



The Winemaker's Guide to Napa Valley Harvest Season

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Fall is as busy a time as ever on the XOJET event radar, but it's not just because of primetime sporting events like the U.S. Open of tennis or World Series of baseball. Chief among private charter destinations is the annual spectacle of wine happening not far from our [Operations Command Center](#) in Sacramento, California, namely harvest season in Napa Valley and Sonoma.

September—and sometimes early October—is the vintage climax, and judging by the comments from the winemakers we interviewed for this article, it could very well be a 'hang-time vintage.' There was a lot of rain in the spring, a lot of heat this summer, and now the grapes are in the clubhouse turn. Below are five wineries on which you can place your bets, with firsthand vintage evaluations from the owners and winemakers, in addition to their favorite places to hang out when they're off-duty.

As for getting there, XOJET can touch down at any suitable airport of your choice and arrange direct service to your final destination. We recommend landing at either [Napa County Airport](#) or [Sonoma County Airport](#), both of which are conveniently located near the region's finest hotels and, of course, the vineyards themselves. Contact your personal Aviation Advisor or visit [xojet.com](#) to plan your trip.

Melka Wines: Philippe & Cherie Melka (owners)





This is where aristocratic Bordeaux training meets New World potential. Philippe Melka honed his craft at the haute couture of French winemaking (Haut-Brion and Pétrus), did a stint at Badia a Coltibuono, and then at the ur-Napa property, Dominus. “All of my background is in superb, traditional winemaking,” he says. It’s the way the French have always done it, which he summarizes in three words: “It’s the terroir.”

Philippe and his wife Cherie, a long-time wine professional who manages the operations of the company (and advises with blending decisions), make four wines—all beginning with the letter ‘M’—from Napa and Sonoma. The estate Cabernet comes from a two-acre vineyard in St. Helena, where they live in a cool pre-fab, corrugated-metal, modular home (see the website).

The Melka Métisse Jumping Goat Vineyard (82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Petit Verdot, and 3% Merlot) reflects the overall approach, as the vineyard, says Philippe, is similar to one in Graves. The flavors (dark fruit, graphite, tar, and creosote) are going to take time to mature, hence why he recommends decanting the 2014 for three hours. On the other hand, the 2013 Melka Mekerra Proprietary Red (Cabernet Franc and Merlot from a mountain vineyard) is raring to go (there are only 400 cases, so you better be as well).

THE 2017 VINTAGE

“There’s been enough water to refill the reservoirs,” says Philippe, echoing the comments of other winemakers. But despite the “crazy warm” July heat, “the yield should be pretty decent,” he says. He predicts the Cabernet harvest will go into the second week of October.

FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

“Very simple: four years of drought and now a year of massive rain in winter.”



BIGGEST HARVEST CHALLENGE

“The war is on—you have to be ready to take very quick decisions, always be ready for drama.” If there is a predicted heat wave.

“should we pick prior or take the gamble?”

Also, surviving two to eight daily espressos during harvest. (Sogni Di Dolci on Main St. in St. Helena is Philippe’s caffeine spot.)

FAVORITE PLACES

“To make good wine you have to drink a lot of beer,” he says, referring to a shed he has with beer on tap. “It’s the coolest place on the estate.”

His go-to local spot is [Brasswood Bar + Bakery + Kitchen](#), part of the Brasswood winery in St. Helena.

He and Cherie also like “a quick flight to Hawaii.”

Photo credit: Suzanne Becker Bronk

Hourglass Vineyards: Tony Biagi (winemaker)



The vineyard is named for its shape, a pinch in the valley between the Mayacamas and Vaca Mountains near Calistoga. It’s this geographical quirk that creates a wind dynamic that cools the vineyard and slows the ripening process, leading to extremely balanced and layered 100% Cabernet wines.

