



Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson: Their unique viticulture/wine dream fulfilled in Napa

California's rarified North Coast wine country of Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties attracts improbable folks, some with equally improbable quests of producing the enological Holy Grail.

Harry Cline, Farm Press Editor Emeritus | Nov 28, 2016

He is Canadian-born, son of two anthropology professors, and spent part of his childhood in Arizona before getting a philosophy degree at Whittier College, Los Angeles. She grew up in Pennsylvania, where her family owned mill town bars. Each had some early agrarian experience: His family farmed in North Dakota and Manitoba, where he spent summers growing up; she grew tomatoes in her family's backyard.



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Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson's early days fit that depiction. Their wine experience, she admits, didn't go beyond box and jug varieties.

But today their influence on wine grape growing on the North Coast, and their uncommon wines, have earned them Winemaker of the Year honors from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Food and Wine* magazine.

It was a circuitous journey.

Educations for both at University California, Davis, and stints in the San Joaquin Valley, helped shape them into visionary viticulturists, who have also won acclaim as winemakers — a combination definitely not ordinary.

Steve immersed himself in the California viticulture/wine world at Davis, where he went for his M.S. in the horticulture department. Jill was there to pursue her passion for sustainable agriculture. But before Davis, she'd studied agriculture at the University of Pennsylvania, and had spent two years in Israel working on ag projects. Later, from Davis, she worked with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers.

TRYING NEW IDEAS

It was there that she hired Steve as an intern. He worked specifically on the Biologically Integrated Orchard Systems (BIOS) projects in Central Valley almonds.

“Steve was so anxious to learn about growing tree crops using integrated pest management,” recalls retired University of California Entomologist Walt Bentley. “He came out of Davis very well-trained. He listened intently and learned quickly. Two things really impressed me: First, he was so respectful of all the people who worked with him — most of all, the farmers — and second, he trusted his judgment and wasn’t afraid to suggest and try new ideas.”



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Steve, 47, a licensed Pest Control Adviser (PCA) for 23 years, was one of the first to move to ant baits and away from Lorsban sprays for almonds. And while it's a long way from using ant baits in almond orchards to pioneering winemaker and vineyard consultant for many well-known North Coast wineries, Bentley says, "I think his confidence in himself led him to where he is now. He is honest as the day is long — a straight talking, all-around good man. I think he will continue to be a success."

Steve's viticulture résumé includes Four Seasons Ag Consulting at Modesto, staff member of the Lodi-Woodbridge Wine Grape Commission, and co-authoring the *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook: A Self-Assessment of Integrated Farming*. The workbook was the basis for the Wine Institute's *Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Self-Assessment Workbook*, used by more than 1,400 vineyards and wineries. He was also research viticulturist for R.H. Phillips Wine Company's 2,400 acre operation.

ON THEIR OWN

This is the solid foundation he and Jill possessed when they struck out on their own in 2002 to farm in Napa, Calif., where they now live with young sons Kai and Harry. They farm 40 acres of mostly organic wine grapes. They own five acres and lease six other vineyards.

His consulting business, PremiereVision, has included Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Araujo Estate, Spottswoode, Hall, Della Valle, Trefethen Family Vineyards, Young Inglewood, Limerick Lane, and others. Today, that totals about 1,000 acres. It was more when he was not as immersed in his own wine ventures. He consults for both conventional and organic producers.

Jill farms fruits and vegetables — her produce is popular at the Napa farmers market and local restaurants — and she runs the business side of the Matthiasson wine label.

Steve’s grape-growing goal, he says, is to create “a balanced vine.” For example, he says, it’s an industry myth that thinning achieves a bigger crop of quality grapes. “That’s extremely wasteful — if you’re working to grow a crop, why drop so much on the ground? You need to find an edge to produce a solid, mature crop, using things like water stress on clay soils, and using deep-rooted California native grasses to get rid of excess soil moisture so the vines will kick in their drought tolerance mechanism earlier so sugars will come up.”

