

The New Napa

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Photography by Adam Goldberg and Daniela Velasco

At Napa Valley's newest winery, Ashes & Diamonds, you won't find the Tuscan stone treatments or clay roof tiles that adorn neighboring wineries. The concept is instead inspired—both in wine and design—by California's past, while offering an experience that's distinctly modern. Although the winery's vintages are a departure from the stereotypically-bold California wines, they are also a shift back to the Old World-style of winemaking, one without modern chemical intervention and additives.

And while Ashes & Diamonds may be the splashiest new winery in the valley, it's indicative of a significant trend in California's wine country, one that places greater importance on sustainable farming and light-handed winemaking. Here, it's about the experience as much as it is about the wine. And, it embraces transparency and inclusiveness, rather than the unapproachability and elitism for which much of the industry is known.

This change in winemaking and the approach to the winery experience is evident upon entering the estate where white, minimalistic buildings are configured in a campus-like setup with a communal plaza connecting all of the various vignettes for lounging. Inside, comfortable mid-century modern furniture populates the central area. A black marble bar with accompanying stools expands across the back. It looks more like the living room of Don Draper's bachelor pad than the archetypal Napa tasting room.

Resident chef Emma Sears, who previously worked at Sonoma-based Scribe Winery, offers a local, plant-forward menu, featuring dishes like asparagus with dry-cured olives and tarragon, and house-made tagliatelle with spring pesto, fried Meyer lemon and green garlic, which complement the single vineyard and varietal blends available for tasting.

Ashes & Diamonds also offers guided tours of the property in which visitors can learn about its organic farming methods and sustainability measures—like its use of recycled vineyard water to irrigate the

landscaping. It also takes you behind the scenes of the winemaking process. Akin to an open kitchen, the open winery concept shows off everything, from the custom-made equipment to the gleaming wine cellar.

Not only is it a reflection of a more sustainable approach to winemaking, it also tries to satisfy consumers' expectations, something Kashy Khaledi, founder of Ashes & Diamonds, takes seriously.

THE START OF SOMETHING NEW

Ashes & Diamonds is the amalgamation of Kashy Khaledi's Napa winery heritage (his father was the owner of Darioush Winery) and his background in the music business.

Khaledi brought on two terroir-focused Napa winemakers, Steve Matthiasson (five-time James Beard Award nominee) and Dan Petroski (*San Francisco Chronicle's* 2017 "Winemaker of the Year"), both celebrated among oenophiles. Inspired by the collaborative process in the music industry, Khaledi wanted his label to represent a collaboration between these two different winemakers. After Petroski's contract ended, Khaledi brought on Diana Snowden Seysses (of Snowden Vineyards), who is known for her site-specific vintages and "non-invasive," or low-intervention, winemaking.

Generally, Matthiasson leads the winemaking for the vineyards that he farms (both on his own land and the Ashes & Diamonds vineyard on the estate), while Seysses focuses on the single vineyard Cabernets that are sourced from different growers. "They do work fairly collaboratively, despite one person being named as the winemaker for each bottling," said Ashes & Diamonds sales and marketing director Lauren Feldman.

OLD-WORLD WINEMAKING FOR THE NEW WORLD

Both Seysses and Matthiasson are quick to shed the label "natural wine" because they say it has an "unregulated and



undefined” meaning. Instead, they prefer to use terms like “low-intervention” winemaking to describe their return to a classic wine-making process without chemicals and shortcuts.

Splitting her time between California and Burgundy, France, Seysses approaches winemaking with “Burgundian eyes.” To her, this means not using fertilizers or herbicides; instead, she naturally cultures the growing ecosystem.

“To have an expression of terroir making site-specific wines, you have to farm organically, if not biodynamically,” said Seysses. “It requires an intimate relationship between the winemaker and the grapevine.”

Even after harvest, she doesn't rely on chemicals when crafting the wine. “I use natural fermentation parameters, like temperature, pH, and oxygen, to encourage what I want to grow while leaving room for nature to do what it will.”

Matthiasson echoes her sentiments; he's been a leader in sustainable agriculture and low-intervention winemaking. “There are a lot of decisions you make in the vineyard, from microbes to cover cropping [a practice of planting crops—like grasses or legumes—to protect and improve the soil], that impact the wine,” he said. “A lot goes into not doing very much; don't confuse low-intervention winemaking with laissez-faire.”

While it's a winemaking practice that's starting to gain traction with the California wine industry, it's far from new. Littorai co-founder Ted Lemon, who spent 20 years consulting in Napa Valley, acknowledged that slowly the wine culture has begun to shift away from using additives, even though he and others (like Matthiasson and Seysses) have been making low-intervention wines for years.

