

How one Napa winery is getting ready for climate change

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At Larkmead Vineyards in Calistoga, winemaker Avery Heelan has spent the past seven years quietly experimenting with grape varieties that are mostly foreign to Napa, but not to high temperatures. Now, Larkmead is debuting the trial's first wines.

[Former winemaker] Petroski left Larkmead in 2020. Heelan, who trained under him, took over winemaking and the research block, and she's made a few changes. She took out the Zinfandel, which has already proven to be drought-resistant in California, and replaced it with Italy's Nero d'Avola. She also removed the Touriga Nacional and planted the Greek white grape Assyrtiko in its place. "There's a reason Touriga Nacional is made into port," she said. "It's so wildly floral, it's almost too floral. I didn't love it, and I don't think it and Cabernet are going to be the best of friends when blending."



Charbono is one of many grape varieties Larkmead Vineyards has planted in an experimental research block to get ahead of climate change.

In 2023, Heelan harvested her first fruit from the research block and last spring, Larkmead released its first wine, a Chenin Blanc. "Customers are loving it," she said — so much so that she expects to plant more.

This fall, Larkmead will release two more research block wines, both unorthodox red blends. The first, named Contour, is a Tempranillo-dominant wine with Cabernet, Aglianico, Malbec and Zinfandel; Heelan called it a "baby step" from a traditional Cabernet blend. The other, named Keyline, is a true outlaw, though still plush and structured like a Cabernet, featuring Shiraz as its base with Malbec, Petite Sirah, Charbono, Touriga Nacional and Zinfandel. "I don't think consumers have tasted blends like this before," Heelan said.

The blends will likely change with each release, and Larkmead's research block project is still in its infancy, Heelan said, for the vines are very young and they haven't been tested. She also plans to transition to dry farming in the next few years. "We haven't had a really hot vintage since we've had fruit," she said. "Once we have another heat wave, it will be really interesting to see how resilient they are."

There may even be a collateral benefit to the project: Helping Larkmead chip away at some of the industry's more pressing problems. All of the research wines are priced between \$75-\$85, a value compared to Larkmead's Cabernets, which start at \$125. That price point, the colorful labels, featuring the art of Larkmead proprietor Kate Solari Baker — a major departure from the winery's classic look — and the experimental nature of the research block wines could appeal to younger drinkers, who tend to seek out more affordable, esoteric options. "It's part of surviving tomorrow, too," Heelan said. "Being able to offer a red wine from our estate, under \$100, that's very exciting to me. It's a step in the right direction."



Contour and Keyline are the two new estate red blends coming from the Research Block vineyard.