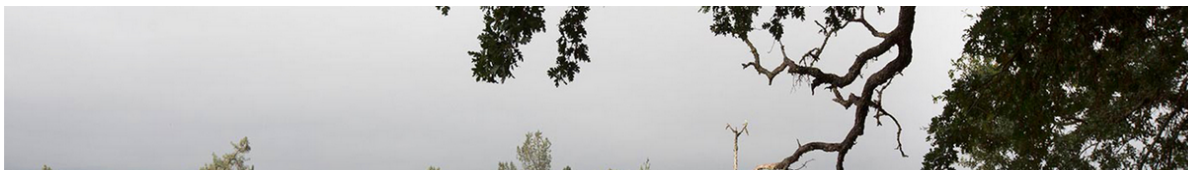
In 2006, Hourglass acquired the Blueline property, also in Calistoga, which takes its name from the two “blue-line” streams that form its boundary and are the source of the vineyard’s gravelly soil. It’s quite similar to Bordeaux, hence why wines from this 20-acre vineyard are a classic Bordeaux blend (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec), noted particularly for their minerality and ability to age.

THE 2017 VINTAGE

“Up until June we were worried because of the winter rains. But now we’ve had days of 100-degree weather that took away the water, which for the vine can be a crutch. It won’t be a big crop—the berry size is going to be small—but it could be a wonderful vintage.”

FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

“The run of vintages—2012, ’13, ’14—was phenomenal. 2016 came in as good as advertised. There’s hang-time without a lot of sugar, and a lot of flavor development. You couldn’t ask for a better set-up for the harvest. I love ’16.”





BIGGEST HARVEST CHALLENGE

"Letting it hang and being patient. Dan Duckhorn once told me, 'If you look hard enough, you'll find something to pick.'" September 27th is Tony's prediction for the harvest kick-off.

FAVORITE PLACES

"I'm at [PRESS](#) all the time. It's the winemaker country club. Have the 52-day dry-aged steak with an old Cabernet and you'll see that Napa Cabernet can age."

Tony also likes sitting on the pool deck at [Meadowood](#) after having lunch in order to catch an hour's sleep. "It's my guilty pleasure. You have to get away from the harvest sometimes."

His other new go-to: [Las Alcobas](#) in St. Helena. "A very romantic dining room."

Photo credit: Mimi Giboin

[Arrow & Branch](#): Steve & Seanne Contursi (owners) and Jennifer Williams (winemaker)



Steve Contursi is a nuclear particle physicist who made a career out of rare coins, founding [Rare Coin Wholesalers](#). ("I didn't have to be a rocket scientist to be a numismatist," he says.) He and Seanne didn't intend to become winemakers; they're a family couple (with five children) and they bought the property outside Napa town just as a vacation home.

But once they realized the Cabernet potential of the L-shaped estate vineyard—now part of the new [Coombsville AVA](#)—they took the plunge. [Arrow & Branch](#) also sources grapes from two other vineyards, both with Cabernet and one with Merlot. One of them is the [Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard](#), which yields "a creamy, textured wine from front to finish with a mineral stone finish that is unique to the

Crane site,” according to the website. Says Steve, “We’re about blend and balance, as we love the Bordeaux classics. We want length on the palate and the ability to age.”

THE 2017 VINTAGE

“It’s one of our hottest summers,” says Jennifer. “Late bud-break and veraison but we’ve got a lot of really healthy canopy, which helps protect the fruit and allows us to take our time to harvest.”

FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

“2012 is a showy vintage and it’s still that way,” says Jennifer, while 2013 “is one of the strongest in California—the wines have a lot to give if you hold them. Buy it.” She calls 2014 “a restaurant vintage,” and 2015 one that has turned out to be fruit-forward and longer than 2014. As for 2016, “We loaded up on some big, beautiful wines.”



BIGGEST HARVEST CHALLENGE

“To keep the acidity up,” says Jennifer. And accidents. “I once had a load of grapes en-route from Napa to Sonoma and the truck broke down. I had to call a special tow truck.”

