

# A fresh batch of Napa winemakers barrel into new territory

By [Christopher Muther](#) | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 08, 2017

NAPA, Calif. — The tasting room wasn't quite what I expected. I wasn't even sure I was in the right place.

Could a budding and buzzed-about winery in one of the most prolific and established grape-growing regions of the United States really be located in a nondescript industrial park? I was assured by [Leaf and Vine](#) co-owner Timothy Keith that I was in a tasting room, and not an auto body shop.

This is the Napa Valley that most visitors miss. Away from tourist-laden Highway 29 there is a growing collection of fresh winemakers who are experimenting with new grape blends and flavors.

These mavericks of maceration are helping to eliminate outdated Napa stereotypes with atypical wines.

“You can drink a Napa chardonnay from any winery up and down the valley,” Keith said. “For the most part they're all going to be pretty solid and have a similar style. Our chardonnay is not like that style in any way.”

Keith warns those who come for tastings that their initial reaction may be to spit out his chardonnay if they are expecting the norm. The taste is (according to Keith) “sherry-like at first with oxidative hazelnut and honey suckle aromas, hints of lemon peel, and green apple.”

The new breed of indie Napa wine producer can be traced back to Steve Matthiasson and Jill Klein Matthiasson of [Matthiasson Wines](#). They released their first vintage in 2003, and struggled to sell their product because it was so different from other Napa wines.

With backgrounds in farming, they made wines from grapes more commonly found in Europe. Confusion ensued.

“The red wine was our first wine,” Klein Matthiasson said. “It was a merlot-based Bordeaux blend. The white wines were Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, and Fiulano.”

“People were telling us ‘If you’re in Napa, this is what we expect from you. Don’t try to be European, be Napa.’ That was very difficult for us,” Klein Matthison continued as she gave a tour of the couple’s farm and small vineyard on a scorching afternoon with the family cat in tow. “At some point someone asked us if we were ever tempted to make wines that were more typical of Napa. We said absolutely not. Those aren’t the wines that go with the food we like to eat.”

The wine world has since caught up with the Matthiassons. In 2003 they produced 120 cases, This year that number is 8,000. The San Francisco Chronicle named Matthiasson winemaker of the year in 2014. This year he was a finalist for the James Beard award.

Take that Matthiasson naysayers.

As the Matthiassons paved the way, the small wineries followed. Their specialties are remarkably different. Anderson, owner of Kales Wines, started making Rhône-inspired wines in 2008. As he often reminds people, there is no kale in his wines, it’s just his name.

“People are yearning for more craftsmanship in any industry,” he said while pouring out wines for a tasting at the Grill at Meadowood. “That has really put a lot of attention on craft brew and craft wine making. It’s a fun time to be in the wine industry.”

My opinion as a professional drinker is that it tasted good. I'm always hesitant to sniff, swish, and spit. Why treat a perfectly good tasting room like a dentist's office? I hate to waste good wine.

What I know about the fine details of wine could fit on single poppy seed, but even I understood the Leaf and Vine chardonnay was different.

There are some parallels between Napa's upstart wineries and the craft beer movement. In both cases its purveyors are generally young, passionate, and excited to play with flavor. But unlike beer, wine takes much longer to produce, requires bushels (or tons) of grapes, fermentation tanks, oak barrels, a lot of space, and a knowledge of science. Also, a fair amount of money. Tossing out a large batch of wine isn't much of an option here.

"It's not a get-rich-quick scheme," said Kale Anderson of [Kale Wines](#). "Even when you share facilities, share fruit, and have collective situations, the barrier to entry is still high."

Because few of the new winemakers own land, or every piece of equipment they require, there is a lot of borrowing. Like master chefs, these young, small batch winemakers purchase a mix of very specific grapes to create varieties such as [Gamling & McDuck's](#) Chenin Blac or Cabernet Franc Rose.

Adam McClary of Gamling & McDuck can tell you where each grape comes from for his wines, and why they were chosen.

"We could have gone to Virginia, or Oregon, or chased the trendiest new region," McClary said. "But this is where the industry is. This is the big dogs. This is where we want to be."



Craftsmanship is a very good description of what brothers Alex and Graeme MacDonald do at [MacDonald Vineyards](#). Other appropriate adjectives include heritage, artisanal, or legacy wine. Their cabernet grapes are grown on 15 acres owned by the family for decades. I've never seen a winemaker as enthusiastic about vines or grapes than Graeme. It's fine wine without a trace of pretentiousness. What they do is not trendy, but it does represent a new approach in Napa. Small and passionate.

The rebels of Napa are McClary and his wife Gabrielle Shaffer of Gamling & McDuck. They explain their wines through a comic book. They put playlists on their bottles. They have no intention of selling to a luxury market. Still, it seems the luxury market has found them. Since 2009, their output has grown from 120 cases a year to 1,500. Their wines are even served at the tony Grill at Meadowood.

He's in the process of putting together his own tasting room, but he's not interested in sharing the space with other small wineries, saying that Gaming & McDuck is too idiosyncratic to share.

"We are banking on the idea that there is an underbelly of Napa that is unique and interesting," he said. "There are some real artists out there, and people who live here and visit here are looking for them."

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Just returned from a very first trip to Napa.