

Larkmead
VINEYARDS

16

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Winemaker of the Year

How Dan Petroski is
forging an exciting new
path for California wine.

Page 11

2017

WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR

Dan Petroski of Larkmead Vineyards and Massican Winery

By Esther Mobley
December 29, 2017



How to describe Dan Petroski's Massican wines? They're from California, but somehow don't taste like it. Ostensibly they're modeled on the wines of Friuli, in northern Italy, but they don't taste quite Italian either. The Massican wines are white wines. They're crisp wines, high in acid. They're fresh — neither laden with creamy richness nor beset by savory funk. Words like "clean" and "pure" come to mind. Saltiness appears. So does bright, relentless fruit.

Not that the Massican wines are identical to each other. Each wine performs its distinctions: a tart Sauvignon Blanc; a citrusy Chardonnay; a textured Pinot Grigio and Greco di Tufo blend, called Gemina; a perfumed, mineral cuvee based on Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano, called Annia. Yet they all, somehow, taste like

Massican. Like paintings in a series, cast from the same color palette yet individual, the pieces cohere.

"No matter what you're drinking, I want you to know you're drinking Massican," says Petroski, 44, who launched the label in 2009. Since then, he's introduced Massican vermouth, Massican beer and — still in the research phase — Massican gin. He makes a Massican wine in Friuli, with the winery Ronco del Gnemiz. All those taste like Massican, too.

"It all has to adhere to a style," Petroski says. (The name refers to Mons Massicus, an Italian ridge as it was known under the Roman empire; Petroski's grandparents hail from the area.)

“Style” is a dirty word in some circles these days, if you believe that a winemaker’s strong stylistic vision can obscure a wine’s inherent voice. Certainly, the Massican wines honor terroir, but fundamentally they are a triumph of style, carving out a new expression for these grapes and these vineyards.

As for the style of Petroski himself? That’s harder to say. Massican is not Petroski’s only work; in fact, it’s not even his main work. By day, Petroski is the winemaker at Larkmead Vineyards, one of Napa Valley’s oldest and most storied estates. Larkmead was founded in 1895 by Lillie Hitchcock Coit — the namesake of Coit Tower, legendary patron of San Francisco firefighters — and boasts the sorts of assets of which Napa Valley newcomers could scarcely dream. On 110 acres of prime Calistoga vineyard land, sandwiched between the Mayacamas and Vaca ranges, the Larkmead property gets the best influences of both mountains’ benchlands, holding a remarkably diverse set of soils.



Fermentation tanks at Larkmead Vineyards in Calistoga.
Mason Trinca, Special To The Chronicle

Over his 11 years at Larkmead, Petroski has honed a focused, but ultimately traditional, voice for the estate’s Cabernet Sauvignon wines. Structure, a commingling of herb and fruit, tannins that will outlive decades: These are the noble mandates of Cabernet from Napa Valley as from Bordeaux, and have been for centuries. Petroski enacts them masterfully.

It’s the rare winemaker who can contain multitudes such as these: to forge a style of wine as original and unmoored as Massican while upholding the epitome of the American wine establishment, Napa Valley Cabernet. Or at least, it’s the rare winemaker who can do them both as well as Dan Petroski does. For this, and for much more, Petroski is The Chronicle’s 2017 Winemaker of the Year.

Petroski grew up in Brooklyn’s Windsor Terrace neighbor-

hood — tony now, working-class then. During his childhood there was wine in the house, but just barely. His Italian mother, Annia, would buy a bottle of red wine every Saturday and drink one glass per night, filled with ice cubes. “It would last her through Friday,” Petroski remembers, “then Saturday she’d buy a new bottle.”

A singular goal loomed on the young Petroski’s horizon: “I wanted to work in magazines.” At 14, he subscribed to Conde Nast Traveler, spending countless hours thumbing its flashy pages, imagining trips to Mediterranean islands. “It became important to me — aspirational,” he says.

Dreams come true. After studying history and playing football at Columbia, Petroski eventually landed himself at Sports Illustrated, then Time. He worked in consumer marketing, finance and advertising. It was glamorous, the twilight of the three-martini lunch era. “I wanted to be at parties with Graydon Carter,” he says.

Like many practitioners of the three-martini lunch, Petroski fell for wine by drinking it in New York restaurants. A taste of Sean Thackrey’s Pleiades — that quirky California red blend — set him off. He subscribed to the Wine Advocate, to Wine Spectator, to House and Garden for Jay McInerney’s column.

Meanwhile, at night he attended business school at NYU. A classmate, Massimo Califiori, noticed Petroski’s growing interest in wine and offered to connect him with some family friends who owned a winery, Valle Dell’Acate, in Sicily, Italy. At the time Petroski was weighing a job offer from the Wall Street Journal. He turned it down.

That changed Petroski’s course for good. He moved to Sicily, working at Valle Dell’Acate and spending time tasting at wineries like Cos and Benanti. In Italy, he saw, wine was a way of life: a right, not a privilege. It flowed indiscriminately, not reserved for special occasions, and presented a different value system: “In Sicily the white wines were considered the good wines,” he says.