FAVORITE PLACES

Seanne has liked [Angele](#) “from day one.” She and Steve are regulars at [FARM at Carneros Inn](#) and go to [Oxbow Public Market](#) for oysters. They also like [The Charter Oak](#): “Napa casual in a sophisticated way,” says Steve.

Photo credit: Arrow&Branch

Dakota Shy: Todd Newman and Tom Garrett (owners)





"With only its second vintage, Dakota Shy bursts to the front of the pack of Napa's Cabernet start-ups," extolled *Wine Spectator* in its 2016 Top 100 List. The estate vineyard lies at the base of Pritchard Hill, but Todd and Tom source grapes from all over Napa Valley, with the idea that they're creating an heirloom portfolio. This is a Cabernet-only enterprise, and the wines—some blends, some single-vineyard—are full-throttle, but each is intended to reflect the terroir.

THE 2017 VINTAGE

"Monumental winter rain," says Tom, but he thinks it has given the vines vigor after a few years of drought. They'll pick later than the past few years, he predicts, but welcomes the summer heat because "we need to see some vine stress."

FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

"An incredible string of vintages since 2012. The right amount of rain, sun, and heat, and at the right time." 2014 and 2015 have density and richness, Todd says, and 2016 (still in barrel) will be a little bit softer and more approachable in structure.

BIGGEST HARVEST CHALLENGE

Dealing with 17 vineyards, one as far south as Calistoga and one as far north as Oak Knoll. "Each has its own time," Tom says.

FAVORITE PLACES

The *Charter Oak* is "incredible, brilliantly simple, and flawless in its execution," Todd says. "A boiled Yukon potato will open your eyes." (He likens this to making wine in the vineyard.)

He also likes *Bouchon* for a late afternoon lunch of oysters and a bottle of Sancerre. "We adhere to the three-hour lunch," he adds.

Gott's is the place where the winemaking community goes to wind down with their kids over exceptional burgers and shakes: "Where you'll see winemaker powerhouses sitting with family."

Photo credit: Dakota Shy

Crocker & Starr: Pam Starr (co-owner and winemaker)



Pam, formerly the owner of *Spottswoode*, makes Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, and a Malbec blend at Crocker & Starr winery in St. Helena. The vineyards date back to 1875 when Irish immigrant James Dowdell planted Zinfandel and Riesling, and now the property—fronting Dowdell Lane—has been brought back to life by Pam and her partner, Charlie Crocker. Funnily enough, the venture had its roots in a misunderstanding over a grape purchase made when Pam was still at *Spottswoode*.

enough, the venture had its roots in a meal he's enjoying over a grape purchase made when Pam was still at SpotoWoods.

Crocker & Starr's emphasis is on combining sustainable farming techniques and cutting-edge winemaking to produce wines of power—but also balance—and ones that express the terroir of their respective vineyard plots.

THE 2017 VINTAGE

"I think 2017 is the year to expect the unexpected. It rained so much in the winter that Lake Berryessa overflowed for the first time in 25 years. During bloom, it hailed in some places, then it got super hot."

But her bet is that this vintage will turn out to be classic. "Some of Napa's best vintages have had the hottest days and the coolest nights."

FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

"2012 was textbook. 2013 had such long hang-time that you could have gone golfing and come back in three days. 2014 was a smaller crop, but super-high quality and structure. 2015 was easy-peasy, a no-rush vintage and one of the earliest finishes ever. I actually got to celebrate Halloween. 2016 was early, abundant, and generous, and all about tradition and community."



BIGGEST HARVEST CHALLENGE

"Getting the grapes in is pretty easy. It's the logistics of getting the bins back. What if the scale breaks?"

FAVORITE PLACES

Pam is big on the town of Napa, where she lives. "[BANK](#) at the Westin Hotel makes a beautiful botanical gin martini, has a terrific casual menu, and lets me bring our dog, Griffin." Her tip: Order off the wine list from [La Toque](#) (stocked with Napa Cabernet, she says), the hotel's formal restaurant.

