

Rising Stars of the Wine World - David Sparrow

Innovation can occur as technical change, or as change in branding or marketing. Among producers profiled in "Rising Stars of the Wine World," we see examples of each sort. As One Cru, Napa Valley, uses Carneros Pinot noir for red table wine. Pinot noir has long been grown in Carneros for sparkling wine production but much less to make table wine. Winemaker Chris Radomski ages his Pinot noir in second-year Cabernet sauvignon casks that impart some influence of the bolder wine to the Pinot noir.

Lloyd Cellars, Napa, pursues a project to make varietal wines of single vineyard provenance not labeled Lloyd Cellars. Among these is Prescription Cellars Clarksburg Chardonnay. Winery owner Rob Lloyd cooperates with the vineyard owner in Clarksburg AVA to assure his chardonnay vines are not too vigorous in the nutrient-rich soil lying atop the high water table there.

Oak Ridge Winery in Lodi AVA innovates by relying on its staff's knowledge of differences in soils and microclimates among the seven sub-AVAs of Lodi, as winemaker Laura Chadwell explains. Maggio Estates Chardonnay is made from grapes from Mokelumne River sub-AVA, selected for the vigor that its sandy loam soils introduce to the fruit, and grapes from Jahant sub-AVA for the detail in fruit flavor that its clay-loam soils foster in a relatively cool microclimate.

Daniel Daou, an owner of DAOU Vineyards in Paso Robles, discusses his eponymous Patrimony cru in terms of its phenolic generation and extraction. While careful nurturing of the Bordeaux-variety vines in the mountaintop Patrimony Vineyard is completely important, relatively brief maceration controls overextraction of phenolic compounds to create wine of extraordinary moment, subtlety, and durability.

Winemaker Isabel Mitrakis of Viña Concha y Toro, Maipo, has developed a wine that is innovative both technically and commercially. Mitrakis has conceived a Cabernet sauvignon, called UNRATED XTRA CAB, that strives to be unconventional in presentation though proficiently nurtured in the vineyard and cellar. Projecting that entry-level wine drinkers will respond to packaging that disrupts conventions of wine presentation, Mitrakis has crafted a wine using fruit from three regions. Maipo and Puente Alto fruit contribute elegance and finesse to the wine. Cauquenes, Maule, grapes contribute power. Requinoa, Cachapoal, grapes introduce black fruit flavors to the blend. Education Director Dino Altomare explains that Villa Banfi, Piemonte, intends to transform a wine little known in international commerce, Brachetto d'Acqui, into one that is widely popular. Crafted in a style drier and livelier than many examples of Brachetto d'Acqui, Rosso Regali has achieved significant popularity in key markets through Villa Banfi's aggressive approach in off- and, especially, on-premise marketing.

Among these producers I must give highest marks for innovation to DAOU Vineyards for its understanding of the role that phenolic development and extraction plays in outstanding wines, and to Viña Concha y Toro for its understanding of the importance of addressing new wine drinkers' appetites for excellent wine in iconoclastic packaging. Between these two producers, I give my final nod to DAOU Vineyards for the profundity of its wines.