



TONY POER PHOTOS

Eric Penneys, northeast regional manager for Far Niente, and Larry Maguire, Far Niente Winery president emeritus, stand in front of portraits of Maria Callas, George Gershwin and Arturo Toscanini while talking to guests at the Oakville Growers tasting at Carnegie Hall.

## ON WINE

### Alternative choices

**W**ine comes in so many different styles that most consumers are faced with endless dilemmas. One of the most daunting is: what's in each bottle?

Chardonnay is supposed to be a rich white wine, but some are delicate or even austere and totally dry. But almost never does the label tell you what's inside.



**DAN BERGER**

Some people like Sauvignon Blanc, but they can be shocked if the acid is too high, or if there is too much sugar. Again, the label almost never offers any help.

And although regional characteristics can be helpful in determining the general style of the wine, much of this is never communicated to average consumers.

Alternatives to the most common wines can be a good solution when you're facing a wall full of choices and the only help you're getting is from a clerk who's not even old enough to legally consume it.

Domestic Pinot Noir? Average consumers like this lighter weight red wine, and I'm constantly asked for a good one at about \$20 or less. Such a quest usually is fruitless: demand for top-rate Pinot Noir fruit is at an all-time high, so are grape prices, and inexpensive Pinots are rarely very interesting.

One alternative is from France, called Beaujolais (\$8-\$13), Beaujolais-Villages (vee-lahj) (\$12-\$17), or Cru Beaujolais (\$15-\$30). Made from the "other" red grape of Burgundy (Gamay Noir), it has a similar weight and structure of Pinot and is often a bargain selection in restaurants where French red Burgundies start at \$50, or more. Usually a lot more.

Most Beaujolais are best-consumed young. No aging necessary.

Chardonnay? Still one of the most popular wines in the country, Chardonnay is made in huge amounts, much of it priced in the under-\$10 class. Most of this is generic and can be sweet.

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## Big Grapes in the Big Apple

Oakville Growers' biennial master class and trade tasting at Carnegie Hall

TONY POER

On a frigid Thursday a week before Thanksgiving, representatives from nearly two dozen Napa Valley wineries gathered in Midtown Manhattan. They had traveled east for "Taste of Oakville: Live at Carnegie Hall," the Oakville Growers' biennial master class and trade tasting at the historic concert venue.

For the Napa contingent in New York, the theme could have been out of the frying pan and into the freezer. Leaving behind the Butte County fire's hazy, orange-brown skies, they ran head-first into a late fall nor'easter that dumped six inches of snow on the Big Apple in as many hours. But the storm didn't stop them. Nor did it deter scores of New York sommeliers and retailers from attending the sold-out event.

Ahead of the afternoon and evening tastings, the Growers hosted a panel discussion for a smaller group of 45 guests that focused on the generational shift taking place in the Oakville AVA. It was, indeed, a master class, with a Master of Wine, Constellation Brands' Peter Marks, on hand to moderate three masters of Oakville Cabernet. They were joined by a pair of younger professionals who appear well on their way to that status. The



"Taste of Oakville: Live at Carnegie Hall," the Oakville Growers' biennial master class and trade tasting, took place at the historic venue in November.

conversation was a 100-minute deep dive into the past, present, and future of Oakville.

"I wanted to stay on the East Coast. Now, with this weather, I'm wondering why," replied one of these latter panelists, Lindsay Hoopes, owner and general manager of Hoopes Vineyard, to the first question Marks asked of the entire panel: how did you end up in Oakville?

With her back to the 10th floor windows of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Room, the audience laughed as Hoopes motioned at the steely gray Manhattan sky behind her. She confessed to being glad that after attending East Coast boarding school and Georgetown University, she eventually resettled in the Napa Valley to take over her family's

winery. A stop along the way working at E&J Gallo helped her to recognize the value of her father Spencer's grape growing.

"I learned a lot about the marketing side and business development," she said. "But I wanted to tell a story about our terroir that I had grown up on, and I understood the difference between just building a brand and telling a story about our family. So Oakville became much more important to me, and I wanted to go back."

It was sentiment shared by Far Niente Winery president emeritus Larry Maguire, one of the three senior panelists and a 35-year veteran of the Oakville winery.

