

ON WINE

California's Non-Cabernet Sauvignon legacy

Cabernet Sauvignon -- the grape that launched California into the world's wine spotlight 43 years ago -- created a heritage that constantly reminds us how important it is as a grape and a wine. But when California's wine history is written, the chapter on Cabernet rightfully should a lot smaller than most people think -- especially in relation to the state's north coast wine/grape culture dating nearly 140 years.



DAN BERGER

Indeed, Cabernet is a relative Johnny-come-lately to the party. The grape was basically non-existent in the first two stages of California wine history -- pre-Prohibition (before 1919) and Rebirth (1933-1966). Since 1967, I see the third epoch as World Greatness. And yes, in the last five decades, Cab has been king. But has it seen better days? Are we entering a new era in California wine? More about that next week. I was reminded of Cab's place last week when irreplaceable Jean-Charles Boisset formally opened "1881 Napa," what is

being called "the country's only wine history museum." The museum is based in one of America's most important Cab regions, Oakville. It's a handsome facility adjacent to Boisset's upgraded Oakville Grocery. It offers visitors a look at how Napa began as a wine-growing region two decades before turn of the last century. One feature of the Grocery: visitors can purchase tastes of dozens of Cabs -- the grape that's the Grocery's major wine focus. But Napa and the entire North Coast had ostensibly no Cabernet (or Chardonnay for that

matter) until relatively recently. Only scant acreage of either grape could be found anywhere in the North Coast as recently as the mid-1960s. In Napa, only Beaulieu and Inglenook consistently produced Cabernet in the 1940s and '50s. It wasn't until 1961 when the late visionary grapegrower Nathan Fay planted the variety on his large Stag's Leap ranch that Napa had any significant acreage of Cab. Indeed, even then Fay was considered a bit daft to plant in an area many thought too cool to ripen Cabernet! The North Coast's almost-lost

legacy of wine grapes was based on Petite Sirah, Chenin Blanc, Carignane, Barbera and Zinfandel -- and much more recently Pinot Noir. **Petite Sirah:** This dense red grape has always produced monumental, dark, age-worthy reds, including the sensational, long-lived 1971 and 1975 versions of Petite Sirah from both Ridge and Freemark Abbey -- two of the best Petite Sirahs ever made in the state. Napa's top Petite Sirah producers in the late 1960s and 1970s often used fruit from

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THE WINE EXCHANGE

Exploring Aligoté

Jacky Young is co-proprietor (with her husband Jim Young) and director of wine making for St. Helena based Young Inglewood Vineyards where a precious one-third acre is dedicated to growing Aligoté. Jacky is a self-avowed "Burgundy nut" and planted this block with Aligoté (as is often done in Burgundy) because she knew Chardonnay would not do well on their site. The first vintage produced in 2015 was a mere 10 cases from 3-year-old vines where she "hand-squeezed" the grapes as the quantity was too small for the mechanical press. A true labor of love!

A couple weeks ago, Jacky invited a group of industry professionals to taste a range of Aligotés from California, Oregon and across Burgundy. Jacky proved a deft organizer and conducted the tasting in an informal, but structured, format where each flight, served blind, had a theme and the selection included some of the world's most revered Aligoté producers.

Flight One (four wines) represented Burgundy's "Haut-producers" exhibiting more varietal typicity from four different vintages -- 2011 through 2016. Flight Two (three wines) showed varying stylistic impressions from the same (2017) vintage. Flight Three (four wines) paired two notable Burgundian producers with recent and library vintages from each ranging from 1995 to 2015.

Attending the tasting were a highly regarded Napa winemaker with a master's degree in viticulture from the University of Burgundy Aaron Pott; noted viticulturist and winemaker Steve Mathiason with his wife and partner Jill; Hill Family Estate and Oak Knoll Farming principle Doug Hill; Young Inglewood winemaker Scott Young; Burgundy aficionado Josh Shapiro from San Francisco's Flatiron Wines and Carolyn Scheinberg of the Crenn Restaurant Group in San Francisco.

Together, under the able guidance of Jacky we tasted,

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1881 Napa Wine History Museum opens in Oakville

REGISTER STAFF

1881 Napa, a wine history museum, has opened in Oakville in the historic mansion adjacent to the Oakville Grocery.

The project is the creation of vintner Jean-Charles Boisset, who bought the property earlier this year.

At the official opening, Boisset said, "America is really the reflection of the people of the past that really crafted this valley and created the valley... This is your 101 class on the history of California, the pioneers of Napa Valley, the terroir -- you can taste history here. 1881 Napa features an ex-

tensive collection of historic wine relics from Europe and the United States, antique decanters, original artifacts from the Early California Wine Trade Archive and background on all of the 16 sub-appellations of Napa Valley and the founders and pioneers of those areas.