Returning to the U.S., Petroski was unable to find work in New York. He turned to acquaintances in California and was introduced to Webster Marquez, the winemaker then launching Anthill Farms. Petroski came to Sonoma County, camped in Marquez’s guest room, and went around town knocking on doors for work. The year was 2006.

Against all odds, he landed a harvest internship at DuMol.

“Normally I would never have hired someone with no experience,” says DuMol winemaker Andy Smith. “We took a chance.” Smith questioned his judgment when Petroski showed up to work the first day in loafers — “so, he was definitely green” — but soon recognized Petroski’s intelligence, enthusiasm and willingness to do any job, no matter how banal.

“Nothing was beneath him,” Smith says.

Like many multitasking winemakers, Smith had another job in addition to DuMol — at Larkmead. After Petroski’s first harvest, Smith tapped him to come work in the Larkmead cellar. That made two big chances Smith had taken on him, and now it was time for Petroski to put his head down and learn how to make wine. (Petroski was named Larkmead’s head winemaker in 2012, and Smith left in 2013. Consultant Scott MacLeod now helps with winemaking.)

Petroski spent his first years alone in the Larkmead cellar, “tasting, tasting, nonstop tasting,” he says. He had come at an advantageous moment: It was the dawn of a new era for Larkmead. Although the estate has history on its side — in 1928, André Tchelistcheff named it one of Napa’s four great wine producers — for decades it barely registered on the Napa Valley radar. Its grapes were sold to others, its name rarely spoken. But owners Cam and Kate Solari Baker, along with Andy Smith, had been working on a reboot. When Petroski arrived in 2007, a major vineyard replanting was under way, a winery had just been built and a tasting room recently opened for the first time.

Among the old vines spared replanting were some Tocai Friulano — a curious white grape grown in Friuli and a holdover from the Italianate days of early Napa Valley. Working with the Larkmead Tocai gave Petroski an idea: What if he could make a noble white blend, in the tradition of the Italian wines he loved, but inject it with California sunshine? “I had in mind a super-Friulian,” he says, like the rich, high-octane, kitchen-sink blends of Friuli’s Vie di Romans.

So in 2009, the same year he started dating his future wife Jessica Mennella, he cobbled together some fruit: Tocai (not from Larkmead), Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc and Friuli’s signature grape, Ribolla Gialla, with that super-Friulian blend in mind. But the Tocai and Ribolla were virused, and hadn’t ripened properly. The Sauvignon Blanc had screechingly high acid. The Viognier was too waxy. “The wine I was trying to make just wasn’t there,” Petroski says.

He ended up making three different wines. To him, it was a failure, a last resort. But suddenly, upon their release, master

sommelier Dennis Kelly wanted them for the French Laundry.

Thus Massican was born.

Grapes like Tocai Friulano aren’t exactly easy to find in Napa; only 51 acres stand in all of California. Haphazardly, with the help of friends, Petroski continued finding vineyards for Massican. When Andy Smith decided not to use some Chardonnay from the Hyde Vineyard in Carneros, he alerted Petroski; he now makes a Hyde Chardonnay every year. Tegan Passalacqua of Turley Wine Cellars tipped him off to rare old-vine Tocai at the Nichelini property in eastern Napa’s Chiles Valley. Steve Matthiasson introduced him to George Vare, who had planted a vineyard in Oak Knoll devoted to Friulian grapes, especially Ribolla Gialla.



Bottles line the walls in the cellar library at Larkmead Vineyards. Mason Trinca, Special To The Chronicle

Eventually, Petroski even convinced grower Chris Bowland, who owns a vineyard in Russian River Valley, to plant some Ribolla and Tocai specifically for him. (Bowland also planted the Italian white grapes Greco di Tufo and Fiano.) “When you plant, it’s a 20-year investment, so you don’t just do that on a whim,” Bowland says. “But what encouraged me with Dan is that he’s an honest person, and I know he’s going to be around a while.

“He’s the kind of winemaker I call finicky, but fair,” Bowland says of Petroski. “He has expectations. He has high standards, and he holds me to them. And I respect him for that.”

Unlike many of the trendy Friulian wines that populate Instagram feeds these days — from producers like Radikon and Gravner, who incorporate skin contact and oxidation on their white wines — the Massican wines taste clean and linear. Reduction, that burnt-match sensation created by a wine’s limited exposure to oxygen, fetishized in white Burgundies like Coche-Dury, is rejected in favor of purity. Due to its high pectin content, Tocai is naturally prone to reduction, “but it’s not sexy grand cru Burgundy reduction,” Petroski laughs. “No one wants that stink on a \$30 Napa white blend.” to George Vare, who had planted a vineyard in Oak Knoll devoted to Friulian grapes, especially Ribolla Gialla.

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Dan Petroski uses a wine thief to test the wines at Larkmead Vineyards. Mason Trinca, Special To The Chronicle

“I’m still just an intimidated wine consumer at heart,” he likes to say. The wine needs to be obvious; to enjoy it shouldn’t require a lifetime of wine education. “Massican isn’t a ‘great wine.’ It’s not Montrachet, it’s not Didier Dagueneau. It’s wine built for the table.”

