

San Francisco Chronicle

SFCHRONICLE.COM • WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2025 • CONTAINS RECYCLED PAPER • \$3.00



Photos by Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Co-owner Felicia Woytak's Palisades Canyon Wines made only 30 cases of its Chenin Blanc, a white grape whose popularity has waned over the years. Palisades Canyon sold out of the Chenin within two minutes.

The renaissance of Chenin Blanc

There isn't enough of this resurgent grape to go around

By Jess Lander

When Felicia Woytak and Steven Rasmussen released their first wines in the fall from Palisades Canyon, a historic vineyard in Napa Valley's Calistoga region, their Chenin Blanc sold out in two minutes.

They made only 30 cases of it, but the demand for this under-the-radar white wine at a pricey \$75 a bottle suggests that Chenin Blanc, a longtime black sheep of California wine, is having a moment — again. This time it's poised to stick.

Chenin Blanc, a wine that's famously grown in France's Loire Valley, was once California's most widely planted white wine grape. "It was a cult wine," said Palisades Canyon's winemaker Graeme MacDonald, whose grandparents



With an increased demand for white wines, production of Chenin Blanc has surged.

INSIDE

Napa County seeking more than \$8 million in fines and fees from Hoopes Vineyard after winning lawsuit in November. **A5**

grew Chenin Blanc for Charles Krug on one of the original parcels of To Kalon, Napa Valley's most famous vineyard. Back then, most wineries were producing it in an off-dry style.

"It was the wine people lined up for more than anything," MacDonald added. "They couldn't get enough Chenin."

But over time, most of California's Chenin was blended into mass productions of other cheap and sweet white wines, often labeled "California Champagne" or "Chablis" by the industry's big- **Chenin continues on A9**

Lurie's rhetoric will be put to the test

New mayor has broad support but myriad issues to address

By J.D. Morris

Daniel Lurie is about to complete his transformation from a wealthy but politically inexperienced nonprofit founder into the most powerful person in San Francisco, becoming the city's next mayor at a crucial juncture in its history.

When he is inaugurated Wednesday at a ceremony in Civic Center Plaza, Lurie will enter office with broad political support as moderate and progressive leaders all profess a desire to work with him.

But it remains unclear how effectively Lurie will be able to marshal that goodwill to address the myriad issues that plague the city, from open-air drug dealing to an ailing downtown that's partly to blame for the whopping \$876 million two-year deficit that Lurie will have to close in his first budget.

Lurie campaigned on bold promises to grow the city's homeless shelter system, shut down drug markets, expand the police force and broadly shake up the status quo at City Hall that he blamed for allowing San Francisco's problems to fester. Ideologically, he differed little from the incumbent he unseated, London Breed, but he argued that she had failed to manage the city well and that an outsider's perspective was necessary to turn things around.

On Wednesday, Lurie will begin the difficult task of trying to turn his campaign rhetoric into reality. So far, he's tried to establish productive relationships with everyone in city politics, including the Board of **Lurie continues on A9**

New plan for high-speed rail: Reach Las Vegas

By Rachel Swan

California leaders are ready to lay high-speed rail tracks through the Central Valley, and on Monday they signaled where the tracks are headed: south toward Palmdale, to make connections into Las Vegas.

When they'll arrive at the Transbay Terminal in downtown San Francisco remains uncertain.

The new map would plug California high-speed rail into a regional network with two other bullet train lines — the High Desert Corridor in Los Ange-

CHENIN

From page A1

gest players like Gallo. Chenin's reputation plummeted. By the late 1980s Chardonnay had taken over as the state's prized white.

"Chenin Blanc went down the tubes right at the advent of the white wine boom," said John Skupny, who has produced Chenin for his Napa Valley winery Lang & Reed since 2013. "Then most of the land here was converted to Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chenin completely fell off the radar."

In 1984, there were roughly 45,000 acres of Chenin Blanc planted in California, according to the California Grape Acreage Report. In 2023, there were only about 4,000 acres left. That accounts for less than 1% of the state's wine grape acreage.

Since the early 2000s, Chenin Blanc had a couple of mini California renaissances; the latest was fueled by small and trendy natural winemakers like Craig Haarmeyer of Haarmeyer Wine Cellars in West Sacramento and Tegan Passalacqua of Sandlands in Lodi. (There was even a hashtag: #HellaChenin.) But this new wave feels bigger and more serious, and most importantly, the timing finally feels right. "People seem to know a little bit more about it, or have at least heard of it," said Haarmeyer, who produced eight single-vineyard Chenins last year.