The museum is open to visitors free of charge. Visitors to 1881 Napa can also taste wines from throughout Napa Valley via rotating comparative tastings with themes such as "Majestic Mountains Versus Plush Valley" and "Is it Cool to be Hot or Hot to be Cool?" as well as an option to "Embark on a Journey Through-

out the Valley" by tasting Cabernet Sauvignons from 12 different sub-appellations.

Guests can also sample wines from a blend of Napa Valley grapes, including a sparkling wine, Sauvignon Blanc, rosé, Chardonnay, red blend, Merlot and a Cabernet Sauvignon, all made for 1881 Napa by Winemaker Thane Knutson.

1881 Napa is at 7856 St. Helena Highway in Oakville and is open daily from 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Reservations are recommended.

LOWELL DOWNEY PHOTO

The 1881 Napa Wine History Museum in Oakville is open daily 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Chris Carpenter at Hickinbotham Clarendon Vineyard, one of two Australian wineries owned by Jackson Family.

Not a Stranger in a Strange Land

The map of Chris Carpenter's wine world reads more like an atlas.

TONY POER

As general manager of Napa Valley vineyards for Jackson Family Wines, Chris Carpenter is a prolific California vintner. He heads up winemaking at Oakville's Cardinale Estate and does the same for Lokoya, Mt. Brave and La Jota Vineyard, all owned by Jackson Family. He is the company's standard-bearing winemaker.

Not quite settled after years spent building a stellar Napa Valley career, the veteran vintner opted in 2012 to flip things on their head and make for the Antipodes.

"I'm connected to the South Australia community," Carpenter said in late February of his thrice-yearly sojourns in the wine-centric Australian state. "Understanding that has been a great revelation to me."

His destination is always McLaren Vale, one of the principal grapegrowing regions in sunny, California-esque South Australia. The late Jess Jackson and



The Hickinbotham estate in McLaren Vale, South Australia.

his wife, Barbara Banke, decided nearly two decades ago to establish a Southern Hemisphere outpost there.

Carpenter was preparing for his next trip to Clarendon, a village near the South Australia capital city of Adelaide and home to Hickinbotham Clarendon Vineyard, one of two Australian wineries owned by Jackson Family. On top of his local responsibilities, he has directed the winemaking at Hickinbotham for its last seven vintages.

Compared to most winemakers, Chris Carpenter follows an unusual schedule. His Australian

calendar is centered on an annual harvest trip in March. As a vintner working in two hemispheres, he oversees a harvest and crush not once, but twice a year.

He seems to welcome the challenge the last several years have brought to his life.

In the Veeder Room, an elegant meeting space at Cardinale Estate, the tall, gravelly-voiced winemaker talked about his Australian project. A winery colleague opened a bottle each of Hickinbotham's newly-released Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Carpenter started the conversation discussing a

region he doesn't work in: the Barossa Valley.

Arguably Australia's best-known place on its wine map, the river valley 90 minutes north of McLaren Vale began to capture the attention of the wine critic Robert Parker more than 20 years ago.

"There's a lot going on in Australia right now with the wine culture," he said. "I think for many years, particularly around Shiraz, it was being driven by the success of brands that Robert Parker had anointed."

Some of that critic's favorite wines, he noted, went "a little too far on the ripening scale. But the Aussies are coming back on that, especially in the Barossa."

He pointed out that winemakers in McLaren Vale didn't receive the same critical attention in the '90s but have distinguished themselves in their own way. "They've concentrated a lot on producing wines that really speak to the terroir. So, it's been very exciting, because there are some beautiful McLaren Vale wines over there that we don't see here."

Hickinbotham is a notable exception. Along with its other McLaren Vale property, Yangarra

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Leo Tellez joins Ackerman Family Vineyards

REGISTER STAFF

Ackerman Family Vineyards has appointed Leo Tellez to the role of winemaker. His first Ackerman wine, a 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, was released in June.

Tellez's great-grandfather moved to Napa Valley from Jalisco, Mexico and bought one acre of land in 1950. His grandfather spent his career at Charles Krug Winery and his father

devoted more than 25 years at Robert Mondavi Winery until the winery sold in 2004.

Tellez's personal connection to wine came via sommelier and chef mentors at restaurants such as Domaine Chandon's Étoile restaurant, La Toque, The French Laundry and Masa's.

After graduating from San Francisco State University with an international

relations degree, Tellez took viticulture and enology classes at Napa Valley College and started his first wine-making internship at Kapcsandy Family Vineyards in Napa Valley, working closely with winemaker David Sotelo.

