

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Napa's Retro Dudes

By Jay McInerney

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Napa, Calif.

Are we still in the Napa Valley? Certainly not the Napa I'm familiar with. We have turned off Highway 29 into a dense housing development, a maze of nearly identical, recently constructed single-family residences. I've spent the day at some of the valley's iconic wineries, touring cellars gleaming with stainless steel tanks, fragrant with new oak barrels, admiring houses featured in *Architectural Digest* and the *Wine Spectator*. My driver, Dan Petroski, works by day at Larkmead, one of Napa's premier producers, but he's off duty now. Mr. Petroski, who studied winemaking in Sicily before moving to Napa, has a personal winemaking project, Massican, named after a mountain range in the southern Italian region of Campania and produces crisp, intensely flavored white wines from Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla and Viognier. And he has a band of brothers engaged in similarly arcane winemaking ventures.



THE DUDES ABIDE: From left, Steve Matthiasson, Abe Schoener, George Vare, Nathan Lee Roberts and Dan Petroski in Napa last Saturday.

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It seems as if we have been driving past the same houses for 10 minutes when we finally spot the number we're looking for and turn into a driveway, which leads us through backyards behind the housing development. Finally we emerge, as if through a time warp, into a sprawling vista of vineyards and orchards stretching all the way to the Mayacamas range to the west, foregrounded by a bright yellow 19th-century Queen Anne-style bungalow and an unpainted barn that looks as if it's about to fall over. It's a real through-the-looking-glass transition, and not a bad metaphor for the new world I'm about to discover. I'm about to meet the Retro Dudes of Napa.

Napa is known for big Cabernets bred from big fortunes chasing big scores, but there's another school of winemaking here, composed in part of those who work at the big wineries by day and in their spare time pursue their passion for quirky, individualistic, artisanal wines. They produce a few hundred cases, using purchased grapes. And while they have different approaches, they seem to share a common goal of creating wines that express the character of the vineyards of origin, as well as a relative distrust of high technology. The 1903 farmhouse owned by Steve Matthiasson and his wife, Jill Klein Matthiasson, seems like the perfect setting for a gathering of this tribe.

Mr. Matthiasson works as a vineyard consultant for top Cabernet producers such as Araujo and Spottswoode. He seems, in alternating sentences, both intensely earnest and offhandedly wry, a

combination that makes a little more sense when I learn he was born in Canada. Under his own name he makes a few hundred cases of one of the most interesting California white wines I've ever tasted, a blend of Sauvignon, Semillon, Tocai Friulano and Ribolla Gialla, an ancient grape variety from Friuli, as well as a superb red blend. Mr. Matthiasson calls his white "our New World conception of a mythical ideal Old World wine." Some of the grapes come from the vineyard that surround the house, although more are purchased from carefully chosen sites which he's found over the years working up and down the Napa Valley. And if the Old World forms part of his inspiration, so does old, pre-Prohibition-era Napa, and the farmers who preceded him here.

Gradually, as the sun declines and cars pull in, I meet the tribe.

ON WINE

Incisive criticism and accessible advice on the world of wine.

Abe Schoener, 52, originally from Kansas, pulls up in a chauffeured town car, a stylish but also sensible strategy. This does not have the hallmarks of a dry evening. Earlier, when I asked Mr. Matthiasson how he got into winemaking, he cited a "longtime close personal relationship with alcohol" before urging me to try the pate he made from a wild boar he shot

in the Dry Creek Valley last week. Meantime, the aluminum washtub full of ice is also filling with bottles from winemaker guests. It's going to be that kind of night.

A former professor of Greek philosophy, Mr. Schoener is the proprietor of Scholium Project, a winery that makes deeply eccentric (mostly white) wines beloved by sommeliers and geeks. He looks a little alien here in his sharp black suit and his tinted Utopia LA glasses, but it's clear that he's part of the gang. He exchanges affectionate greetings with Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts, who grew up together here in Napa. With their similar burly builds and closely shaved skulls, they are initially hard to tell apart. Together they own Arnot-Roberts, a tiny artisanal winery based in Forestville. In recent years Nathan has worked at top wineries like Acacia, Groth, Caymus and Pax. Duncan is a second-generation cooper who makes the barrels used in the winemaking; he goes to France to choose the wood. The childhood friends don't own a single vineyard acre; they scour Napa and Sonoma looking for hillside vineyards with "intense character," buying fruit from the owners, generally producing no more than a few hundred cases of each wine.

