

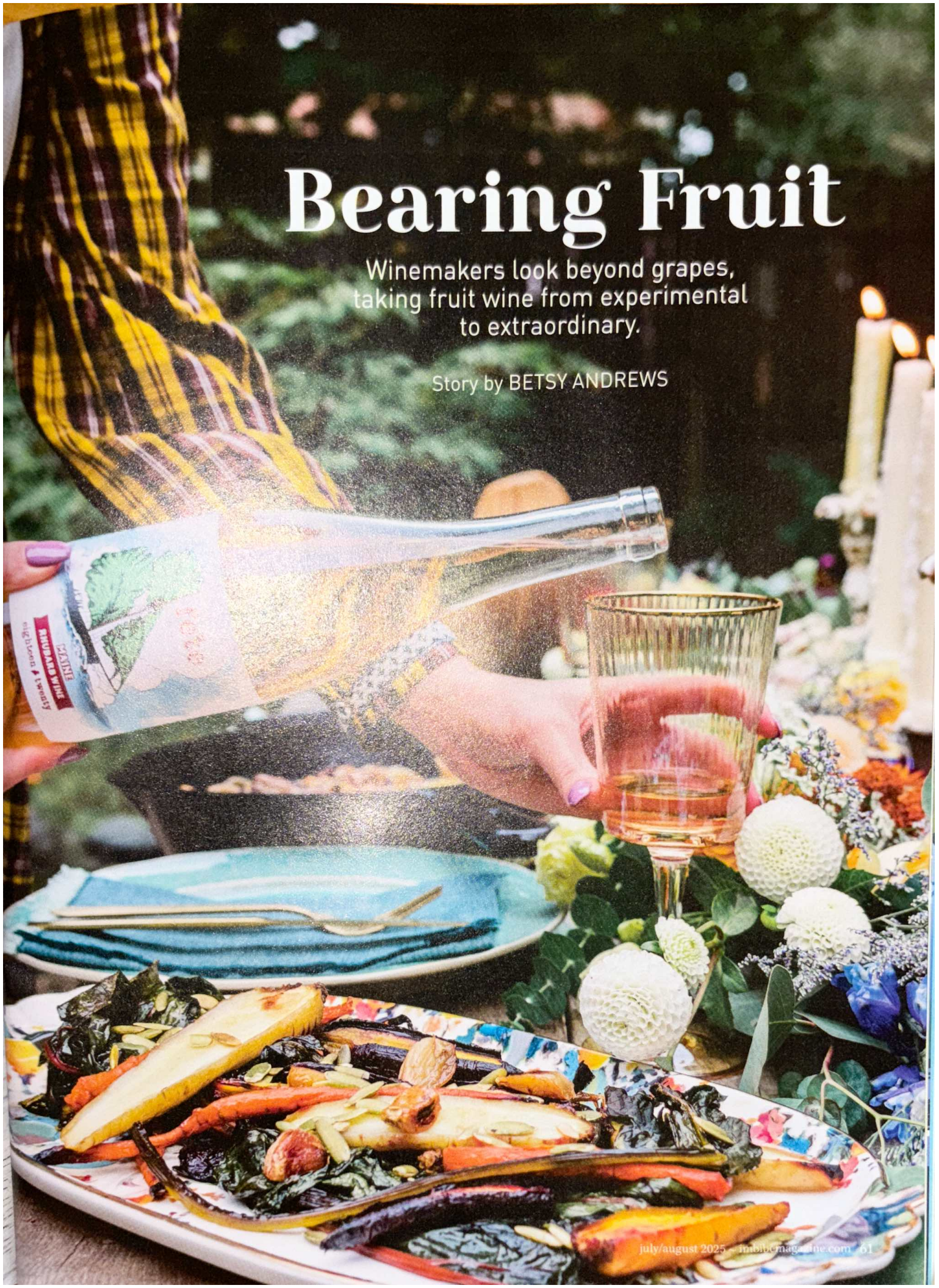


This page: No Fuzz No
Love, a nectarine wine from
Châteauneuf-du-Fargosonini in
California. Facing page: Fête,
a rhubarb wine from Eighteen
Twenty Wines in Maine.

