



LARKMEAD WINERY OF NAPA VALLEY BALANCES BRAWN WITH COMPLEXITY

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Winemakers come in different shapes, sizes and sexes, but all share a passion for what they do—turning grapes into a wonderful beverage. In the case of Dan Petroski, winemaker at Napa Valley’s Larkmead Vineyards, he is of a tall, large size, bearded and looking like he’d be a good choice for a Judd Apatow comedy as a sidekick to Seth Rogan.

Petroski met me for dinner at New York’s Union Square Café, and despite just having come from a prodigious industry wine exhibition, he bounded into the dining room, immediately ordered a martini—I drank a daiquiri—followed by dinner for four of us with three bottles of Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignons. Then he was off to have a drink with a friend uptown—the true image of the passionate gourmand.

Petroski arrived at Larkmead, which is considered one of the most prestigious and priciest wineries, by a circuitous route. Born and bred in Brooklyn, he attended Columbia University, where he played football, got his MBA from NYU, then worked at Time, Inc. managing advertising clients, a job that required expense account meals at New York’s finest restaurants on a regular basis—this at a time when magazines were flush. He recalled one night dining with Time, Inc.’s publisher, who blew \$4,000 at the wine-centric restaurant Veritas. But the evening that changed his life, as well as his career plans, was at the French seafood restaurant Le Bernardin in 1999.

“We were drinking Sean Thackrey’s Pleiades,” he said, “and it completely blew me away. I begged to get on his mailing list, and I was hooked on fine wines, especially the romance surrounding them. For me, great wines always have romantic vignettes attached to them, not just technical stats and chemical analysis.”

The result of that evening was that four years later Petroski turned down an offer to work at the Wall Street Journal in favor of moving to Sicily for a year, where he interned at Valle dell’Acate Winery, returning to the U.S. to work for Andy Smith at DuMOL Winery in Sonoma Valley for the 2006 harvest. Smith thereupon offered him the job of cellar master at Larkmead, and by 2012 he’d been appointed winemaker. In 2017 the San Francisco Chronicle dubbed him Winemaker of the Year.

Petroski, now 46, is especially known for big, muscular Cabernet Sauvignons at Larkmead, which is owned by Cam Baker and his wife Kate Solari, who revived the vineyards as of 1995, a century after Larkmead was founded, and now encompassing 110 acres of vines in southern Calistoga.

Over a meal of pasta and pancetta and a massive ribeye, Petroski spoke of California’s “Golden Age of Wine” being 2000 to 2010. “It’s the time we really changed the way wine is bought, sold and enjoyed by Americans. The wineries opened some pretty impressive, beautiful tasting rooms where people could buy the wines or have it shipped home. You can stop by a chateau in Bordeaux, but you have to load the cartons of wines into your trunk. We also have our mailing lists for our faithful customers.”



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At Larkmead the tasting room is open daily, with tastings at \$75 to \$90, “depending on the experience.” Memberships range from a guarantee of 10 to 12 bottles per year at \$1,400-\$1,500; 20 to 24 bottles at \$2,800-\$3,000; and 30 to 36 bottles for \$4,200-\$4,500. Some wines, like The Lark, are allocated.

None of Larkmead’s wines are made in large supply. Only 3,029 cases were made of their 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$120), made from 94% Cab and 6% Petit Verdot, aged for 19 months. The 100% Cabernet Dr. Olmo 2013 (\$180) production was only 1,635 cases, aged for 17 months; and the 100% Cabernet Solare 2015 only 565 cases (\$240). (Consider that Petroski’s favorite Bordeaux, Château Haut-Brion, produces about 9,000 cases annually.)

These were all deliciously bold Cabs, unquestionably in the brawny Napa Valley style, but their complexity and spice kept giving up more flavors as they mingled with the ribeye’s, with tannins already softened up.

My tolerance for high alcohol stops at 14.5%, but though these were 14.7%, probably higher, by meal’s end they still showed finesse over mere power.

As I do whenever I speak to winemakers, I asked about the effects of global warming on the wine industry in California.

“It’s very real,” he said, “and we in Napa and Sonoma have problems with drought and now chronic wildfires. If I had to guess, I’d say that within the next 20 to 30 years the industry and the vineyards will have to shift 250 miles to the north, where it will be cool enough to grow wine grapes.” Which, I calculate, would put them just south of the Redwoods National Forest, where temperatures currently range from 40 to 80 degrees throughout the year.

Knowing Petroski, I imagine him pulling up stakes whenever he gets a great notion and go wherever he thinks he can make better wines. I’ll check back with him in twenty years.