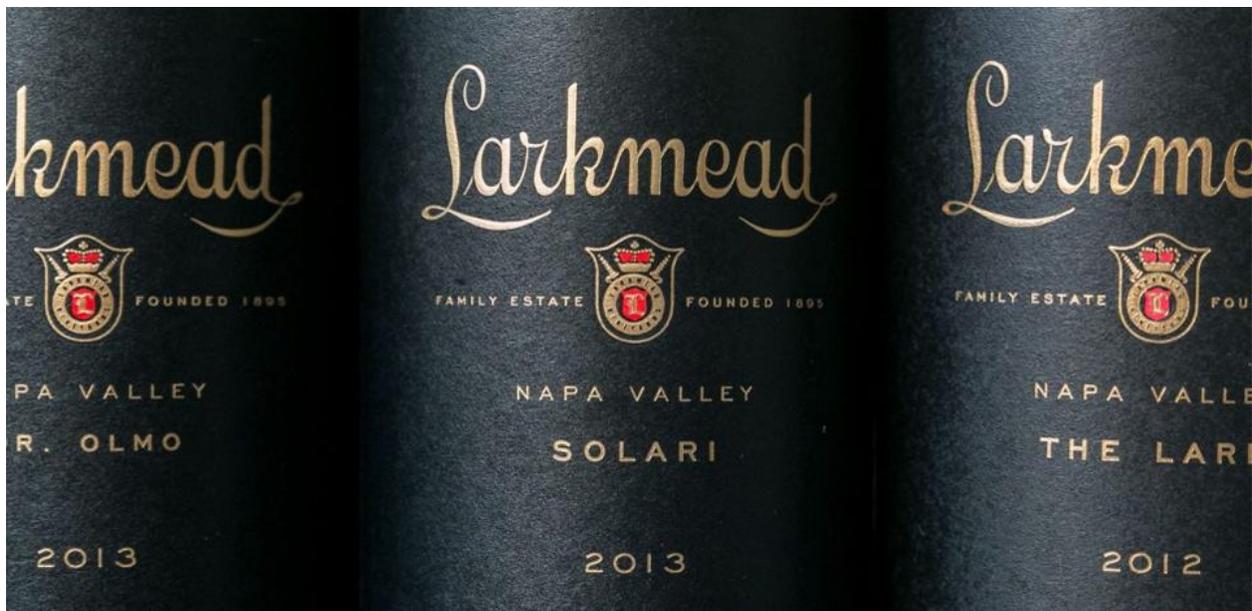


Forbes

How A New York Publisher Became A Successful Winemaker For Two Wildly Different Brands

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How did a Nebbiolo-lover from the New York publishing world become an icon of hipster wine while simultaneously producing some of Napa's most exciting Cabernet for a heritage brand in Calistoga? Because Dan Petroski is uniquely suited for both.

Petroski is the owner/winemaker for his label Massican and head winemaker at Cabernet Sauvignon house Larkmead, owned by Cam Baker and Kate Solari Baker. Meeting with him last winter proved a fascinating encounter. Over dinner in Calistoga, I could sense the dichotomy of his character, the toggling between his innate East Coast city sensibility and his newfound agrarian lifestyle as a California winemaker. He problem-solves like a corporate strategist with a science background who cares deeply about artistry. It's as though his left and right brains hum along in harmony, politely ceding the floor to the other when required.

A Brooklyn native, Petroski resigned from publishing in 2005

after working for Sports Illustrated and TIME in New York for nearly a decade. Having developed a penchant for Italian wine, he moved to Sicily for a complete life reset, eventually returning to the States to find work in Napa's wine industry. While landing a spot in a cellar, he founded his own brand, Massican. The name derives from Monte Massico, a coastal mountain in southern Italy's Campania, although the wine he produces actually pays tribute to the north, namely Friuli.