If this were actually a school of winemaking, instead of just a loose band of confederates, the headmaster would be George Vare, who arrives by pickup truck bearing an armload of unlabeled bottles. Tall and silver-haired, Mr. Vare is a genial patriarch, at least a generation older than most of the company. He is the cofounder of Luna Vineyards, where some of the company, including Abe Schoener, got their start. He's also a kind of unofficial ambassador for the wines of Friuli, the northeastern Italian wine region that serves as inspiration for everyone in the group. For the past decade, Mr. Vare has traveled to the region with friends, including Messrs. Schoener and Matthiasson. At Luna, which made a name for itself with Pinot Grigio, he hired John Kongsgaard, a Napa native who would eventually achieve renown with his eponymous wines, especially his Chardonnays. Mr. Kongsgaard is definitely an honorary retro Napa dude.

Mr. Vare is the owner of California's only vineyard devoted to Ribolla Gialla, the Friulian white grape, and all of the winemakers assembled here have made wines with grapes purchased from his vineyard. In the hands of such Friulian masters as Stanko Radikon and Josko Gravner, who preside over eponymous wineries in the town of Oslavia, Ribolla produces powerful, age-worthy whites. Early results from Mr. Vare and friends have been extremely promising, although as often as not it is in a blend with other grapes—as with Mr. Matthiasson's Napa White or Mr. Petroski's Ania—that the grape finds its perfect home. In Friuli, grape varieties were traditionally interplanted, in part as insurance against the failure of one variety—and blended together in cask, a practice that was also common among Napa's Italian immigrant farmers in the 19th century.

Mr. Schoener has brought along some teal shot by one of his grape growers, but someone forgets to turn on the oven and by the time ducks hit the outdoor picnic table it's late, and loud, and the searing heat of the day has long dissipated. But in the meantime I've tasted some of the most intriguing and delicious wines in recent memory, some of them bracingly fresh and floral, like Petroski's '09 Giana, a Viognier/Chardonnay blend; some incredibly rich and opulent, like Mr. Schoener's 2005 Scholium Project Cena Trimalchionis, a honeyed nectar made from Sauvignon Blanc infected with botrytis, or noble rot. (Appropriately enough, the wine was named for the banquet/orgy scene in Petronius's *Satyricon*.)

Whether the inspiration is European, or pre-Mondavi Napa Valley, these friends have rejected some of the technological winemaking of the modern era in search of wine authenticity (and presumably, drinkability.) Mr. Matthiasson presses his grapes the old fashioned way, with his feet. The Arnot-Roberts duo often work with grapes that most modern Napa vintners would consider underripe, as earlier generations of Californians did. Mr. Schoener leaves his white grapes on their skins till they turn orange, and waits for natural yeasts to induce fermentation, (as did all winemakers until recently) rather than introducing artificial yeast, even if it takes years.

It would be hard to pigeonhole these wines, precisely because what distinguishes them is that they don't really taste like one another, or quite like anything else out there. As someone who sometimes fears he's in danger of drowning in an ocean of ripe, fruity, oaky over-manipulated Frankenwine, I think that's a good thing.



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Oenofile

2006 Matthiasson Red

Napa Valley, \$75 Smashed berries and wood smoke on the nose. If this wine doesn't wake up your palate, check your pulse. Very bright and fresh up front, with green herbal notes that enliven the plush, plummy fruit. Needs decanting. Fifty-one percent Merlot, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, plus some Petit Verdot, Malbec and Cab Franc. Right now the '05 is drinking even better. matthiasson.com

2009 Scholium Project,

The Prince in His Caves, \$45 Savage, funky Sauvignon Blanc nose. Pinkish-orange in hue. Strong, oxidative style—one of Abe Schoener's notorious "orange" whites. Hard to believe that grapefruit and butterscotch could go together this well, but that's what I taste and I love it. scholiumwines.com

2007 Kongsgaard

**Napa Valley
Chardonnay, \$99**

John Kongsgaard's blend of Chardonnay grapes from the famous Hyde and Hudson vineyards, this is an incredibly rich chard with stony undertones which almost suggests a great Lafon Meursault Perrières, but in the end it's a California dude for sure. kongsgaard-wine.com

2008 Luna

Pinot Grigio
Napa Valley, \$12.95

Better than the average Italian example, with its peach and citrus notes, and widely available at retail, this is one of the great American white wine values. *lunavineyards.com*

2009 Arnot-Roberts Compagni-Portis Vineyards

Old Vines White Blend Sonoma Valley, \$30 Incredibly piercing attack, like lime juice filtered through limestone, rounding out in the middle, with a long finish. *arnotroberts.com*

Note: Massican's inaugural '09 vintage is sold out; look for it at restaurants. The others are available via their websites.

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