

# Winemaker of the Year: Steve Matthiasson digs for Napa's roots

Jon Bonné Updated 4:03 pm PST, Sunday, January 5, 2014



Photo: Erik Castro, Special To The Chronicle



## IMAGE 1 OF 5

Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson met in Davis when she received a grant to work on almond farming and hired him as an intern. They moved to Napa in 2002.

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Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson are proud owners of one of California's most improbably situated farms.

Go to the back of a subdivision on Napa's west side, just off Highway 29. Find a gap between two houses. Round the bend, and their yellow 1905 Victorian farmhouse sits at the end of a gravel driveway, shaded by a handful of old palm trees - a symbol, explains Steve, a keen student of agricultural history, of 19th century rural affluence.

Next to their weathered barn sits a winter vegetable garden, the victim of a nasty recent frost. Chickens scratch the ground. Sheep in

the backyard are a new arrival.

Napa may have mastered farmer chic, but this is no facade. It is a haven created by the Matthiassons, with their two sons, Kai and Harry: a 5-acre thumbnail, a reminder of the valley's agrarian past, wedged into some of the nation's most expensive agricultural land.

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"I still pinch myself every morning," Steve says. "I'll go out there at night and stand in the vineyard and look at the stars and say, 'Wow, this is our farm. We pulled it off.' "

California wine has bred its share of radicals of late, and Steve, 44, certainly carries those credentials. He's best known for a white wine that combines grapes native to Italy's Friuli (Ribolla Gialla, Tocai Friulano) and Bordeaux (Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon), a West Coast tribute to both. Also for esoterica, like ethereal versions of red Refosco and Cabernet Franc. And frankly, dropping a homestead, chickens and all, into the midst of Napa provides its own radical twist.

## Helping hand

But then there's Matthiasson's day job. He has become one of Napa's top viticultural consultants, with a client list that has included Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Araujo Estate, Spottswoode and Hall. When a vintner wants more flavor at lower sugar levels, Matthiasson is the one on speed dial. And he has achieved that while evangelizing for a reversal of the past two decades' trend toward overly ripe flavors and high alcohols.

These beliefs aren't reactionary so much as grounded in a respect for values that have kept wine on the table for centuries.

"He's looking for something more permanent, more perennial, more in keeping with what this beverage is meant to do for human beings," says Stag's Leap founder Warren Winiarski, one of Matthiasson's early clients.

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Unlike much of the new generation of California dreamers, Matthiasson has worked in the field for nearly two decades. It provides him with an authoritative voice to dispute the argument that Mother Nature's gift to California is unchecked exuberance.

If one person stands to rewrite the trajectory of California wine - in Napa's luxurious heart, no less - it is Steve Matthiasson. For that reason, he is The Chronicle's Winemaker of the Year.

## Going mainstream

Matthiasson's early renown, mostly for his white wine, derived from a fascination with Italy, one inspired by a veteran wine executive named George Vare. In 2002, Vare asked Steve for help planting a patch of Ribolla Gialla near his house in western Napa. Later, Steve and Jill grafted Refosco and Schioppettino in the 3 1/2 acres of vines behind their own home.

But the mainstream called. The couple leased 14 acres of a Chardonnay vineyard, Linda Vista, adjacent to their property. Their tangy Linda Vista bottling, aged in neutral oak, might be their most useful wine - not just for "good cash flow," per Jill, but also because it's Chardonnay, requiring no complicated introduction to thirsty novices.

In Napa, making a point about ripeness ultimately comes down to red wine. So Matthiasson has made a Bordeaux-inspired red blend for a decade. Three years ago, he and Jill, 51, a talented orchardist in her own right who runs the business side of their label, added a Cabernet Sauvignon.

Their Cabernet is an homage to a classic style for Napa, specifically the ripe but restrained Mondavi Reserve wines of the late 1980s and early 1990s, although its plummy flavors are a bit quieter. At \$60, it's also modestly priced for its neighborhood - part of the Matthiassons' skepticism about modern Napa's \$100-and-up pricing.

"For one thing," Steve says, "It's not us. But the other thing? From a business standpoint, we're not convinced of the sustainability of that model."

Yet he exults in the "raw unbridled power" achievable in Napa wines. Modern advances of viticulture have made ripeness a given - a big change from the 1970s, with its old, often diseased vines and unruly trellising, and the often lean wines of the 1980s.

With today's clean clonal material and spiffy viticulture, Matthiasson says the trick is to "slow the sugar train down." He isn't naive enough to believe that lower-alcohol wines will earn 100 points, but he's trying to slowly notch back ripeness, a victory one degree of sugar at a time.

