



LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Robb Report

#26

*An epic Central American odyssey (where you'll plant a few trees along the way)

The Giving Issue

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as putting Melka's own team on the wine-making (for those vintners who have no estate vineyards and winery of their own) and even guiding a winery's brand messaging and marketing. Atelier Melka can help get the word out.

The consultant now has some 30 clients, all but six in Northern California. Both Lail and Seavey are still with him, and if you consider how green he was when he started, that's saying something. During his initial harvest at Seavey Vineyard, in 1995, after Melka pressed the Chardonnay, the owner suggested he feed the residue skins and seeds, known as pomace, to the cows. When it came time to press the reds, Melka recalls, "without thinking, I did the same—gave the pomace to the cows." The glitch: White grapes are pressed before fermentation and red ones after, so the pomace was full of alcohol. "They had the party of their lives. The day after, they were all of them on their backs, legs up. After a few hours of sweet dreams, though, they were able to stumble to their feet and zigzag around the fields."

Melka estimates that he and his team oversee about 150 wines each year. That's quite a reach, to be sure. But there's also a less visible influence growing in Napa Valley and beyond from the Melka orbit, in the form of the talented young wine-makers he has handpicked for his team, then wished well as they moved on.

Julien Fayard, who, like Melka, is French-born, spent seven years under Melka's tutelage before becoming a partner in Coombsville's Covert Estate.

The 42-year-old was still with Atelier Melka, in fact, when he established his own consultancy, in 2007, which he continues to run and now has 12 clients in addition to his own three brands. He describes what it's like to "graduate" from Atelier Melka: "To work for Philippe, you have to know what you're doing if you want to last. But the work, and the team, created this intricate symphony that I enjoyed." His most important takeaway from Melka? "Non-interventionist wine-making," he says. "The vineyard drives the difference."

Fayard has established a team of his own now, based on the same close relationships with winery owners that enable Melka to create wines of singular character. If anything, he's even more locked in with his clients on a business level, insisting on good financials and a clear brand-building vision. His model is to get in on the ground floor and help each company grow into a healthy, sustainable business—one that happens to make terrific wine.

Robb Recommends

With dozens, even hundreds, of wines on each consultant's roster, selecting a few to try isn't always easy. Here, some of Sara L. Schneider's favorites.

PHILIPPE MELKA



Lail Vineyards 2016 J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$275)

Named for proprietor Robin Lail's father, who inherited historic Inglenook Vineyard, this Cab shows the generous ripe fruit Melka is capable of coaxing into a wine. But a savory vein of minerality adds an earthy quality, layered with cedar, spice, mocha and supple tannins.



Château Boswell 2016 "True Course" Chardonnay Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast (\$90-\$100)

Here's proof that Melka has a deft hand with Burgundian varieties as well as Bordeaux stars. This is a rich, mouth-filling Chardonnay, its nose perfumed with honeysuckle, its palate brimming with orchard fruit, candied orange peel, a touch of caramel and a hint of oak spice.

THOMAS RIVERS BROWN



Theorem Vineyards 2016 "Voir Dire" Cabernet Sauvignon Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley (\$145)

From one of Brown's newer clients, this wine speaks of its old-vine source and concentrated mountain fruit. Dense and mouthwatering mulberry and blackberry flavors are underpinned with dark chocolate and savory crushed herbs.



Senses 2016 "MCM88" Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$85)

The new-ish Senses—launched in chilly, far-west Sonoma by three (young) old friends who grew up there together—is one of Brown's rare Burgundies (he's much better known as a Cab craftsman). This is a powerful Pinot, inky and rich, with an exotic range of spices, elegant dark-berry fruit and an intriguing sweet-savory balance.

HEIDI BARRETT



La Sirena 2018 Rosato Amador County (\$28)

From the creator of Screaming Eagle comes a rosé for less than 30 bucks! Made from Primitivo (a near-DNA double for Zinfandel) from the Sierra foothills, the mouthwatering pale pink is crisp and aromatic, with rose-petal notes and bright red-berry flavors.



Amuse Bouche 2016 Napa Valley Red Blend (\$225)

Barrett's artistry cuts two ways for this Merlot-Cabernet Franc blend: She not only made the wine but also painted the vineyard image on the label (Barrett long ago added "commercial artist" to her list of talents). The wine is a swirl of dark-cherry and plum notes mixed with anise, black tea and exotic spices backed by silky tannins.

JULIEN FAYARD



Covert 2014 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Coombsville (\$175)

This dark, brooding wine makes the best possible introduction to Napa's newest AVA: Coombsville. Its aromas are earthy, with tobacco, flint, espresso and savory minerality, while a fresh energy comes through on the palate, with dark-cherry and blueberry flavors and refined tannins.



