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TASTING ARTICLES

CALIFORNIA

USA



New-wave California A–J



California is about so much more than Napa Cabernet and basic brands, and more and more of these lighter, fresher, more original wines are available outside the US. Here's a taste of some of them. See also New-wave California K–W, to be published tomorrow. Picture of the sandy Evangelho Vineyard in Contra Costa County by Larry Piggins.

Matthiasson

We have often written about Steve and Jill Matthiasson on this site (see [this link to 23 mentions](#)) and he has been to London quite a few times, but it was not until February 2020 that I had a chance to visit their atmospheric homestead and home vineyards in the Oak Knoll District in the south-west of Napa Valley. The Matthiassons are only the third owners of their 1905 house, which they had just done up before it suffered serious damage thanks to the [2014 earthquake](#).

The few acres around the house, their Linda Vista vineyard, are the Matthiassons' vineyard test lab, where they have trialled various training systems and ended up with what Steve calls a 'modified Lenz Moser'. Walter will be pleased to know that the original idea was 'a mechanisable [pergola](#)' with two canopies angled at 45 degrees that shields the fruit from the sun and reduces water use and [apical dominance](#). It helps to reduce vigour in California's wet springs, apparently, and protects the grapes from shrivelling at the end of the growing season.



Steve Matthiasson and his trellis in Linda Vista vineyard, Oak Knoll District

The fruit and canopy are trained higher than most Napa Valley vines, which keeps them cooler at night and also makes the work easier for the Matthiassons' relatively mature vineyard workers. 'Our employees are in their fifties. We rely on their experience and they're happy they don't have to bend down', explained Steve. It also has the advantage of producing relatively decent yields ('it drives me crazy that people still think lower yields equal higher quality', says this high-powered viticultural consultant who has advised the likes of Eisele Vineyard, Dalla Valle and Accendo). 'The vines doubled their production in the first two years so it has paid for itself.'

They also love the hedge that runs through the property and the home it provides for 'beneficial insects'. There are bird boxes, natch, native grasses aplenty, and 250 peach trees. Since establishing their own Linda Vista vineyard, in 2017, they bought the 4.5-acre (1.8-ha) Phoenix Vineyard a little further north but still on the west side of the valley on the lower slopes of Mt Veeder. They are replanting with [mass selections](#) from top Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards, as shown in our main image at the top of this article with its view over the valley towards Atlas Peak at sunset. Steven Matthiasson had picked grapes for the previous owners who still live there.

In the tasting room there (where I noticed that neither Matthiasson tasted themselves) they explained that Jill had worked for a sustainable non-profit before they started out in 2003. 'We didn't know that making a wine you like wouldn't necessarily be easy to sell. It was a tough decade. We had an old-style Merlot and *Sideways* had just come out. We also had a weird white bend at 12% and it was that that finally saved us.'

Their [skin-contact](#) Ribolla Gialla was inspired by Steve's mentor George Vare, who had run Geyser Peak and Beringer and founded the Italian-focused Luna with John Kongsgaard. It now 'sells itself', apparently, though originally the Matthiassons really struggled to sell each vintage through. One of them commented ruefully, 'We didn't see the natural thing coming and now we feel staid with our minimal intervention policy.' All their wines, including their entry-level Tendu range from Dunnigan Hills north-west of Sacramento, are certified organic.

Matthiasson 2017 Napa Valley

16

50% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Ribolla Gialla, 20% Sémillon, 5% Friulano. Picked at 18–19 Brix. This wine put them on the map. Eric Asimov wrote about it and that helped enormously.

Quite a mix on the nose. Slightly astringent. Made a bit like white bordeaux.

Lots of white-wine concepts rolled into one wine. 12.1%

Drink 2021 – 2023

\$40

Matthiasson, Linda Vista Chardonnay 2018 Napa Valley

17

Their biggest production by far, from 14 acres of clone 4 vines planted from the 1980s in the far south-west of Napa Valley. Used to be Beringer's. They leased it in 2011 – when it had decrepit vines and low yields. They ripped out the vines and put in cover crops. No fertiliser and no irrigation, but they managed to triple the yields thanks to cover crops! They still sell about one-third of the fruit for cash flow. 15% of the fruit had powdery mildew – ‘not necessarily a negative. We love it so we’ve cut our sprays way back.’

Quite Chablis-like on the nose. Very pure and fresh. Super-clean and crisp. Very distinctive. **GV** 12.2%

Drink 2020 – 2025

\$32

Matthiasson, Michael Mara Vineyard Chardonnay 2016 Sonoma Coast

16.5

Volcanic rocky soil, in Sonoma Valley by the Petaluma Gap. Clone 4. Has to be irrigated. Tannins mean it gets a second year in the barrel.

Citrus nose, ‘cool’, very typical of Sonoma Coast (though the fruit is specifically from Sonoma Valley). Then quite rich on the palate. Slightly salty. Rocky and mineral on the palate. Very firm rather than sweet. Still quite youthful. Quite long. 13.3%

Drink 2019 – 2024

\$55



Matthiasson, Matthiasson Vineyard Ribolla Gialla 2017 Napa Valley

17

Skin contact, for two weeks whole cluster with punchdowns. 'You can't use SO2 with skin contact because the tannins are really aggressive if so. VA is an important component because Ribolla is quite soft.'

Very deep, slightly cloudy gold. Intense, burnished nose. Very smoky apricot. Masses of character and not much alcohol. It's a great food matcher. Bruised apricot flavours. Nice balance. 11%

Drink 2019 – 2022

\$45

Matthiasson, Matthiasson Vineyard Refosco 2017 Napa Valley

17

Planted because of the Matthiassons' Friuli trip. Not that suited to the California climate – 'it's kinda wimpy in a heat spell'. It's supposed to be Refosco Nostrano. Slightly cloudy dark ruby. Very pure. Masses of flavour and sufficient ripeness. Italianate tannins. Perhaps it needs the extra heat of California to ripen the tannins. SO clean! Almost delicate. Varies considerably year to year, apparently.

12.1%

Drink 2020 – 2026

\$49

Matthiasson Cabernet Franc 2017 Napa Valley

16 ++

They don't put Oak Knoll on the label. Made from their vines closest to the hedgerow of which the Matthiassons are so proud.

Pale ruby. A bit jammy on the nose. Not as aromatically pure as I would have expected from this producer. Dry, pretty tannic finish. Dusty. Perhaps it will transform like the 2008 did. 12%

Drink 2021 – 2024

\$55

Matthiasson Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Napa Valley

16.5 +

From Rutherford, Coombsville and Oak Knoll. Six different fruit sources. Their biggest-volume red.

Pure, aromatic, leafy, leanish – in another universe from the typical Napa Valley Cab. Appetising. Youthful. 13.3%

Drink 2021 – 2028

\$65

Matthiasson 2015 Napa Valley

17

49% Merlot, 38% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Cabernet Franc, 5% Petit Verdot, 2% Malbec. Essentially a natural wine.

Deep crimson. Gorgeous vitality and well balanced. Slightly inky but really healthy fruit. Juicy! Racy. They hold on to it because it's their most ageworthy wine. Sweet and light and SO fresh. 13.9%

Drink 2020 – 2030

\$90