"My family brought me to Napa kicking and screaming as a

14-year-old," he recalled. "I left southern California to start my sophomore year in high school in Napa Valley. I thought it was the worst thing that could possibly happen to me, and it turns out it was the best thing."

Educated by the Christian Brothers in both high school and college, Maguire would go onto a wine sales career that began in 1977 and led to a Far Niente partnership with Gil Nickel and Dirk Hampson in the early '80s.

Seated between Maguire and Hoopes was Genevieve Janssens, chief winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery, who grew up in a French wine-making family and first visited Napa Valley as a wine-curious tourist, also in 1977. With far fewer wineries in the Valley back then, Robert Mondavi was an easy choice. A year later, she found herself working in the Mondavi lab as an enologist.

"I was very much under the philosophy of Mr. Mondavi, which was the holistic approach of winemaking," Janssens told the audience. "He made wine not to collect but to be drunk and to be enjoyed with friends, family, and a good meal. So I thought, 'That's a good life. I think I want to have that life.' And that's how I arrived in Oakville."

Napa Valley's most famous vintner also had a huge influence on Groth Vineyards winemaker emeritus, Michael Weis, who rounded out the panel's trio of industry veterans. Weis had been a pre-med major in college, but,

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## THE WINE EXCHANGE

### Yeast, wine's indispensable ingredient

**W**hen thinking about winemaking, most of us look to the grape varietal, vineyard location and pedigree, the winemaker's skill and a committed vintner's ability to blend it all together for the "ultimate" enjoyment of the finished product.

But without yeast, wine would be merely grape juice. Its sole role in the winemaking process is to convert the sugar so carefully nurtured throughout the growing season to alcohol through fermentation that, in great measure, defines wine as a unique product.

Yet, while wine has been produced and enjoyed by countless civilizations for roughly 9,000 years, the fermentation pro-

cess was not really understood and merely taken for granted. During this time, fermentations were observed and often referred to as "boiling," which described the frothy bubbling juice in the vat.

The actual study of fermentation dates back only to the mid-19th century when the French government told Louis Pasteur to research wine spoilage. During his studies, he discovered that yeast converts (metabolizes) sugar to alcohol, carbon dioxide and other molecular components. But the exact mechanism of this conversion was only isolated by others in the early 20th century.

Yeast strains break down into two major categories with both serving necessary roles in winemaking, the understanding of fermentation and many of the stylistic differences we observe. Wild yeast (often re-

ferred to as ambient, natural, native or indigenous) are complex blends of various strains that exist throughout the vineyard and in the winery. Commercially cultured yeasts are typically isolated strains that are available from production laboratories around the globe to serve specific functions during fermentation.

So let's first take a brief look at fermentation. Then we can explore the various roles of yeast in the process and their effect on the finished wine.

Yeast, whether wild or cultured, loves sugar and will devour it in an anaerobic environment through the metabolic process of glycolysis until it dies and settles to the bottom of the vessel. This process results primarily in the production of ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide. The level of alcohol produced is directly re-

lated to the amount of sugar in the grape, the efficiency of the yeast or any interference by the winemaker to limit the process.

Port and other fortified wines see the addition of brandy to halt fermentation, thus retaining residual sugar and bolstering the level of alcohol. Cooling the tank as fermentation begins to wind down will also halt the process and leave some residual sugar as seen in many of today's table wines despite being marketed as "dry." And many dessert wines are harvested at sugar levels so high that the yeast strains cannot fully metabolize it leaving wines of enticing sweetness, texture and complexity.

Fermentation science in winemaking is a broad and multifaceted study where a myriad practical applications

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**ALLEN BALIK**

## COMPLINE WINE OF THE WEEK



### Off the pedestal and onto the table

**RYAN & MATT @COMPLINELINE**

Straight outta the Savoie comes this après-ski favorite, perfect for dreaming of January sunshine and snow. Le Cellier du Palais "Vieilles Vignes" Apremont 2016, made by Beatrix Bernard, is a cool-as-a-cucumber bottling of the white Jacquère grape. The Savoy village of Apremont, which means "bitter mountain" — a reference to the cleaved Mont Granier looming over the commune — is home to this lightly scented grape. Whenever you need a break from the slopes or a foil for cheese fondue, this gentle white wine will do.

