



GLASS HALF FULL:

LARKMEAD VINEYARD ADAPTS TO HEAT, DROUGHT, SMOKE

ANNE WARD ERNST, WEEKLY CALISTOGAN, AUGUST 6, 2021



Class, classic and a touch of quirky all land on the timeline of Larkmead Vineyards. If you think you know the whole story there you may not; you may not have done enough research, tasted enough of their wine, or listened to enough tales.

Talk to Dan Petroski, who up until this week was the winemaker at Larkmead, and he'll tell you that the yarns of cigar-smoking, gambling and first woman volunteer firefighter, Lillie Hitchcock Coit, should be retired (more on Lillie later). The wave of the future for Larkmead — and any other winery that wants to stay in business, Petroski said — is finding grapes that will grow in the increasing heat Napa Valley is experiencing. Climate change is here, Petroski said, and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are not learning to adapt, so wineries and grape growers need to find the grapes that will grow best in this new climate that includes regular doses of drought, smoke from wildfires and the blazes themselves. At Larkmead they've used shade cloths and misters to beat the heat, and there are some vineyards that have experimented with spraying sunscreen on grapes, but Petroski said those things aren't going to work going



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forward.

Petroski, who has moved on to focus on his own project called Massican, has left to the new winemaker, Avery Heelan (promoted this week from associate winemaker) the experimental research section of Larkmead. The research vineyard, some three acres planted in 2020, includes varietals such as Charbono, Chenin Blanc, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Aglianico, Tempranillo, and Touriga Nacional, all thicker skinned and more tolerant of heat and less water.

Charbono in particular is already a familiar face in Calistoga, where there are believed to be more acres planted to the varietal than anywhere else in California — at last report it stood at about 45 acres of the statewide total of about 76. It's a friendly-drinking varietal that some like to pair with pizza and pasta, so popular there once was a Charbono society dedicated to the grape.

Larkmead's story — besides making great drink-now-or-age-it-wine — Petroski said, has been about being good stewards of the land and the environment. "Every single aspect" has a climatic story attached to it, he said.

They've chosen bottles with less weight, shortened the foils, and planted cork trees, and any number of other things such as added solar and planted pollinator gardens, to be environmentally friendly, for example.

The research vineyard is a 21-year project, three pieces in "seven-year chunks," he said, that will place Larkmead "way ahead of the curve" in terms of dealing with climate change. But in the meantime, Larkmead continues to make impressive wines on a property located about mid-way between the downtowns of Calistoga and St. Helena on Larkmead Lane, between Highway 29 and Silverado Trail.

During the pandemic shutdown, Erik Siebelist, tasting room manager, said Larkmead was blessed to have ample seating available for outdoor tastings. Now, being able to move indoors for tastings they can still spread guests apart for both safety and privacy in the Howard Backen-designed spaces. There are tasting salons that give the sense of being on a southern plantation, or a private home, and of course those areas that show you where you really are — Napa Valley — with vineyard and mountain views. And in some rooms one can enjoy the art of proprietor Kate Solari Baker and a collection of Prohibition glass.

The wines are released when they are ready to drink right away, but for those who have patience, a tastebud reward is in store. Siebelist is pouring the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon (75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot, and 10% Cabernet Franc) for tastings now. It's full of dark berry flavors and dried herbs, but it can lay down for several years. In comparison the 2009 vintage (80 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 12 percent Petit Verdot, and 8 percent Cabernet Franc) shows where a younger wine can go if allowed to age. The 2009 is rich and rounded with flavors of dark, ripe plums, clove and notes of Snickerdoodle cookies.



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Other wines to enjoy include Firebelle and Lillie, both named for Lillie Hitchcock Coit, the daughter of Larkmead founders Charles and Martha Hitchcock, and for whom the Coit Tower in San Francisco is named.

The Firebelle is a Merlot-based supported by other Bordeaux varietals, and the Lillie is a Sauvignon Blanc that masquerades as a Chardonnay, they say.

Learn about Larkmead's other wines, tastings and history at Larkmead.com.