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OCTOBER 2023

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WINE

Sam Kaplan continues to be one of the most talented winemakers in the region. He might also be the kindest.



Genius Farmer

SAM KAPLAN CONTINUES TO BE ONE OF THE MOST TALENTED WINEMAKERS IN THE REGION. HE MIGHT ALSO BE THE KINDEST.

BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

When I met Sam Kaplan in late July, I shook his hand and called him Bob. I'm not sure why. I know his legendary status and follow him on social media (@thesamkaplan). I'm a fan. And yet, "Hey, Bob."

He reached out his hand to shake mine, smiled and said,

"Sam." Kindness and humility know no bounds with this guy. Nor does talent. Kaplan is the lauded winemaker behind Napa's Arkenstone (arkenstone.com) and Memento Mori (mmwine.com). He's also the winemaker and co-founder at Vida Valiente (vidavalientewinery.com) and MAXEM Wine (maxemwine.com), producing pinot noir and Chardonnay from the Sonoma coast.

Winemaking journeys typically have meandering paths,

and Kaplan's was no different. Still, he had a fruitful foundation. Growing up on a farm in Oklahoma, his father, a doctor, used to tinker with winemaking by ordering grapes from Napa. "I stomped grapes as a kid," laughs Kaplan. Years later, after college in Portland, Oregon, he visited a winery in the Willamette Valley. Olfactory nostalgia took hold when Kaplan walked through the cellar. The smell of fermentation and rich aromas transported him to his childhood. "It sent chills down my

spine," he says. "And that was it."

Kaplan figured he'd attend UC Davis to earn a master's degree and learn the trade. But his early winemaking mentor, the late Gary Andrus, founder of Napa's Pine Ridge Winery, encouraged him to move to Napa. "He said, 'What you need is experience.' I landed in Napa and learned everything in the business from the bottom up—from the fields to bottling to shipping," Kaplan told me. "I was riding a

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insider WINE

Sam Kaplan is the winemaker at Memento Mori, Vida Valiente, MAXEM and Arkenstone, where he's pictured.

...CONTINUED tractor every day and speaking Spanish. It was heaven." He eventually worked at ZD Wines, where he met his wife, Nancy, now a Michelin-starred chef.

Chatting with Kaplan is akin to wine college, minus the pretense. Here's a taste.

You're renowned for having an incredible wine and food palette.

Sensory actions, flavors and tastes have always been filed away in my brain, almost like a Rolodex. I remember different wines through their tastes, of course, but also even as shapes and feelings. It's pretty powerful.

I couldn't imagine bringing a bottle of wine to your house for a dinner party. I'd be intimidated and get a four-pack of Guinness instead.

[Laughs] And that would be perfect. I always tell people to drink what they like and not to feel nervous about wine. You can study wine worldwide your entire life and never understand everything. I love that. There are so many evolving varietals everywhere, and that's mind-blowing and fun.

So, drink the damn wine and have a good time?

Exactly. Follow your heart and palate. Drink local. Relax. There's never a right or wrong answer about what you like. After all, we're just drinking a glass of wine together. My favorite meals might be when I'm traveling in Spain with my family, eating grilled fish and drinking a bottle of wine that's 12 euros.

Do you have a typical day?

I don't. But I'm always in the vineyards, and that's where I start my days—whether in Oakville, the North Valley or out on the Sonoma Coast. And



From left: Arkenstone: Vida Valiente; Memento Mori.

I'm just meeting with so many people daily. It's what I love and makes this job perfect.

What's the secret to crafting great wine?

Have a great site, orient it well, and farm it properly throughout the season. And hope Mother Nature delivers. I am pretty hands-off and let the vineyard show. Then there's also the whole good energy thing; I think great wines emerge when there's good energy and great people.

What might surprise people about Napa winemaking?

Yesterday, I met with a wine collector, and he said, 'You know, I'm just blown away by how everyone in Napa roots for everyone else.' This guy is in the energy business, where everything is about cutthroat competition—if you figure something out, you don't tell a soul.

Not here. The community is tight and small. When you compare Napa Valley to Bordeaux, Napa is a little thumbprint on a map compared to the size of an area like Bordeaux. In Napa, many really cool, small, high-end brands and companies share and care about each other's success.

It sounds like you're bullish on the future of winemaking in Napa.

I am. I'm optimistic. A young generation of winemakers is passionately moving toward organics, taking care of the planet and using less water. Everyone

is on a mission to perform better on behalf of the planet. Climate change means we have to adapt. What else can farmers do, right? Throughout the country, we have to learn and adapt and do better.

And amid all of this, the wines we're all producing right now are just incredible—and it's a joy to be part of it daily.

Here comes my Simon Sinek question: What's your why?

In our short, little stay on Earth, we all rise together when we take care of people. Wine is my life, and my goal is to create something great. At the base of this is farming, which has connected me to so many wonderful people. I want to take care of people and the land.

Continuing with that theme, please tell me why the Vida Valiente Foundation has become so important to you, Hayes and Susana Drumwright.

This year, the Foundation (vidavalientefoundation.org) selected 40 disadvantaged students with mentoring and financial support. These kids are the first in their families to attend college, and they got accepted into schools like Stanford with hard work. It's inspiring. And if we can allow them to kick butt, meet great leaders, land internships and make connections, we've done our job. ■