Ryan Stetins and Matt Stamp are the owners of Compline Wine Bar, Restaurant and Merchant, at 1300 First St. #312, Napa. For more information, visit [complinewine.com](http://complinewine.com).

## WINE TO SAKE

## What's ahead in 2019

With the exciting gifts of 2018 behind, I am thrilled to welcome 2019 with open arms, looking forward to experience the year's offerings.

## 2016 wine releases

In the wine realm, a number of releases from prior story-telling vintages like the 2016 wines, extending from Bordeaux



EDUARDO DINGLER

from 2016 over-deliver on balance between fruit, sunshine and tannin.

to the Napa Valley, show overall power and finesse, thanks to ideal growing conditions.

So far, the Cabs I've come across

## Sake No Jin

On the sake side, I'm thrilled to check out this year's Sake No Jin, the record-breaking sake celebration featuring nearly 90 producers from the acclaimed Niigata Prefecture including Sado Island. This will be the second time I attend this tasting, which has an attendance of nearly 150,000. The dates are March 8 and 9 in

Niigata City in the Western Central region of Honshu.

## Sake in the mainstream

Adding to the sake list and things that get me fired up from the inside is seeing the appearance of various styles in Non-Asian restaurants like the

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## Oakville

From C1

he noted, "every so often you have a fork in the road. You go this way, or you can go that way. I decided to not get into medicine because I found out about wine."

Working towards a master's degree in microbiology at UC Berkeley in the 1970s, he and his friends would take breaks on weekends and visit Napa Valley. "Back in the early '70s, you each put a buck in the gas tank, you all get into the VW Bug and go up to Napa and taste wine for free. That's how I kind of started getting into wine. And interestingly enough, one of the first wineries that I was really taken aback by was Robert Mondavi."

In 1973, Weis landed an experimental enology position at Mondavi, "the plum job of that particular vintage," as he described it. His Oakville fate was sealed.

The fifth and final member of the panel was Weis's colleague and director of wine grapegrowing at Groth, Cameron Parry. Like Lindsay Hoopes, Parry, 43, was selected to represent the newer generation of Oakville winemaking.

While the elder Groth winemaker credited serendipity for bringing him to Oakville, Parry, who studied microbiology at New Mexico State, explained that it was a combination of good timing and scientific curiosity in his case. With his and Weis's shared science backgrounds and intersection of careers at Groth, the audience might have viewed their experiences as two sides of the same coin.

The Albuquerque native worked a variety of cellar jobs after college, which led him to UC Davis and a master's degree in food science and enology. After a brief stint at a Chilean winery, Parry, in his own words, "then had the good fortune to come back up and get a position with Chateau Montelena," where he eventually became the winemaker. He spent a decade at the Calistoga winery. Oakville was his next stop.

"Michael decided to retire," Parry said, before correcting himself. "Well, not retire, but slow down a little, I guess. And the Groth family came up with a new position, director of wine grapegrowing, which was a relatively unique opportunity. There aren't too many people in the Napa Valley that have this type



TONY POER PHOTO

Master of Wine Peter Marks, left, led a panel discussion at the Oakville tasting with Michael Weis, Cameron Parry, Lindsay Hoopes, Geneviève Janssens and Larry Maquire.

of a position, watching over both farming and the wine production. And the intent there, the idea, was to have one person looking at quality from dirt to bottle."

That concept, the intertwining of grape farming and winemaking, was a theme of the panel's discussion. But whatever the enthusiasm for making wine in Oakville — and, as the masterclass demonstrated, there's quite a bit of it — the wines have to reach wholesalers and their customers. Hence the trade show that followed the seminar, along with the consumer tasting. Tickets sold for that evening portion carried a New York price tag and benefited Carnegie Hall's artistic and education programs.

Underscoring the artistic side of Oakville Cabernet, the tastings were held one floor down in the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Terrace Room. Large, black-and-white portraits, including Julie Andrews, Ella Fitzgerald, and Leonard Bernstein, adorn the walls of the multi-use space.

Soprano Maria Callas stared enigmatically over the heads of Larry Maguire and Far Niente's northeast regional manager, Eric Penneys, while George Gershwin stayed focused on his piano keys. Meanwhile, Paradigm Winery owner Ren Harris shared his space with the smiling and very famous mug of Tony Bennett. It was all fitting: wine is art, as well as science, with a little pizzazz mixed in.

