

{ events }

Winemakers

FOR A DAY

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN **RAYMOND VINEYARDS'**
SOMMELIER SELECTION COMPETITION

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LEFT TO RIGHT: SOMM Journal editor-at-large Jonathan Cristaldi; Raymond Vineyards winemaker Thane Knutson; Katherine Wojcik, director of beverage programs and partnerships, IHG, Sonoma, CA; Omar Lima, lead sommelier, Sushi Note Omakase, Beverly Hills, CA; Ashley Pengilly, founder/creative director, Quintilis; Raymond Vineyards owner Jean-Charles Boisset; Karim Lakhani, chef, executive vice president, and food and beverage manager, Northwood Hospitality, Denver, CO; Raymond Vineyards vice president of winemaking Stephanie Putnam; Roddy Kirschenman, director of operations, Cunningham Restaurant Group, Indianapolis, IN; Lindsay Colucci, bar manager and sommelier, Shelter Harbor Golf Club, Charlestown, RI; J. Matt Nickels, wine manager, Jeff Ruby Culinary Entertainment, Cincinnati, OH; Cayleigh Starr, general manager, Lucille's and Starr Cellars, Montreal, Canada; and Theodore "Teddy" Halmi, general manager, The Vine Room, Naples, FL.



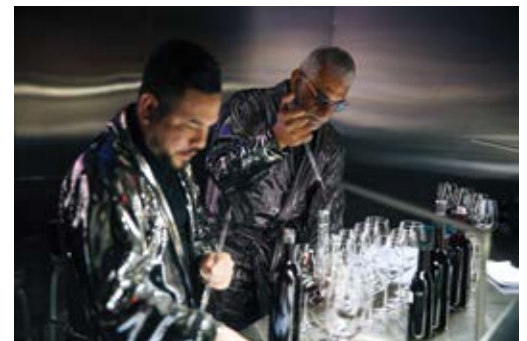
Joe Papendick, Raymond Vineyards' director of gardens, leads a tour of the winery's "Theater of Nature."

IN LATE FEBRUARY, as the last remnants of morning fog lifted above the vineyards in Napa Valley's Rutherford AVA, eight sommeliers readied themselves to participate in a major event at one of the appellation's crown jewels: Raymond Vineyards, a Boisset Collection winery that's celebrating its 50th anniversary this year; was hosting its 12th annual Sommelier Selection blending competition. The invitees would pair up to create a Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend, and the winning wine would be bottled as Raymond Vineyards Sommelier Selection, which is offered exclusively to on-premise accounts around the U.S.

The occasion kicked off with a tour of the "Theater of Nature," as Joe Papendick, Raymond's director of gardens, described a collage of biodynamically farmed plants on the property that's meant to represent a miniature vineyard ecosystem. Amid a circle of rose bushes, Papendick, who has the vibe of a plant whisperer, was speaking of the flower's significance at the ends of vine rows when J. Matt Nickels, wine manager for Jeff Ruby Culinary Entertainment in Cincinnati, Ohio, chimed in: "In France," he said, "with the Napoleonic code, different breeds of roses helped identify individual row ownership." Boisset Collection brand manager Kelly Hyatt added that rose bushes once "helped horses plowing the rows to know when to turn." Papendick noted that he hoped "the takeaway is clear that seemingly aesthetic touches in vineyards are often intentional, and everything serves a purpose."



Jean-Charles Boisset himself was among the participants of the blending competition.



Omar Lima and Karim Lakan hard at work on their blend.

Lunch was served in The Red Room, where Jean-Charles Boisset led the group in his favorite song, "Le Ban Bourguignon."



He then handed the group off to Raymond vice president of winemaking Stephanie Putnam and winemaker Thane Knutson, who showed the somms around the winery before whisking them off to a portfolio tasting.

GETTING TO KNOW THE HOUSE STYLE

To prepare the somms for their blending session, Knutson offered some words of wisdom: "We all have our own style interpretations, but as a group, we must work to come together to create a blend that is representative of the style of Raymond," he said. To that end, the group delved into a discussion of the 2021 and 2022 Sommelier Selection. The 2021 vintage featured 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot from Lake County, while the 2022 included 90% Cabernet Sauvignon from Lake County and Dry Creek plus 10% Merlot from Mendocino.

"I find the 2021 easier-drinking," said Karim Lakhan, chef, executive vice president, and food and beverage manager at Northwood Hospitality in Denver, Colorado. "It has a food-friendly quality that is



Theodore "Teddy" Halmi and Roddy Kirschenman with their Sommelier Selection blend.

great for us." Omar Lima, lead sommelier at Sushi Note Omakase in Beverly Hills, California, agreed with Lakhan: "The '21 has a rustic quality with brick-like mineral tension that makes it great with food." Roddy Kirschenman, director of operations for Cunningham Restaurant Group in Indianapolis, Indiana, called the '21 "very structured" while noting that "the '22 is fresh and lively and has more per-

fumed notes that the Merlot really brings out." Nickels concurred: "I like it when wine has that kind of floral quality," he said, adding that both wines were worthy of his wine list.

