergoing organic certification, a separate process that regulates materials including cleaning solutions and yeast nutrients.



Every six months, the team determines which wines are tasting best and releases those to its mailing list, regardless of how old the wines might be.  
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

White Rock also implemented an unorthodox approach to releasing wines to its mailing list. Every six months, the team tastes through a range of older and younger vintages to determine which are at their peak, then sells an assortment of those regardless of their age. The current release includes reds from 2013 and 2014 as well as 2014 and 2018 Chardonnays. (The White Rock wines currently available at restaurants and wine shops, on the other hand, are from the 2022 vintage.) Customers love it, Christopher said: “When they hear that they can buy a wine that was perfectly aged in a cave for 10 years, they’re really excited.”

Christopher has increased his driftwood art collection. When I visited him a decade ago, he produced around eight wines a year; he now makes upwards of 15. “I’ve become obsessed with single-tank wines,” he said, and now has a series of small-lot bottlings. He added a [Champagne-method](#) wine in 2019, White Rock’s first foray into sparkling.

But these shifts are not fundamental. For the most part, White Rock remains charmingly the same. A taste of its jasmine flower-inflected Breccia Chardonnay, its mint- and sage-forward Merlot or its licoricey, herbal Claret makes it clear: These wines are timeless.

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