

Winemaker Steve Matthiasson | Matthiasson Wines

NAPA / SONOMA, CALIFORNIA

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Photo Credit: Find, Eat, Drink, LLC

WHO

Steve Matthiasson is the owner and winemaker at Matthiasson wines in Napa, California.

WHY

Matthiasson crafts blends and single varietals, emphasizing balance over any other characteristic, such as impact or power. In addition to his flagship red and white wines, he also produces passion wines -- one-off tiny production wines, which try new ideas or varieties, such as Ribolla Gialla or Refosco dal Penduncula Rosso.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Steve Matthiasson's recommendations for his favorite wine producers, resources and where to eat, drink and shop for wine in California, New York, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, Tucson and Barcelona.

“I’m going after Plato’s form of a wine. I can never get there, but I keep trying.”

-Winemaker Steve Matthiasson

The Matthiasson flagship wines are their ***Red Wine*** and ***White Wine***. They are both blends with generic names, because they are intended to represent an ideal of what red and white wines “should be.”

Their self-described passion wines are one-off tiny productions, where they try to discover a new expression of a wine. The skin-fermented Ribolla Gialla, for example, is fermented in the vineyard, so there is no chance of contamination with winery yeast. The Refosco dal Penduncula Rosso is fermented at cool temps and very simply, with one punch down per day, aged in an older neutral barrel and stainless steel, made as minimally as possible. It’s made a delightful 12.4% alcohol wine, scented of rose-petals and Bing cherries. [*Available through their [wine club](#).*]

Q & A WITH STEVE MATTHIASSON

Q. You seem to be taking a different path than the average wine producer in Napa Valley. How would you describe the wines you produce and what drives you to make these unique wines?

A. I’m really into balance with wines. In crafting blends, or single varietals, I always emphasize balance over any other characteristic, such as impact, or power.

Balance, depth, age-worthiness, and interest in wine are all enhanced by picking fruit a little earlier than is currently the norm for modern winemaking. Because of this, our wines tend to have more acidity, brighter fruit, and more complexity in the aromas and flavors than most of the wines made by our peers. They are not the types of wines that tend to get high scores. They are the kinds of wines, though, that evolve over the course of the evening, and are surprising to revisit the next day. The label design is an organic-looking montage of vintage pruning shears--it does a good job describing our philosophy.



Q. Do you think there is more opportunity to be experimental in California than other parts of the world, such as Europe, where there is an older wine tradition?

A. California has a couple things going for it in this regard:

- we have a tremendous diversity of microclimates and soil types
- we don't have much in the way of old traditions.

However, we do have a very strong current tradition of making heavy and over-ripe wines, and this is a surprisingly strong barrier to being experimental.

There is a lot of fear on the part of winemakers that wines that don't fit that mold won't sell, and in my experience that is a legitimate fear--it's hard to buck the trends. Also, there is a contingent of wine gatekeepers who aren't open to domestic experimentation whereas they welcome it from Europe.

The natural wine movement, for example, is very strong in Europe, but is starting up fitfully here. I think it depends on the form of experimentation. I do love the fact that we have complete freedom to blend and try new varieties.

Q. Some of your wines are skin-fermented white wines... what is it about skin-fermented whites that are so interesting?

A. Skin-fermented whites are fascinating because they open up a whole new arena for wine style. They have the full potential of red wine mouthfeel (tannin, etc.), but the flavor and aroma of the wine is missing the red and black fruit, which in a sense unveils the mineral spectrum that is typically hidden behind that fruit character. Pinot noir kind of has this, since the red and black fruit character is so transparent in that variety, and much of its charm is that it lifts its skirt a little, allowing you to see the scaffolding, as it were. Skin-fermented whites are all scaffolding, which creates tons of interest, and really great food pairing options.

