

Beyond Cabernet: Napa Valley Vintners Innovate to Fight Climate Change

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Winemakers around the world are grappling with climate change. Grapes that once thrived in stable conditions are now showing signs of stress. In Bordeaux, vintners have begun cultivating hardier varieties from elsewhere, a shift that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

California vineyards, including the heralded Napa Valley, are no exception. Cabernet sauvignon, for instance, can lose acidity and color when stressed by heat.

Several producers are experimenting with new grape varieties common to hot regions like Spain, Portugal and South Africa. Larkmead Vineyards, for instance, planted a 3-acre Research Block in 2020 to 8 new varieties, including Australia's shiraz and Italy's aglianico. Not only is it hedging its bets against a hotter climate, but it is also searching for new wines that appeal to a younger generation that is not hung up on tradition.

This movement is being braced all across California wine country as owners and winemakers embrace a new environment in the vineyard—and in the market. Ehlers Estate's new "Research & Discovery" program explores 9 grape varieties while opening the door to fresh approaches in the vineyard. The program's debut release features three rosés, each drawn from the same grape but vinified by distinct methods in the winery. Another example is Randall Grahm who sold most of his Bonny Doon labels and launched a project to breed 10,000 new grape varieties from seeds. His quest is to find the perfect grape to withstand warmer California weather.

This column is focused on the innovative program at Larkmead; next week, we'll write about how Ehlers Estate is planting a foot into the future. Larkmead has been laser focused on cabernet sauvignon in its illustrious 125-year history, but its location in central Napa Valley is one of the hottest parts of the valley. Winemaker Avery Heelan said she is seeing the effects from climate warming occurring faster there than in other parts of the valley.

"We decided we have to be creative if we want to be around another 125 years," she said.

Heelan has an impressive background with stints at Cade, Capel Vale in Australia, Domaine Yves Boyer Martenot in Meursault and most recently at Screaming Eagle.

Making their debut this year are two experimental reds: one blends tempranillo, cabernet sauvignon, aglianico, malbec and zinfandel and the other brings together shiraz, malbec, petite sirah, charbono, touriga nacional and zinfandel. Heelan also made a chenin blanc that she said has become very popular among club members who are given exclusive access to these special wines made in small quantities. The wines get fewer pump overs and are fermented in neutral oak to preserve their fresh-fruit character.



Instead of lacing thin juice with grape concentrate to boost consumer appeal, responsible producers like Larkmead prefer to turn to other grape varieties to achieve flavor and texture. It's a far more honest approach to create the best wine possible.

Like us, Heelan loves charbono, a rare grape variety that Inglenook has been making for decades. We bought and aged cases of this wine before it was discontinued in 1998. She also loves the chenin blanc and the late-ripening aglianico. Coming from 6-year-old vines, these wines are just beginning to show their potential. She decided to drop the zinfandel (“uneven ripening, finicky”) and touriga nacional (“medicinal flavors”). Where this experiment takes her next is unknown, but she and the Solari-Baker family are committed to exploring new opportunities to weather the future.

Will any of these grapes be blended with cabernet sauvignon, given the weather challenges of that wine? “We’ll see,” she said. “I would love to have one percent shiraz in my cabernet sauvignon.” It’s no longer uncommon to see small doses of petit sirah, syrah, petit verdot and other grape varieties in Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon. We suspect winemakers are using these grapes to fill holes in the wine caused by weakened crops.

The prices of these wines are high because it’s expensive to make wine in Napa Valley and they are made in small quantities, 200 cases. Maybe avid followers of Larkmead will latch onto these rare gems, but it will be an uphill effort to convince average consumers to shell out \$85—an average price in Napa—for these approachable wines:

Larkmead Keyline Estate Red Blend 2023 (\$85). The forward fruit character of this soft and delicious quaff comes from the heavy dose of shiraz and petit sirah. Charbono gives it body. Juicy blackberry notes with hints of mocha and earth.

Larkmead Contour Estate Red Blend 2023 (\$85). More structured than the Keyline, this wine has expressive aromas and layers of vibrant, youthful black cherry and plum flavors and a bit of cassis and mineral.

Larkmead Chenin Blanc 2024 (\$75). Green apple notes with good acidity and tartness to make this a refreshing wine but one that can be paired with a lot of summer food.

The beautiful labels, featuring local plants, are the work of proprietor and artist Kate Solari Baker.