She's also big on the new [Andaz](#): "Great, dog-friendly rooms, fresh, clean look, a room with a gas-lighted fireplace, and a big bathroom. It's not a Napa Valley historical property, but it's a great base within walking distance of everything."

Finally, she loves the [Poetry Inn](#) ("I can have everything delivered there") and the [Napa River Inn](#) ("Get the new rooms facing the Napa River"). She also recommends [TORC](#) for "pork and mushrooms like nobody's business."

Photo credit: Joe Hendricks

WHAT'S NEW IN NAPA AND SONOMA

To find the latest and greatest on Napa Valley and Sonoma's bustling restaurant and hotel scene, we asked Kimberly Charles, head of [Charles Communications](#) in San Francisco, which specializes in wine and spirits. Here are her recommendations:

[The Charter Oak](#): Since its opening in June 2017—the week after the Napa Valley Auction—this casual restaurant has generated endless buzz for creating a spin-off of the three-star Michelin Restaurant at [Meadowood](#). It is settling into its stride and the

consensus is that chef Christopher Kostow, who runs the kitchen at Meadowood, and his business partner Nathaniel Dorn, who worked for him there, are going to make it live up to expectations. “Charter Oak has the best burger in the Valley,” says one big fan, Tony Biagi of Hourglass Vineyards.

Acacia House: Opened in May, this restaurant in the Las Alcobas hotel (a transformed inn from circa 1907) is a winemaker favorite. Chef Chris Cosentino, creator of Cockscomb in San Francisco and Jackrabbit in Oakland, is aiming for a seasonal menu inspired by the cuisine of the world’s leading winemaking countries. Thus you’ll find Napa Valley lamb tartare topped with green harissa and mint and Klingeman Farms Iberico pork schnitzel. The bread is baked in-house and there are plans to brew beer on-site. Also open for breakfast.



The French Laundry: This Michelin three-star is not new, but renewed after a two-year, \$10-million renovation that included the installation of a new kitchen, 16,000-bottle wine cellar, and 9,000 square feet of gardens. (The restaurant remained open during the renovation.) The nine-course menu remains with one rule as its foundation: No ingredient can be featured more than once on each night’s menu, with the exception of truffles, caviar, and foie gras. *Photo credit: George Arriola*

Two Birds/One Stone: Yakitori (skewered chicken) comes to the Valley via Doug Keane and Sang Yoon, whose restaurant is in the historic **Freemark Abbey winery**. “What we’re doing at Two Birds is learning to tame fire. We’re taking the traditional Binchotan [charcoal] that’s the standard for yakitori, but adding in some local oak and even grapevine clippings to impart our own special blend of smoke to flavor the food,” says Sang Yoon.

SingleThread: This Healdsburg jewel of a restaurant and inn—created by chef Kyle Connaughton and his business partner (and wife) Katina—received four stars out of the gate from the San Francisco Chronicle. Billed as a luxury Kaiseki dining experience, it offers an 11-course tasting menu (\$295 without wine per person) sourced primarily from the restaurant’s five-acre farm. The inn, above the restaurant, has five rooms. Restaurant reservations are only taken a month in advance and must be purchased as tickets. Room rates start at \$800 per night.

Kenzo: This restaurant in the town of Napa is the product of big money—owner Kenzo Tsujimoto founded the video-game company Capcom—and big talent. The chef is Hiroyuki Kanda, who has earned three Michelin stars at his Tokyo restaurant Kanda nine years in a row. The fish is flown in from the Tsukiji Market in Tokyo, and many of the servers have been brought in from Kanda, as well. The wines are from Tsujimoto’s Napa estate.

Featured photo credit: Arrow&Branch

By Gary Walther

Gary Walther has been a travel journalist for 40 years. He has been editor-in-chief of Departures, Expedia Travels, Luxury SpaFinder, and Forbes Life magazines, and for the past five years a freelancer with a column on Forbes.com called The Hotel Detective. He has passport stamps from 61 countries and is a million-miler on American Airlines. He writes for the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, and Departures Europe among other publications.

