



# REGENERATION GAME

A new generation of winemaking talent has succeeded the pioneering baby boomers that drove California wine in the 1970s and '80s. Ben Weinberg meets five of these young guns to discover how their youthful perspective is influencing some of the state's top wines



**W**ine is generationaly complex, with yesterday's titans at some point inevitably handing off their viticultural visions to subsequent generations of passionate producers. These transfers are now particularly evident on the West Coast, in northern California. The founders of California's vinous revolution in the 1970s and 1980s are slowing down, and a bunch of 20- and 30-somethings, bound by family, passion, or both, are now raising the wine bar above the admirably high levels reached by their parents and mentors.

Some members of the new generation, such as Loren Trefethen of Trefethen Family Vineyards in Napa and Sarah Cahn Bennett of Mendocino County's Navarro Vineyards (*above*), are the latest scions of wine's aristocracy. Others, including Janet Myers of Franciscan Oakville Estates (and Mount Veeder Winery) in Napa and Brian Maloney of DeLoach Vineyards, as well as Jesse Katz of Lancaster Estate

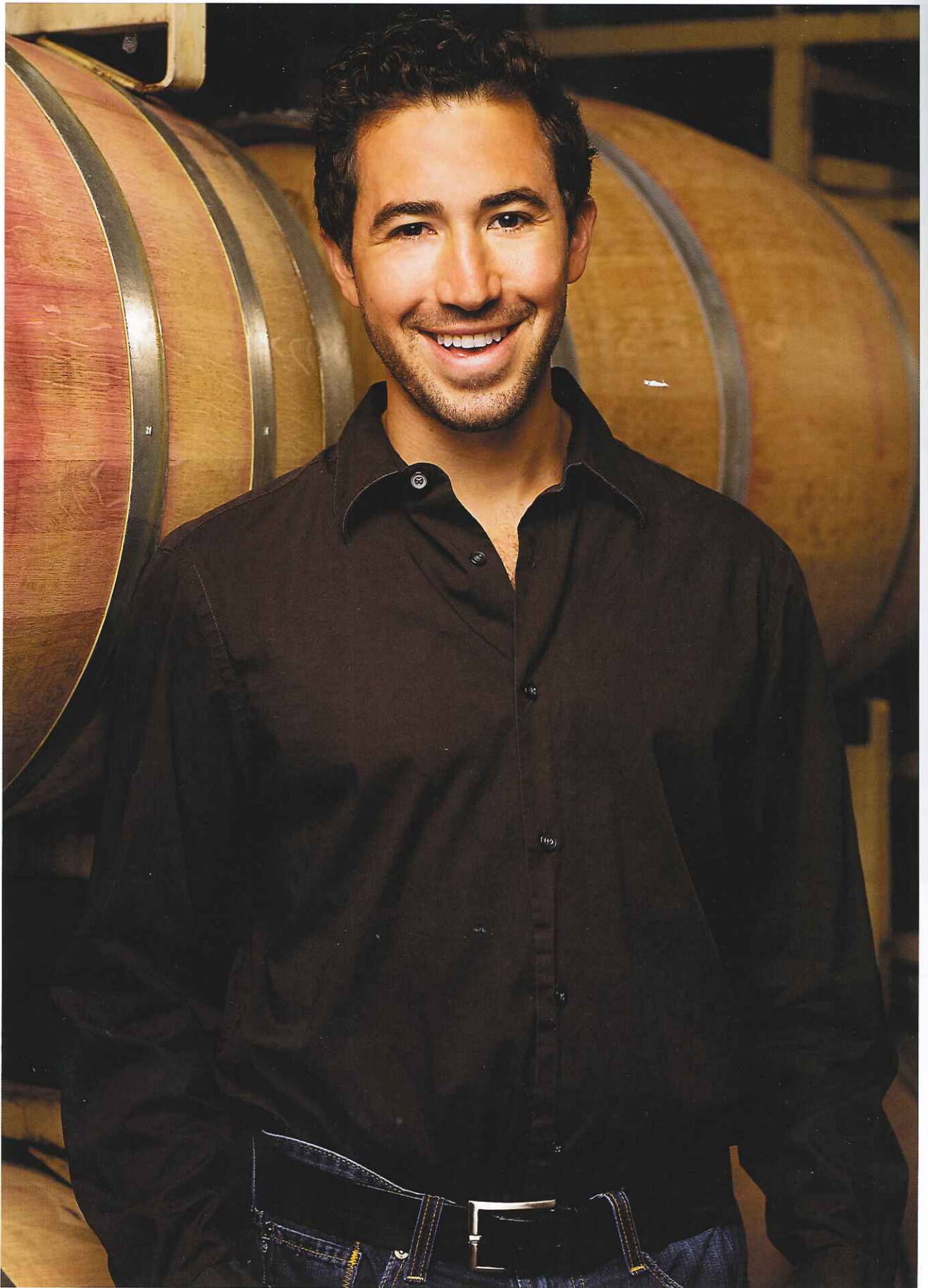
and Roth Estate (both in Sonoma), have more technical credentials. Their back stories range widely, but their spirit and energy are already changing the world of wine. I call these fresh, energetic faces the "young guns of Nor Cal."

