

Napa's new elegance

In search of wines with a lighter touch, Adam Lechmere encounters a trendsetting breed of Napa winemaker. A diverse bunch, they are all following a path that favours restraint over opulence, and are all worth seeking out

AMONG A CERTAIN sector of the wine cognoscenti, Napa's stock is low. Alongside its hipper neighbour, freewheeling, experimental Sonoma, Napa looks strait-laced; paralysed by excessive prices and overblown wines. One is untamed, the other regimented. In the wilder parts of Sonoma you might expect to find a mountain lion asleep in your vat room; in Napa, the only cougars you're likely to see will have arrived in a Cadillac Eldorado.

All stereotypes are based in truth, of course, but there is far more to Napa than unattainable cults, and winemakers who abandon restraint in the chase for 100-point scores. Napa has achieved fame because of its wonderful terroir, and all over the appellation there are those for whom the commercial imperative is trumped by other considerations.

Some, like Aimée Sunseri and Tom Garrett, are direct descendants of 19th-century pioneers; some, like Austin Peterson, are

driven young winemakers working for wealthy patrons; others are recent arrivals but dedicated experimentalists nevertheless. Still others are those who have been making the same sort of wine for decades and see no reason to stop, especially now that leanness, high acidity and structure are in fashion again.

They are a diverse bunch; they work with Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but also with varieties considered more obscure in Napa: Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petite Sirah, Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel. But they are united by a common belief, that overripeness and high alcohol obscure terroir.

They instinctively pursue balance, and for that they may be considered anomalies in a region noted for excess. The wines are difficult to get hold of (in many cases there simply isn't enough wine to export), but they represent an ideal of Napa that was nearly lost. They are worth searching out.

Dan Petroski Larkmead Vineyards

Calistoga's Larkmead is possibly one of the most celebrated but least known of Napa wineries. Founded in 1895 by the eccentric socialite Lillie Hitchcock Coit, it was for decades regarded as the equal of Beringer, BV and Inglenook (a display of dusty bottles of 'Larkmead Burgundy' bears witness to its



illustrious past). Dan Petroski, a New York publisher turned winemaker, joined in 2007, after present owners Cam Baker and Kate Solari Baker revived the label. An aficionado of Friuli, he makes Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano under his Massican label, and at Larkmead has 45ha of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Sauvignon Blanc ('it makes no economic sense but we want to exalt our diversity').

Petroski's winemaking selection is on the Burgundian model: 'parcel-based winemaking to express the variation of soils we get up here'; in his Sauvignon Blanc, he's looking for 'gravitas, a cleaner version of Dageneau'. He aims for markedly different expressions from different soils, whether the sweet briar of the gravel-based Dr Olmo or the savoury intensity of The Lark, grown on loamy soils.

Petroski has the inspired winemaker's mix of restlessness and self-assurance: 'I want consumer appeal and the respect of my peers.'

One to try

Larkmead, Solari, Napa Valley 2013 94

N/A UK www.larkmead.com

A bright nose on this gravel-planted Cabernet Sauvignon. Dark, juicy fruit aromas; delicate, sinewy tannins and fine briar fruit. Overall impression of restraint – it's not a heavyweight – but also has undeniable power and presence. Delicious. **Drink** 2020-2040 **Alcohol** 14.9%

Austin Peterson Ovid

'We took out 50,000 cubic metres of rock from here,' says a youthful Austin Peterson, looking at a boulder the size of a small car. He becomes lyrical when discussing the effect the shallow topsoil of Pritchard Hill, 430m above Oakville, has on the vines. 'The stress it induces is something beautiful to see.'

Ovid, created in 1998 by two software entrepreneurs, Mark Nelson and Dana >

*'I want
consumer
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Dan Petroski (above)



Austin Peterson's philosophy is 'to preserve integrity and freshness, driving toward precision, length and energy' (above)

Johnson, is in many ways typical of this rocky eminence, home to Colgin and Chappellet among half a dozen brash newcomers. The tasting room is magnificent – a symphony of wood and stone with a vast picture window over the vineyards. It's self-consciously highbrow (dog-eared volumes of the Roman poet after whom the winery is named are scattered artfully about; each vintage comes with a reading list) but there's nothing pretentious about the wines.

Has Peterson read much Ovid? 'Well, I remember a bit from fifth grade...'

He, along with consultant Andy Erickson and vineyard manager David Abreu, is a relentless experimenter. From a starting point of 'maximising the ability of the vine to work with minimum intervention', he separates his 6ha of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot into small concrete fermenters, constantly experimenting with maceration, skin contact, barrels and every aspect of winemaking. His philosophy is simply 'to preserve integrity and freshness, driving toward precision, length and energy'.

One to try
Ovid, Napa Valley 2013 94

POA **Hedonism**
84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Cabernet Franc. Sweet blackcurrant, a hint of coffee, fresh acidity and brisk tannins, density and grip and a sour, saline finish. An exuberant wine with superb, controlled energy. **Drink** 2020-2040 **Alc** 16%



Christopher Vandendriessche

White Rock Vineyards

There's a pleasing harmony about White Rock's gateway being marked not by any name but by a massive white rock. Tucked into the rolling hills between Stags Leap District and Atlas Peak, the Vandendriessche family's 14.5ha of Cabernet and Chardonnay are defined by the friable volcanic rock, poor in nutrients but water-retaining, that sits half a metre beneath the topsoil.

Christopher Vandendriessche worked at Château Pape Clément in Bordeaux in the 1990s, and later under John Kongsgaard. He makes wines of extraordinary complexity and allure with very little fanfare. His attitude is non-interventionist though undogmatic. He uses inoculated yeast as he sees fit – 'There are a lot of ways to take risks; some increase quality, some don't' – and controls malolactic fermentation on the Chardonnay ('apart from a little bit to make it sexy').

