



Wine Spectator

MODERN CRAFTSMAN:
DAN PETROSKI WORKS TO REVITALIZE NAPA'S LARKMEAD AND RE-
FINE HIS OWN MASSICAN LABEL

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Petroski tweaks his winemaking to the character of each vintage to make the most of the vibrant fruit he harvests. Recently, he's been experimenting with the oak regimen. (Aaron Wojack)

By Aaron Romano

Sitting in the Lark Room and Gallery at Larkmead Vineyards in Calistoga, Calif., winemaker Dan Petroski is surrounded by old bottles, artifacts and ephemera from the winery's 125 years of history. They're a glimpse into Napa's past, but Petroski is focused on Larkmead's future. Founded in the 1890s and having been owned over time by California luminaries such as Lillie Hitchcock Coit, Larkmead is one of Napa's oldest and most storied Cabernet estates. But a 50-year hiatus from use rendered the vineyard obsolete until current owners Kate Solari Baker and her husband, Cam Baker, revived the brand beginning in 1997. Petroski's contributions began as an intern in 2006, when he traded in power

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lunches for punchdowns after a decade in marketing and sales in publishing in New York. He took over as winemaker in 2012 and has been an integral part of the winery's reemergence.

With no formal winemaking background, Petroski learned with his boots on the ground, and formulated his own philosophies about winemaking along the way. He's kept a notebook, now holding 14 years' worth of data from growing seasons and harvests in Napa, but also relies on his instincts and observations in each new year. Iconoclastic, thoughtful and forward-thinking, he has no intention of emulating the wines made before his arrival.

"Anyone could have inherited the job at Larkmead and not changed anything and lived happily ever after. But not me," he says. His goal is to reposition Larkmead to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the seminal Cabernet estates in Napa Valley. Stylistically, he aims for tension and restraint in the wines, eschewing long hang times and flashy oak character.

"This vineyard can achieve berry ripeness and a flavor profile with energy, freshness and power at lower sugars," he says of his intent to capture what he believes is a more natural expression of the vineyard's character by harvesting earlier, at lower Brix, and thus achieving more structure in the wines.

The tall, good-humored 47-year-old recognizes he's not reinventing the wheel with his Cabernet, but also explains that restraining ripeness is a challenge at the 110-acre Larkmead vineyard, which lies in one of Napa's hottest and driest locales, near the southern tip of Calistoga. Warm, dehydrating afternoon winds stress the vines, and promote earlier ripening. The contiguous vineyards are planted in distinct plots with myriad soil profiles, including ancient riverbed gravel directly beneath the topsoil that provides a well-draining environment reminiscent of hillside sites. Results of recent Wine Spectator blind tastings point to Petroski's success, with all of the Larkmead Cabernets and the Merlot blend Firebelle earning outstanding scores.

Where Larkmead is an exploration in Napa terroir, Massican, the white wine brand Petroski founded in 2009, embraces his romance with Italy. The name is derived from Monte Massico, a mountain range in Caserta, a province within the Campania region where Petroski's great-grandparents were born. The project also takes inspiration from time Petroski spent working a vineyard in Sicily early on in his wine education.

Massican underscores Petroski's penchant for innovation. The signature wine, Annia—named for his mother—is an intriguing blend comprising predominantly northeast Italian grapes, including Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano, with a touch of Chardonnay. Not shy about his ambitions, Petroski wants Massican to be considered among the greatest white wines in America. Perhaps on its way, the 2017 landed a spot on Wine Spectator's Top 100 in 2018. Petroski grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., exploring the world through magazines. He says he often hurried to the newsstand every month to buy new issues. "Those were my pages to the world," he recalls. As one of four kids raised by a single mother, he didn't have opportunities to travel. Fittingly, after graduating from Columbia University in 1995 with a degree in history, he landed a job in magazines—at Sports Illustrated. He later moved on to Time magazine, where his introduction to wine came—drinking Opus One and Joseph Phelps Insignia during the late 1990s and early 2000s. "I drank more good wine in my twenties," jokes Petroski, trailing off before adding, "I wish I could turn back the clock with my new palate."