Improving uniformity is No. 2 on Matthiasson’s check list. Most vineyards have weak and strong areas, and the fastest way to improve overall production and quality is to identify those areas and mitigate them. That may mean spending money for a second drip hose, or disking and mowing in the same row. Improving uniformity is not costly — if production increases and overall costs are reduced.

GOOD HEALTHY VINES

“Good viticulture is good viticulture ... regardless of the style of wine you want to produce,” Steve says. “You want good, healthy vines that aren’t working too hard. I want our vines to be like Navy seals: fit and strong, pushing themselves, but not pushing themselves over the edge and falling apart.”



His enological focus in his own vineyards is producing quality low alcohol wines, the viticulture quest he has been pursuing for the past decade or longer. His target is 12.5 percent alcohol; a typical North Coast Chardonnay is 15.5 percent.

His philosophical wine and grape growing goals are well-grounded in science— but they daily face realities such as labor needs and pest problems. Napa has an established, skilled, non-migrant farm worker labor force, but producers must rely on migrant labor in the spring, mostly for shoot thinning/canopy management, and again at harvest.

“Fortunately, we pick early, at 23 sugar, for our low alcohol wines, rather than the more traditional 26 sugar, and we can get labor,” Steve says. “But the last two or three years, there have been bidding wars for harvest labor later in the season. Wineries can’t get fruit picked when it should be harvested.” Unfortunately, like Steve’s vineyards, most plots are too small for machine harvest.

Historically, growers have given 48 hours notice to get contract labor; this year, he says, it took 10 to 14 days to get workers. “Forget about overtime issues — you can’t get people at any price.” During one stretch, growers were scrambling unsuccessfully to get grapes picked before a heat spell, then were frantically looking for pickers before a forecast rain in the same vineyards.



BORDER ‘WAR ZONE’

“I don’t know where we are going to hire people in the future,” Steve says. “For years workers would come to work, then go back to their families in Mexico — but, no more. It’s really a shame, because the border is now a war zone, and people are afraid to come here.”

Economists also are reporting that economic conditions south of the border are improving, and many former migrant workers can now make a living in their homeland.

Diseases and their vectors are also a major challenge, particularly Pierce’s Disease, and maladies spread by the vine mealybug. “Pierce’s disease has been really bad in recent years,” Steve says. He attributes it to warm winters and early springs, which have produced big populations of the disease vectors, primarily sharpshooters and possibly spittlebugs. “We’ve had hardly any frost in recent years. People used to walk around bleary-eyed in the spring from being up many nights frost-protecting vines. No longer.”

The vine mealybug is getting worse, he says. The pest produces honeydew that drops onto bunches and other vine parts and causes black sooty mold. Ants feed on the honeydew, but if they are not present, there can be so much honeydew that it resembles candle wax. The pest can also transmit grapevine leafroll-associated viruses.

“Drip tubing has become high speed rail lines for ants going after the mealybug honeydew,” Steve says. “We don’t have an eradication mode for managing it.” As an organic grower, he has used mating disruption and parasitic wasp to control the pest. He relies heavily on field workers spotting pests, diseases, and powdery mildew.

A BELIEVER IN ORGANIC

“I am a tree hugger,” says Steve smilingly. “I believe in organic. It is becoming pretty important in the wine business. There is no question that it’s cheaper to farm conventionally — but I enjoy the challenge of organic. When you farm organically, you solve problems with one arm tied behind your back.”

Fortunately, more effective materials are available today to farm organically than when Steve started. That includes mechanical advancements. One of the big challenges in organic farming is weed control, because herbicide choices are limited. “The two-row, under-vine tillage tools can compete with any herbicide,” he says.

A new organic material on the market is effective against Eutypa dieback, a subtle but deadly killer. Eutypa spreads during winter rainfall, when spores are released to infect pruning wounds. Once the wood is infected, the disease can’t be eradicated. It can be minimized by delayed pruning, double pruning, and applications of pruning-wound protectants.