Bearing Fruit

Winemakers look beyond grapes, taking fruit wine from experimental to extraordinary.

Story by BETSY ANDREWS



At a tiny, shared winery in California's Central Valley, Alejandro Fargosonini oversees a hodgepodge of barrels, tanks, bins, and carboys holding ferments of both well-known and less common grapes: Nebbiolo, Zinfandel, Charbono; varieties rarely seen outside of Europe, like Palomino and Sagrantino; the old-vine Grenache he and his girlfriend and winery co-founder, Andrea Spaziani, inherited when they leased their nine acres here. But on top of all this experimentation, the founder of Châteauneuf-du-Fargosonini is producing something even more unique: dry wines made, not from grapes, but from the fruit grown in neighboring orchards.

"We have done apricots, plums, pluots, plumcots, nectarines," he says. "A lot of people don't want to mess with picking persimmons, but if they don't, all these bugs come, and it's a nightmare of sloppy fruit on the ground. So we picked them and did two barrels of persimmons that are still fermenting."

A natural winemaker, Fargosonini comes from a scene in which co-fermentations of grapes with other fruits are increasingly popular, so it isn't a huge leap for him to remove the grapes altogether. In doing so, he is partaking in a small yet venerable tradition of vinifying wines from alternative fruits. Some producers come out of the back-to-the-land movement; many work in regions ill-suited to vinifera. But all make wines that are the opposite of the cloying styles we've come to expect from fruit-based ferments.

In part, Fargosonini's fruit winemaking is a sustainability strategy. It decreases food waste and helps manage pests on their suppliers' orchards. It can also help the winery weather climate change. Diversifying across fruits that ripen at different times, they'll always have wine ready to sell, even when disaster ravages the grape crop.

But Fargosonini also just believes in play. A philosophy doctoral candidate, he was driving an Uber in Los Angeles when Covid hit. He moved to Santa Cruz, where he started making wine in his yard. "But the grapes were \$4,000 a ton, so I looked around and found that they're \$400 a ton in the Central Valley." When he and Spaziani relocated here, they discovered the other fruits.

