

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Leading Larkmead into the Future

Winemaker Avery Heelan is building on her predecessors' solid Napa Cabernet foundation



Larkmead Vineyards represents more than 100 acres in Napa Valley's Calistoga AVA. (Jimmy Hayes Photography)

By James Molesworth



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As I made the rounds leading up to my next annual California Cabernet tasting report, I stopped in at Larkmead Vineyards in Calistoga. There's been a transition here in recent years that mirrors the general progression in Napa lately, as this historic property has a relatively new winemaker and an appropriately shifting winemaking philosophy to go along with her, tilting the winery's lineup toward a fresher vein in the face of a changing climate.

"I definitely think we shifted the pendulum here," says Larkmead winemaker Avery Heelan, 32, who took over from **Dan Petroski** in 2021. "From **Andy [Smith]** to Dan there was an initial shift. Then, in terms of the move to more freshness, I think Dan was ahead of the curve. And now I'm here, and I think capturing how the site expresses itself best is the main goal. I'm changing a few things, but other things won't change."

Smith since moved on to DuMol, where he is fashioning some top-flight Pinot Noirs, among other wines. Smith helped mentor Petroski, who joined in 2006 as an intern without any formal wine training. While working together, they reined in the amount of new oak and tried to ease off on the extractions a bit. After Smith's departure in 2012, **Petroski prioritized wrestling the rustic tannins** of the warm Calistoga site.

Heelan, after working at **Screaming Eagle** for a few years, was eager to learn from Petroski. The mentorship lasted just a few years before **Petroski left to focus on his own Massican brand**, leaving Heelan to assume full control of the winemaking heading into the 2021 vintage.

"It's not so much about swinging the pendulum anymore, but settling in and looking ahead at how we want to manage Larkmead for the future," says Heelan. "We're experimenting, with new varietals, for instance. The idea isn't to replace Cabernet, but to figure out what might work well with Cabernet. What can we blend with it to add acidity, when that drops? So we've got Tempanillo, Touriga Nacional, Aglianco, Charbono and a few others planted in our experimental plot."

There's a change in the cellar as well, where Heelan has cut the number of red wines from six to three (or "morphed out" as she prefers to describe the changes).

The LMV Salon, Dr. Olmo and The Lark bottlings concluded with the 2019 vintage. The Cabernet Franc blocks that went to the LMV Salon bottling will go to the Firebelle bottling; the Cabernet Sauvignon to the now expanding estate Cabernet bottling. Meanwhile, the older vine Cabernet Sauvignon that went into the Dr. Olmo and The Lark bottlings will go to the Solari bottling.

It's a notable shift, in that The Lark (gravel soils) and Dr. Olmo (sandy loam) selections were based on soil types. The end result is that production is up for Firebelle and Solari, but their varietal and site expressions have shifted: Firebelle is Merlot dominant, with a fair amount of Cabernet Franc, and Solari remains Cabernet dominant, becoming a blend of the vineyard's best parcels, regardless of whether they come from sandy loam or gravel soils.

While the **2020 wildfire vintage was a difficult harvest**, it gave Heelan the chance to start her plan. The decision was made to produce just a single red wine: the estate Cabernet bottling.

"We stressed over the decision a lot," says Heelan. "We knew we had some good wine in the cellar, but we also knew there were just so many questions out there about the vintage in general. In the end, we chose to do the one bottling, with our best fruit, while skipping the other cuvées." Following that remarkably hot growing year, Heelan decided to drop the aging time a little bit, aiming for extra freshness in the wines.

The **2019 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** shows the style that Petroski honed during his tenure, leading with rooibos tea and alder notes before showing gently steeped red and black currant fruit laced with licorice root, warm earth accents and good, juicy energy.

The **2020 Napa Cabernet** is silky, just a touch lighter in body than the '19, but with the site's DNA showing in its red and black currant fruit profile. The **2021**, the first vintage here solely under Heelan's hand, shows an even silkier feel, with a slightly darker fruit profile, featuring currant and black cherry and a tug of warm earth that asserts itself nicely on the finish.

There's a similar shift in the Solari bottling, with the **2019 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Solari** emphasizing raspberry and red currant fruit backed by a warm earth echo and lingering iron note. The **2021** version is plusher in feel, with dark currant and cherry fruit paste notes that are still fresh in feel, all carried by a long and very structured finish.



Back in the vineyard, Heelan notes that nearly 90 of the vineyard's 110 acres were replanted over the past 20 years.

"That's a lot," she says with a bit of a sigh. "And we're getting ready to move through them again and change a few things. "It would be really cool if we could get to a vineyard that was 50, 60 years of age or more. The vines can adapt, we just need to figure out how to help them along. Primarily, that means mitigating the heat we get in this part of the valley, either through canopy management, water management or some other way."

"I think as we do that in the vineyards, then we'll learn more about how the estate can express itself," says Heelan. "And then we can keep going in that direction, fine-tuning the freshness in the wines. And I like the direction we're heading in."

Heelan has the benefit of a terrific foundation, thanks to Smith and Petroski's previous work. Consequently, her new direction isn't a drastic change, but rather a fine-tuning led by a narrowing of the portfolio and a continued emphasis on letting Larkmead's soils and vines lead the way. Heelan's direction is one worth your attention.