

New Directions in Napa Cabernet

A roundup of the latest developments from Napa's new wave of winemakers



Almacerro owner Frank Scherkenbach makes a fresh start with his new cellar team (from left): Françoise Peschon, Lindsay Dale and Matilda Scott. (Matt Morris)

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The Napa Valley winemaking scene remains dynamic and forward-looking, with new projects emerging each year while established estates make notable shifts in their operations. Here are some of the most exciting investments, advances and revivals in the world of Napa Cabernet.

Almacerro

Few new family-owned Napa Cabernet brands have as much history as Almacerro and its Howell Mountain estate vineyard, some of it planted in the late 1800s. Following Prohibition, the estate was inherited by the Hess family, and in the 1970s Bill and Joan Smith purchased and developed four parcels for their La Jota wines.

When the Smiths moved on to a namesake Pinot Noir project, the La Jota brand (and three of the parcels) passed to new owners, first to Markham and then to Jackson Family Wines, where the label's distinctive mountain Cabernets live on.

The final piece is a 40-acre parcel that had been the Smith homestead, known as Piedra Hill, which included six acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. These were purchased by trial attorney Frank Scherkenbach in 2016.

"The remoteness of the estate was intriguing to him," says Almacerro general manager Lindsay Dale, who adds that Scherkenbach is a passionate wine lover who was "always looking for his own dirt off the beaten path."

Scherkenbach assembled an all-star team, with Mike Wolf as vineyard manager, Matilda Scott as winemaker and Françoise Peschon as consulting winemaker. They expanded the vineyard to 11 acres in total, with Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Petit Verdot and Tempranillo in addition to the core plots of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Dale emphasizes that the team thinks of themselves first and foremost as stewards of the land. "We aren't going to be this monster company," she says. "We're only going to be as big as our 11 acres can produce." The aim is to make nuanced, balanced and elegant wines. "Typically, when I think of Howell Mountain, I think of big, tannic monsters. We are making wines of Old World finesse and elegance."

While the goal is to use only estate grapes, there have been some challenges, including fires in 2020 (when no wine was bottled) and frost in 2021 and 2022, which lead to purchasing some grapes from nearby vineyards. Even though 2017 was Almacerro's first vintage, that year's wines won't be released until some additional bottle time, making the 2018, 2019 and 2021 bottlings the first releases.

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