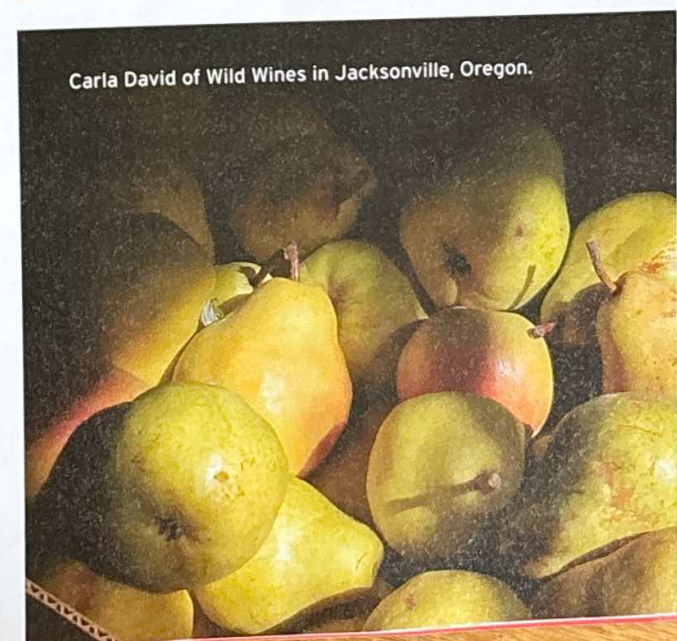
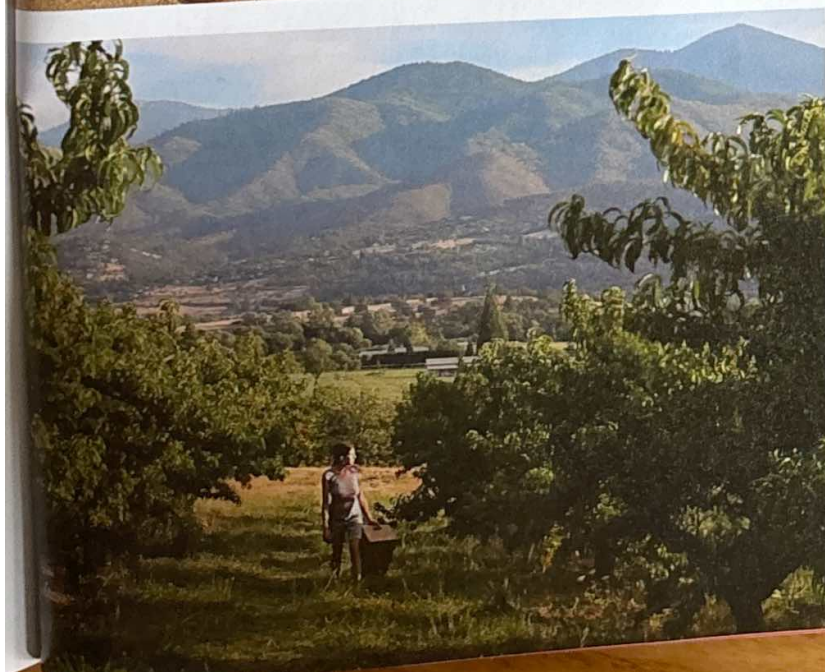
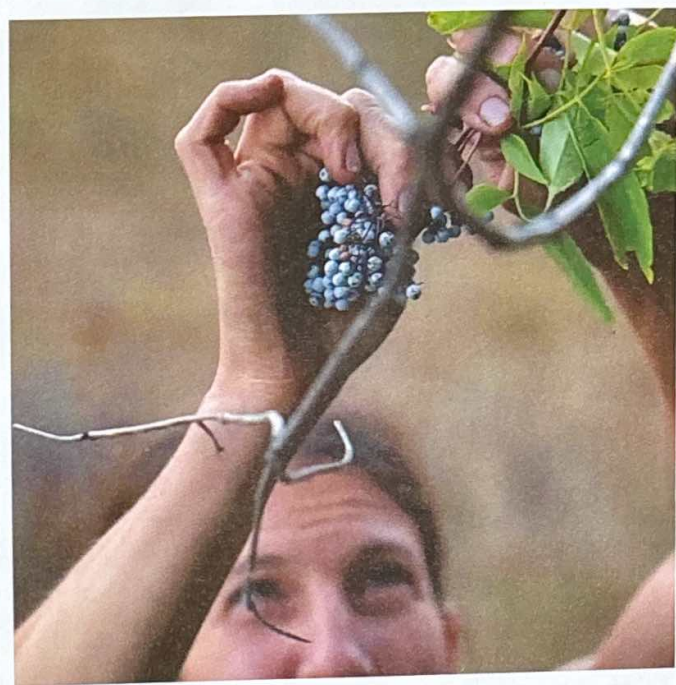
Made from organic Damson plums and packaged in cap-topped half bottles, their Plum Noumena offers a cake-spice nose, a bright mid-palate of plums and cherries, and plenty of tannic structure. In No Fuzz No Love, a nectarine wine,

zesty Sauvignon Blanc notes mingle with a cidery earthiness. They've tried strawberries, melons, wild mulberries, even tomatoes. "Nietzsche talks about Apollo versus Dionysus. Apollo is the God of math, architecture, and plans. Dionysus is the god of sex, wine, and madness. In the last hundred years, wine has gone too Apollonian," says Fargosonini. "What we do is madness versus being too engineered."