Like the vines themselves, he thrives on constraint: 'It almost doesn't ripen,' he says with satisfaction, pointing to a strip of Merlot in the lee of the hill. Everything comes back to the rock. 'I try to do this and that, make the finish a little less tannic, fight the opulence,

'There are a lot of ways to take risks. Some increase quality, some don't'

Christopher Vandendriessche

change maceration times, but I come to the conclusion that it all happens in the vineyard.'



One to try
White Rock Vineyards, Chardonnay, Napa Valley 2014 95
POA **The Winery**
A zesty, lime-scented nose and a beautifully weighted palate, the result of 11 months on lees. Dry, becoming exotic with melon and hints of peach, balanced by bright acidity. Luscious but restrained. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14.1%

Aimée Sunseri

Nichelini Family Winery

The bloodline goes back to 1884, when Swiss settlers Anton and Caterina Nichelini arrived in Chiles Valley. Aimée Sunseri is the fifth generation, and the seventh family winemaker to occupy the old wooden shed at the top of Sage Canyon Road. Has she travelled much, or worked a European vintage? 'I never had the time. I felt I had to get back into the winery.'

Continuity means a lot at this old-fashioned winery, and the wheel has come full-circle – Sunseri's style suddenly seems very modern indeed. 'I'm a fan of freshness, and I love the grapefruit spectrum,' she says of her Roman Press white, a meadowgrass-inflected blend of Muscadelle and Semillon with singing acidity.

Everything happens slowly in the cool, high Chiles Valley. Budbreak is a week later than down below, the Cabernet Sauvignon picked a good three weeks later than in other appellations. 'We have to wait for the acidity to drop,' Sunseri says. The reds – as well as the Cabernet, there's Merlot, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel – are delicate, fresh, with lifted, juicy fruit. They have power but not heat.



One to try
Nichelini, Petite Sirah, Napa Valley 2014 92
N/A UK www.nicheliniwinery.com
Instant acidity gives freshness, then peppery spice, blackberry and dark ripe plum, black cherry. Concentrated and gamey, quite dry mid-palate leading to a wash of juice giving a food-friendly finish. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 14.3% >



Above: Michael (left) and Christopher Vandendriessche of White Rock Vineyards

Left: Aimée Sunseri is the seventh family winemaker at Nichelini

John and Tracey Skupny

Lang & Reed Wine Company

John and Tracey Skupny own no winery and no vineyards but they are consummate wine insiders. Kansas City sommeliers, they came to Napa in the 1980s and between them have held senior positions at Caymus, Clos du Val, Inglenook, Spottswoode and other key producers. A love of the Loire Valley led them to dedicate themselves to Cabernet Franc and Chenin Blanc when they started making wine in earnest in 1996.

Fruit is sourced from multiple sites in Napa, Lake County, Mendocino, Alexander Valley and Coombsville. 'We've worked with more than 40 vineyards in the past 20 years,' says John. Napa is 'less certain' year by year, he adds – there are 7.5ha of Chenin now, compared to 2,800ha of Chardonnay.

They work closely with growers on all aspects of vineyard management from pruning to picking dates, and will often pick earlier than their neighbours. Structure is paramount – achieved with cool fermentation and some carbonic maceration to preserve freshness; the top wines are left on their skins for up to a month. 'We want people to know this is Cabernet Franc,' says Tracey.

One to try



Lang & Reed, Cabernet Franc, North Coast, Napa Valley 2013 93

£25 (2014) Reid Wines

The North Coast AVA encompasses five regions directly affected by cool maritime influences.

Newly mown hay on the nose, a delicate palate with damson, lots of juice, violet perfume, good brisk tannins. Voluptuous but

fine structure. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14.1%

Tom Garrett

Detert Family Vineyards

The Detert holdings fit like a slice of pizza into the southwestern edge of To Kalon, that amorphous, legendary Napa vineyard. The Garrett brothers' great-grandmother bought it in the 1950s, selling the grapes she produced to the Mondavis; brothers Tom and John Garrett and their cousin Bill Cover took over in 2000.



Above: John and Tracey Skupny arrived in Napa in the 1980s

Below: Tom Garrett, winemaker at Detert Family Vineyards



Photograph: Jason Henry

The Cabernet Franc here is claimed to be Napa's first planting of the grape, in 1949. The vineyard is at the top of the alluvial fan, its layers of gravel ideal for a variety whose vigour needs reining in. Tom, who has worked with Helen Turley, Phelps and Mondavi, loves his Cabernet Franc. 'Robert Mondavi did too. He kept saying, plant more!' His first vintage, the 2002, is dense, fresh and youthful, a savoury marvel of aniseed and sandalwood. 'Yes, I'm pretty pleased with that,' Garrett says, noting that he hasn't opened a bottle for some time.

His goal is to achieve long, elastic tannins by way of 25- to 30-day macerations and short fermentations to balance freshness and fruit. The Detert Cabernet Sauvignons are classic, perfumed, dark chocolate-infused Oakville; they are very fine, but Garrett is clear where his heart lies. 'The best wine I've ever been able to make is old-vine Cabernet Franc.'

One to try



Detert Family Vineyards, Cabernet Franc, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 95

N/A UK www.detert.com

Nose of blackberry and molasses, with a fresh palate that's concentrated and acidic, spiced with dark fruit, dark chocolate, sage and fresh hay, and hints of the perfume that will come with age.

Drink 2020-2040 **Alc** 14.7%

For full details of UK stockists, see p117

Adam Lechmere is a freelance wine journalist based in London who travels regularly to California