

Model Farm California

(California and WA DC regional sales only)



Readers already know how much I have admired the wines from Model Farm, run by the husband and wife team of Sean Castorani and Joanna Wells... – John Gilman, View from the Cellar, March 2025



Model Farm is the artisan brand of Joanna and Sean Castorani, a couple who, having caught the wine bug early on and diligently worked their way up the ranks, embarked on a labor of love in 2013 with a two-acre plot of vines. They wanted to farm the grapes they would turn into wine. Their guiding light was Jack London’s “Model Farm” in Glen Ellen, where London had launched a progressive farming program to replenish his soils. His ranch wasn’t economically successful, and the ideas he espoused—natural fertilizers, planting cover crops, rotating crops, terracing hillsides and installing drainage tile to mitigate erosion—were more or less discarded for generations after his death in 1916.

Be that as it may, a century later the concept of creating a model through trial and error fundamentally appealed to this couple. They had just leased the two acres in the Petaluma Gap AVA, and it was this patch of ground that became their place of experimentation to learn how farming affected the quality of grapes that they turned into wine.

The two met at the Robert Sinskey Winery in Napa. Joanna’s path started with a winery job in Walla Walla, where she moved sight unseen upon graduating from college in Denver with a business major (she found no passion in spreadsheets). For two years, she was the only cellar hand at the side of the winemaker for the family winery of Zerba. In 2008, she moved to Napa and knocked on Sinskey’s door, a winery that intrigued her because it was a prominent nonconformist at the time (farming organically, concentrating on Pinot Noir rather than Cabernet, and producing the valley’s best selling dry rosé year in and out). She took a job in the tasting room and quickly moved into management.

Sean sold wine for a distributor in Delaware while in college, earned a Master’s in environmental science at Cal Monterey Bay studying soils and their relationship to grape chemistry, and continued the research at UC Davis. He also worked harvest with Aaron Pott at Seven Stones. Meanwhile, at a part-time gig in the Sinskey tasting room, he met Joanna.

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In 2012 they took what today would be highly coveted assistant winemaking jobs: Joanna at Kutch Winery and Sean at Rhys. In 2013, they leased the two acres of Syrah in the Petaluma Gap. For seven vintages they worked those vines in the evenings and on weekends without any heavy equipment but with all manner of commitment. Depending on the vintage, they made between two and seven barrels of wine, some to their satisfaction, some not. But they earned their stripes and figured out what worked best for their style of wine.

In 2016, they expanded to make wine from the P.M. Staiger vineyard, and in the years that followed the couple branched out further. Their criteria for sourcing were simple: higher sites at cooler elevations with owners who cared (deeply) and who had the same farming ethos as they did. They undertook this with the blessings of their employers at Kutch and Rhys, where they worked until 2020. By then, Model Farm had reached adulthood.

In 2021, the couple decided to make a new range of wines. “I have always,” Joanna wrote years later, “been on a mission to bring handmade, artisan domestic wine to the marketplace in an affordable way.” Thus was born Alta Heights, created to bring back what California had all but abandoned early on during the wine boom of the 1990s—distinctive, quality-driven wines of value (really, there used to be no shortage of such wine produced throughout California, including, notably, in Napa Valley). As the name suggests, the wine comes from high elevation alpine vineyards, just like the Model Farm wines, without inputs save perhaps for a bit of sulfur. These are serious, characterful wines you can buy and still have change in your pocket.

<https://www.modelfarmwines.com/>