### **The players**

Trefethen occupies much of the Oak Knoll district in the heart of the Napa Valley, and Loren Trefethen's pioneering parents did much to entrench their winery in the upper echelon of Napa's nobility. They also made sure that their children, Loren and his younger sister Hailey, knew enough about the wine business to choose their own futures.

Loren Trefethen majored in economics at Stanford University, where he also studied French. "Stanford gave me a good background in economics, chemistry, and engineering, all of which help me on both the business and technical sides of things. My time there also contributed to a

(veraison)



Photography courtesy of Jesse Katz

general belief in the value of sharing information, a tendency to see issues as opportunities, and an entrepreneurial drive to solve problems. My French expertise allowed me to participate in some fantastic wine-related experiences, including an unforgettable 2003 harvest at Domaines Jean-Pierre Moueix in Pomerol." But to Trefethen, the key was growing up on Oak Knoll, particularly his last four years working at the winery. "I've also built a valuable network of friends outside of the business, many of whom have become good customers who keep me up to date with innovations and developments that a technologically archaic wine industry tends to miss."

Like Trefethen, Sarah Cahn Bennett of Navarro Vineyards in Mendocino County spent her youth at her family's estate. "My brother and I finally got our own bedrooms when Navarro's offices were moved out of my parents' house. So, I guess you could say that my wine education started particularly early!"

Unlike Trefethen, however, Cahn Bennett chose to attend wine school, in her case UC Davis. But as with Trefethen, it was growing up in the industry that gave her an appreciation for wine and food and the hard work it took to produce them. "In school, I learned the science behind the art, but one of the most motivational parts of wine is learning how there is no one right answer—that diligence and effort create their own success."

Janet Myers, while not from a wine background, agrees that solid schooling allows understanding and anticipation of what's going on with the vines and wines. But it doesn't teach craft. "I've had the great fortune to work in California, Italy, and Australia, with different winemakers, palates, and terroirs. That has helped immensely to frame my points of view and provide perspective," Myers says. "My other key experiences revolve around my family's fruit orchards in Illinois. The cycle of the seasons, planning, pragmatism, rolling with what Mother Nature gives you—whether grapes or apples—it's agriculture. The only way to learn is to do."

Brian Maloney's family has also long been involved in farming—in this case, in the Sonoma/Napa/Marin area—a 150-year tradition that continues today at Fallon Hills. "We raise grass-fed lamb and beef," Maloney says. "By the time I grew up, we weren't directly making wine or growing vineyards. But I've always enjoyed showing people the special nature of this little part of the world."

Jesse Katz (*left*) took yet another path to a youthful peak, freely admitting that he was always passionate about wine but initially knew nothing about grapes, much less agriculture. "At age 18, while at school in Santa Barbara, I needed a summer job and applied to be a lab assistant at Fess Parker. I immediately fell in love with the interplay between science, nature, and art. I was also fortunate that Fresno State then gave me a full-ride scholarship to make wine on campus during my studies." Three years after graduation, Jesse already had six harvests under his belt by working six-month alternating stints in Argentina and California at some of the world's most famous wineries. There he learned his trade from such notable winemakers

as Hans Vinding-Diers (Argiano and Bodega Noemía), Paul Hobbs (Viña Cobos), Bob Foley (Robert Foley, Hourglass, Switchback Ridge), and Andy Erickson (Screaming Eagle).

But it was actually Katz's parents who, much earlier in his life, sparked an interest in wine, wine regions, and eventually winemaking. "As a kid, I was able to tag along with my father [wine photographer Andy Katz]. By the time I graduated from high school, I had already been to a lot of cool places like France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and New Zealand. In France alone, we spent time at Olivier Leflaive and Château Mouton Rothschild, among many others. At an early age, I could smell and take tiny tastes of the most amazing wines in the world. Even though it was not my family's winery that I grew up in, wineries and vineyards were where I spent much of my time as a child."

### The opportunity

Though often complex in its methods of production, wine has been slow to adopt information technology. However, a universal characteristic of wine's young guns is that they possess a tacit understanding of computers and their impact on productivity.