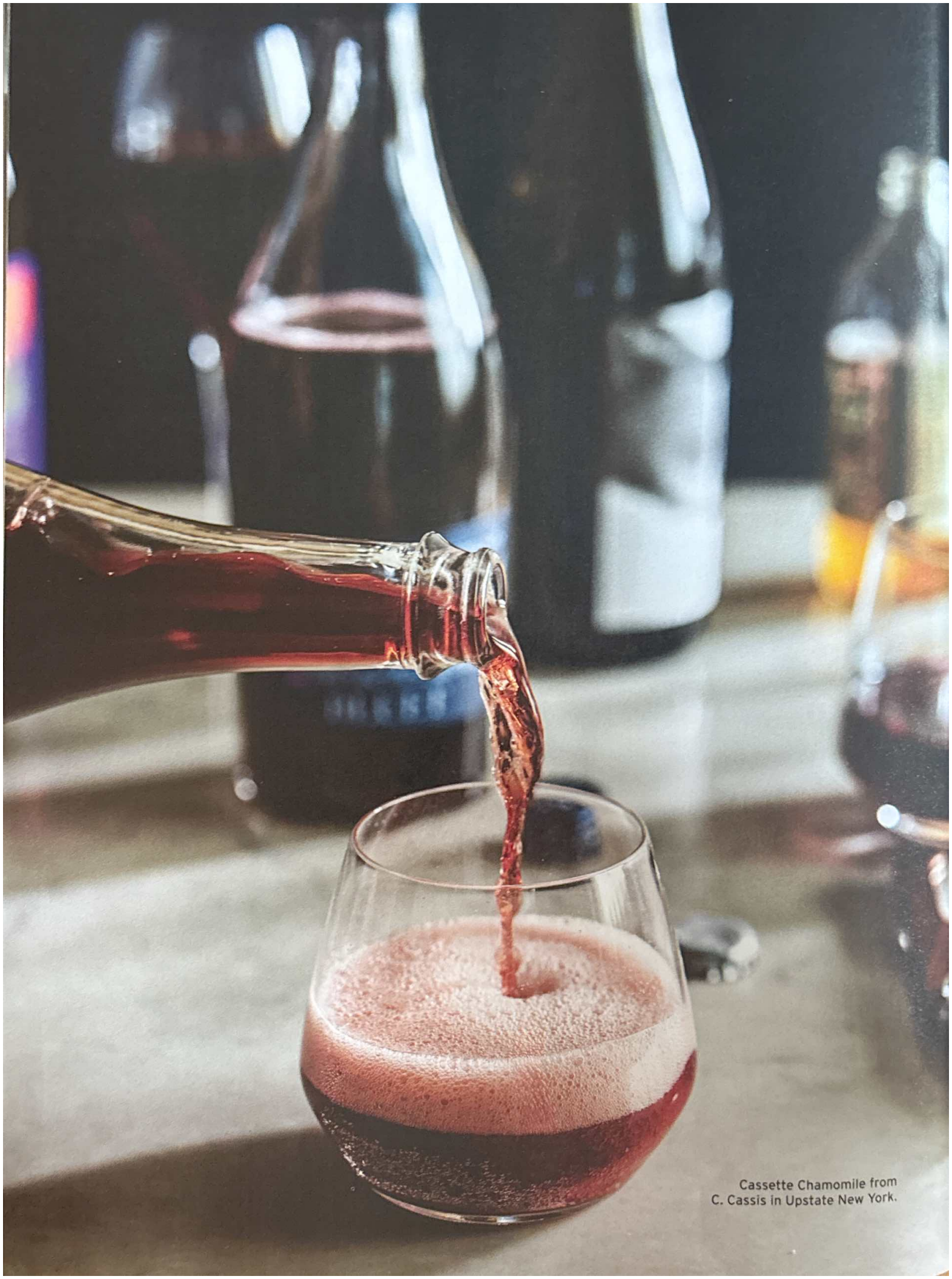
Carla David describes her early fruit winemaking not as madness, but as medicine. The vintner behind Wild Wines started out in the 1990s as a homesteader and herbalist in Southern Oregon, where many wild fruits and flowers have medicinal value. "Wines seemed more approachable and maybe would reach more people than tinctures," she says.