THE COMPETITION BEGINS

After calibrating their palates, the somms were introduced to the charismatic Jean-Charles Boisset, owner of the Bois-



Raymond winemakers Stephanie Putnam and Thane Knutson prepare to announce the winner of the Sommelier Selection competition.

set Collection, who immediately raised the energy level. "Be as creative as you want and as wild as you want," he began, building to a passionate and rousing pep talk. "People want supple, delicate, velvety, sexy wine that they can drink!"

Before entering the blending room, everyone, including me, was outfitted with a newly designed blending robe. Ashley Pengilly, founder and creative director of fashion brand Quintilis, gave it a futuristic look: Think of a disco ball reimagined as an ultra-cool smoking jacket. "It will never stain," Pengilly explained, "and [it's] made from ultra-low waste materials."

As the somms broke into four teams of two, Putnam revealed the barrel samples for the 2023 vintage blending session: Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley, Lake County, and Sonoma County and Merlot from Sonoma County. "Our only requirement is that your blend include no more than 20% of the Napa Valley Cabernet," she said.

I walked around and talked to the teams as they built their blends. Lindsay Colucci, bar manager and sommelier at Shelter Harbor Golf Club in Charlestown, Rhode Island, had teamed up with Katherine Wojcik, director of beverage programs and partnerships for IHG in Sonoma. "I want our blend to be consumer-friendly," said the bright-eyed Colucci, "and have that juiciness and approachability of California wines." Super focused on her measuring beaker, Wojcik added, "I'm hoping to create a balanced expression . . . that can satisfy the consumer idea of what Cabernet from California is." As

they debated how much Merlot to add to their seventh attempt, I wondered if either of them found their task challenging. Colucci said it was "all about adjusting your palate and picturing how the wine will settle into itself."

"It's definitely challenging to work with barrel samples," said Cayleigh Starr, general manager at Lucille's and Starr Cellars in Montreal, Canada, who partnered with Nickels. "We're working on micro-additions of each of the wines across numerous blends," she noted; indeed, every available glass seemed to be piling up on their table. Eventually, they decided to omit the Lake County Cabernet and use a minimal amount of Napa Cabernet while turning up the dial on the Sonoma components.

Kirschenman had teamed up with Theodore "Teddy" Halmi, general manager of The Vine Room in Naples, Florida. "We like two different styles of wine," explained Halmi. "I like a big punch in your face, and Roddy likes elegant and lifted reds." They aimed to compromise by bringing out floral notes in their blend.

Teammates Lima and Lakhan felt that tasting these young wines offered a glimpse into an aspect of winemaking they hadn't experienced before. "Each [barrel sample] on its own is too overwhelming," observed Lima. "Blending is critical to finding that balanced expression." A pensive Lakhan added with a wry smile, "We know we have to take ourselves out of the picture to make wine for the people—but you do want to make yourself happy."



SOMM Journal editor-at-large Jonathan Cristaldi samples the final blends in a blind tasting. Cristaldi chose Blend D as his top wine, and it came in first place after it was mistakenly announced as last place. (Imagine the relief!)

A SURPRISE TWIST

Once each team had chosen their favorite blend, everyone broke for lunch. An hour and a half later, the somms returned, happily full of foie gras, fine Burgundian cheeses, and three wines from the Boisset Collection's import portfolio: J. Moreau & Fils Grand Cru Chablis, Jean-Claude Boisset Corton Grand Cru Les Renardes, and Domaine de la Vougeraie Chassagne-Montrachet Premier Cru Morgeot. Despite the extravagant lunch, the energy was anything but sleepy now that it was time to blind taste the competing blends, rate them, and wait for the big reveal.

As the results were tallied, the somms—only half of whom felt they could identify their own blends in the lineup—chatted in anticipation. When Putnam finally emerged with the results in hand, she announced the last-place entry—Blend D. Having chosen this wine as my top pick, I commiserated with its creators. But then, Putnam caught a tabulation error and quickly retreated to conduct a recount. It turned out Blend D was the winner!

The pandemonium that ensued only intensified as it was revealed that Blend D included zero Napa Cabernet. Still, it was the winner. Therefore, the 2023 Raymond Vineyards Sommelier Selection will be a North Coast–appellated wine of 66.5% Sonoma Cabernet, 23.5% Lake County Cabernet, and 10% Sonoma Merlot.

The confusion caused a great deal of mirth, but the somms got the last laugh: Jean-Charles Boisset himself had created a blend, and *his* was actually the last-place wine. "It shows you you can't do anything on your own," he said with a humble smile. J. Matt Nichols didn't miss a beat. "Thanks for making us all feel better," he cracked, to a round of hearty guffaws. **SJ**