Trefethen thinks his peers tend to be more open to new ideas and processes than their older colleagues. "When combined with the incredible opportunities allowed by new technology, such an acceptance of the unknown should push the wine industry far ahead—perhaps even to parity with other, more technologically adept businesses."

As befits his winemaker status, Jesse Katz is focused on production. "My generation is blessed to have so much information at our fingertips. We can get numerical data on anything—from phenolics in a single grape, to tannins from an oak barrel. But just as with the wines themselves, we have to strike a balance. I think that maybe sometimes we rely too much on numbers and forget that there is an art to winemaking. Numbers should only be used as a tool. Wine is a craft, and balance is the key."

All of these industry leaders informally yet enthusiastically peer-network. Janet Myers gets together with a band of women winemakers who call themselves the Wine Divas. "We gather for conversation, bubbles, and great food. This is important stuff!"

Bryan Maloney's DeLoach has organized regular competitive tastings since 2004, with an average of six per year. "Over time, we've set up a blind format in which the theme is announced beforehand but the individual wines are not, and we invite participation from our growers and winemaker friends. Of course we can gauge how our wines are doing, but it's also a point of reference for visiting winemakers to share their perspectives on vintages, vineyards, and techniques."

All but Trefethen are also active in formal producer and industry groups. "I'm a bit distrustful of formal organizations to begin with," he says, "and have become allergic to anything with 'Next Generation' in the title. In the end, a great wine has to cross generational divides and appeal because of its quality, not against branding."

### The downside

When asked if they've experienced any specific inter-generational problems with family or co-workers, Trefethen replies, "Almost constantly! Just kidding. Sort of." He also cautions that his generation tends to be impulsive and obsessed with virtual information flows. "While some of the things we do off the cuff are beneficial, others could definitely use more thought. Learning how better to manage streams of emails, Twitter feeds, and status updates would benefit everyone, right? This is definitely an area in which an older, more experienced generation, with their time-management skills honed by years of work experience, can actually help."

Maloney echoes Trefethen's concerns, seeing in his vinous cohort a sense of knowing too much without having learned the reasoning behind it. "Knowledge without wisdom leads to stylistic variations that can override the more subtle aspects of terroir and style. Not having the deep background that comes from years of focusing on location and method makes it impossible to refine one's craft to the point of excellence. But obviously this is a weakness that time, through hands-on experience, will correct."

Maloney also fears the limitations that future governments may place on the wine industry as a whole. "So many interesting and positive things are only being done on a small, local scale because of the mountains of regulation that need to be followed. As long as we have to register labels in 51 different places just to do business in the USA, a large portion of the populace will miss out on many of the best values and experiences."

Cahn Bennett jokes that, besides being asked if she's old enough to serve wine at tastings, she hasn't experienced any ageist negativity. "Having people not be serious because I was a quarter their age was sometimes difficult, but since I started getting gray hair it's been a little easier."

### The upside

All of the young guns have great stories from their youth. One of Katz's favorites took place while his father was working on his second book, *The Heart of Burgundy*. "We were staying at Olivier Leflaive's house. I think I was 14. I didn't know any French, and the only kids my age were the beautiful, English-speaking daughters of Olivier Leflaive. They were my first crushes of the non-harvest variety, and I was pretty excited when they asked me out for Bastille Day. Thinking I was just going to dinner, I told my parents I

would be back in a few hours. We didn't return for two days! My parents were not too happy, but it was well worth it."

Myers's maternal grandparents are Italian, which allowed her to learn about life through post-college European adventures. "I waited tables in London for several years, lived above a wine shop, studied Italian, and went to the continent whenever I could. It was a magical time that also prepared me for my future."

### More of the same?

All wine professionals, this generation included, foster continuous innovation while maintaining links to ancient technique. But this has probably been part of the job description since the second batch of fermented grape juice. While innovation can be a key element of a winery's success, changing an organization's perspective, especially one with a cherished history, isn't something to be embarked upon lightly. If done properly, though, it becomes something that everyone can celebrate.

"It's why we work with consultants like Phil Freese and David Ramey," says Katz, "and why we're constantly introducing innovations in the winery and the vineyard—from new extraction methods, to injection tubes. There may also be a new label coming out soon, but that's all I can tell you for now. Of course, Lancaster Estate and Roth Estate are on Facebook and Twitter, and we've also

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—Brian Maloney

done some very cool YouTube videos."

The innovation of which Maloney is most proud didn't seem very innovative at the time. "It was an old-vine Zinfandel blend that I put together as an enologist in the lab. I called it Forgotten Vines, because it came from three pre-Prohibition vineyards. At the time, DeLoach only made three wines—Single Vineyards (which are all from one vineyard), appellation wines (Russian River Valley), and OFS (a reserve)." He tells me the latter "stands for 'out-f\*\*\*ing-standing'"—officially, though, it's Our Finest Selection. "To make a blend that was more about the story of the vineyards, the grapes, and the history behind them was a thrill. It was a big break from what we'd been doing."