For Massican, Petroski makes moody, textural dry whites that have caught the attention of young, t-shirt clad sommeliers across the U.S. (Being on-trend in that niche in no way diminishes the wines' import.) For Larkmead, he produces savory, intellectual – and very expensive – Cabernet. Granted, “intellectual” is not typically an adjective used for the hedonistic style pervasive in Napa, but that's not the kind of wine Petroski makes. By picking earlier and separating lots by soil for the “Larkmead” line (Dr.

Olmo, Solari, and The Lark), the product is as much about the pleasure of a fine-tuned Cab as the exercise of understanding it. The amalgamation of art and science.

Here's what Petroski had to say about his unusual backstory, his vision for Larkmead, and the future of his Massican label.

From publishing to wine: how did that happen?

Wine was a vehicle to fulfill some of my wanderlust and desire for aspirational living. Wine was luxurious and sophisticated and in some restaurants and retail shops, wine was expensive! I was fortunate to have a number of friends who worked on Wall Street during the late '90s and early aughts and I drank a lot of iconic California wines on someone else's dime. As I read more about those wines, and their producers, I began to trace California's influences back to France and Italy. In my 20's, books and magazines provided me cheap transportation to Europe and her wine regions.



Dan Petroski in the Larkmead Cellar.
Jimmy Hayes

What was your first wine job?

I moved to Sicily on June 5, 2005 to be an intern. I did a stage with one of the families that owns the winery Valle dell'Acate. My time in Italy was mostly spent in the vineyard. The family I apprenticed with were solely involved as grape growers for Valle dell'Acate. By the way, it's funny how the wine world comes full circle. Larkmead is distributed in NY by Polaner Selections who also import Valle dell'Acate.

How did you end up in Napa?

Napa was not my intention when I returned to the U.S. in July 2006. I originally came back to the States thinking I would pursue a job in wine sales and marketing, but I realized immediately

that the wine industry that I was interested in -- fine wine, small production, high-end -- didn't practice corporate sales and marketing techniques. Wines were distributed or imported in traditional "door-to-door" sales ways.

So, without the "job" I was looking for, I reached out to some friends of friends living and working in Napa and Sonoma. Through those relationships, I landed an internship at DuMOL in the Russian River Valley. The owner/winemaker of DuMOL, Andy Smith, was also the consulting winemaker at Larkmead during that period. Andy hired me to work mostly at DuMOL during the 2006 vintage, and part-time at Larkmead. On Halloween in 2006, Andy asked me if I would be interested in managing the cellar and day to day winemaking at Larkmead. I was hired as Cellar Master on the 1st of January 2007, then promoted to assistant and then associate winemaker in 2008 and 2009 and then, finally, winemaker in 2012.

Larkmead has a fascinating legacy in Napa, starting with the founding family's smokin' and drinkin' daughter, Lillie. An excerpt from Larkmead's website:

Lillie was a force of nature whose wit, poise and charm in San Francisco society ensured a loyal following of admirers while at the same time she would challenge all the conventions of the day by drinking bourbon, smoking cigars, playing poker and driving a team of six horses. She was without doubt one of the most famous women in America at that time. For many, she represented the independent pioneer spirit of the early Californians. However, this personality was not proper of most young women of the time and in an effort to get her "to learn to quiet down," Lillie was sent to the family's country estate in Napa Valley.



Front porch at Larkmead's tasting room in Calistoga.
Lauren Mowery

What role does this history play in shaping and marketing the brand today?

Since Larkmead opened its tasting room doors, we have made an effort to connect with our past. As you can imagine, the myth of Lillie continues to grow, and it should as she was a fascinating character of a bygone era.



Tasting bar at Larkmead.
Lauren Mowery

We pay homage to her in many ways with the branding of our wine but the real marks on this estate are owed to the Salmina family who had the foresight in the early 1900s to purchase the existing Larkmead winery, expand the production facility and grow the vineyard holdings around the winery. They had the wherewithal to continue producing wine during Prohibition and became one of the prominent wineries post Prohibition distributed on the East Coast by legendary importer Frank Schoonmaker. The Salmina's were founding members of the Napa Valley Vintners in 1944 and built an incredible wine estate that stood shoulder to shoulder with Inglenook, Beringer, and BV.