Nicholson Jones 2014 Sleeping Lady Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Yountville, Napa Valley (\$150)

Fayard finds the voice of a different part of the valley here: Yountville. Concentrated aromas of briary berries, dark plum, anise and high-toned florals give way to big, ripe fruit flavors and tannins layered with oak spice, tobacco and loam.

Before Fayard, though, and before Melka, there was Heidi Barrett. The early doyenne of cult wines might describe her choice to become an “independent winemaker” (a term she prefers to “consulting winemaker”) as simply the most flexible path for a mother with two young daughters, but that is to greatly understate the immense influence she’s had in the top echelons of Northern California wine. While working with Dalla Valle in 1992, where she earned a couple of perfect 100 scores from Robert Parker Jr., Barrett noticed Dalla Valle’s neighbor Jean Phillips “playing at making wine” (Barrett’s words) down the hill. As it turns out, Phillips was Gustav Dalla Valle’s real estate agent and had bought the valley-floor property for herself. Dalla Valle suggested that Barrett go down and help out. And once Barrett took over the wine, extracting much power and layers of ripe flavors from the fruit, the allocation list for the Screaming Eagle she created gave bragging rights to the most serious collectors worldwide. The wait list is now years-long. A bottle of the current release runs in the neighborhood of \$3,000—and older bottles much more than that on the secondary market.

The character of that 1992 Cabernet blend might have pegged Barrett for a certain style of winemaking. And when pressed, the 62-year-old native Californian and second-generation professional winemaker says, “I think I do have a style. It’s balanced, with great silkiness and finesse—ageable and elegant—yet power-packed if possible.” Those param-

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ters, in her view, leave plenty of room for diversity. “My job is to make the best wine I can. But you work with what you’re given. Dalla Valle has hillside fruit, and Screaming Eagle is on the valley floor. Add in different soil, rootstock, Cabernet clones, temperature, wind, sunlight angle . . . and the wines will be different even if I could pick them at the same ripeness.”

Fellow prominent consultant Thomas Rivers Brown came to his impressive roster of about 40 highly regarded brands, including Outpost, Schrader, Gemstone, Pulido-Walker and Jones Family, from an entirely different direction: A wine-loving college girlfriend introduced him to her hobby. After making his way to Europe and then Napa, he worked in a top-notch wine store, establishing connections to up-and-coming winemakers

and would-be vintners in the valley, which in turn brought great clients his way. Since founding his business in 2001, the South Carolina native has racked up more than 25 perfect 100 scores from Parker or *Wine Spectator*. And, like his cohorts, he leaves ego behind and approaches each client individually. “We don’t want to be known for a house style,” he says. “That would give consumers a chance to buy wine from one client only and still be able to check the Thomas Rivers Brown box!”

If anything, it’s Brown’s style of winemaking—not the wine itself—that’s consistent: non-interventionist, with minimal manipulation, so there’s transparency of place and variety. Take the case of Kisha and Jason Itkin, who founded Theorem Vineyards in 2012 on remote Diamond Mountain and recently finished restor-



Thomas Rivers Brown at Mending Wall winery.
BELOW: Heidi Barrett pilots her helicopter to visit clients.



ing the historic home on the site. They assumed they’d be ripping out the ancient vineyard, ravaged by deer and neglect, but Brown recognized the exceptional potential. “He’s only interested in bringing out what is unique about each vineyard site and never compromises that for a specific vintage or desired wine profile,” says Kisha. Even in the cellar, she adds, Brown and resident winemaker Kathleen Ward, whom he handpicked for Theorem, “never let the winemaking overshadow the site-specific flavors and characters unique to our high-elevation Diamond Mountain estate.”

The individualized approach that Melka, Fayard, Barrett and Brown take to each vineyard, vintner and bottle not only magnifies the range of California’s wine character but also makes them uniquely equipped to respond to the next generation of wine lovers. “In the American wine business,” says Fayard, “there’s a new evolution of palates looking for fresher, less manipulated wines. I like to call it ‘American wine with old-world restraint.’ Today’s wine drinkers are in search of better balance and increased ageability from wines that are properly crafted.”

In forgoing the long-haul flights in favor of more miles on the vineyard SUV (or helicopter, in Barrett’s case), a thicker layer of dust on the boots and availability to clients, they are redefining what it means to be a consulting winemaker. No longer are the top brands subject to a celebrity’s signature style. “It’s we who need to adjust,” says Melka, “not our clients.”

And they’re amplifying the inherent diversity of the West Coast’s best wine regions—to say nothing of making our cellars more interesting. **R**