Since RSVPs were thinned out by the storm blowing down Seventh Avenue, there was more room for the 150 or so members of the trade to mingle alongside the vintners' tables. The crowd was mostly restaurateurs and retailers from New York, unfazed by the severe weather. Some intrepid buyers even

ventured over from New Jersey.

In addition to the vintners from the panel, attendees had the opportunity to taste and chat with winemakers like Tom Garrett of Detert Family Winery and Andy Erickson of Favia Wines.

Miner Family Winery's head winemaker, Stacy Vogel, also made the trip to meet buyers and convey the Oakville message. The Napa resident was a long-time assistant to former winemaker (now GM) Gary Brookman before taking over for him in 2013. This was her second New York visit in 18 months.

"There are thousands of restaurants in New York, but it also feels like a very crowded market," the winemaker observed, switching gears to show off her sales prowess. "[It] requires a lot of individual attention. I think the potential is good, but every single restaurant is a hand-sell, and you have to get to know the buyer at every place. I think you really have to kind of be committed to it."

The Oakville contingent wasn't made up of just Californians. Far Niente's Penneys and Miner Family's New York-based broker, Tony Didio, are ambassadors for Oakville up and down the East Coast and two of the better-connected salespeople who participated. They comfortably worked the Terrace Room like Napa Valley hospitality directors.

Oakville Winegrowers' Executive Director Joyce Stavert has organized four of these biennial events going back to 2012. She later pointed out that "the ability to execute a presentation like this really shows the camaraderie and dedication of this talented collection of vintners, and their passion for the Oakville AVA."

Stavert's efforts, especially in creating the mas-

terclass program, didn't go unnoticed. "The planning leading up to the event was very detailed and organized, which I appreciated," Penneys said. He was particularly happy to see his emeritus boss on the panel that morning.

"Larry has been working for Far Niente for close to 40 years, and he knows Napa Valley as well as anybody. And I think the other participants, with their history in the Valley and specifically Oakville, they bring a lot to the table. There was plenty of information shared that I'm sure most people didn't really know about Oakville."

What is widely acknowledged about this narrow strip of Napa Valley — on both U.S. coasts and most everywhere in between — is that it produces some of the world's best Cabernet Sauvignons. Near the end of the master class, Geneviève Janssens commented on the structure and ageability of Mondavi's and her colleagues' Cabernets from the much-heralded 2013 vintage.

"The beauty of Oakville is the fruit," she said. "I see across the board, there is a gentleness. There is a finesse and elegance and with very dark fruit. Cassis and a little bit of a hint of herbs, which is very important for all of us, and [wine] evolving in the bottle in an incredibly gracious way. That's really what I think is important about Oakville."

Back home in Napa in early December, Lindsay Hoopes took a few minutes to reflect on the Winegrowers' trip to Manhattan. That nor'easter was still a shiver-inducing memory, but an excellent 2018 harvest was in the books, the Butte County fire was contained, and wine country skies were blue again.

The 37-year-old talked about Cameron Parry's and her participation in the masterclass, lined up next to three of the California wine industry's most accomplished veterans.

She said that Janssens, Weis, and Maguire had painted a clear picture of how Oakville and Napa Valley looked 40 years ago, "and then Cameron and I were able to talk about what we think our generation has contributed to improving the farming and the understanding of how to get our wines from, let's say, the quality levels of the '80s and '90s and into the 2000s and beyond."

"I think the idea is that Napa has always moved forward because we've always been trying to catch up with everybody else," Hoopes added. "We just need to keep that momentum towards being spectacular, because we are more spectacular the more we know."

Tony Poer is freelance writer in Napa and the sales manager for Meyer Family Cellars, a member of Oakville Winegrowers.

## Berger

From C1

Pinot Gris, on the other hand, is a floral grape that can often be slightly spicy (almost like fresh fennel) and typically isn't aged in oak. Pinot Gris has been disparaged by many wine writers as lacking in flavor, but when young and fresh, it can be a good alternative to boring Chardonnay.

Argentine Malbec? A lot of this rich red wine is sold in the \$9 to \$19 range. People like its juiciness and attractive flavors of blueberry and plum. But I find many are simple and lack depth, which is rarely a problem with West Coast Malbecs. For a few dollars more, Malbec from California and Washington often are worth it.