Since becoming Larkmead's winemaker, you've taken a European tack by delineating and vinifying Cabernet Sauvignon fruit by soil type. Why?

After seven vintages of evaluating the vineyard as a wine, we proposed expanding the cellar in 2013 to begin isolating the soil profiles that make Larkmead unique. The original winery had 12 fermentation tanks and we did a fair amount of co-fermentations that masked the diversity of the land. With the winery expansion, we grew to 28 fermentation tanks, allowing each parcel we work with to have its own place in the winery, with no compromises.

Have you found the soil profiles influential enough to merit the separation? If so, in what ways?

Oh, certainly. First, I wouldn't bottle a wine if it wasn't "complete." This is paramount. We are not doing this as a marketing gimmick. But as you get to know your land a little more each year, you get to know its personality and begin to appreciate not only its quirks but also its beauty. And the prouder you are of your children, the more you want to exalt these individual personalities. This isn't anything new, there are soil diversity conversations all over Europe. In California, we tend to talk soil diversity with regards to larger swaths of land. In Napa and Sonoma County, wineries build their brands looking for unique "terroirs" and creating single appellation or vineyard designates. At Larkmead, it is unique and rare that we can have seven soil profiles in the span of a contiguous 110 acres of vineyard land. In my opinion, it would be disrespectful to the vineyard not to bottle individual designate wines.

Have you received feedback from the local winemaking community on your single-parcel wines?

Yes, the 2013 vintage is our first release of the new portfolio of bottled wines, but most of my peers have been able to taste the future wines before release and in barrel: 2014, '15 and '16. The feedback has been positive and re-affirming. I always ask the same question you asked me, do these wines merit their own stage? And the answer is resoundingly, yes.



Massican in a line-up of Napa's best Sauvignon Blancs.
Lauren Mowery

Stylistically, what's your goal for the "Larkmead" wines? What about the "Vineyard" wines?

My overarching goal is simple: to achieve a high level of quality and consistency over time. I want our stock to keep rising. When making six wines, that can be considered very challenging, but I don't look at it that way. I start at the macro level, at 36,000 feet, and ask: where is Larkmead in relation to its overall appellation

and climatic conditions? Second, as we move closer to the ground and boundaries are still divisible, can we still identify the diversity in the picture? And finally, when we land and dig into the soil, we start to understand what makes each vine tick.

Classifying the two Larkmead lines was born out of this vision, and the hope is that they get recognized as individual portfolios under the umbrella of a single entity. The “Vineyards” series are our young vines, blended of multiple varieties and multiple parcels. A series that looks at the sum of the parts. We believe we make very good Cabernet, with the Vineyard series we set to prove that we can do well with Cabernet Franc and Merlot as well.

As we turn towards the “Larkmead” series, we shine a spotlight on our estate’s diversity within Cabernet Sauvignon. These are vines with a little more experience (i.e. vine age), more depth, nuance, complexity, but also the power and structure to stand the test of time.

Stylistically, the goal is to have a thread needle through each of the wines, to leave the fingerprints of the vineyard’s 36,000’ aroma and flavor personality. But as we get closer to earth and zoom in, the goal is for the wines to have their own voice, and this is where the tone and the volume of the wines will differ.

What are your plans for Massican? Any updates?

With Massican coming upon its 10th vintage next year, I am still waiting to make a great wine! But seriously, Massican has been a major part of my wine education over the years; it got me off the Larkmead estate and able to see other appellations in Napa and Sonoma. And being a white wine brand, it allows me to see the vintage before Cabernet harvest begins. You know, Massican may never become a verb, like google, but I have some ideas about the brand that may make it a lifestyle. After all, it was the pursuit of the lifestyle that got me into wine.