So he might ditch vertical vine trellises in favor of spread crossarms - a partial revival of the old technique known as "California sprawl" - and align vine rows away from the sun. Both help allay his concern, one reinforced by a study earlier this year, that top wine regions like Napa are getting hotter.

Viewed from outside Napa's through-the-looking-glass viticulture, Matthiasson's ideas seem perfectly rational. Why not pick a bit earlier rather than risk late-season weather? Why not leave more crop on the vine, seeing that California vineyards' great virtue is productivity? In his view, higher yields are both good business and a sound environmental choice: "You don't need as many acres of the world to grow the wine we want to consume."

Yet the challenge he faces was never clearer than during a recent panel arranged by the Napa Valley Grapegrowers at Matthiasson's suggestion, on farming Cabernet at lower alcohol levels.

Were there technical concerns? Not so much. His fellow vineyardists were primarily concerned with what one called "the elephant in the room": If Napa pursued a modest approach, would it be skewered by the critics who had prompted winemakers to chase ripeness *uber alles*?

It's not that Matthiasson's views were kooky. It's that so many of his colleagues still live by the score, die by the score.

"That's what has been so shocking to me," he says. "I thought getting up there and saying 'You're doing it all wrong' was going to create controversy. And there was no controversy."

## Two approaches

As a viticulturist, Matthiasson has earned a reputation for thriving on gray areas, something that made him appealing to people like Bart and Daphne Araujo, who turned the famed Eisele vineyard into a laboratory for top-quality farming; and to philosopher-vintners like Winiarski, who admired Matthiasson's ability to mesh modern research science with a farmer's intuition, which explains why Matthiasson refuses to irrigate at season's end, even as vines wither.

As Winiarski puts it: "His science does not blind his holistic perception of what the plant is normally doing."

So it is no surprise that Matthiasson is often downright aggravated by many popular techniques, even something as simple as the use of copper sulfate, a common antifungal. One day while driving with him, I receive a long discourse about its toxicity in the soils of Bordeaux.

Jill shrugs. "He's the child of anthropologists."

True enough: Matthiasson was born in Winnipeg, the son of two anthropology professors. His family's farm, founded by his Icelandic great-grandfather, was just across the border in Mountain, N.D., a bump in the landscape nestled into the state's northeastern corner. He spent most summers at another family farm in Manitoba.

His parents divorced when he was 8, and moved Steve to Tucson. Its arid landscape was a very different place. He took up skateboarding - a hobby he's never quite abandoned - and punk, listening to bands like Minor Threat and the Dead Kennedys as he worked his way through high school in restaurants and landscaping jobs.

## Heading west

Afterward, he was sent farther west, to study philosophy at Whittier College outside Los Angeles, then drifted north to San Francisco in the early 1990s, where he lingered in his punk phase, making money as a bike messenger while volunteering in the city's community gardens.

To the Matthiasson family, farming was an intellectual's pursuit. His North Dakota relatives were highly educated, many of them accomplished musicians. And farming retained its pull. He returned to school, studying horticulture at UC Davis, and found an internship in Merced helping San Joaquin Valley orchards adopt sustainable practices.

Jill Klein's upbringing was rather less agrarian, in a quiet enclave just outside downtown Pittsburgh. Her family owned bars in various Pennsylvania mill towns, and her childhood green thumb was limited to backyard tomatoes - although the Kleins had a yen for the food business. Her cousin Ray Klein helped found Tartine Bakery.

Jill caught the ag bug while at the University of Pennsylvania. But Philadelphia doesn't lend itself to studying agriculture, and Penn State only offered agribusiness programs. So she looked abroad, spending two years in Israel on such projects as rainwater harvesting and later working in Tucson for Gary Nabhan, a pivotal figure in the seed-saving movement.

She landed at UC Davis, to study sustainable farming. Later, she took a job with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers. There she met a growing community of farmers like peach grower Mas Masumoto, who were trying to figure out how to nourish California agriculture on a small scale. In 1994, she received an EPA grant to work on almond farming and hired an intern - a fellow UC Davis student named Steve Matthiasson.

The two began dating. After a month, they made wine together in their shared garage.

Steve was drawn to grape farming, and helped the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission develop one of the industry's first serious sustainability protocols.

## **Farming dreams**

It was clear they would need to be closer to the coast to work seriously in the wine business. In 2002, the family moved from Davis to Napa.