Q. You also started Matthiasson Fruit - tell us how that came about?

A. My wife, Jill Klein Matthiasson, and I first met in an orchard, where we were both working on a sustainable agricultural project. We have always wanted to produce local food as part of a family farming operation. Our fruit production is small--we supply restaurants, one farmers market here in the Napa, and sell jams through our *wine club*. We make fig, nectarine / ginger, Santa Rosa plum, and apricot jams. All picked dead ripe... good stuff. It is an incredible experience for our kids, and feels right in terms of our values and lifestyle.



Organic Figs

Photo Credit: Find. Eat. Drink. LLC

Q. Your fruit for Matthiasson Fruit is produced organically. Are your vineyards organic too, and what is it about being organic do you think is important?

A. The vineyard we own is organic. We lease some other vineyards, and for various reasons, we haven't converted them to organic farming just yet.

Creating our lifestyle of farming and making wine has been a long and challenging process, and we've had to take things one step at a time. It was a major accomplishment to get our home vineyard and our orchards certified--it feels really good--and we're working on getting there with the other vineyards.

There are a lot of things that are important with organic farming, but probably the biggest thing for us is that it creates a discipline and a space where, due to the restrictions of the certification, there is a different paradigm and problems are solved in a different way.

'Sustainability' is very ambiguous and organic certification provides clarity. Being on an organic farm feels different because the entire system of farming is, by definition, different and an important step towards creating a lasting farming endowment for the future.

ADVICE / TIPS

HOW TO FIND INTERESTING WINE IN RESTAURANTS

With any restaurant, I always ask the sommelier for a recommendation of one of his/her favorite wines--it's a chance for me to learn something. I never order something I already know. Almost everywhere, as long as it isn't a chain, has a sommelier who loves wine and slips some favorites into the list--you just need to ask.

BEST HANGOVER TIP | N-Acetyl-L-Cysteine

The way cysteine works is that the body first processes the alcohol into acetaldehyde, which is very toxic, and then has to try to process the acetaldehyde into acetic acid (vinegar), which it can easily get rid of. The combination of cysteine and vitamin C help turn the acetaldehyde into acetic acid. Cysteine is a common sulfur-containing amino acid. It is found in eggs, meats, chili peppers--all the hangover foods. There is plenty of cysteine in food for moderate drinking, but when we overdo it, we swamp our natural mechanisms, and popping a few pills from the health food store can really help.

[See [details](#).]

A WINEMAKER'S RECS | Wine

DRINK | Wine

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES FOR WINE IN CALIFORNIA

In California, wineries that are pushing boundaries well, and making delicious wines, include: Scholium Project, Massican, [Arnot-Roberts](#), Anthill, Kesner, Demuth Kemos, White Rock, Vivier, Robert Sinskey, Araujo, and Broc Cellars. Some of these are avant-garde, and some are classicists.

SKIN-FERMENTED WHITE WINES | Abe Schoener at Scholium Project

He probably has the most experience making skin-fermented whites here in California and has some really interesting examples.

YOUR WINE HEROES

Enzo Pontoni of Miani, Michael Havens, Edi Simcic, Anthony King, Warren Winiarski, Bill Chambers, George Vare, Chris Bilbro of Marietta Cellars.

CALIFORNIA WINE WORTH TRYING

David Arthur

Structured Napa Cab, beautiful location on Pritchard Hill to go taste.

Ryme Cellars

Husband and wife making tiny amounts of daring yet balanced wine.

Limerick Lane

Classic Russian River Zinfandel producer, just purchased and being updated by my friend Jake Bilbro.

Marietta Cellars

Affordable honest good wine, family-owned (the Bilbro family, of which Jake is one of the sons; wines crafted by Chris Bilbro, who is a master blender, and his son Scot).

Zeitgeist

Well crafted Napa Cabernet, tension between modern style and classic cab character.

Modus Operandi

Jason Moore is the hardest working winemaker in Napa.

HdV

Burgundy meets California.

[See [details.](#)]

WHAT WINES ARE ALWAYS ON HAND AT HOME

There is so much wine in the world that I never buy the same wine twice. So the best I can do here is to focus on categories.