"Fifteen years ago, no one knew what Chenin was," he said, but his Chenin is now the house white at several Sacramento area restaurants and has even replaced a few Chardonnays on some by-the-glass lists.

While wine consumption is down, white wine sales are outpacing reds, and consumers are looking to trade in their rich, often buttery Chardonnays for crisp, aromatic white wines like Sauvignon Blanc. Chenin, combining Sauvignon Blanc's signature acidity and freshness with the complexity and body of Chardonnay, offers a compromise. Reed Skup-



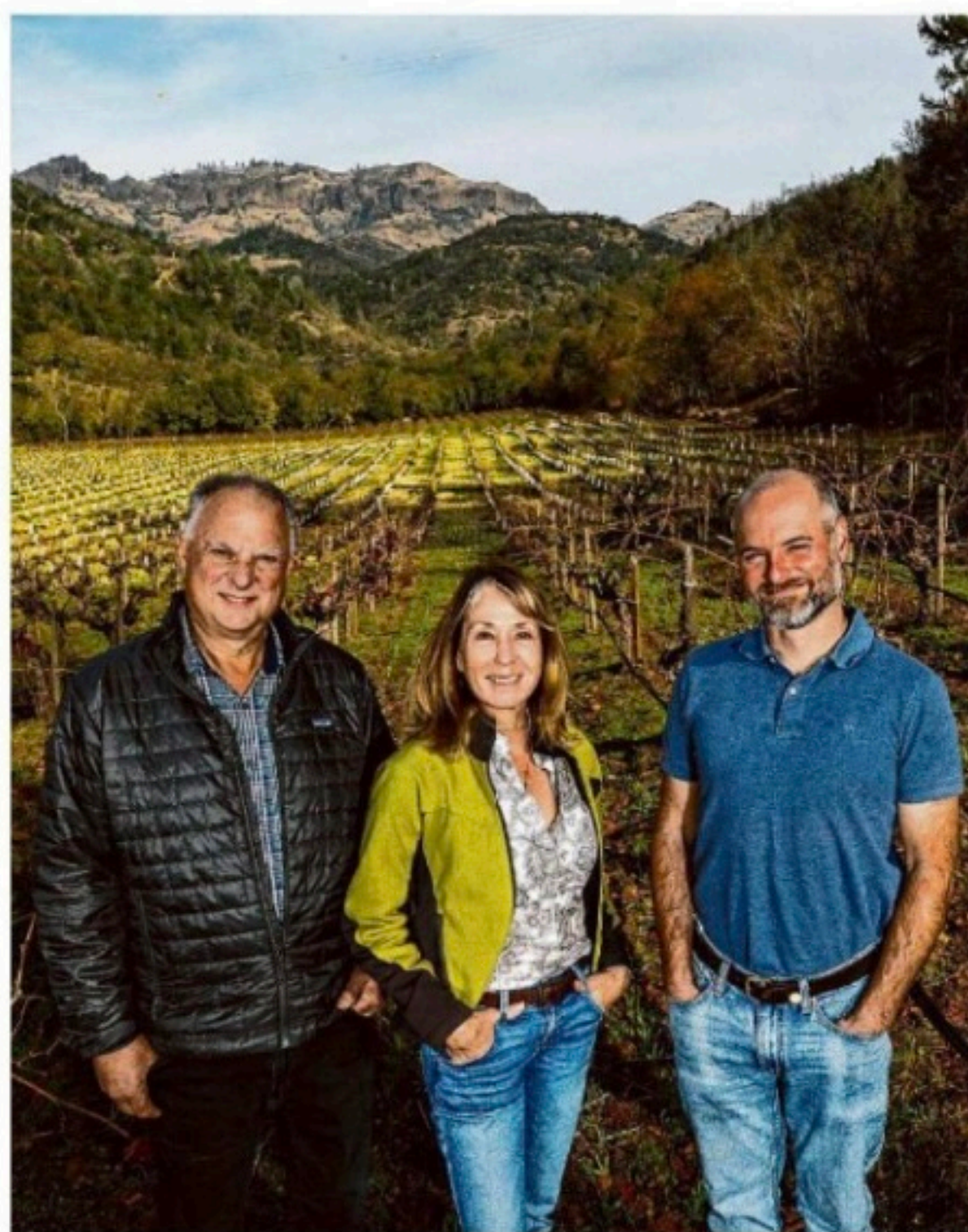
Photos by Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Juan Luis Vigil, ranch manager, feeds animals at Palisades Canyon's vineyards in Calistoga. Palisades has seen a surge in interest in its Chenin Blanc, a grape that accounts for less than 1% of the state's wine acreage.

ny, who makes Lang & Reed's Chenin Blancs, described it as the "Goldilocks grape."

