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A Frenchman in Napa Valley

By Lettie Teague



Although Michael Rolland may be the most prolific wine consultant in the world, fellow Frenchman Philippe Melka is easily his equal in the Napa Valley.

The ever-modest Melka might well protest this isn't true. Indeed, Melka, for all his awards and high-scoring wines, is a resolutely modest man. Even when he

was telling me the story of his recent near-brush with death, courtesy of a New Zealand wine-making intern driving on the wrong side of the road, he told it, well, modestly. (Never mind that the story ended with Melka's car declared a total wreck.)

I sat down with Melka (who I've had the pleasure of knowing for quite a few years) at one of his latest, most-acclaimed projects, Dana Estates, owned by Korean businessman Lee Hi Sang. Located in the Rutherford district, the winery, under Philippe's direction, produces three prodigious and decidedly distinct Cabernet Sauvignons all priced at \$275 a bottle. The Helms Vineyard bottling is made from Valley floor fruit while the other two (Hershey and Lotus) are made from mountain vineyards.

While all of the wines were deep, rich and concentrated, each proved a revelation of a different kind. The Helms was lush and strikingly accessible, the Hershey more structured and powerful and the Lotus, well, it was a beautiful synthesis of both: a powerful but elegant and ultimately gorgeous wine.

At the end of our tasting, Philippe and I shook hands and drove off in separate directions. And then I noticed there was a large piece of my car's undercarriage dragging on the ground. I'd have to take it to a repair shop straightaway. Not that I'd mention this to Philippe, who not only makes great Cabernet, but also cheated death.