It may seem paradoxical, then, that against Petroski’s insistent populism he has helped lead Larkmead to an audacious tier of luxury. When he joined Larkmead, the wines ranged from \$45 to \$75. Now, they stretch up to \$360. That’s a lot of money, even for Napa Cabernet. How does Larkmead justify it? They’ve decreased production somewhat, and made huge investments in the vineyard replanting and in building their state-of-the-art winery. But you’ve heard those justifications for high Napa wine prices before.

Regardless, for Petroski the new Larkmead offers a chance to regain the sort of clout that Tchelistcheff bestowed on it. If Massican isn’t meant to be “great,” Larkmead is. And Petroski has an enterprising streak. “To be recognized as a great winemaker of the world, I know I have to work with one of the noble varieties,” he says.

About that enterprising streak: Ten years into Massican’s life, Petroski is shifting gears, if subtly.

Massican beer, Massican vermouth and Massican gin are just the beginnings of what Petroski hopes will ultimately be a wholly different sort of wine business. “I want ‘Massican’ to be synonymous with refreshing white wine,” he says — a generic trademark, like Kleenex or Xerox. He wants “Massican” to conjure that bright, seductive Mediterranean island glamour he once coveted in the pages of Conde Nast Traveler. He wants “Massican” to be the name of a new shade of the color blue.

The same impulse that’s propelling this new phase of Massican is causing Petroski to look outward, too, at Napa Valley as a whole. He’s outspoken and critical of his local wine industry, to a degree that’s sometimes shocking. Why, for instance, hasn’t Napa made a full commitment to organic farming, he wonders?

“If we’re not incentivized by drought, by earthquakes, by fire, what’s going to do it?”

Frustrated by the lack of wine industry-wide conversations, Petroski reinstated a ritual that Lillie Hitchcock Coit had begun at Larkmead in the 19th century: salons. Semi-annually now, he gathers a group of Napa Valley winemakers, viticulturists, retailers, sommeliers and writers to discuss a single point: the future of Cabernet.

With climate change, could Cabernet Sauvignon’s future in Napa be much more limited than the valley is willing to acknowledge? “I give it 30 years,” Petroski says, somewhat apocalyptically. But he appreciates the openness of his salon attendees to commit to an uncomfortable discussion. “The CEO of Ford Motors does not go to the CEO of General Motors and say, ‘Hey, can I come in and look under your hood?’” he announced in August as he began one of the salons. “That doesn’t happen in the rest of business.”

As Petroski rattles off ideas, whether about organic farming or trademarking shades of blue, it can be hard to parse the proportions of fearless genius and brave delusion. “The thing that gets me out of bed in the morning is: What’s next for the wine industry?” he says. “Like, how do I turn a Massican bottle into that water bottle that you take to the gym?”

These aren’t obvious ideas. They aren’t highbrow ideas. Then again, neither was Napa Valley Ribolla Gialla.

TASTING NOTES

LARKMEAD



Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2014 (14.7%, \$135)

Unlike the “black label” Cabernets made from individual parcels, this Cabernet is comprised of various sections of the Larkmead vineyard and is made in larger quantities. Brawny and powerful, walled by forceful tannins, it shows cherry, cola, tobacco and pencil-lead flavors.

-Esther Mobley



Firebelle Napa Valley 2014 (14.5%, \$165)

Larkmead’s Merlot-based cuvee – named for “Firebelle Lil,” as the estate’s founder was nicknamed – is a hulk of a Merlot, formidably structured and driven by an iron-tinged line of sanguinity. Underneath a layer of leather and sandalwood flavors is a core of succulent fruit, purple flowers and warm spices.

-Esther Mobley

TASTING NOTES

LARKMEAD



Dr. Olmo Napa Valley 2014 (14.5%, \$180)

Named for UC Davis Professor Harold Olmo, who conducted viticulture trials on Larkmead's property in the 1940s, this is the first in Larkmead's black label Cabernet series, introduced with the 2013 vintage. Each wine is taken from a small parcel on the property, defined by a distinctive soil profile. The Dr. Olmo parcel is all cortina gravel, producing a wine that's generous and open-knit, wafting orange peel and licorice. Brambly, with black currant, citrus pith and mocha flavors, it finishes with the impression of cocoa powder.

-Esther Mobley



Solari Napa Valley 2014 (14.9%, \$240)

The second of Larkmead's black label wines is distinguished by its soils' mix of gravel and clay. It's fresh, expressing sandalwood, blackberry and leather, muscular but plusher, more pillowy than Dr. Olmo. A hint of bay leaf and laurel – qualities you'd expect from mountain fruit, not the valley floor – appears at the end.

-Esther Mobley



The Lark Napa Valley (14.9%, \$360)

The final black label wine, sourced from sandy soils, is also Larkmead's most characteristically Napa Valley wine. Polished in a way that Solari and Dr. Olmo are not, it's driven by anise, brambly black fruit, bitter cocoa and blueberry. Its tannins are silky.

-Esther Mobley