



**LARKMEAD VINEYARDS HELPING SHAPE NAPA VALLEY'S FUTURE:
HISTORIC WINERY'S OPERATIONS ARE A ROLE MODEL FOR
RESPONSIBLE VITICULTURE**

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINDER | LYLE NORTON, JUNE 20, 2021



Larkmead Vineyards, thanks to winemaker Dan Petroski, is taking a leadership role in discussions shaping the future of Napa Valley as the region experiences warming temperatures caused by climate change.

Leading a recent tour of the winery in Calistoga, Petroski quotes scientists when he says drastic measures to combat global warming must be implemented within 10 years.

“Mother Nature is too fast for us; we can’t keep up,” he says, pointing out that heat rises sugar levels, changes harvests and presents challenges in farming.

Larkmead, founded in 1895, has been owned by the same family since Larry Solari purchased the property in 1948. When his daughter Kate and her husband Cam Baker decided to update the historic vineyard to create a generational family winery, Petroski warned them of risks in investing in an agricultural business in the Napa Valley and advised them to plan for a sustainable future.



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The Bakers listened to his recommendations, overseeing changes that have made their operation a role model for responsible viticulture. They undertook the arduous process of becoming a certified organic winery, with certification expected to be completed in 2022. Increased worms in the soils are one measure of Larkmead's success, according to Petroski. Following a trend in the Bordeaux region, and pursuing a holistic approach to viticulture, the Bakers authorized a three-acre exploratory vineyard on land that could be producing valuable cabernet sauvignon.

The Larkmead Exploratory Vineyard is planted in three seven-year explorations, with varieties such as tempranillo from Spain, touriga nacional from Portugal and aglianico from southern Italy, all regions with warmer temperatures than the Napa Valley. Other grapes in initial test plots include zinfandel, chenin blanc, charbono, petite sirah and Australian shiraz, which thrives in the Southern Hemisphere.

Another issue on Petroski's mind is the carbon footprint of the wine industry. Sustainable farming is the easy part, in his mind; finding ways for more efficient shipping and transport is the challenge.

One small effort comes from select oak barrels, imported from France. Shipping bundled staves and having them assembled here cuts down on shipments and creates local jobs.

Petroski, Larkmead's winemaker since 2012, is a board member of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers and chairs the Environmental and Climate Change committee. He works closely with Beth Milliken, owner of Spottswoode Winery and chair of the Environmental Stewardship committee of the Napa Valley Vintners.

With a goal to create generational wines befitting of a historical Napa Valley property, Larkmead produces only 6,000 cases per year, sourced from the best vineyard blocks, and sells off the other grapes.

A small patch of tocai friulano, a popular white grape from northern Italy, is the source of the Tocai Friulano 2020 (\$75), available to winery members only because just 130 cases were produced.

Petroski and assistant winemaker Avery Heelan led a tasting of current releases, including the 2020 Tocai Friulano. Barrel-fermented with 25% sauvignon blanc added, it's more viscous than most white wines, and has fresh peachy and floral notes throughout. A colorful David Hockney-inspired painting by Kate Baker, of her mother sitting by a pool on the property, is on the label.



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The Firebelle 2018 (\$100) is named in honor of the eccentric Lillie Hitchcock Coit (aka "Firebelle Lil"), who owned Larkmead for many years. Deep-colored and aged in 74% new French oak, it's a blend of 75% merlot and 25% cabernet sauvignon, and Larkmead's only non-dominant cabernet red.

The premium-blended Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 (\$125) and exquisite Solari Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 (\$200), both harvested before the area's big fires, are perfumed and flavorful but not overpowering.

The quality of the vintage 2020 fruit has Petroski convinced that Larkmead is doing the right thing and taking the right risks with every varietal. It's committed to making wines that are bright and energetic, but don't weigh on your palate. The term is subtle elegance.

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