In 2012, he joined wine-making consultant Dennis Malbec as his assistant winemaker working with wineries including

Kapcsandy, Blankiet, Repris, Capture, Notre Vin and Sodaro Estate.

In 2016, Tellez joined Sodaro Estate in Coombsville full-time as their winemaker, working with viticulture consultant Michael Wolf and the family to make small-production Cabernets. He will continue to make the Sodaro Estate wines.

Ackerman Family Vine-

yards purchased the Stonehaven vineyard in Napa's Coombsville district in 1994 and began making wine for themselves in 1995. An entire replant of the vineyard in 1999 led to the first Ackerman Family Vineyards' commercial release in 2003. The Ackerman's Stonehaven Vineyard received the first organic vineyard certification in Coombsville in 2009.



ISRAEL VALENCIA PHOTO

Leo Tellez is the new winemaker for Ackerman Family Vineyards.

Carpenter

From C1

Estate, Jackson Family has put considerable energy into marketing these wines across the U.S. In addition to making wine on opposite sides of the globe, Carpenter works with sales teams in this country and in major Australian cities to promote the Clarendon winery.

Australian red wine is practically synonymous with Shiraz and, to a lesser extent, Grenache. At Hickinbotham, Carpenter produces well-regarded versions of both Rhône grapes. But with the winery's 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in front of him, he zeroed in its Bordeaux varieties.

"Our climate in McLaren Vale, our terroir, is much more similar to California than it is to Bordeaux. So what I've been trying to do is take advantage of what I've learned here in California and apply it, terroir-wise, to what I'm seeing over there. I'm letting the vines tell me when to pick and how to pick from a flavor standpoint, from an acidity and tannin development standpoint. And that's kind of driven my style of the wines, not only here but down there, and I think it really shows in these wines."

At \$75 each, the prices for Hickinbotham's wines are higher than many other Australian imports. In relation to Cardinale and the Napa Valley brands Carpenter makes, however, those prices seem pretty reasonable, at least for collectors.

And they are collectible red wines. The Hickinbotham Merlot is more approachable than the Cabernet, but neither wine is forbiddingly tannic. Tightly wound, to be sure, with dark red-to-black fruit, and earthy, exotic flavors, they're the kind of wines that benefit from a few



Wines from the Hickinbotham portfolio.

years in a cellar. Carpenter has over a decade's more experience in California than in McLaren Vale, but you wouldn't guess it by his Australian wines' depth and complexity.

"One of the things that's happened to my winemaking style here in California is it's been influenced by what I've learned in Australia," he said. "I'm constantly trying to understand how Aussies think about wine and find the synergies—and there's a tremendous amount of synergies—and find the

departures. There's enough that it's benefited what I do here."

When Jackson Family launched the Hickinbotham Clarendon Vineyard brand in 2012, it was named for the viticultural estate the company purchased. The previous owners supplied grapes to a renowned McLaren Vale winery, Clarendon Hills. Carpenter's Australian colleague and good friend Peter Fraser, who is the winemaker at Yangarra Estate and a guy "with his ear to the ground," according to him, was the facilitator of the deal. He was also the person who enabled the Napa veteran to take on a project Down Under.

"Pete was instrumental in bringing this into the fold, this vineyard," recalled Carpenter. "When we acquired it he...thought it might be a good idea if I went over there and put my efforts into working with the Cabernet planted in the vineyard."

"So I jumped at it, because it was a new challenge. It's a place I've always wanted to go. And Pete's a good mate."

After seven years of extended stays at Hickinbotham, with a vineyard house and a "Ute," an Australian pickup truck, at his disposal, Carpenter has come to think of McLaren Vale as a home away from home. He emphasized that he hates being away his family, but he has made lots of friends in South Australia, both in and outside of the wine business.

"I'm down there for a good four or five weeks. People take pity on me and invite me over for dinner," he exaggerated with a smile. "I get to know some folks. And you know, I've gotten to the point now where I've hosted people coming back to Napa, and it's become a really nice community of people that, when I go down there, I don't feel like a stranger anymore."

One of Carpenter's mates is a gentleman affectionately known to friends and colleagues as "Biggles," and to the world at large as Leon Bignell, MP. He is a member of the South Australian Parliament for McLaren Vale and the former Minister of Agriculture, Food, Wine, and Tourism for his state.

"I'm the Bill Dodd of Down Under," the good-natured politician quipped over the phone recently, though, as a state representative, the analogy was apt.