At Navarro, Cahn Bennett has been building up a goat and sheep flock for milk and cheese production. "Last year, we put in a milking parlor, and we're now creating a cheese facility. Although producing my own food and eating locally have always been a part of my life, in the USA we are unfortunately more at ease with nuclear waste than we are with raw cheese. So, setting up the proper infrastructure to make this happen has taken quite some time." Navarro plans

to use the by-products from the creamery as mildew control in the vineyard, as well as to feed their flock of chickens. Most recently, the winery installed a solar array and has also heavily replanted trees and repaired culverts to battle the decline of tan oaks from sudden oak death.

### The bottom line

When asked for one suggestion for a young person considering going down the path of creating wineries and wine brands, these young guns give varying advice. Loren Trefethen offers that competitive sports have always been key elements of his performance—from riding horses, to racing cars: “Aside from providing an outlet—something else to focus on and occupy my mind—they’ve also honed my competitive edge and desire to outperform the competition. It’s important always to be looking for something to improve, a new edge to gain.”

Myers says that if someone is interested in the wine industry, they should first consider whether winemaking and grape growing fit within their passions. “It was a light-bulb sort of moment for me, to think that I could pursue winemaking as a career, that I could draw my background and interests together and never look back. Winemaking is a terrific combination of science, farming, food, culture, and craft. If that’s what interests you, then go to school and apprentice in wine country.”

Katz’s advice is also to get the proper education and then seek out as much experience in every aspect of the industry as possible—and not only on the production side. “I think that enology and viticulture schools sometimes fail to highlight the business side of winemaking, including hospitality. There are a lot of great wines out there. You can make great wine, but you also have to know how to sell it.”

For Maloney, balance is everything. “A wine without balance falls apart, and the same can be said about business, brands, and lives. A mentor can help provide perspective and guidance. Life is complex, but such a person can help you sit back and appreciate at the end of the day what fun you have and how great this creative act that we’re part of really is.”

But in the end, I think I like Cahn Bennett’s response the best. “First, make sure that you like the lifestyle and are passionate about it. It’s not just a job. If you think you’re merely producing a generic sort of product, then the hard work is not going to be worth it.”

Each of these young guns is helping rewrite the map of California winemaking. They break through barriers as a matter of course, yet none has yet given much thought to legacies. They are all unmarried and without children.

But that doesn’t mean they don’t ponder the future. As Maloney says, “No kids yet, but I have nine nieces and nephews. Though they’re still pretty young, while at the table a couple of them usually ask to smell the wines we’re drinking. It’s actually pretty cute to see, and they have no fear. They swirl the glass, take a sniff, and then proclaim on the features of the wine. I think that one or two will probably be in the wine industry. After all, it’s in our blood.” ■

#### CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

/// 2006 Chardonnay  
Russian River Valley

/// 2005 Cabernet Franc

#### DeLoach Vineyards

1791 Olivet Road, Santa Rosa,  
California 95401  
Tel: +1 707 526 9111  
www.deloachvineyards.com

/// Sauvignon Blanc  
/// Cuvée Sauvage

/// Chardonnay

#### Franciscan Oakville Estates

178 Galleron Road, St Helena,  
California 94574  
Tel: +1 707 963 7111  
www.franciscan.com

/// Estate Select Merlot  
/// Estate Select Syrah

/// Sauvignon Blanc

#### Lancaster Estate

15001 Chalk Hill Road, Healdsburg,  
California 95448  
Tel: +1 707 433 8178  
www.lancaster-estate.com

/// Cabernet Sauvignon  
/// Lagier Meredith Syrah

/// Chateau Potelle VGS  
Chardonnay

#### Mount Veeder Winery

1178 Galleron Road, St Helena,  
California 94574  
Tel: +1 866 223 3802  
www.mtveeder.com

/// Riesling Cluster Select  
/// Pinot Noir Deep End  
Blend

/// Sauvignon Blanc Cuvée

#### Navarro Vineyards

5601 Highway 128, Philo,  
California 95466  
Tel: +1 800 537 9463  
www.navarrowine.com

/// Pinot Noir  
/// Cabernet Sauvignon

/// Sauvignon Blanc

#### Roth Estate

15001 Chalk Hill Road, Healdsburg,  
California 95448  
Tel: +1 707 433 8178  
www.rothwinery.com

/// Cabernet

/// Merlot

#### Trefethen Family Vineyards

160 Oak Knoll Avenue, Napa, California 94558  
Tel: +1 707 965 2669  
www.trefethen.com

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