But finding little demand for medicinal wines, she dropped some of the more obscure varieties and expanded the fruit wine. Peaches from a local U-pick; marionberries, a blackberry hybrid; wild-foraged elderberries; the earthy state fruit, confusingly nicknamed Oregon grape berry—David vinifies them all. Harvesting fruit at peak ripeness, she freezes it until she's ready. "Freezing breaks down the cell walls, allowing more of the juice and color to be released once it starts fermentation," she says. Most fruit is not nearly as sugary as wine grapes, so some fruit winemakers, like David, chaptalize their juice, adding sugar to kickstart fermentation and yield body in the wines.

Her Aronia Berry Wine is quite light for a red; it looks more like a Spanish rosé. But with a bit of funk and the snappy acidity of an unripe raspberry, it is her tasting room's top seller—a quaffable bottle to appeal to natural wine lovers. "It's the most comparable to a grape wine in taste," she says. "The highly antioxidant skins give the wine some structure."



Carla David of Wild Wines in Jacksonville, Oregon.



Cassette Chamomile from
C. Cassis in Upstate New York.



Some fruit winemakers strive for styles that mimic Old World vinifera. "My benchmark is Europe," says Ken Hardcastle, vintner at New Hampshire's Hermit Woods Winery. "Some fruits are too high acid, some are too concentrated, some lackluster, so blending them as different components, I strive to make wines reminiscent of classics."

His swarthy, Rhône-style red, brazenly named Hermitage, contains any combination of blackberry, blueberry, elderberry, and blackcurrant, depending on the year. Like David, he often freezes fruits when they're ripe. "That gives me great extraction and flexibility to co-ferment," he says. The blend is fermented in open vats, where punchdowns maximize extraction, then it's pressed off into neutral French oak and topped up over time "if it needs a touch of blueberry or elderberry." That kind of winemaking sounds like old-school red wine production. Even the freezing is akin to a cold soak.

The result is a fruit-forward red with ageable structure. Though fruit wine cannot legally be labeled with a vintage, Hardcastle will write the vintage on the bottle when conducting a taste trial. Thinner and not as spicy as an actual Hermitage, his 2012 bottling nevertheless has the tapenade nose and intermingled black and red fruit flavors that characterize the northern Rhône.

Even more intriguing is his Lake House White, which is built in parts, co-fermenting donut peaches and rhubarb on their skins and aging them on the lees, then blending in rosehips he's carbonically macerated, separating the wine into neutral oak and stainless steel, and topping the barrels with quince wine. "I emulate some of the Southern French techniques for balance," says Hardcastle, who describes Lake House White as "Chardonnay-like." In fact, it's reminiscent of a Georgian amber wine, made from white grapes aged on their skins in amphorae. Similarly, it exhibits floral aromas, weighty texture, and tea-like tannins. "Lake House White" sounds like a porch pounder, but this is a serious food wine.

Other winemakers are proving that some of the components in Hardcastle's blends yield intriguing single-varietal wines. At C. Cassis in upstate New York, Rachael Petach started out making crème de cassis from locally sourced blackcurrants and added wine to close the loop on her production. "The fruit is wildly potent, so there's a lot of life left in it once it's pressed. We were giving it to cider-making friends and brewers, salt-curing it and using it for pantry condiments. Then we thought, what if we tried a piquette?" Made from rehydrated blackcurrant pomace co-fermented with marigold, chamomile, or lemongrass, her traditional-method sparkling wines, called Casette, are "unfussy, unserious but structured because of the tannins and acid in the fruit," she says.

