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## Matthiasson Wines, Napa: Current Releases



If there is anything that could be described as a fabric of winemaking influence in Napa, it consists of a loose-knit network of shining threads connecting winemakers and wineries. There was a time in Napa when this network consisted of a few bright nodes from which all other connections spread. Icons such as Andre Tchelistcheff and Myron Nightingale were some of the strongest hubs of winemaking influence that spread to populate an entire valley with a next generation of vintners. With each generation, the web of influence has become more diffuse.

Still, there are defined constellations of winemakers who owe allegiance to sources of influence that have shaped their evolution of craft. At the center of a cluster of what many believe to be the hottest new winemakers in Napa sit two men: the late vineyard owner George Vare and winemaker Steve Matthiasson. Parsing their individual impacts on the current crop of winemakers in Napa proves to be a tough exercise. Vare, a long-time industry executive gained a passion for the wines of Friuli, and planted a vineyard with Ribolla Gialla before most people in Napa had even heard of the grape. Matthiasson turned those grapes into some of the most exciting wines that Napa had seen in years. With Vare's death this past April, Matthiasson is left as one of the key influencers for where wine is going in Napa.

Matthiasson might protest this claim of influence. Indeed, it's not like winemakers such as Dan Petroski of Massican or Matthew Rorick of Forlorn Hope apprenticed at his knee, as many did to the giants of yesteryear. But Matthiasson's leadership, if you can call it that, is more subtle. Simply put, he is the inspiration for many of the new winemakers who are breaking the mold of what has been done in Napa for the past thirty years.



Matthiasson has a degree in Philosophy from Whittier College. "I majored in Philosophy because nothing interested me," he recalls. "I didn't realize you could have a career in farming. My relatives were born into farming, but mine was an urban family."

Still, wine featured in his life from an early age. "We always had wine in the fridge," Matthiasson remembers with a chuckle, "a box of Franzia. Wine always marked the end of the work day and the beginning of family time. That's how I learned what wine means."

But that didn't mean Matthiasson yet knew what to do with his life when it came to choose.

"I was working as a bike messenger in San Francisco -- think of me as sort of an early hipster -- and I was spending a lot of time in a community gardening plot when someone told me about U.C. Davis. I didn't know there were such things as 'Ag Schools' and didn't know there was such a thing as international agricultural development. My parents are both anthropologists, so I was interested in that sort of thing."

"I thought to myself I'd go to Davis, take classes, learn how to farm, go someplace international and help out the developing world, then come back, buy some land in Arkansas and settle down," chuckles Matthiasson.

"Once I got to Davis I got stuck with professor Bill Liebhardt because I was interested in organics and he was teaching Sustainable Agriculture. I confessed to him one day that I wanted to become a farmer and he looked at me and lowered his voice and said, 'You're not going to learn that here. Give anyone on this hall \$100k [to start a farm] and they'll be broke in a year. You need to go work on a farm, kid.'"

"Well, fuck," laughs Matthiasson. "I was nine months in and didn't know what to do."



So he did the thing that most college kids do when faced with existential crises. He talked to his roommate, and found out about an internship down in Merced working in an orchard. That was good enough for Matthiasson and so he took the Spring semester off, packed up, and headed south for two job interviews -- the first for an internship with an agricultural consulting gig (he passed) and the second with the woman who would later become his wife.

Jill Matthiasson was working for the Community Alliance for Family Farming, and had created a program focused on helping to build sustainable practices for orchards. The Alliance was partnering with the company at which Matthiasson was interning, and it fell to Jill to find out about the fresh-faced young man they had sent her to help out.

Presumably Matthiasson said the right things in his job interview, because not only did he get the job, within a few months he had himself a girlfriend as well. A month after they started dating, Matthiasson returned to his studies at U.C. Davis and the two crushed their first grapes together from the teaching vineyard at the school.

That was 19 harvests ago, and Steve and Jill Matthiasson have made wine together ever since. First in their garage, and then later in various rented and borrowed facilities where Steve was working at the time. For many years, the wine was just for them -- a project in which they could involve the whole family -- and the quantities reflected that. Jill continued her work with the Alliance, and Steve plowed himself into his career as a top agricultural and viticultural consultant.

Eventually, Steve's work brought him to Napa, and a particularly good contract prompted the whole family to move there in 2002. He quickly built up a book of business consulting on sustainable viticulture for a roster of clients that would turn most heads in Napa: [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#), [Spottswoode](#), [Araujo](#), and [Chappellet](#), among others.



