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Matthiasson, Napa Valley: Current Releases

The past of most wine regions becomes physically embodied in its most iconic destinations, whether grand Chateaux, or venerable old cellars. The future of many wine regions, on the other hand, can be much harder to find. It is often tucked away, or sometimes hiding in plain sight, but usually off the beaten pathways of expectation.

One incarnation of Napa Valley's future, or at least a future furtively hoped for by many, can indeed be found in a place most unexpected. Just off of Highway 29, down a back street, a modern sub-division gives way to the valley's ubiquitous vineyards, but not before the newer construction drops away to reveal a timeworn yellow Victorian farmhouse standing in the shadows of a few stately redwoods, a dilapidated old barn, a makeshift chicken run, and a lovingly tended little garden.

Should you find your way to this little farm, and step over the children's toys and bicycles in the front yard, you will likely be greeted on your way up the stairs by the family that lives here. They will usher you into their dining room with a friendly hello, sit you down with little pomp or circumstance, and proceed to pour for you some of the most exciting wines being made in Napa, or indeed, all of California these days.

Jill and Steve Matthiasson met in an orchard. Or more specifically, they met when she interviewed him for a job working in an orchard. At the time Jill was working for the Community Alliance for Family Farming, and had created a program focused on helping to build sustainable practices for orchards. Steve was busy in graduate school at U.C. Davis studying viticulture, but took some time off to get an internship with a consulting company that was providing technical support for the Alliance on the same project. 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, the two crushed their first grapes together, from the teaching vineyard at U.C. Davis, and they made wine together.

That was 17 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," said 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," Steve added, "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 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," said Steve as we stood among the vines sipping a glass of his white wine. "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 to know a man named George 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.

Officially the Matthiasson portfolio includes only two wines, each made in what Matthiasson refers to as the "Platonic ideal." They are simply called "Red" and "White." But those savvy enough to be on his mailing list know that he actually produces a number of other wines in tiny quantities that are offered to eager buyers who keep them from ever showing up anywhere someone might just stumble across them.

The lineup of these micro-production lots that Matthiasson refers to as his "passion wines" changes a bit each year as he gets access to bits of fruit, thanks to his work with many top growers, but at least one wine will always remain the same, and that is a wonderful Chardonnay made from a bit of land near the Durrell vineyard on the Sonoma Coast for which the Matthiassons have a long term lease.

"I've worked with thousands of vineyards at this point," said Matthiasson, as I tried hard to keep myself from swallowing his Chardonnay. "This vineyard is the rockiest piece of vineyard I've ever worked with," he continued with a gleam in his eye.

Matthiasson sells most of the fruit from the vineyard, but keeps a bit to himself from which he makes a nerve-tingling wine that nearly knocked me out of my chair.



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. "Last year it didn't go so well," said Matthiasson with a bit of chagrin.

Two other interesting wines that are worth noting are Matthiasson's Refosco, a red grape from Friuli that I had no idea was actually still planted in Napa, and his Flora, a wine that has to be smelled to be believed. A cross between Gewurztraminer and Semillon (what crazy-ass viticulturist dreamed THAT one up?) that is occasionally added to some California sparkling wines to give them a little floral fruitiness, Matthiasson decided to try his hand at doing something with the grape when he overheard a fellow winemaker claim that no one could ever make a decent wine from Flora. The result? A botrytized, long-skin-macerated (aka orange) dessert wine that is unlike anything I've tasted.

If Napa is going to evolve and change as a wine region, as I believe it must to remain relevant and attractive to the broadest range of wine consumers, it will do so in the hands of people like Steve Matthiasson. His two flagship wines are so unlike anything else being made in Napa Valley at the moment that they are enough to stop any seasoned Napa wine lover in their tracks. Not just that, though. They are also phenomenally good. There are not enough people making restrained, savory, high-acid wines with little or no new oak in Napa Valley, but at least we have people like Steve Matthiasson to prove that it can, and should, be done.

