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Making Wine the Melka Way

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Philippe and Cherie Melka are a Napa wine power couple, but what makes them tick?



© Mariana Calderon | French native Philippe Melka is one of Napa's most in-demand enologists and he has prospered in his new home.

Every now and then, there is a wine that makes you sit up and take notice.

During a recent visit to [Lail Vineyards](#) in Rutherford, I tasted the winery's 2023 [J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon](#) and was amazed by its realization of what a great Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon can be.

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Some of that has to do with the stellar 2023 growing season in [Napa](#), but the site where the fruit is sourced consistently yields beautiful results, so for this particular vintage, winemaking played a large part in this wine's excellence. This is where Philippe Melka, who has been working with Lail Vineyards for more than 20 years, enters the picture, one of the most influential and in-demand enologists in Napa.

Melka, a native of France, is a trained geologist, and has degrees in that specialty, along with agronomy and enology. He has worked at wineries in Italy, Australia and France; in Bordeaux, he gained experience at wineries owned by Christian Moueix, including [Petrus](#). He met his future wife Cherie, a microbiologist, at Ridge Vineyards in California's [Santa Clara County](#); she had also worked as an enologist at Beaulieu Vineyards and Silver Oak.

They started their own label, Melka Estates in 1996, just a year after Philippe started his own consulting company; his first clients in 1995 included Lail Vineyards, Seavey, located in [St Helena](#), and Constant on Diamond Mountain Vineyards. Reflecting on his beginnings as a consultant.

"It was interesting time then. The '90s were really interesting for me, just to keep it simple," he says.

"A lot of people were investing in real estate, with some vineyards around the house; they did it to make some wine. Of course, they were wine people most of the time, so they wanted to make the best wine possible for their own estate. So, you started to have an explosion of vineyard-designated or estate wine, which for me was really interesting because we wanted to learn about all the different terroir of Napa Valley, and that was a fast track to do it."

Today, Melka consults for approximately 30 wineries; he states that the past few years have been like a "roller coaster" in this regard. A list of his clients is ultra-impressive, with such Napa producers as Spring Mountain Vineyard, Roy Estate, Moone-Tsai, Dana Estates and Raymond; other clients include Skipstone in Geyserville in [Sonoma County](#), Crown Point in [Santa Barbara County](#) and Corliss in [Walla Walla](#), Washington.

I asked Melka about the decision making regarding who he will consult for.

"I'm more of an emotional winemaker, so people are really important to me," he explains. "We're really trying to build in a perfect world, a big family in a way. That's how we kind of build the business. We try to really get all the clients to know each other if we can by creating a special event where we all get together, so we really want to have this kind of connection."

He adds that he seeks people that have "a long-term vision; this is kind of important. We really enjoy when people interview us, but we also interview them to make sure they have a long-term vision."

Working together

Philippe and Cherie are a winemaking team for their own label [Melka Estates](#), which consists of four separate projects: Métisse from Napa Valley; Mekerra, wines from their vineyards in [Knights Valley](#) in Sonoma; Majestique, wines from Rhône varietals, primarily grown in [Paso Robles](#), and CJ, a Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc named for their children Chloe and Jeremy.

I asked them what qualities they bring to the table when making their wines. Cherie responded that as Philippe is a trained geologist and she is more of a chemist, "I've learned from him, and when we're out there sampling the fruit and deciding when the picking date will be for each of those blocks – sometimes multiple times in one block – when the fruit finally arrives, he's usually out and about with other clients. He's got a lot of balls in the air so by text or phone I give him my appraisal of the fruit as it arrives at the winery."

For Philippe, it's all about collaboration as a partnership.

"This is a team company where we all have a kind of opinion because it brings more energy to the place, but the way we work in a sense, I work in the vineyard, where Cherie is really into the wine. That's the start of our journey, and then obviously during blending, we have a very similar palate, which makes it easier for the blend we are looking for.



© Mariana Calderon | Cherie and Philippe Melka have different approaches to winemaking, but they gel as a team.

"I kind of go in one direction, and if it doesn't work, Cherie goes in another direction, and we try to find the answer together."

Cherie adds: "If we can't come to a decision on that particular day, and we say, OK, this particular blend is in the hold column, and we'll get back to it in another 10 days or a week. Somedays we can't find the solution, so we kick the can down the road."

"It's like a husband and wife," notes Philippe. "We don't always agree on stuff, so there's a part where we're both not really happy, so when one of us is not happy, we put things on hold, until we both agree at the end of the blending session."

Recent vintages

Getting back to that glorious 2023 J. Daniel Cuvée from Lail, Melka notes how special that year's weather was. He says that since 2018, there have been nice growing seasons in Napa – with the exception of 2022, where there were seven or eight days with 100-plus temperatures; this as compared to a typical summer of only two or three days of such heat.

"Going back to 2018, 2019, 2023, obviously, 2024 and 2025, we didn't experience any kind of dramatic heat waves, which at the end translates to a lot more purity and elegance; it's all about the type of wine you want to express."

For Melka, 2023 compares to 2025 in Napa; he labels them a "brother/sister vintages, going back to a fresher style of wine, vintages with really, really good structure". He recalls that he checked the growing degree days, which is a good indicator, at least at the start of the vintage.

"2023 is the lowest I've seen in 30 years. It was a very cool vintage, and 2025 is very close, maybe just a touch warmer, but really negligible. It was on the lower end of the spectrum in

terms of heat accumulation during the growing season." He adds that the wines from 2023 and 2025 are going to age "very well".

The allure of Napa

I asked both of the Melkas what the reasons were they settled in Napa Valley as their winemaking base, given all their experience elsewhere.

"A lot of things, as you can imagine," Philippe said. "First off, I mean just like a lot of foreigners who come to the US, there is kind of a free spirit and especially in the wine business, which has been such a traditional business, feeling like there's a lot of things you can offer. There was at the time a feeling of extreme high level potential of making great wine. You know, this kind of vibe of youth, energy and experimentation."

For Cherie, it was the local tendency of cooperation.

"Sharing information; in France, it's more of a 'this is our domaine; this is how we do it, we're not sharing.' There's more of a collaborative spirit and feel in Napa."

For Philippe, "I felt borderline like I was more needed or could express myself much more in the US than in Bordeaux, so that was part of the reason.

"Also, my family is not in the wine business, so that's part of it. And then, my formation, my education at the beginning was really about learning the terroir, and the connection with the soil and the grapes, and the quality of wine, and those things. Here [California], there was nothing about those things, it was all lumped together in a way, so there was this great feeling like you were starting something from Ground Zero."

I concluded my interview with the Melkas by asking them if they ever pinch themselves over their remarkable success. Could they ever have dreamed it would be like this? "No," replied Cherie. "We're blessed every day ... we're extremely, extremely lucky. I think all in all, we're very happy."

Philippe realizes their good fortune.

"I don't know what we would have done without the business, but first of all, it's a drinking business, so it could be much worse. You feel blessed, even in a difficult time. It took us a long time; I think we did it the right way, we did it very slowly and surely having a strong foundation.

"As you can imagine, there was a lot of hard work behind it, so we definitely appreciate what we've done. I would have never imagined 20 years ago to be where we are right now. Never."