Dodd, the California state Senator and Napa native, arranged for Bignell to visit Napa Valley in 2010 while he was a Napa County supervisor. "Biggles" had come from Adelaide with an agenda to find out about the Napa County Agricultural Preserve, which he hoped to emulate back home in the McLaren Vale and Barossa Valley wine regions. He has since done so through separate preservation acts that were passed by the Parliament in 2012, both of which he backed as a legislator.

On a follow-up trip in August 2014, which hap-

pened to coincide with the Napa earthquake, he met Carpenter through their mutual friend, Yangarra's Peter Fraser. "I met Chris Carpenter, and the earth moved for me," he laughed.

Joking aside, the MP is one of Carpenter's biggest fans back in Australia.

"We haven't had a lot of Americans down here in McLaren Vale. So to have someone of Chris' stature coming into town, people just hang off what he's got to say. We're very open here, just like people in Napa are, and we love to learn new things. And I guess having Chris here, he's seeing two vintages a year, because he's doing the Napa vintage and the vintage in McLaren Vale."

"He's an outstanding winemaker who can teach us some things," Bignell added. "He's also a keen learner, so he wants to hear from our guys about how they do things. He just fits in perfectly here; he's good for a laugh, he's good for sitting around listening to a bit of music, and he loves his sport."

In college, Carpenter played football at the University of Illinois and is admired, according to Bignell, for his ability to follow the Australian rules version of the game. He has a sense of humor about the differences between Napa Valley and McLaren Vale, particularly when it comes to South Australia fauna like noisily mating koalas, grape-devouring lorikeet birds, and deadly spiders.

Kangaroos, of course, are ever-present. They're his companions in the Hickinbotham vineyard when he's alone practicing his trombone. Via his passion for Jazz Fest in New Orleans and that city's music, he picked up the instrument several years ago and often brings it to Australia. He believes he's gotten pretty good but confessed that his family would differ.

"Music really drives me. It's one of my passions outside of winemaking," he said. "I think you'll see this with a lot of winemakers: many are frustrated musicians in one way or another. So they realize their creative abilities by way of taste versus by way of sound. But we still reflect back on that music side of it."

At the end of the Southern Hemisphere fall — May in Napa — Carpenter was back home in the valley and able to offer a little reflection on his most recent Hickinbotham trip. For a winemaker who's been through many harvests, he sounded measured but ecstatic.

"It was a great harvest. It was unique in that we had a couple of heat spells leading up to it, which really took a lot of the water out of the soil. We don't irrigate that often down there, so the berries were really tiny, which drove a fairly quick harvest."

He described small clusters of fruit on the Hickinbotham vines, resulting in a yield that was 20 to 30 percent down from his vineyard team's forecast. "But," he said, "the fruit and the wine that we made

as a result of it was really intense. I think it's going to be a great Aussie vintage for McLaren Vale and South Australia, because we heard the same thing coming from other regions."

From a low point in the early 2000s to today, things seem to be looking up for Australian wines in the U.S. The '19 vintage will only help, if Carpenter's assessment proves correct. He acknowledged back in February that, through Hickinbotham's and Yangarra Estate's wines, the doors pushed open by the Jackson Family's powerful marketing arm allow smaller but equally quality-driven wineries to reach new consumers in this country.

As a former importer based in Napa, Australian national Rob McDonald has kept his eye on the South Australia wine scene. He founded Old Bridge Cellars in the early '90s and after a decade had created a highly respected import portfolio before selling his company in 2004. He has since branched into — some might say single-handedly created, along with his wife, Kat — the craft wine cooler category vis-à-vis their company, St. Mayhem. But South Australia and McLaren Vale artisan wines are never far from his thoughts.

"The things that are going on with Australian wine are things that have been going on all the time consistently," McDonald said. "Right from the birth of the industry, there have been lots of small, independently minded people making really cool wines from different places. The single vineyards are an important part of it."

He went on to echo Carpenter's assessment of the '19 harvest conditions at Hickinbotham, noting that "it's more of making something that really works in an area using very little water, because it's the driest continent on earth. So the idea of making high volume and also very cheap wines from the driest continent is sort of nuts. What we do really well in Australia is the creativity around sites, and around grape varieties that work in a given spot."

Between the Bordeaux and Rhône varieties that Carpenter's team in Clarendon work with under the Hickinbotham label, they certainly seem to have found a great place to execute their boss's plan. And they know that, sooner or later, he'll be back to help them.

"When I leave, you know, I'm still part of the community," the winemaker said. "That's why I go back a couple times a year, to make sure that people are aware that I'm engaged in it and that I respect what is happening. I don't want to ever be seen as the American who comes in and, you know, anoints certain things and has it all dialed in because of my experience here, or I'm pushing the Aussies one way or another. That's not what I want to do. I want to be seen as somebody who is still learning, because that's how I am."

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