While the rest of the Bay Area may have been obsessed with local foodways, Napa had doubled down on its cash crop, distancing itself from its old farming roots in pears and French prunes.

"When we planted an orchard, you couldn't get fresh fruit from Napa," Jill says. "People would say, 'Oh, you planted peaches? I hear you can't grow peaches in Napa.' "

Even before they met in Davis, Steve and Jill each had an improbable desire: to find a bit of land that they could farm for themselves.

The irony is that Napa economics - Steve's ability to earn good money for his talents - allowed them to fund those dreams in the most unlikely of places.

Today, when visitors come, Steve often serves salumi (and come spring, one assumes, mutton chops) he's cured himself, one of many things he and Jill make themselves: jam, vinegar, now vermouth. Jill assembles a salad with lettuce and peppers from the garden.

Napa's farm roots are stronger now than a decade ago. Jill now sells her fruit at the booming local farmers' market. And the sui generis style of their wines dovetails perfectly with today's fashionable farm-to-table gospel. This is merely the continuation of a belief they honed during their Davis days - that it was the moral work of the small farmer to counter California's agribusiness status quo.

After watching friends trying to make the numbers work in fruit or vegetables - "working crushing hours, living like 16th century peasants," Steve says - it became evident that wine, even with its messy economics, was a far better return.

Yet, as Jill puts it, "We're still ultimately selling expensive wine to rich people."



Which explains Tendu, a project the Matthiassons launched with wine broker Matthew Plympton. This one-liter bottle, meant to be a California alternative to Austria's everyday liter bottles, is made from Vermentino and retails for around \$20. Last year, they added a red from Aglianico, Montepulciano and Barbera. Steve calls it "a Beaujolais, but with Italian varieties."

Tendu's grapes come not from Napa but from somewhere the Matthiassons knew would pencil out: Yolo County's Dunnigan Hills, the same Sacramento Valley spot where Steve once worked for value label R.H. Phillips. He grafted about 30 acres over from Merlot to varieties he knew could withstand 100-degree summer heat. It's a way to share Steve's talents with customers have no recourse to \$60 Cabernet.

For all the success, Napa's economics are not kind to the small farmer. So the Matthiassons decided to lease land they couldn't buy outright - including Coombsville's Dead Fred vineyard for Cabernet, and a newly found 2 1/2-acre parcel in Rutherford. They surmised that modern-day sharecropping - lend us the land, let us farm it, get a manicured vineyard around your house and a bit of wine - would appeal to those with means, but not green thumbs.

After a decade, they are set to acquire a piece of Linda Vista, which will allow them to expand their own property. Napa's zoning requires a 10-acre minimum to obtain a winery permit for agricultural land, which will enable them to make wine on their own land - the final step in a dream they hatched nearly 20 years ago in California's inland orchards.

"It changes things dramatically, because it changes this from a hobby to a real farm," Steve says. "It becomes something that could support a family."

## From the notebook

**2012 Matthiasson Linda Vista Vineyard Napa Valley Chardonnay** (\$25, 13.5% alcohol): The user-friendly wine in the lineup, with tangy sweet lime, wintergreen and green apple flavors, and a mouthwatering saline aspect. Will get better with some time in the bottle.

**2011 Matthiasson Napa Valley White** (\$35, 12.9%): This edition of the white blend of Ribolla Gialla, Tocai Friulano, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon took a bit longer than most to come around. The oak is down to around 25 percent new, and it's a stonier, stoic version, matched by dense figgy flavors and that electric energy that Ribolla can bring to a wine.

**2011 Matthiasson Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$60, 13.7%): Production is still minuscule, but as a proof of concept, this Cabernet from a cold year shows Matthiasson's talent with reds: subtle, finessed tannins, aromas of fresh flowers and chopped thyme, chicory and a plummy fruit. There's skill here in both farming for moderate ripeness and nuanced work to extract flavors.

**2013 Tendu California White Wine** (\$21/liter, 12.8%): Consider this Vermentino Nouveau - a newly vinified interpretation of that Italianate grape, grown in Yolo County, meant for instant enjoyment. Bright citrus accents match a wheatgrass herbal side and ripe pear. An impressive concentration of flavor for a table wine, which I suspect was very much the point.

- Jon Bonné

## The wines

The Matthiassons don't offer public tastings, but their wines are available at many Bay Area wine shops, and via their website. Their wine club offers access to some of their more limited bottlings. More information at [www.matthiasson.com](http://www.matthiasson.com).

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