Cabernet Sauvignon? Far too many inexpensive bottlings of this popular wine are of little interest to me because they taste manufactured, artificially flavored (with oak substitutes), and lack acidity. Many were grown in areas where it does only marginally well.

Two alternatives are intriguing.

— Maligned more than a decade ago in a successful comedy movie, Merlot has quietly regained much of the stature it had 30 years ago, and today offers attractive fruit and lower tannins than often-brutish Cabernet Sauvignon does.

— Cabernet Franc, one of the genetic parents of Cabernet Sauvignon, can be a challenge to those unfamiliar with its occasionally herbal aromas, but aeration often opens up this shy, but complex, personality and shows traits that most young Cabernets do not.

Riesling? Yes, I adore this wine from Germany's favorite grape variety, and we consume at least two bottles per week, almost all of it dry or nearly dry. Such wines work nicely with most Thai foods.

But Gewurztraminer, the more exotically aromatic Alsace grape, works well with very spicy foods because it's usually broader in texture and made with a trace more sugar.

Syrah? Most of the wines from his grape are, in California, grown in warmer climates, where the resulting wine is relatively tannic and rustic. As prices for Syrah rise, perhaps a good alternative choice would be Petite Sirah, with its fascinating fruit and real potential to improve with aeration.

Blended Red? As heavy, clumsy and amorphous as are most of these domestic wines, you'd think they would be a bit more interesting than they are. Besides, many are \$25 to \$35 a bottle. Not only has France two or more solutions here, but at varying prices. Cotes-du-Rhône reds typically can be interesting in the \$13 to \$25 range, and for not much more you can experience the southern Rhône blend called Chateaufort-du-Pape (shat-toe noof du pop).

## Wine Discovery of the Week: 2016 Chateau de Saint-Amour, Saint-Amour (\$22)

— The 10 "cru" sub-districts of Beaujolais designate 10 different styles of red wine, with the northernmost being St.-Amour, often considered the most sensual. In 2016, the wine came out slightly bolder than in some vintages. This superb effort from the master of Beaujolais, Georges Duboeuf, has deep blackberry fruit, some fruit tannins for 2-4 years of aging, and perfect balance for drinking now — slightly chilled.

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## Balik

From C1

exist in real time. The ultimate effect depends not only on the choice of indigenous yeast versus cultured or a mix of both, but more directly on the winemaker's knowledge and experience along with the stylistic impression he wants to exhibit in the finished wine.

Wild yeast exists throughout the vineyard and is naturally transported to the winery on the grape's skins to flourish and multiply in the air and on various equipment. Under proper conditions, and left on its own, the complex mix of wild yeast strains can initiate and continue fermentation to dryness. But the process is not always perfect and may require the winemaker's skilled intervention along the way.

Many winemakers elect to take advantage of wild yeast to begin fermentation and follow with the inoculation of specific cultured strains that take over and finish the process. These specific strains are chosen by the winemaker to better control fermentation and willingly serve to express his stylistic goals.

Others let the native

yeast fermentation proceed on its own hoping to achieve more complexity and enhanced textural feel even though this tack is a bit riskier and far less predictable. In case the wild yeast fermentation gets "stuck" or begins to show negative characteristics, the winemaker does have the option of inoculating with cultured yeast, allowing the process to proceed to completion in a more predictable manner.

When it comes to fermentation protocols, the treatment of different varieties or grapes from different vineyard sites does not fit a linear pattern. A winemaker may elect to treat Chardonnay very differently than Pinot Noir or Cabernet Sauvignon regarding the choice of native vs. specific strains of cultured yeast or a combination of the two. If cultured yeast is the choice at any point during fermentation, there are many specific strains available, each with individual characteristics to best complement the winemaker's objectives.

In researching this column, I contacted several respected winemakers, both locally and abroad, to gain a better understanding of their differing practices with yeast and its role in various fermentation regimens. Their individual opinions and experiences were most informative, and I look forward to sharing them with you in a couple of weeks as we further explore several diverse modalities of yeast driven fermentations by the talented and dedicated people who know best.

Share your experiences with other readers by commenting on this article with an email to me at allenbalik@savorlifethroughwine.com.

Allen Balik, a Napa resident, has been a wine collector, consultant, author, fundraiser and enthusiast for more than 35 years.

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