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SUZANNE BECKER BRONK PHOTO

Napa Valley winemaker Kale Anderson and Mochi walk a Coombsville vineyard in July.

Making Rhône varieties in Cabernet land

TONY POER

When Kale Anderson joined in a wine festival this spring down on the Central Coast, it didn't say "double-outlier" anywhere on his name badge, but it easily could have.

For nearly two decades, the career winemaker has been responsible for many sought-after Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons, earning critical reviews and scores that have helped burnish his reputation. Yet in any roomful of Napa counterparts, Anderson manages to set himself apart through his own label, Kale Wines, with its focus on Rhône Valley grape varieties.

And in April at Hospice du Rhône, the bi-annual celebration of wines produced from those same grapes, he stood even further out from the crowd as one of the only Napa vintners in the room — or, as it happened, at the Paso Robles Event Center.

The outlier's role is familiar to Anderson, and it's one he embraces. "Cabernet Sauvignon is fantastic here in Napa Valley, and it makes the whole world go around in our community," he said a few days before traveling down to Paso Robles to share his decidedly non-Cabernet wines with nearly 1,600 fellow Rhône enthusiasts. "But there's a lot of other cool stuff, too. That's the passion project. That's why I started my own business."

Calling it a "project" describes the lengths to which Anderson and his wife,



MEL HILL PHOTO

Kale Wines' Christophe Smith pours at Hospice du Rhône in Paso Robles in April.

Ranko, have gone since founding Kale Wines. The couple's label is devoted to the core trio of red Rhône Valley varieties that can stir up winemaking passions in California: Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. He produces rosé and red wines from blends of all three, along with a varietal Syrah that, for its complexity and age-ability, could rival some of the Cabernets he's put in the bottle since starting his career.

When Anderson was a pre-med student at UC Davis in the late 1990s, the genesis of that career came unexpectedly when he attended a "Rhônes Around

the World" tasting. He remembers a signature California Grenache-Syrah blend, Bonny Doon's Le Cigare Volant, being revealed after the blind tasting, along with an Australian Shiraz, a Spanish Garnacha, and French reds from Saint-Joseph and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, two of the Rhône Valley's top appellations.

"It was one of those moments where it was like, 'wow, these wines are so wildly different. I can really get into this,'" he said, recalling the bottles that caused a

Please see **KALE**, Page B6

ON WINE

Avoiding typecasting

Some actors spent most of their careers trying to avoid being typecast.

John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and several



DAN BERGER

others found it difficult to avoid roles they played most often, though all were such good performers they eventually did. (Tom Hanks started out as a comic actor, e.g., "The Money Pit," but successfully avoided typecasting.)

In much the same way, several of the world's most acclaimed wine regions often gain such reputations for greatness with some grape varieties that it's hard for some people to understand that they also do well with other grapes.

Most of what follows can be found in various books on wines of the world, or books that discuss wine subregions, but you'd have to read extensively, and often between the lines, to find such opinions.

This exploration is a personal look at how to avoid vinous typecasting. Most of the "second bananas" listed here tend to be less expensive than the star wines, and part of the reason is less promotion.

— Napa Valley: Cabernet is Napa's most acclaimed grape variety, rivaling that other region in France with which it often is compared.

The obvious differences between the two areas show up in the second-best grape of each.

Lovers of Bordeaux might argue for Merlot as the No. 2 variety because it not only produces some of the district's greatest red wines (such as Chateau Petrus), but Merlot also acts as a salvation grape if bad weather impacts the Cab.

Although Merlot has made some exceptional wines in Napa, I think over the last decade or so, Napa's greatest second line wine has to be Sauvignon Blanc. It is

Please see **BERGER**, Page B6

Thousands of oak barrels stuck in port

JESS LANDER
San Francisco Chronicle

California's 2022 grape harvest is underway, but many wineries are missing a key component for wine production — new oak barrels.

Droves of barrels destined for Northern California wineries have been sitting in shipping containers for weeks, sometimes months, longer than usual because of a massive bottleneck at the Port of Oakland. New oak barrels are essential during the harvest season for fermenting and aging wines, and the delays are generating logistical challenges that could force wineries to cut corners on quality.

Barrels, which cost roughly \$1,000 each, are just the latest supply-chain issue affecting the wine industry, as delays have persisted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Wineries have already struggled to get materials like glass and corks to bottle their wines.

The most pressing issue for those waiting on barrels is a lack of space for bringing in fruit. Each winery has a limited number of tanks to use. When a fresh wave of harvested grapes is brought in and needs processing, they typically move some of the wine in tanks into barrels. This year's harvest is expected to be compressed, said Linda Hanson, associate winemaker at Hanzell

Please see **BARRELS**, Page B2

Napa Valley Vintners' gift to OLE Health

REGISTER STAFF

The Napa Valley Vintners have transferred ownership of the Community Health Center they built in North Napa to OLE Health, providing a permanent, mortgage-free home that will be called the OLE Health Napa Valley Vintners North Napa Campus.