Chablis & German Riesling

I always have some of both on hand. There are certain foods that just demand it. In both of these cases, I buy the most expensive version I can afford.

Loire Valley Sancerre | Friulian White | Southern Italian White

In these cases, it's not what I can afford, but what I can find. With Italy it's all about learning for me.

Pinot Noir

I always have some Pinot on hand--since Burgundy is expensive and hard to find here in Napa, I often go for Pinot from Northern Italy, Austria, the French Alps, even Australia--Yarra Yerring made incredible Pinot.

Tawny Port

The house is not a home if it doesn't have a few bottles of Port, especially Tawny, ready to be pulled out when the conversation gets long and you don't want to leave the table.

Southern Italian Reds

And I usually have some Southern Italian reds, or reds from anywhere in Italy, for food pairing. If there are four or five different ones on hand then most bases should be covered.

DRINK | Aperitifs & Digestifs

APERITIFS | Carpano Antica

We drink a lot of sweet vermouth while cooking (Carpano Antica is a common one we drink).

APERITIFS | Cocktails

We'll often make a Manhattan or an Old-Fashioned--much better with home-made maraschino cherries (easy to make if you have a source of sour cherries--just soak them in vodka, then correct the sweetness).

DIGESTIFS | Amaro

Consumed at least once a week after dinner, mostly in the winter.

DIGESTIFS | Nocino

We like to make Nocino (walnut liqueur) or various other liqueurs from our fruit.

FIND | Buy Wine

ONLINE WINE PURCHASING | Winebid.com

They sell older vintages of Napa reds at great prices. I buy them by the case and drink them every day. Napa reds from the 80's tend to be well balanced and great with food. They were made in a totally different style than they are today.

FIND | Wine Resources

NEWSPAPERS

I read everything I can by:

- Jon Bonne (SF Chronicle)
- Eric Asimov (NY Times)
- Jay McInerney (Wall Street Journal).

BLOGS

[1 Wine Dude](#), [Drink What You Like](#), [The Wine House San Francisco](#), and [RJ's Wine Blog](#) are really good.

BOOKS | Emile Peynaud's The Taste of Wine

Most of the books I read are super technical, but this is a classic [[buy it](#)].

WINE BOOK COLLECTING SOCIETY & NEWSLETTER | The Wayward Tendrils

An amazing little wine book collecting society that has a fascinating quarterly newsletter--it's worth joining just for the newsletter.

MAGAZINE | Wine & Spirits

Of the major magazines, this is my favorite--it shows the most respect for the breadth of the world of wine.

A WINEMAKER'S RECS | California Wine Country

FIND | Wine Stores

FAVORITE PLACE TO BUY WINE | Backroom Wines

In Napa, it's the perfect neighborhood shop... they have one of everything.

[See [details.](#)]

EAT | Restaurants

FOR THEIR WINE LISTS

In Napa, Oenotri, Solbar, and Bottega have awesome lists. All three go very deep and have really knowledgeable sommeliers.

Oenotri

An amazing Italian meal that shocked me with how deep it got into some kind of proto-Italian quality.

[See [details.](#)]

FOR THE FOOD

Ad Hoc

Thomas Keller's family style restaurant--like you'd imagine the family meals in Norman Rockwell paintings to taste like--meat, potato, veggie, executed perfectly.

Bistro Angele

France through a California lens, very pure preparations.

Bistro Jeanty

A quick teleportation to France--a little funky, but crazy authentic: bone marrow, cassoulet, lamb kidneys.

Farmstead

Southern cooking, farm to table to the extreme--they grow almost everything on the menu.

Pizza Azzuro

Casual nouveau Italian--simple, interesting, good--perfect for lunch or dinner on day two or three of wine tasting when you need something a little less rich but still want something special.

Solage

Shockingly good healthy spa food and rich decadent food (the menu has two columns.)

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Fremont Diner

In Carneros, they are reviving Mid-Atlantic diner cuisine with a California local food sensibility.

