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THE NAPA ISSUE

CHAMPIONS OF UNEXPECTED GRAPES

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Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson, advocates for Refosco and Ribolla Gialla

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CHAMPIONS OF UNDERDOG GRAPES

*Even in high-rent
Napa Valley, these
growers and winemakers
are charting courses
that avoid cliché Cabernet
and Chardonnay.*

BY VIRGINIE BOONE

PHOTOS BY
ERIC SCHWABEL

It's important to have heroes who are willing to stick up for the underdog.

Whether it's sports, politics or wine, the champions of underserved causes help ensure diversity and interest. In Napa Valley wine circles, this means tending to varieties less obvious than Cabernet Sauvignon, even when it doesn't pencil out on paper or resonate with the popular consciousness. Our heroes of unsung grapes are growers and winemakers. They're champions of something different, beating the drum for their cause over generations, decades or just a few years. They show us that there's more to Napa Valley than one might assume, and that ultimately, if it grows well and tastes good, adoration will follow.

Refosco, Ribolla Gialla, Schioppettino

Steve Matthiasson and Jill Klein Matthiasson
Matthiasson Wines

This husband and wife are heroes of many unsung grapes, both on their property and as caretakers of other vineyards across the valley.

"We see ourselves as unique in Napa both for the varieties we grow and produce, and for the style of wine we make," says Klein Matthiasson. "It's important to have that diversity for consumers. As a small farmer, diversity is also very important, but some of the varieties, including the Refosco and Schioppettino, are actually harder to grow than Cab and Chard."

Horticulturalists at heart, they love to see how different things grow and the challenges they present.

That philosophy guides them in the garden, where they plant different types of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and beans. They like the differing flavors that each variety provides, which help guide their cooking. They also nurture fruit orchards and make jam to sell at the farmers market and to local restaurants.

"Diversity away from just grapes is important," says Klein Matthiasson. "We grow most of our own food and try to purchase the rest locally. When we moved here from Davis, we were surprised how little food was being produced in the Napa Valley. We've tried to do our tiny part in changing that."

The Matthiassons make varietal Ribolla Gialla, Refosco, Schioppettino and Cabernet Franc wines from their home vineyard. They produce their Ribolla Gialla in the traditional way, fermented in contact with the skins so it becomes an orange wine. While the wines are all delicious, that doesn't mean they're easy to commercialize.

"We'll never be able to sell the weird stuff for the same price, and the truth is, our Cab and Chardonnay wines just sell better," she says. "The other problem is that with the uncommon varieties, we're competing with the imports, and since the dollar is so strong, the imported versions of the same varieties cost less. But Napa Cab is Napa Cab, and the only competition there is Bordeaux."

So why produce these less obvious wines?

Ultimately, the couple does it because they love it. They'd find it boring to just make two or three varietal wines.

92 Matthiasson 2014 White Blend (Napa Valley). Crisp, refreshing and uniquely spicy and mineral-driven, this blends 50% Sauvignon blanc, 25% Ribolla Gialla, 20% Sémillon and 5% Tocai Friulano, all unusual varieties in the Napa Valley. Light, bright and fleshy, it tastes of lemon, mango and the sea.

abv: 12.5%

Price: \$40