The move coincides with the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Community Health Center and the 50th anniversary of OLE Health.

The 25,000-square-foot facility building, valued at \$17 million, is the largest-ever single donation to a nonprofit by NVV.

In 1972, farmworkers and vintners found OLE Health to provide health care to low-income, uninsured individuals. Today, OLE Health provides affordable care to the community, serving one in four Napa County residents including more than 4,000 farmworkers.

The late John Shafer, founder



COURTESY OF NAPA VALLEY VINTNERS

The Napa Valley Vintners have given the 25,000-square-foot Community Health Center in north Napa to OLE Health.

of Shafer Vineyards, proposed building an affordable home for OLE Health in 1998, and he became an indefatigable fundraiser for his idea, which inspired the Vintners to build the health center on Pear Tree Lane.

As NVV announced the gift

at a reception on Aug. 18, Linda Reiff, the president and CEO of the Vintners, recalled that Shafer had told her that when people saw him on the sidewalk, they'd cross the street to avoid him.

But his idea became the catalyst for the NVV to build a

health center on Pear Tree Lane in Napa, and he worked with other local leaders, including Richard Walton, Peter McCrea, Rick Jones, Bernard Portet, Davie Piña, Oscar Renteria, Lynn Hill and Scott Hill among many others, to see the project through to completion.

When it opened, it housed four nonprofits: OLE Health, Sister Ann Dental Clinic, Healthy Moms and Babies and NEWS (Napa Emergency Women's Services). The first three groups eventually merged with OLE Health. Today, OLE Health and NEWS remain in the building.

At the announcement, the Vintners also paid tribute to Sue Parry, who worked with Shafer and served as administrator for the building since its opening until this summer, when she is retiring.

The facility was the first permanent home for OLE Health,

Please see **VINTNERS**, Page B2

Berger

From B1

establishing itself as a star performer and some producers are making it with such personality that it really does call for 10 to 15 years in the bottle before it shows how phenomenal it can be.

The only problem with identifying Napa Sauvignon Blanc as a universally great wine is that too many are simply overpriced and/or too oaky. Or both.

— Piemonte: This cooler region in the northern part of Italy is widely recognized for the greatness of its Nebbiolo grapes and the wines that Nebbiolo produces, Barolo and its cousin Barbaresco.

Great Barolos, especially those produced by one of the master wine-makers of the region, are some of the most impressive red wines I have ever tasted. Moreover, Barolo also can be one of the longest-lived of reds.

A great Barolo will be expensive and the best are extremely scarce. That’s because even at exalted prices, worldwide demand is high.

And although Barolo’s little brother, Barbaresco, usually is rated No. 2 in the region, I personally find Barbera to be a stellar alternative. Especially those produced by a top-rate producer, such as Giacomo Bologna (Bricco dell’ Uccellone).

A great Barbera will cost between \$40 and \$60 per bottle, which makes it a bargain in relation to top-flight Barolo.

— New Zealand: No one would dispute the greatness of New Zealand’s exceptional Sauvignon Blancs or its Pinot Noirs, but equally as amazing, and with none of the international reputation, are Kiwi Syrahs, notably from Martinborough, Central Otago and Hawke’s Bay.

Stunningly scented with hints of black pepper and violet, these amazing wines offer instant likability as well as remarkable longevity.

— Columbia Valley: Riesling and Cabernet are widely regarded to be the best wines being made in this large and diverse subregion in southern Washington.

Yet insiders, especially locals, will be the first to point out that the Merlots in Columbia Valley may represent the pinnacle of wine achievement in our most northwestern mainland state. The wines usually are loaded with personality and they have the ability to age for decades, which always seems to amaze Cabernet lovers.

— Finger Lakes: This exciting region in upstate New York is so well known for its dry and off-dry Rieslings and its exceptional sparkling wines that it is difficult for some people to understand how surprisingly delightful the region’s Cabernet Francs can be.

This is not just any old Franc, but “cold-climate CabFranc,” a unique, food-friendly red wine that’s difficult to describe. I served one to five California winemakers a few years ago and they all said they had never tasted so intriguing a wine!

— Australia: The Aussies’ extremely varied wine culture is highly regarded for several different grape varieties, so it’s hard to pick just one for iconic-ness.

High on the list is Shiraz, especially those that come from warmer regions such as the Barossa Valley or Hunter Valley.

