9 Winemakers Defining the Next Generation of California Wine, According to Sommeliers

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There's a line in John Steinbeck's "East of Eden" that seems to sum up our collective attitude toward the state of California winemaking today: "It never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years."

While it's no surprise that, over the nearly 300-year history of winemaking in California, it has had its own rich years — vintages of critical acclaim, recognition through events like the Judgement of Paris — and dry years — periods of oversupply and bulk-wine glut. And yet we seem to have lost the thread on both ends. Not only have we forgotten what made California wines so celebrated in the first place, but we have also failed to reclaim our sense of pride and excitement for what winemaking in California could be.

Today, the image of California wine that most drinkers carry is ripe and heavily extracted, made with an emphasis on production and promotion, on scale and consistency. As Kae Whalen, wine director at Los Angeles' Little Fish explains, "The monolith of overproduced, overwrought Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, the idea that there's an inherently lower quality of wine than what you can find in Europe… it obscures what's really special about winemaking in the state for many drinkers."

What that generalization overlooks is that the qualities that first made California a world-class wine growing region haven't disappeared. If anything, Napa and Sonoma's ocean-influenced climate, biodiverse terroir, and mix of volcanic and alluvial soils remain as compelling as ever. "Wine made in California has only become more interesting, more diverse, with as much room for classicists as for the avant-garde," Whalen adds.

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Early advocates for lighter expressions of California wines have laid the groundwork for the next generation. In 2011, a small group of winemakers led by Raj Parr and Jasmine Hirsch, of Hirsch Vineyards, created the In Pursuit of Balance (IPOB) movement, which was founded on the belief that grapes like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay could shine in California when treated with the same nuance and finesse long associated with Burgundy.

Although the group officially disbanded in 2016, their legacy carries on through some of the state's most exciting producers today. These winemakers aren't necessarily inventing a new California so much as carrying forward an ethos that IPOB helped reinvigorate: wines that speak to the land and history from which they come, with less intervention in the cellar and a greater emphasis on farming, balance, and the quality of the fruit itself.

That philosophy, however, comes with its challenges. "Making wine in California, particularly within the natural wine world, is becoming increasingly difficult," explains Tatiana Ettensberger, co-owner and beverage director of Wilde's in L.A.'s Los Feliz neighborhood. Large Napa estates control so much of the land and fruit, and climate change continues to make conditions more and more impossible." She has a deep reverence for the renegades who, despite these hurdles, remain optimistic about California's future. "The commitment these winemakers have to working without [additives] is genuinely courageous, and deserves far more recognition than it receives."

Even through some of the state's "dry years," the future of California winemaking looks incredibly rich. And sommeliers are taking note. Wine lists that once prioritized bottles from Europe are now finding ways to make room for both long-standing new wave wineries like Hirsch, Bedrock, and Arnot-Roberts as well as labels on the rise. So we asked sommeliers which new producers they're most excited about right now.

Madson Wines



Before Cole Thomas was a winemaker, he was a California farmer with a deep love for the land on which he was raised. Beginning his career as an organic vegetable farmer, he later worked as an edible landscaper and manager of the Demeter Seed Library, before finding his way to viticulture while working for Jeff Emery of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard. The experience set him on a path toward winemaking, first in Australia and then in New Zealand, before returning to his native Santa Cruz to launch Madson Wines in 2018. Shaped by his background in agriculture and the low-intervention winemaking techniques he learned abroad, Thomas brings an earnestness and delicacy to his wines. Rafa García Febles, general manager of NYC's acclaimed Kabawa and Bar Kabawa, enjoys recommending bottles from Madson to showcase how the Santa Cruz Mountains are capable of remarkably expressive, balanced wines. Madson focuses on refined, terroir-driven takes on Pinot Noir, Syrah, Chardonnay, Chenin, and beyond. And its single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is a far cry from the overripe California Cabernets of yesteryear — tannic yet smooth, with notes of black pepper, oregano, moss, and warm spice balanced by the tartness of blackberry and plum.