

Varietal Focus: Icons

September 1, 2026 - By Lance Cutler



Larkmead Vineyards 2021 Solari Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (14.7% alc., 1,202 cases. \$200)

THE HISTORIC LARKMEAD ESTATE, which was originally founded in 1895, consists of 115 acres in Calistoga at the northern end of Napa Valley. Larry and Polly Solari purchased Larkmead in 1948. Their daughter, Kate Solari, spent her childhood growing up in a very different Napa Valley, one that was rural with orchards, cattle ranches and empty fields. The grapes from Larkmead Vineyard were farmed and sold to various wineries. When Kate Solari married her husband, Cam Baker, they took it upon themselves to completely replant the historic vineyard as their first project. They designated individual vineyard blocks based on soil type and then matched varieties, rootstocks and clonal selections to thrive in each block.

By 2005, with the replanting completed, they opened the first phase of their state-of-the-art winery, which they expanded upon with the completion of a new barrel hall, gallery and hospitality space. The Solari-Baker family has been committed to caring for the land by farming organically, finally receiving their official CCOF status in 2023. They achieved the Napa Green Winery certification in 2011 and the Napa Green Land certification in 2017, sitting at the highest gold level of Napa Green certification.

Avery Heelan grew up in New England and earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Northeastern University. After several visits to Napa Valley with her parents, she found herself in the master's program at UC Davis where she earned her degree in agricultural and environmental chemistry with a specialization in viticulture and enology. Heelan made wine in Western Australia and Meursault before returning to California to work at Screaming Eagle and, eventually, Larkmead Vineyards, where she was promoted to winemaker in 2021.

According to the winemaker:

"Our grapes are farmed and vinified separately and then blended into wines that honor the site's diversity. Our goal is to make a wine of balance and elegance, Cabernet that embodies both strength and restraint, with depth that unfolds slowly rather than declaring itself all at once. The goal is always harmony: fruit, floral and savory notes in perfect conversation. Our Solari Cabernet Sauvignon should be evocative and textural, an experience that engages all of the senses. Ultimately, I am crafting a wine that will endure. It should offer pleasure upon release but evolve gracefully for decades, revealing new dimensions of character and nuance over time.

"This vineyard has been here since 1895; but after many years of replanting, most of the vines are 25 to 28 years old. The soil is Cortina gravel with some bale loam. The elevation is 300 feet. Vine spacing is 6 x 8 feet, and we have multiple Cabernet Sauvignon clones: 337, 7, Olmo, 15, 4 and 169. Our rootstock is a combination of 3309, 101-14 and 110R. We have irrigation but have reduced water usage dramatically over the past five years.

"Our vineyard team farms the estate with a hands-on, block-by-block approach. We use cover crops and composting to maintain soil health with minimal tilling, and we avoid herbicides and neonicotinoids entirely. Each growing season begins with thoughtful canopy management to balance vigor and sunlight exposure and reduce mildew pressure while protecting the fruit from afternoon heat. We have changed to incorporating a moderate California sprawl where the canes flop over, protecting the fruit zone and giving us longer hang time and better color development.

"While we track grape chemistry, harvest decisions are entirely driven by taste and texture. We look for a point when the fruit shows both purity and energy, freshness and depth. We wait for the pulp to soften and separate from the skins. We like to pick before any dimpling, and we like to see good color, when we spit, after chewing the berries.

"Grapes are picked at night, cluster-sorted, destemmed and then berry-sorted before getting pumped to closed stainless-steel tanks. We add 30 to 40ppm SO₂ at the destemmer. We cold soak at 45°F for three to five days. We'll warm the juice to 60°F before using both native and commercial yeast (usually FX10 because we like the violet character it gives the wine) to carry out fermentation. We add organic nutrients at inoculation and again at 1/3 drop in Brix. We pump-over up to three times a day, one full volume each, tapering off later in maceration. Fermentation temperatures are kept at 80°F to 84°F.

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2021 Solari Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Tasting Notes

Heelan: I love the fresh florals and violets. There is a nice herbal element with hints of cedar and mocha. On the palate there is nice freshness balanced by mid-palate tension. There is a juicy core of freshness and acidity. The tannins have good resolve but have a lot of aging potential left.

Others: Warm florals with earth and spice. Wine is supple, upright with energy, and the tannins are there but elegant. Very young, raw and tight with black fruit. Love the warm fruit, dry herb spectrum with the freshness of fruit along with the balance, making this pretty and drinkable. Cedar, cigar box with good richness with lingering tannins. Wonderfully expressive classic Napa Cabernet with dark fruit and good energy and lift on the nose. Savory with a bit of vegetal sweetness. Rich with some black olive character, very structured with a bit of alcohol at the end. Super juicy and meaty, like a dry aged ribeye. Black cherry, including the pit, lends a hardness to the wine that melts in the finish. Black fruits with some minty herbal notes and toasty oak, along with coffee and chocolate.



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THE FIRST VARIETAL FOCUS appeared in *WineBusiness Monthly's* (WBM) February 2011 edition, and the concept of focusing on the approaches of nine different winemakers from three diverse regions in their handling of a single varietal was a challenge to bring to print. The goal was for each winemaker to state their stylistic goals, reveal in exacting detail what they did in both the vineyard and winery to achieve those goals, and then assess how well they accomplished what they set out to do by reviewing the tasting comments from all the participating winemakers.

The Varietal Focus series became a cornerstone feature. Over the years, major varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, were considered alongside more esoteric grapes, such as Mourvèdre, Gamay Noir and Nebbiolo. The famous California regions—Napa, Sonoma and the Central Coast—were included, but so were established regions, like Oregon, Washington and New York. Even British Columbia, Canada and Argentina participated in Varietal Focus stories.

For the 30th Varietal Focus story, I proposed something special: we invite nine iconic wineries to participate in a reflective conversation about how winemaking has evolved in California's top wine-producing regions over the last 15 years. For this story, we selected Pinot Noir producers from Sonoma



County, Cabernet Sauvignon specialists from Napa Valley and Syrah aficionados from the Central Coast of California.

I decided to invite winemakers from iconic wineries to participate. I use the term “iconic” in its definition as being widely known and recognized for distinguished excellence. Frankly, I was surprised by how easily these winemakers agreed to participate. There was no hint of trying to keep secrets. Instead, it became clear that each of these winemakers believed the individual vineyards and terroir directed the quality of their wines. As Ted Lemon put it, “Wine should be a reflection of the vineyard and not the cellar.”

We ended up with a veritable “Who’s Who” list of some of California’s most famous wineries. From Sonoma County, Ted Lemon, founder of Littorai Wines, Tom Rocchioli from Rocchioli Winery and Jasmine Hirsch, representing Hirsch Vineyards, explained their approaches to Pinot Noir. Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon symbolizes a winemaking pinnacle, and our three wineries contributed to that reputation: Avery Heelan, winemaker at the historic Larkmead Vineyards, Fredrik Johansson and Matt Peterson from Staglin Family Vineyards, and Aron Weinkauff from Spottswoode Winery. Syrah producers Adam Tolmach from The Ojai Vineyard, Chelsea Franchi of Tablas Creek Vineyard and Foxen Vineyard winemaker Bill Wathan explained their approaches.

ICONS ~ Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

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