However, wine purists will tell you that the most intriguing wines in all of Australia are the Cabernets from a region called Coonawarra. I once thought Coonawarra Cab would eventually challenge the finest Cabernets in the world for pre-eminence.

I believe it already has! But in the Northern Hemisphere, Napa Valley and Bordeaux demand so loudly to be heard that Coonawarra’s legacy has been muted here. If you adore Cabernet, you’d do well to seek out a 20-year-old example from Australia to see what I am referring to.

— Argentina: The dramatic worldwide success of Malbec clearly makes it the number one wine offering from Argentina. However, there is a tire-some sameness in so many Malbees.

To avoid that kind of ordinary typecasting, try to find a bottle of a wine called Bonarda. It is a grape that’s often blended into Malbec to make it a little lighter, but as a varietal wine it offers lovely fruit and much less tannin.

Bonarda wines typically are easier to drink young because of lower asstringency.

(No Wine of the Week.)

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TONY POER

In a 2016 interview with the California Winery Advisory, Kale Anderson was asked what it was about Rhône-style grape varieties and wines that excited him as a winemaker. “Terroir is magnified in Rhône wines,” he replied, “and they express time and place as well as any variety.”

While Anderson’s boutique brand represents a smaller Napa expression of these wines, the scope of California wineries and growers working with the grapes of France’s Rhône Valley is huge, from Santa Barbara to Mendocino and many points in between.

Add to that the Pacific Northwest, a handful of other U.S. states, and a long list of New World and European countries—France and Spain chief among them—and it’s not just terroir that gets magnified by Rhône-style grapes and wines, but the significance of the entire category: these are some of the wine world’s essential products.

For a long weekend every other April, Hospice du Rhône is their showcase.

Since its founding as the Viognier Guild in 1991, rebranding eight years later and becoming a nonprofit business in 2000, the festival in Paso Robles has had a dedicated following.

In both 2020 and the makeup year of 2021, it was canceled because of COVID-19, but a rebooted Hospice du Rhône this spring hardly broke stride in terms of attendance and international participation. There was no shortage of anticipation, either.

“After planning and postponing and rescheduling Hospice du Rhône for four years, we were really happy with the way it turned out,” Vicki Carroll, its longtime president, said over the phone after the event. “With the number of attendees and the feeling of people when we were on the property, I believe that it was very successful.”

Post-pandemic, Carroll explained, some procedures had to be rethought to accommodate the 1,600 ticket holders and winery representatives at the Paso Robles Event Center. The most drastic change was moving the Friday and Saturday grand tastings from an indoor to an outdoor location, a switch that,

Kale

From B1

light bulb to turn on. “I liked the idea of traveling and of working outside, working with my hands. And I liked the idea of being creative but wasn’t sure if I had a good palate or if I could get inspired, you know, to do it in this medium.”

He credited the Davis tasting as his inspiration. “That was my original, not just Rhône wine moment, but kind of the ‘aha’ wine moment,” he said. “And also the idea that terroir was real, it kind of blew my mind.”

Anderson experimented with his first, tiny lot of Grenache at the university’s winery (“I made it in a garbage can,” he laughed) and helped produce Colgin Cellars’ IX Estate Syrah as an intern in 2002. Early on in what would become a Cabernet-focused career, these two Rhône varieties had him hooked.

Establishing Kale Wines several years later was no mere matter of securing grape sources. Rather, as he developed an appreciation for grapes grown in different terroirs, Anderson identified specific Napa Valley sites whose potential most excited him. To incorporate Syrah into his wine-making, he accessed fruit from two renowned properties: the Hyde Vineyards in Carneros; and, straddling Pritchard Hill and Atlas Peak, Stagecoach Vineyard.

As for the Grenache-Mourvèdre blends, which come out of McGah Vineyard in Rutherford, they speak directly to the effort it took the couple to launch Kale Wines in the first place. It was a project literally from the ground up.

“My relationship with the McGah family goes back to 2005 when I was working at Cliff Lede,” the vintner said in mid-April while his GM, Christophe



MEL HILL PHOTO

Ventoux AOC Director Marie Flassayer greets an attendee at one of the Hospice du Rhône grand tastings in April.

she confessed, “could have been risky, but ended up turning out to be beneficial for everybody.”

Under the roof of the breezy Stockyard Pavilion, tables were arranged for approximately 120 producers and importers. California vintners comprised the majority, with strong representation from the Central Coast, Santa Barbara, and, of course, Paso Robles AVAs.

Another 20 French producers traveled from the Rhône Valley itself. Maison Guigal and Château de Beaucastel lent familiar and famous names to the festival, and a trio of winemaking friends—Pierre Gaillard, Yves Cuilleron, and François Villard—returned to pour their wines and those of their collaborative project, Les Vins de Vienne. They’ve done so for over two decades.