“Rich, oaky, and bold styles made a lot of people a lot of money,” he said. “Now, there is a whole other level of interest in what wineries are doing. People are interested in: ‘Who owns this place?’ ‘What are their values in farming?’”

Laura Brennan Bissell is another winemaker who's also shedding the old, bold-and-overripe Napa style for more lighter-touch winemaking methods. She founded Inconnu Wines, which features affordable, low-intervention wines: The whites are salty and acidic, while the reds are bright and fruity. Last year, she was named a “2017 Winemaker to Watch” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “Making wine this way has taught me to be patient,” Bissell admitted. “I have to wait until it's ready, instead of forcing it to be.”

PURSUIING NEW BALANCE

Given the philosophy of Ashes & Diamond's winemakers, it's no surprise that its wines are a sharp departure from the stereotypically-Californian bold flavors and higher alcohol content.

“What's being rediscovered is the sense that California wine made with a lot of restraint can be a great wine,” said Matthiasson. “Napa Valley has been written off by people who are looking for more subtlety. It can whisper as well as shout.”

This quest for balance has resulted in wines that are moderate in alcohol, which Matthiasson purports are more “harmonious” and better complement food.

David Ramey, of Ramey Wine Cellars, also references this pursuit of balance in contrast to the 20 years of what he refers to as “bombastic” California wines, which have since become pervasive (often biased) stereotypes of California wines, especially Cabernet. California's long, warmer summers can ripen grapes quickly, giving rise to higher sugar content; after fermentation, this results in wine with higher alcohol levels. So, winemakers can control the alcohol content by monitoring ripeness (or sugar content) and adjusting harvest times accordingly. Generally, the riper the grape, the bolder the taste, which is sometimes characterized as “overripe” or “flamboyant.”

“Some people, including us, have returned to time-tested, Old World techniques,” Ramey said. “[But] the majority of winemakers are







Left: Roasted beets with black garlic tarragon vinaigrette and house-made ricotta.

uncomfortable letting nature make the wine. Nature was making wine for 6,000 years before we showed up,” he mused.

When asked about the appeal of wine made with this naturalistic approach, he used the analogy of Wonder Bread compared to artisan, hearth-baked bread. “Which would you rather eat?” he asked.

A RENEWED SPIRIT

Behind the Ashes & Diamonds estate, you can’t help but notice the char from the October 2017 fires, which burned through 200,000 acres across California wine country.

While the fires destroyed wineries and seared the landscape, the impact to the terroir here will be minimal—if at all. For the soil, it’s a natural process. Some of the wine may be affected by the smoke, but winemakers won’t know until after fermentation.

The worst tragedy of the wildfires were the thousands of homes destroyed. Carlisle Williams, who works at Ashes & Diamonds, and her husband barely escaped with their dogs and cat at 2 a.m. The last thing they saw was the fire barreling down the street toward their fleeing car.

After sneaking back to their house to survey the damage, she recounted, “Everything except a few cinder block walls was just ash. The fire must have been incredibly hot; our outdoor furniture was just rivers of liquefied silver metal running down our hillside.”

Napa has a history of fires and droughts, which makes you wonder why winemakers would submit themselves to such challenging conditions. But, their resilience and perseverance are part of the community terroir, a defining component of what California wine country has been and what it will be.

One of the world’s best-known winemakers, Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards, has seen many changes in Napa Valley during his more than 50 years in the industry. He said he’s happy to see

a growing group of young winemakers using minimal-intervention methods and relying on the character of the vineyard to meet the increasing demand for more complex California wines.

“Many of our customers are younger and have had more experience [in wine tasting],” he said. “I think they have begun to taste more wines from around the world in a more moderate style. They’re also looking at wines to enjoy with food that are refreshing rather than dominating what good chefs are trying to show you.”

The interest in this new type of California wine is a movement that’s making ripples outside of California wine country. As master sommelier Dustin Wilson (known from his leading role in the documentary, *SOMM*, and his position as wine director of Eleven Madison Park) observes, lighter wines reminiscent of California’s 1970s and 1980s vintages are becoming increasingly popular.

“Wines that have more structure and show more of their terroir are what have become cool and in-demand now,” said Wilson. “It’s refreshing to see actually; wines are so much more interesting now. I love the Ashes & Diamonds project—these types of producers are changing the way Napa is perceived and it’s great. The cult wines will always have a place, and they should. The best part about all of this is the diversity available to the consumer.”

When asked to speak to this California wine renaissance, perhaps Seysses sums it best when she says, “We live in a very humbling period where we’re turning back to the vineyards, to something more holistic. To make something special takes a lot of care. And it’s not something that can be explained through analysis; it’s something only your heart can tell you.”

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