"One day around harvest he came home from work, just raving," says Jill, "He was going on and on about having best Merlot he'd ever tasted out of a client's vineyard."

"I knew we had to make some wine from these grapes," adds Matthiasson, "and that we should sell it. I had another client who would give me enough Cabernet to blend with it, and so we decided to do it."

"We had no idea what we were getting into," said Jill. "We had no business plan, nothing."

Luckily one of their drinking buddies knew a thing or two about selling wine, and after sampling the results of what was ostensibly their first "commercial" vintage in 2003, said he thought he could sell it. And he did.

On the success of that tiny first vintage, and the growing success of his consulting business, the Matthiassons and their two young sons decided to put down roots, snapping up a small parcel of land at the edge of Napa's Oak Knoll district behind a subdivision, with a 1903 farmhouse, a barn, and perhaps most critically, about three acres of neglected old vines and a few fruit trees.

"You couldn't even really call them neglected," says Matthiasson. "The technical term was fucked up. The guy who planted this property extracted every last bit he could get from the land."

Standing in what is effectively the Matthiasson's back yard, a stone's throw from their house, it is obvious the two have made it their goal to put a lot back into this land. The drainage culvert that runs along the back of their property was originally a mess of weeds, but has now been rimmed with native flowering plants and bushes conducive to insects, in particular, pollinators. Sheep graze the property along with the small pack of chickens, bees hum from a couple of hives, and an raptor box stands waiting for a resident. The vineyard has been replanted or regrafted, beautiful cover crops flourish between the rows, and the slender trunks of new fruit trees dot the edges of the property.

Seeing this, it's no surprise to hear Matthiasson talk about how he spends his days setting up integrated pest management for his organic and sustainably farmed winery clients, nor to find out that Matthiasson and his wife also run the Napa Fruit Company, a farmer's market stand offering organic fruits from the valley.





Matthiasson's growth as a winemaker has been marked by one key milestone above all others. His work as a consultant brought him in contact with Vare, who has the unique distinction of having planted California's first vineyard of Ribolla Gialla grapes, a variety from Italy's Friuli region. Accompanying Vare on a trip to that region in 2005, Matthiasson had what he calls a "religious experience," in particular when tasting the famed wines of Miani. He came home obsessed with white wine, and focused on evolving his already low-alcohol, high-acidity winemaking to include more texture, more energy, and of course, more Ribolla Gialla, which he promptly began sourcing from Vare's vineyard.

Matthiasson began with only two wines, each made in what Matthiasson refers to as the "Platonic ideal." They were, and are, simply called "Red" and "White." Those savvy enough to be on his mailing list over the past decade had access to the wider range of wines that he produced, often in very small quantities. Over time, he has increased production of some of those smaller wines, and now his portfolio officially includes a Merlot, a Cabernet Sauvignon, a Chardonnay from a vineyard that Matthiasson owns on the Sonoma Coast, and a Rosé. Some of his other remarkable wines remain what he and Jill refer to as "passion wines" and sell only to his wine club members and friends.

Matthiasson's winemaking is an interesting mix of non-interventionist, even experimental winemaking (he has a Philosophy degree, after all) coupled with the practicality of someone who makes his living as a consultant.

"I'd love to use native yeasts, but we've crushed in 5 different facilities since our first vintage in 2003, so to keep things manageable, I inoculate," said Matthiasson. Temperature control is quite important to him as well, with a distinct preference for lower temperature fermentations. He avoids fining, and doesn't filter his reds, but because he stops his white wines from going through secondary (malolactic) fermentations, he has to filter them.

Having said that, Matthiasson also produces a batch of Ribolla Gialla each year that is picked by the kids, crushed by their feet, macerated on whole clusters for three weeks, and then fermented for 18 months in his old barn, with no temperature controls or added yeasts. This orange wine is always a crapshoot, and some years it turns out better than others.

This somewhat unpredictable wine aside, Matthiasson's winemaking is remarkably consistent in its almost magical balance between fruit and extremely high acidity, tempered with generally very low alcohol levels. Some of his wines are so fresh and brilliant, they make you gasp when you put them in your mouth.

Tasting through his wines on a recent Autumn afternoon, I pressed him to talk more about how he thinks about his winemaking, in particular how he establishes a vision for what each wine should be, and in the process I made a somewhat startling discovery: Matthiasson has [synesthesia](#).

"When I listen to music, or do math, or taste things," says Matthiasson, "I see colors. For me, balancing the wine is about balancing the spectrum of colors in the wine when I taste it and smell it. With red wines I'm shooting for the color red, balanced by green and black. For white wines the dominant color is a greenish-yellow-gold."