It especially appeals to younger generations of wine drinkers, who are looking to discover lesser-known varieties at approachable price points; Chenin Blanc, often available for under \$40 a bottle, checks both boxes. Palisades Canyon's \$75 Chenin is competitive with others from Napa Valley, but Chenin sourced from other regions, like Clarksburg (Yolo County) and Lodi translates to a much more reasonable bottle price. Haarmeyer's gateway Chenin can be found at most stores for under \$20, while his single-vineyard productions typically range from \$30-\$36. At Healdsburg's Aperture Cellars, the Chenin is priced at \$35; at Napa Valley's Pine Ridge, the popular Chenin-Viognier blend — likely the largest production of Chenin in America at 180,000 cases — costs only \$16. Colleen Fitzgerald, who makes Pine Ridge's Chenin blend, said the winery doubled its production due to increased demand a few years ago.

Winemakers say they're



Palisades winemaker Graeme McDonald, right, with owners Steven Rasmussen and Felicia Woytak.

also gravitating toward Chenin for its unmatched versatility. Chenin, often characterized by orchard fruit flavors like apple, pear and quince, plus a signature waxy aroma, can be produced as a still or sparkling wine. Most modern productions are dry, but it

works as a sweet dessert wine, too. It can be rich, complex and age-worthy like Palisades Canyon's, or light, refreshing and made for a hot summer day like Pine Ridge's. Chenin pairs well with food, yet can stand on its own.

"You can really drive

style as a winemaker, and I've been having so much fun with it," said Jesse Katz, winemaker for Aperture Cellars. Katz's Chenin Blanc is on the pairing menus of several fine dining restaurants, including Healdsburg's three-Michelin-starred SingleThread and the two-starred Jean-Georges in New York City. It's also sold at football stadiums, ballparks and golf courses across the country.

When Lang & Reed started to produce Chenin in 2013, John Skupny compiled a list of California Chenins. In the early years, the list had less than a dozen bottlings and mostly consisted of what Skupny calls "old guard producers," like Napa Valley's Chappellet. Skupny stopped updating his list after 2019 when it had grown to roughly 70. "I couldn't keep up with it any longer," he said.

Despite these positive signs of growth, Chenin hasn't fully shed its stigma from the '80s. "It has an asterisk to it," said Reed Skupny, and still "doesn't fly off the shelves." Wine shops and grocery stores don't typically have a Chenin Blanc section, and the Chenins they do carry are

mostly cheaper bottles from France and South Africa.

"It was known to be kind of simple and a porch pounder," Skupny continued. "Nowadays, these are really complex wines and unless you're exposed to that or step off your safety couch, you're not going to know that necessarily."

Meanwhile, there's still a major roadblock to its long-term success: There simply isn't enough of it to go around. With more wineries jumping on the bandwagon, producers are fighting to snag a measly couple of tons each from the state's handful of Chenin growers. The grapes Lang & Reed purchases for its Napa Valley Chenin used to be sold for brandy production "because the grower couldn't sell it to anything else," said Reed Skupny. "Now he has a line of people wanting the Chenin."

The increasing threat of climate change could push more growers to plant it. Chenin "holds its acidity in hot weather better than Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc," said Palisades Canyon's Rasmussen. In 2022, 324 acres of Chenin were planted in California, significantly more acreage than in the six previous years combined, according to the California Grape Acreage Report.

But last year, only one acre was added. The California grape market is experiencing one of its worst down cycles in history, which could single-handedly put Chenin's rise on an indefinite hold once again. "We're seeing this huge contraction in the wine industry. Nobody is expanding, and I think a Chenin program would be one of the first things to be cut because the (return on investment) might not be as high. It doesn't sell itself," said Reed Skupny.

"We've had to fight tooth and nail for the chance to talk to a grower that might have some Chenin if someone drops out," he continued. "But for the first time ever (this year), we had people call us and ask if we'd be interested in a ton or two of it."

Reach Jess Lander:
jess.lander@sfgchronicle.com

LURIE



safety, and Ned Segal, a former chief financial officer of

Mandelman said.

He viewed Lurie's elec-