Petroski knew little about wine, but as he began to read wine books and magazines, the stories resonated with him. Phelps' Le Mistral, California's first varietally labeled Syrah, became his go-to bottle. Telling clients the story of a wine added an educational element to his lunch meetings, but he teases that it also helped with his expense budget. Le Mistral was available on most restaurant lists for around \$44, he recounts. But Petroski began to think: The stories are great, but how is wine made? The publishing industry was shrinking, and he began considering career options. He was attending business school at New York University when a friend offered to connect him with Valle dell'Acate, a small, family-run vineyard in southeast Sicily.

In 2005, at 33, Petroski gave up his position at Time and turned down a job at The Wall Street Journal for his first opportunity to step out of the pages and into a vineyard. He worked three days a week at Valle dell'Acate for a year and spent his free time exploring other parts of Italy and absorbing its culture. When it came time to return home, he wanted to work in wine, but didn't know what jobs fit his skill set. "I knew how to be corporate, but the wine industry didn't have that unless I worked for a publicly traded company that treated wine like packaged goods," he says. The summer before the 2006 harvest, he was offered a place to stay in Healdsburg, Calif., while he searched for cellar work. One of the first people he met was Andy Smith, winemaker for DuMol in Sonoma and Larkmead in Napa.

"Dan had no experience, but he was clearly intelligent and willing to work hard and learn," says Smith. Petroski was hired as an intern at DuMol, and after the last day of harvest there, Smith sent him to finish harvest at Larkmead. Smith later brought him on full time and Petroski quickly rose through the ranks. With the 2012 vintage, Smith, focused on DuMol, offered Petroski the winemaker position at Larkmead. The duo started fine-tuning the Larkmead wines before Smith left. It began with less heavily toasted new oak. By the time Petroski took over in 2012, the use of medium toasted barrels was standard, and new oak was reduced to 50% to 60%, depending on the vintage. Petroski says that today he's begun experimenting with light toasts and larger-format barrels. During Smith's tenure, Petroski said, alcohol levels often neared 15%. He says that with time, he's become confident in the phenolic maturity of the grapes at lower Brix. "Andy gave me the tools, I just started to get more self-assured with them and started to challenge norms," Petroski says, noting that he did not diverge from Smith's playbook during 2012 and 2013, but that the next two harvests tested him.

The 2014 vintage was hot, with small diurnal shifts, and the vines were progressing rapidly. "I started panicking; the vines were overworked and were going to collapse. I wasn't going to wait, we needed to start picking," he recalls. That year, harvest started seven to 10 days earlier than normal. In 2015, it happened again. "And I said, 'I'm not going to let this vintage beat what I'm trying to achieve,'" Petroski declares, noting that after tasting the 2014s in barrel, they showed vibrancy and freshness. The heat could destroy his ability to replicate that with 2015. He made the bold decision to begin picking even earlier. Each year, Petroski moves the needle a little to find the wine's true essence. Has he taken it beyond where he ever envisioned? "Maybe I'm wrong," he confesses, adding, "Maybe Larkmead isn't a low potential alcohol site; maybe it needs to be reflective of its hot, dry and windy climate for big, pure and rich wines." Nevertheless, alcohol levels for Solari, Larkmead's flagship red, have declined from 14.9% in 2013 to 14.2% in 2017. "Some [winemakers] joke that water and acid additions are just putting back what Mother Nature takes away," he says, adding that he makes no water additions to target alcohol, or acid additions to target higher pH. "But no offense, you can't put those things back. We all want to make that great wine from that great estate, but we have to find our own way of doing it."