In a lovely cranberry hue, the quaffable Cassette Lemongrass has a touch of earth and flowers with plenty of bittersweet lemon pith on the finish.

At Maine's Eighteen Twenty Wines, founder Amanda Denniston's choice for vinification is technically a vegetable, but it's commonly treated as a fruit. "Rhubarb wine was a thing here in the 1800s before freezers. It has great juice with a bright acidity, and it grows here like weeds," she says. "It's a cash crop for our farmers at the beginning of season when they're spending for summer and fall." And, as the base for wine, it's an antidote to what she sees as an unsustainable reliance on vinifera. "Why can't we make good wine from local things versus bringing in fruit or juice in 18-wheelers and calling it 'Maine wine?'" The only problem is getting people to try it. "It takes education, especially in a restaurant setting," says Denniston. "But it has a place at the table." Vinified bone dry, Fête, her summer release, is akin to a French rosé. Its big, fruity mid-palate is bookended by a light, Provençal hue and the bone-dry yet savory finish of a Bandol rosé.



If a seasoned Willamette Valley vintner like Kelley Fox can embrace blueberry wine, then Pinot Noir fans can, too. Fox's revelation came about six years ago with a blueberry ringer at a Pinot Noir blind tasting. "It passed for vinifera wine," she says. Neighboring farmers had blueberries they couldn't sell. "I thought, why not buy a bunch?"

Fox makes blueberry wine just as she does her single vineyard Pinot Noirs at Kelley Fox Wines: one punchdown a day, fermented dry, pressed, and racked into neutral oak for full malolactic fermentation and eight months of *élevage*. Still, the fruit doesn't act like grapes. The pulp can be so thick in the fermentation tank that "it sucks you in," says Fox, who had to buy portable boat ladders to get back out after punchdowns. But the juice is relatively low in brix; she has to add sugar to bring the alcohol up and achieve a Pinot-like texture. But Fox is a pro; her blueberry wine is a deep-purple stunner. Its heady blueberry nose resolves to an herbs-and-bramble character with Old World, mineral restraint. It would be great with steak, followed by chocolate.

The blueberries Fox vinifies are cultivated high-bush varieties, but the wine that first inspired her was made from wild Maine blueberries, the material of a nascent winemaking movement in that state. Bob Bartlett, a homesteader who moved here in 1975, is the grandfather of the trend. He wrote the state's farm winery bill, which allowed producers to sell direct to consumers. Maine was ready for it. In 1983, when he opened his tasting room, "there was a line out the door," he says. "We sold out in two weeks." Aged in new French and American barrels, his Bartlett Winery Oak Dry Blueberry is big and

brawny. Its cake-spice notes and pronounced fruit give off a mid-'90s Napa vibe, but with more acid. "Wild blueberry can hold up to the oak," he says.

Indeed, it is an impressive fruit. "It grows as a rhizome; there are dozens of miles of underground stem networks. The bushes are tended by farmers, but they were never planted by humans. Seeds were dropped 11,000 years ago by birds flying in from Scandinavia. That was just as the last Ice Age was receding. We sometimes joke: What is the oldest *Vitis vinifera* vine in the world? We have plants older than that," explains Joe Appel, a co-owner of Maine's R.A.S. Wines. "Wild blueberry transmits the terroir."

If the story of the fruit doesn't intrigue you, R.A.S. wines will. The intense tannin and color of wild blueberry skins and the bristling acidity of its flesh yield depth and punch. Made with organic, hand-raked fruit that is foot-stomped and macerated for four days, Arkadia is an undisgorged, traditional-method sparkling. With its dark purple hue, a savory flavor, and a lip-smacking acidity, it drinks like a serious Lambrusco. Aiming for a creamier body, R.A.S. is re-releasing their Source Decay sparkling this year, a single-site wine with a higher dose of sugar in the secondary fermentation before it is disgorged. The non-sparkling Still Blue spends a year in neutral oak to round out the texture, offset the high natural acidity, and soften the tannins. It has a heady blueberry bouquet, red-fruit and potpourri notes, and a bone-dry finish.

