

HOW TO LOVE WINE: A MEMOIR AND MANIFESTO

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how
to love
wine

A Memoir and Manifesto



input into the farming process and may not consistently be able to assure access to those grapes.

Still, some young *négociants* are making exciting wines, which indeed convey passion, vision, determination, and hard work. I'm thinking of producers like Arnot-Roberts, which make superb syrahs from a variety of sites in Sonoma and Mendocino counties, along with some very unusual whites, and Copain Cellars, which makes excellent pinot noirs and syrahs, also primarily from Mendocino and Sonoma. I could also name Rivers Marie and Wind Gap, and quite a few others.

One of the most interesting California producers is also one of the most unusual, and, alas, microscopically small. It is Matthiasson Family Vineyards. Just as it sounds, it's a family operation, set unexpectedly in the heart of Napa Valley. And yet the Matthiassons go against everything one might take for granted about Napa—its wealth, the way its denizens do business, the grapes they grow, and the sorts of wines they make. In a Napa world of lock-step assumptions, the Matthiassons are free-thinking, passionate individualists. They go their own way in how they live their lives, and in how they make their wines.

Steve Matthiasson is a vineyard consultant. Unlike many in Napa he is not wealthy, and he did not inherit land. In fact, it's surprising to find Steve, his wife, Jill Klein Matthiasson, and their two sons in Napa at all. But Napa is not populated only by wealthy winery owners. Plenty of people work in those wineries, and they have to live somewhere. One of those places is a subdivision just north of the city of Napa, rows of neat houses on tidy streets. Oddly enough, on one of those streets, a driveway snakes between two houses, seemingly leading to nowhere. Stay on that driveway, take a sharp turn, and another agricultural world opens up behind those neat

houses, including a rambling old house with a tumbledown barn and a small vineyard, all invisible from the street.

This is chez Matthiasson, a kind of modern-day ode to the sort of community subsistence farming that defined how generations of Europeans lived their lives. The Matthiassons are not only grape growers and winemakers. They have two small fruit orchards. They raise and kill their own animals for meat. Jill puts up fruit and vegetables, and sells a lot at local farmers' markets.

Unlike so many producers in Napa, who either inherited vineyards or can afford to buy them, the Matthiassons have had to acquire grapes by other means. As a vineyard consultant, Steve works with vines all over Napa, both small family-owned plots and huge tracts. He's learned to recognize the rows that have the potential to be spectacular and those that do not, and so he gets a few grapes here, a few more there, or he leases an acre and a half of merlot in the middle of a corporate vineyard.

"You have to find the little spots, and if you do it's awesome," he told me a few years ago. "Unless you have a whole pile of money, you have to barter your way through stuff."

Barter. What could be more ancient, and more emblematic of the Matthiassons' archaic aims and methods? Steve acquires odd lots of unusual grapes that one might never imagine could be found in Napa Valley: ribolla gialla and tocai friulano—white grapes found primarily in Friuli-Venezia Giulia—and old stands of *sémillon*, farmed without irrigation and head-trained, an old method of pruning the vines found primarily in vineyards planted before World War II. He blends these grapes with sauvignon blanc to make a lithe, agile, energetic white wine, lean yet textured, delicious and unexpected from the heart of cabernet country. Yes, cabernet does well in Napa, but other

grapes might do well, too. If Napa is indeed cabernet country, it's not because years of trial and error have proved it so. It's simply an understandable economic imperative—people will pay far more for Napa cabernet grapes and wines than they will for any other Napa grapes and wines. It's hard for any but the most stubborn or determined growers to argue with that logic.

Not that Steve disdains red wines. He makes reds as well, oddballs like a ripe yet lively refosco—another Friulian grape—and also more conventional Napa reds, like a blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, and malbec. These wines are big, as most reds are from Napa, but nonetheless retain their freshness. Most of all, they are alive—not denatured products but living, breathing wines that perhaps achieve this quality by sacrificing predictability.

“The whites get a lot more attention, but it could be the red is more our baby,” Steve said. “The red tastes really good to us. Every time we open a red, it's a different wine. I love that!”

It's an almost magical feeling to be sitting with the Matthiasson family around their big, wooden dining table at the center of their residence. Platters of vegetables pickled and jarred by Jill—cauliflower, okra, green beans, green tomatoes—whet the appetite, to be followed by lamb raised and now cooked by the family. Alongside, we drink the wines, both white and red.

It's a do-it-yourself American ethos that we venerate freely in mythology but rarely in real life, and, apart from the electricity, the kids on computers, and the comfort of this suburban residence, the evening tableau might not be all that different from a farmhouse in Europe several centuries ago, where wine was just one of the many staples, products of a community of families, consumed at the table.

If you feel I'm offering an overly rosy view of the past, perhaps you

are right. I would never want to trade my world today for a life in the age before anesthesia. Centuries ago, one might find lamb on the table only for a significant celebration, certainly not for an ordinary meal. No doubt, the wine we drink today is in general far superior. We have many, many reasons to be thankful we are living in the twenty-first century and not the eighteenth. And, of course, dinner in the Matthiasson household is a rare exception in twenty-first-century America. It represents a dream, an ideal, no more than that. Certainly, the Matthiassons augur no incipient back-to-the-land movement or herald the return of an old European wine culture in the heart of Napa Valley. But they do represent where wine came from and where wine at its best belongs, as well as indicating how alienated we are today from wine's original place in the spectrum of life.

Naturally, wine's role needed to evolve, and it has. As with most food staples nowadays, wine comes from somewhere else. Few among us grow our own food, prepare our own bread, raise our own crops and meat, or make our own wine. In the twenty-first century, it's not necessary that we do. Still, it's important to remember where things came from, and to retain at least an understanding of the past and semblance of continuity to it, just as the greatest wines evoke history and tradition.

The commonplace notion today that all that matters is what's in the glass signifies a severing of wine from culture. To isolate wine in this manner serves to make it a fetishistic object of desire for some, an intimidating, anxiety-producing sore point for others, an emblem of pretentious snobbery, and, sadly, too often a bore. When the score of a wine is more important than what a wine represents, yes, that wine is a bore. It is divorced from culture, assessed in a vacuum, judged without context, and prized for its monetary value rather