Juanita Juanita

In Sonoma, is just killer Mexican food (with Tecate on tap).

Buster's Barbeque

In Calistoga, it's straight out of the Deep South.

[See [details](#).]

WHERE TO EAT WHEN YOU DON'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT WINE

I eat mostly Mexican during harvest and I typically start with Tecate and then mellow out with Pacifico. If I'm feeling fancy, I'll order a Bohemia. Chile verde; buche tacos, any organ meat on a taco, really; Carne Asada with grilled serranos; mojado frita (whole fried tilapia); anything on a bed of nopales if they're fresh...pretty much all of the above. Lots of beans. Mexican is my comfort food. I seek out the smallest and grungiest Mexican dives I can find--just like a Chinese restaurant, I want to be the only gringo in the place.

DRINK | Wine Bars

NAPA | Carpe Diem

It's the only wine bar I ever go to. When traveling, I typically go to bar bars. I do love a wine bar with a huge selection so you can try new things, and Carpe Diem is great for that.

A WINEMAKER'S RECS | San Francisco Bay Area

FIND | Favorite Places To Buy Wine

SAN FRANCISCO | Wine House

A huge selection, knowledgeable staff, great wines.

BERKELEY | Kermit Lynch

Has the best grouping of European terroir-driven wines anywhere in the world.

[See [details.](#)]

EAT | Restaurants

FOR THEIR WINE LISTS

I love the lists at NOPA, Frances, Baker and Banker, and Anchor and Hope.

FOR THE FOOD

Chez Panisse

A religious experience the first time I went. Food raised perfectly, harvested perfectly, cooked perfectly, and served perfectly.

Frances

In San Francisco, it blew me away with how creative and perfect the food was.

Oliveto

In Oakland, it was the first truly amazing Italian meal I ever had.

[See [details.](#)]

A WINEMAKER'S RECS | New York City

FIND | Favorite Places To Buy Wine

Acker and Merrill

A classic wine shop.

California Wine Merchants

Great people who created a focused shop.

[See [details.](#)]

EAT | Restaurants

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK | Tommaso's in Brooklyn

With its old-school vibe, awesome Roman-style food, reasonable list of older wines and the real-deal owner, it's my restaurant anywhere.

FOR THEIR WINE LISTS

Cookshop in NYC

With sommelier Richard Luftig, it's my favorite wine list anywhere. You can get an education on the wines of the world there and most of the wines are under \$100. It's phenomenal and Richard is a great story teller.

Restaurant North, in Armonk, NY

Owned by sommelier Stephen Mancini, it has more of an Italian wine focus. He's is a nut for Italian wine, and a walking encyclopedia.

[See [details.](#)]

A WINEMAKER'S RECS | Rest Of The Country

EAT | Restaurants

BARCELONA, SPAIN | Mercat De La Boqueria

The lunch counters at the market in Barcelona, weirdly enough, fits this model as well. That was a case of food in context.

[See [details.](#)]

NEW ORLEANS | Cochon Butcher

I love it for its efforts to continue the Cajun charcuterie tradition.

NEW ORLEANS | Willie Mae's Scotch House

Makes the fried chicken that all others aspire to.

PITTSBURGH | Mineo's Pizza

They have the best crust I've ever tasted (I think they use semolina flour, but I can't figure it out).

[See [details.](#)]

TUCSON | Karichimaka

It's the birthplace of the chimichanga, and has awesome beans.

TUCSON | Little Abner's Steak House

It was my first steak experience, and I've been a lusting meat eater ever since.

[See [details.](#)]

SALT LAKE CITY | Red Iguana

They have my favorite mole.

[See [details.](#)]

F.E.D. RECS ON THE GO

Download the F.E.D. iPhone app and get Steve Matthiasson's recommendations as well as recommendations from other winemakers, sommeliers and chefs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

[Details](#) on Steve Matthiasson's **recommendations** for his favorite wine producers, resources and where to eat, drink and shop for wine in California, New York, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, Tucson and Barcelona.