TASTING NOTES:

2010 Matthiasson White Wine, Napa Valley

Light yellow gold in the glass, this wine smells of bee pollen, lemon zest, white flowers and wet stones. In the mouth bright lemon zest and wet stones flavors have a remarkable delicacy, while gorgeous apple and lemon juice flavors dance with zingy acids across the palate. Gorgeous length, astonishing juiciness. 12.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$35. [click to buy.](#)

2007 Matthiasson Red Wine, Napa Valley

A deep, inky garnet in color, this wine smells of rich mulberries and green herbs, with notes of dark chocolate. In the mouth, gorgeously juicy mulberry, cherry, cedar, and dark chocolate flavors swirl amidst powdery tannins. Fantastic acidity brings the fruit to life while earthier notes rumble about below soaring aromatics. 50% Merlot, 40% Cabernet, 7% Cab Franc, 2% Petite Verdot, 1% Malbec. Stunning, layered. Delicate. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$75. [click to buy.](#)

2009 Matthiasson Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast

Light yellow in the glass, this wine smells of honey, candle wax, and lemon curd. In the mouth, bright lemon curd and lemon zest has a saline savoriness that is super yummy. Explosive acidity makes the mouth water, and a crinkling crystalline quality shimmers on the palate. 40 cases made. Gorgeously smooth and lean. 14.6% alcohol, but you'd never guess. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$40.

2008 Matthiasson Ribolla Gialla, Napa Valley

Cloudy medium yellow in the glass, this wine smells of bizarre things: among them, bee pollen and butterscotch. In the mouth the wine has an acidophilous tartness, with flavors of bee pollen, candied lemon peel, and what I can only describe as creamy green olive. Wet stones emerge on the finish. The wine is quite bizarre and also delightful, though clearly not for everyone. Excellent acidity. 12.6% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5. Cost: \$40.

2009 Matthiasson Refosco, Napa Valley

Inky, cloudy garnet in the glass, this wine smells of mulberries, wet leaves, and leather. In the mouth the wine has a wonderfully mellow dark berry character that hangs between cassis and blackberry with wet stones and a wonderful faint hint of minty/piney quality. Soft velvety tannins mix with a slightly heavy viscosity. Good acidity. 12.4% alcohol. Score: around 9. Cost: \$45.



2009 Matthiasson Cabernet Franc, Napa Valley

Medium garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cherry and hints of chocolate, with notes of flowers. In the mouth you cannot help but be overwhelmed by a gorgeous velvety texture and a beautiful cool fruit core that is super juicy and lovely. Cherries, earth, dark chocolate. Smooth, long, Stunning. 13.1% alcohol. Score: around **9.5**. Cost: \$55.

2009 Matthiasson Syrah, Sonoma Coast

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of lilacs and violets with hints of cassis. In the mouth the wine has lightly grippy tannins that enclose a core of peppery cassis and blackberry along with a wonderfully stony, wet dirt quality. Fantastic length, and poise with great acidity. 13% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**. Cost: \$45.

2005 Matthiasson Red Blend, Napa Valley

Inky garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cassis, black olive, green herbs, and black cherry. In the mouth the wine has a burst of aromatics -- cassis, violets, black cherry, and a hint of bitter woodiness. Leathery tannins, that have a light touch to them linger with a minty quality on the finish. There is also a slight hint of heat on the finish. Not quite as balanced at this point in its evolution, but still delicious. 14.4% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**. Cost: \$75. [click to buy](#).

2009 Lodestar Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

Medium to dark garnet in color, this wine smells of cassis and black olives. In the mouth, the wine has a wonderful savory quality with black olive, cherry, cassis, and wet dirt flavors. Suede-like tannins enclose a nicely textured, well balanced wine with good acidity. Interesting. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around **9**. Cost: \$??.

2010 Matthiasson Flora Dessert Wine, Napa Valley

Brilliant amber orange in the glass, this wine smells of honey and toasted nuts. In the mouth the wine has a wonderful tannic note to it with moderately sweet honey, orange peel, and quite exotic floral notes. Stunningly gorgeous, and orange, what more could you want? 14.7% alcohol. 375ml. Score: around **9.5**. Cost: \$40. [click to buy](#).

Posted by: [Alder](#) on April 26, 2012 11:39 PM