Eutypa kills spurs, arms, cordons, canes, and sometimes the upper section of the trunk. It is in virtually all California vineyards, but often isn’t taken seriously. “It is more widely recognized as a killer now,” Steve says, “because so many vineyards that were planted or replanted in the late 1980s or early ‘90s are only lasting 20 years, when they were expected to last 40. Eutypa is on every grower’s mind these days.”

In addition to the fungicides labeled as pruning wound protectants, there are organic sealants like Tech-Gro B-Lock, which is 5 percent boric acid in acrylic paint, and a new one called Safecoat VitiSeal.

A GAME CHANGER

Hand-applying protectant to wounds is costly, and conventional growers often use a conventional fungicide spray tank mix, but organic growers like Steve cannot. Until recently, he had to rely on painting wounds with B-Lock.

Unfortunately, that material doesn't control *Botryosphaeria* dieback, which along with Esca, and Phomopsis make up a complex of trunk diseases.

Two years ago VitiSeal gained registration. Steve calls it “a game changer” because it is organic and can be applied in a spray. It isn't a fungicide, but sealer that creates a resistant barrier against wood diseases. It can also be painted. It offers a full spectrum of protection against trunk diseases. “It is an easy material to work with,” he says, “and more growers are starting to use it, although it is expensive. It is especially good for larger growers who don't want to hand paint pruning wounds.”

Any farming venture — be it expensive Napa wine grapes or valley almonds — is impacted by price. Steve says Napa wine sales and grape prices are strong, going up on average about 10 percent annually. “The spot market was a couple thousand dollars above Napa averages this year,” he says, noting that these prices are making long-term contracts offered by wineries attractive.

“Growers who remember past years of low prices are going after contracts, but those who don't remember are holding off, hoping prices continue to go up.”

But like the stock market, the top of the spot market is discovered only when prices fall.

A NAÏVE MISTAKE

Ten years of home winemaking bolstered Steve and Jill's confidence to boldly move into retail winemaking only a year after they moved to Napa. "We were talking to clients, and they suggested we make wine from our grapes," Steve says. "It was easy to get a label approved. After all, we said, the hard part is growing the grapes.

That was our first naïve mistake — there is nothing easy about it."

The decision to get into wine came amid the infamous hang-time era, when wineries were telling growers to leave grapes on the vine longer, ostensibly to improve wine quality. Many growers also accused wineries of demanding hang time to reduce tonnage in an oversupplied market.

Steve and Jill didn't like the idea of "working hard to turn grapes into raisins," and they also didn't like the wine styles from those grapes. They saw it as opportunity to make a statement with their low alcohol wines. Fortunately, they found people who shared their wine palette.

"The farm to table movement was picking up; we found that younger wine buyers appreciated our style of wine," Steve says. It was a challenge to market, but "it helped to be in the right place at the right time." They have been successful, and he says proudly, "We did it without debt."

Steve has made as many as 15 wines per year under their wine brand, Matthiasson. One year, he used 24 varieties in their wines, including, among others, Refosco, Tocai Friulano, Ribolla Gialla, and Schioppettino, as well as the more traditional varietals like Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Sémillon in those 15 labeled wines.

The Matthiassons like European style wines — not as fruity as traditional California wines. “I like to call it a classic mineral smell, like the smell of summer rain on the rocks: a distinct, beautiful smell,” he says.

Steve moves easily between grape growing and winemaking; however, it is unusual to find it in the California wine grape growing business. “There is a lot of science in winemaking,” he says. “Most winemakers know the fermentation process well, but it is less common to find those who know the plants — good winemakers are good vine people.

“I will get on my soap box and say that there needs to be more viticulturists involved in the decision-making process when it comes to harvest timing. I see a lot of frustration because viticulturists are not more included in winemaking.”