Taking things a step further, Petroski implemented lighter extractions to tame the bulky tannins. The Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Solari 2017 is still gutsy, with enough tannins to last the next 10 to 15 years, while offering a mix of steeped black currant, fig and boysenberry notes infused with dark tea and licorice root flavors on a rich and polished frame, finishing distinctive and long. Smith points to the role of vineyard health in the direction Petroski has taken. As the Bakers revived Larkmead, they began a near complete overhaul of the vineyards, focusing on rootstocks and clones tailored to soil compositions. "It took 15 years to get to this point with replanting, rootstock selection, row direction changes, shade cloth usage and viticulture consulting," says Smith, adding, "Dan and Larkmead get to benefit from this precise work now and into the future." Vine maturity too has guided the approach Petroski has taken in recent years, highlighting specific plots through individual bottlings such as Dr. Olmo, Solari and The Lark. Annual production is around 8,000 cases, but there's room to grow, as large portions of the grape harvest is still sold to other wineries. The Baker family has given Petroski full autonomy, though he recognizes that if his approach becomes too esoteric he could lose their trust. But he feels like he's fielded enough vintages that he can identify any missteps and quickly correct them for the purpose of making better wines. "Our goal is to have Larkmead recognized as a world-class wine estate," says Cam Baker. "We all agree that Dan has made spectacular wines and great strides towards that

goal. And the best is yet to come.”

One of the more fascinating things about Petroski is his aptitude for code-switching, in part because he was a consumer before he was a winemaker. “There are not a lot of industries that have as much diversity as there is in wine,” he observes. He notes that we’re in a golden age of understanding and appreciating the food we eat and where it comes from, but that consumers’ insight into who and what’s behind the wines they drink is often less evolved. He remedies that by humanizing his wines. He says he spends hours e-mailing and even text-messaging with customers: “They will enjoy my wines better if they can say they know me.”

In 2009, Petroski began drafting a business plan for his own label. It was imperative that his wine be easily enjoyed, and that it tell a story. He looked to Italy for inspiration. “I wanted to make a blended Italian white that reminded me of the saline, fresh, floral wines I drank in Sicily, the wind blowing in my face as I stared at the Mediterranean Sea and that told a story about my ties to my mother’s Italian family,” he says. The vibrant blue hue of the Massican label evokes the Mediterranean; Italian script is translated into English on the back label. What’s inside the bottle also channels the Mediterranean, aiming for a refreshing expression. In addition to Annia, Massican offers a fragrant and focused Sauvignon Blanc from Napa and a vibrantly fruity and well-spiced Chardonnay from Hyde Vineyard in Carneros. Also in the lineup is sleek and refreshing Pinot Bianco and Greco blend under the California AVA, dubbed Gemina after the ancient Roman grape Aminea Gemina. Making Ribolla Gialla in prime Cabernet territory is hardly a moneymaking endeavor. But it has become a love affair. Massican’s first harvest started with 1 ton of fruit from a vineyard planted by the late George Vare, cofounder of Luna Vineyards. Vare is remembered as a champion of Ribolla, having smuggled cuttings into the U.S. in 2000 and grafting over 2.5 acres in his vineyard in southwest Napa.

Ribolla wasn’t necessarily what Petroski was looking for when he started Massican, but it became essential to the brand’s ethos. “Massican lives in two places: my memories in Italy, but born in Napa,” he says. Now, after 11 years, he believes Massican is the cultural zeitgeist he envisioned. “Massican is about taking what I want from my past and putting it in a bottle,” he says, adding that if he can keep polishing the wines and grow the production, he believes Massican will gain market traction.

But growth hinges upon convincing vintners to graft over or plant a few rows for him. He teamed with Chris Bowland, a grower in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley, to graft his once Zinfandel vineyard over to all white varieties, including Ribolla, Tocai and Greco. Petroski hopes that with time, the whole vineyard will become an estate site for Massican. “I’m committed to this and will absorb all of it under my physical and financial capabilities,” Petroski states about his 3,000-case brand, noting that Annia now accounts for 33% of all Tocai and Ribolla planted in California. There is still fine-tuning to be done for both Massican and Larkmead. A former high school and college football player, Petroski muses that Larkmead is at the 10-yard line, and that those last 10 yards are the hardest. He cites barrel refinement and experiments with native yeasts as some of the subtle tweaks he’s still trialing. “Creating uniformity of process and philosophy but still with vineyard diversity is the goal of every winemaker,” he says. That makes for quite an offensive drive.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	CASES
2016 DR. OLMO	94	\$180	1,467
2016 THE LARK	94	\$360	283
2017 SOLARI	93	\$240	1,169
2017 CABERNET	92	\$125	1,589
2017 LMV SALON	92	\$180	470
2017 FIREBELLE	90	\$125	583
2018 LILLIE	89	\$75	326