R.A.S. also makes a force-carbonated canned wine from hand-harvested berries tended by the Passamaquoddy—"Maine's First Peoples, and the first humans to encounter this fruit," says Appel. A fresh summer pounder called Wild with just 7 percent alcohol, it is akin to another brand, Bluet, that is direct-pressed, back-sweetened, and force-carbonated.

Bluet co-owner Michael Terrien crafts premium Cabernets, Pinots, and Chardonnays in California. But in Maine, for the sake of his farmers, he switched from his original méthode champenoise to cranking out easy sippers that he could sell in much bigger quantities. "When you press wild blueberry as fruit rather than extract it through maceration, you get this lovely, floral-fruit character but without the deeper complexity," he says. "We're not going for a robust red wine style, it's a light sparkler—delightful, satisfying, and refreshing, and it doesn't stain your teeth. We can make it for \$20 a bottle and get more people to drink it."

His mission is to grow Bluet large enough to support Maine's small-scale growers, who otherwise sell their fruit to commercial processors. "There are 400 farmers, and their fortunes have declined. The price has dropped 40 percent in the past 20 years. The cost of farming is higher than the price of the fruit," he says. Even pricing his

wine at \$20 a bottle, Terrien can pay the farmers a consistent rate that recently has been double that of the commercial processors. "We're helping out the rural economy," he says. "And we're happy to tell the story of the fields and the cultural and ecological history of the plant."

Terrien sees a future where producers can explore site and vintage expression through wild blueberries. "We need more people that are romantics convinced they want to do it with their lives and not make another Cabernet," he says. "There's so much complexity to it, this is a fruit that deserves to have its story told through fermentation, probably in way that, say, pineapple doesn't."



If Terrien were to taste Hula o Maui, he might rethink his opinion of pineapple. This champenoise-method sparkling wine made from Maui Gold pineapples, a variety with balanced sugar and acid, is textural and layered. It has a heady pineapple aroma and flavor but with a fine, creamy bubble and a briny, bracing, bitter acidity that makes you come back for more.

The wine must be carefully crafted. Each knuckle on a pineapple is an individual flower with its own pollinator, so there are multiple opportunities for microbial contagion. The wine needs more raking, filtration, and fining than grapes, and if the fruit gets over-pressed, the skin can yield off flavors or aromas. Secondary fermentation should be no more than eight months. "If you go past that window, it switches to brioche notes, and you lose the tropical identity of the pineapple," says Maui Wine Company vintner Henry Hegele.

He makes roughly 2,000 cases a year on Maui, where it's served by the glass or incorporated into cocktails at island restaurants and paired with dishes like goat cheese with a lilikoi syrup and black sea salt at the winery tasting room, where it "highlights the acidity and refreshing characteristics of the wine." Though the winery sells it directly, the wine has more limited distribution on the mainland "because we can't keep up with demand for it in Hawai'i alone." On this tropical island, in other words, pineapple wine makes sense. "The story of wine in Hawai'i is the willingness to dare to explore," says Hegele. It's a fitting motto for serious fruit winemakers everywhere. ■

Clockwise from top left: Wild, a bubbly Maine wild blueberry wine from R.A.S.; R.A.S. partners (from left) Emily Smith, Joe Appel, and Dan Roche; Still Blue, Bluish, and Arkadia from R.A.S.; Hermit Woods founders and owners (from left) Ken Hardcastle, Bob Manley, and Chuck Lawrence; Bluet, a blueberry wine from Maine; Bluet blueberries; Kelley Fox making wine in Oregon's Willamette Valley; pineapples destined for Hula o Maui (center).