Other represented wine regions included Oregon and Washington state, with a single producer each from Australia and Spain.

About a dozen Sonoma and Napa vintners made the trip down the coast. Of the latter, Helen Keplinger and Grounded Wine Co.’s Josh Phelps brought their respective wines from parts other than Napa Valley; only Kale Anderson and longtime participant Miner Family Winery had Napa-grown Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre lined

up on their tables.

“The fact is, in Napa Valley, there’s not much room left for these kinds of varieties that have the greatest potential here in America,” commented Sonoma-based wine writer and sommelier Chris Sawyer, who stopped by Anderson’s table during the Saturday tasting. “My biggest regret about what’s going on right now is that we should diversify what we have growing (there).”

The motto on the festival’s website, “22 Varieties. One Vision,” speaks to the diversity of vines that Sawyer finds lacking in Napa Valley. And the data helps explain his regret: according to the Wine Institute, in 2021 Napa County had 734 planted acres of Syrah, the flagship red Rhône variety, compared to Cabernet Sauvignon’s whopping 22,000-plus acres.

But as Hospice du Rhône has demonstrated over its history, it’s easy to leave statistics at the front gate of the event center. The actual story of Rhône wines and grapes gets conveyed through the rosé and live auction lunches, Paso Robles dine-around and farewell dinners, and numerous seminars that make up the program.

Founding director John Alban kicked off the long weekend in a Thursday evening conversation about the future of grape grow-

ing with Dr. Nick Dokoozlian, a renowned viticulturist. Then Friday and Saturday morning seminars were held on a range of subjects, from Washington and Oregon Syrah to France’s lesser-known Ventoux appellation. They got scores of attendees out of their hotel beds, despite the evening revelry.

Kelly McAuliffe, a Nevada-born sommelier and consultant who has worked in France for 25 years, was attending his sixth Hospice du Rhône.

“Having five different Ventoux producers in the seminar was really good,” observed the veteran of chef Alain Ducasse’s restaurants in Paris, Monaco and Las Vegas. “It offered a better version. This was not just one person making the wines. This showed different producers doing great work.”

He and Carroll conceived of a Ventoux wines seminar while meeting up in France in 2019. When it finally took place this April, McAuliffe was one of the speakers and was happy to help shine a spotlight on the southeastern Rhône Valley region that he described as off-the-radar.

“I love the place,” said Marie Flassayer, the young but accomplished directrice of the appellation who is responsible for domestic and international marketing. “I really appreciate the winemakers in Ventoux. Everyone is super-friendly.”

Over the loud din of Saturday’s grand tasting, she added, “There are even people from overseas making wine there, so we kind of have it all. It’s a great community, and we love everyone.”

After Hospice du Rhône’s long postponement, McAuliffe got a similar sense of goodwill from the participating winemakers and enthusiasts alike, who were finally back in Paso Robles. He felt the energy of the crowd was almost palpable.

“The thing about Hospice that’s beautiful is that it feels like a big family. You see all these familiar faces. It’s just a good time, not a fancy or luxury event. And Paso is kind of a cowboy town. It’s got a West Coast, easygoing feeling to it.”

“I know that the French who came in were super-happy that we all got to return here,” the expat said, “as was everyone.”

has proved out successfully.

“The grenache and mourvèdre in Rutherford are totally unique,” he noted with pride. “They don’t make a big, ripe fruit bomb. There’s balance, and there’s dustiness and tannin to the wine. It has backbone.”

In outlier fashion, he has added to the Cabernet-centric definition of Rutherford with a couple of ringer grape varieties, doing so in a small but significant way. “I mean, the Heritage blend is kind of classic Rutherford, and the grapes have that Rutherford dust,” he said. “They absolutely work at McGah. It’s why I think it’s such a unique site that makes a unique wine.”

Moving from the rosés to red wines, Smith echoed the winemaker as he thought about the impending Hospice du Rhône and Kale Wines’ place in it. “You stick out as a sore thumb when you’re making Rhône varieties in Cabernet land,” he observed. “So we continue to be unique, but in a different way. What we benefit from in Paso Robles is that our sore thumb situation is that we’re from Napa.”

He acknowledged that Kale Wines sometimes take people in Napa Valley by surprise, whereas down at the Rhône festival, they would “be with a bunch of actual Rhône winemakers — a lot of like-minded people that are really looking for this style of wine.”

“It’s both following the passion for Rhône wines and going to where the passion is,” Smith added.

Over Anderson’s successful, Cabernet-driven career, those same words describe his relationship to Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre — the grapes he’s kept in his back pocket along the way.

“It’s a passion project,” he said again. “With the Kale brand, it was almost like a commitment to myself. I just wanted to honor the original passion.”