A few minutes of further conversation is enough to convince me that this isn't just a handy metaphor that happens to correspond to the colors of the fruits we use to describe some of wines flavors. Matthiasson actually experiences flavors as visual stimuli. This realization also serves to illuminate a subtlety of Matthiasson's packaging design that I had not fully appreciated in the past. The colors of the silhouetted shears he uses on his labels is carefully chosen to correspond to the colors that he "tastes" in each wine.



When I expound on the fact that this fusion of color and other senses is something quite extraordinary, it's clear that Matthiasson is somewhat embarrassed, and he plays it down. But to me it is the perfect explanation for the revelation that Matthiasson's wines continue to be, vintage after vintage. They are simply some of the most unique and special wines being made in Napa each year.

For his part, Matthiasson seems to have settled into a comfortable, humble confidence.

"We're just trying to make serious, world-class wines. And we never make any decisions based on the expense" he says.

"But how's the P&L coming," I ask.

"We haven't looked at it in years," laughs Matthiasson.

"We don't even have a P&L to look at if we wanted to," chimes in Jill.

Thankfully, their wines continue to find their way into the hands of those who appreciate them, and those looking for something different in Napa continue to make their way to the old yellow farmhouse behind a Napa subdivision. And perhaps most importantly, Matthiasson continues to inspire more winemakers to strike out in new directions searching for more diversity and distinctiveness.





## TASTING NOTES:

### **2012 Matthiasson Rosé of Syrah, Napa Valley, California**

Pale salmon in color, this wine smells of wet leaves, orange peel, and bee pollen. In the mouth an interesting combination of earth and citrus peel mix with gorgeous bright pink grapefruit pith, crushed herbs, and a hint of candle wax. The wine is long, bright, and utterly savory, with a kick of salinity at the end and a gorgeous minerality that frames the entire experience. Whole cluster pressed and fermented entirely in steel. 12.3% alcohol. Score: around **9.5**. Cost: \$23 . [click to buy](#).

### **2012 Matthiasson "Linda Vista Vineyard" Chardonnay, Napa Valley, California**

Light, bright yellow-gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet chalkboard, lemon curd, and pomelo pith. In the mouth, bright lemon curd, wet chalkboard, pink grapefruit pith, and candied lemon peel swirl in a mouthwatering dance on the tongue. Notes of bee pollen and hints of chamomile linger in the finish. Fantastic acidity. Juicy and delicious. Whole cluster pressed, barrel fermented in neutral oak, and prevented from going through malolactic fermentation. 13.5% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**. Cost: \$25. [click to buy](#).

### **2011 Matthiasson White Blend, Napa Valley, California**

Light, bright yellow-gold in color, this wine smells of white flowers, Asian pears, and wintersweet blossoms. In the mouth a burst of lemon oil, wintersweet blossom, crushed stones and rainwater crackles on the tongue with an almost electric presence. Unbelievably juicy and mouthwatering, this wine is perfectly balanced between floral qualities, lovely savory notes, and an ocean-air salinity. Dried yellow herbs linger in the phenomenal finish. Simply one of the best white wines being made in California at the moment. A blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Semillon, and Tocai Friulano. 12.9% alcohol. Score: between **9.5** and **10**. Cost: \$35. [click to buy](#).

### **2012 Matthiasson "Ryan's Vineyard" Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California**

Pale cloudy gold in the glass, this wine smells of honeysuckle and dried lemon pith. In the mouth lemon pith, dried lemon peel, pomelo, and kumquat all have a brightness to them thanks to excellent acidity. The wine offers a deep chalky minerality that has an almost ceramic crispness to it. Bright, steely, and delicious. 13.5% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5** . Cost: \$30.

### **2011 Matthiasson "Ryan's Vineyard" Semillon Napa Valley, California**

Light yellow-gold in the glass, this wine smells of resinous lemon oil, yellow grapefruit, and wet stones. In the mouth gorgeous wet stones, candle wax and lemon oil, all have a lean, stunning angularity to them that is distinct and refreshing. Bright pink grapefruit flavors linger through a long finish. Fantastic acidity and great balance, this wine will age for decades. 11.9% alcohol. Score: around **9.5**. Cost: \$30.

### **2011 Matthiasson "Vare Vineyard" Ribolla Gialla Napa Valley, California**

Light yellow-gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon, a hint of peach and apricot, and wet stones. In the mouth, bright lemon and a hint of bergamot mix with a faintly tannic, stony minerality, and a long lemony finish. Bright juicy acidity and wonderful balance. 12.8% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5** . Cost: \$40. [click to buy](#).

### **2011 Matthiasson "Matthiasson Vineyard" Ribolla Gialla, Napa Valley, California**

Cloudy orangey yellow gold in the glass, this wine smells of burnt match, and a hint of acidophilus culture. In the mouth the yogurty lemon orange marmalade quality continues with a very creamy texture and a hint of nut paste. There's a savory olive brine quality to the wine. Fainter acidity, but quite distinctive. Whole cluster pressed, then 3 to 4 months of skin contact with no temperature control. 10.9% alcohol. Score: around **8.5**. Cost: \$45.

**2011 Matthiasson "Michael Mara Vineyard" Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, California**

Light yellow-gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and wet chalkboard with a hint of cold cream. In the mouth, gorgeously bright lemon curd and lemon zest flavors are beautifully balanced with savory undertones. Stunning crystalline minerality and mouthwatering acidity. Fantastic. 300 cases produced. 14.3% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$45. [click to buy.](#)

**2012 Matthiasson "Tendu" Vermentino, California**

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet stones white flowers and lemon. In the mouth bright lemon peel, wet stones, unripe Asian pear and pomelo pith are all juicy thanks to excellent acidity. A touch of Cortese and Arneis are also blended in. Sold in 1 liter bottles with a crown cap. 12.8% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9. Cost: \$23.

**2011 Matthiasson "Matthiasson Vineyard" Cabernet Franc, Napa Valley, California**

Cloudy garnet in the glass, this wine smells of crushed hazelnuts and cashews, violets, and cherry. In the mouth gorgeous cherry and nutty flavors mix with violets and wet earth, a hint of green herbs and wonderful powdery tannins. Aged in neutral oak. Excellent acidity. 11.6% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5 . Cost: \$55.

**2011 Matthiasson "Matthiasson Vineyard" Refosco Napa Valley, California**

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of violets and freshly crushed grapes. In the mouth, leathery tannins wrap around cassis, cherry, and mulberry flavors. Wonderful deep earthy notes counterpoint the bright fruit. Spicy on the finish with a hint of graphite. 12.2% alcohol. Score: around 9. Cost: \$45. [click to buy.](#)

**2010 Matthiasson Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California**

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of chocolate, graphite, and a hint of green herbs. In the mouth, the wine is incredibly juicy with flavor of cherry, cedar, tobacco, forest floor, and a hint of tapenade savoriness. Phenomenal acidity and a gorgeous balance between the sweetness of fruit and savoriness of earth make this wine effortless to drink, and totally mouthwatering. 25% new oak. 13.8% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$60.

**2011 Matthiasson Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California**

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of mint, dark chocolate, black cherry and violets. In the mouth, flavors of violets, cassis and black cherry mix with a crushed stone minerality. Notes of crushed herbs and violets linger in the long finish. Stunning acidity and length. No new oak. 13.7% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$60. Not yet released.

**2010 Matthiasson "Red Hen Vineyard" Merlot, Napa Valley, California**

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cedar and tobacco and black plum. In the mouth the wine is phenomenally juicy, with plum and bright cherry fruit and incredible acidity. As the wine sits on the palate mulberry and even blackberry fruit make an appearance welded to a phenomenal forest floor and cedar quality. A hint of nuttiness lingers on the finish. Wow. One of the most distinctive and pleasurable Napa Merlots I have ever had. 25% new French oak. 13.3% alcohol. Score: between 9.5 and 10. Cost: \$80. [click to buy.](#)

**2009 Matthiasson Red Blend Napa Valley, California**

Very dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cassis, wood smoke, forest floor and black cherry. In the mouth, smoky flavors of graphite and forest floor mix with licorice, black olive, and deep black cherry fruit. Deep resonant and rich, with savory tapenade quality to it, the wine has a perfect balance between juicy and herbal notes. A blend of 50% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Cabernet Franc, 5% Petite Verdot, and 5% Malbec. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$75. [click to buy.](#)

**2004 Matthiasson Red Blend Napa Valley, California**

Very dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cedar and mulberry, strawberry jam and tobacco. In the mouth spicy cedar and plum and powdery tannins mix with chocolate, notes of leather, and sweet redwood bark. Nutmeg makes an appearance in the finish. Tasted from a half bottle that Matthiasson found tucked away in his garage. 14.8% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5 .





Posted by: Alder on October 12, 2013 12:54 PM