

## A big state on a small scale: California's family-owned discoveries

Though the California wine industry is big it still embraces small, family-owned wineries crafting boutique bottles. Here's a roundup of my latest discoveries. Ranging from affordable to luxurious and spanning the state from north to south, these vintners have a story to tell with every glass.

### **Fortress Vineyards:**

Clear Lake is a high-altitude growing region bordering northern Napa and Mendocino counties.

Moderated by the huge freshwater lake, it's one of California's coolest spots for grapes, which produces wines of clarity and complexity. Fortress is owned by the Snider family and consulting winemaker Nils Venge (a Napa icon) is crafting sought-after Petite Sirah and Sauvignon Blanc.

**Star Sip: 2009 Fortress Sauvignon Blanc, Red Hills Lake County \$15.** Made from the musque clone, this distinctive white is aromatic and fresh. [www.fortressvineyards.com](http://www.fortressvineyards.com)

### **Marita's Vineyard:**

It's the American dream. After coming to California as a teenager from Mexico, Maro Montes worked his way up from laborer to vineyard manager to Vice President of Operations for the famous Joseph Phelps Vineyards. With a passion for growing grapes it was only natural to start his own label; in 2003 he did just that. Their signature Cabernet from the family's 3-acre vineyard is a collector's dream. Looking for a unique Napa experience? Make an appointment and get a home-cooked lunch from the Montes clan.

**Star Sip: 2005 SOMA Cabernet Sauvignon, Coombsville, Napa \$86.** Named for Maro's daughters, this supple, smooth red is a true beauty. [www.maritasvineyard.com](http://www.maritasvineyard.com)

### **Bolen Family Estates:**

Celebrate Merlot Mondays with the Bolens. After a career spent running construction companies, Mike Bolen felt it was time to build something new. He and son Eric are proprietors of Napa Valley-based Bolen Family Estates whose focus is only Merlot. They've hired Merlot master Tom Rinaldi (Duckhorn's founding winemaker) and managed to garner high praise in a valley devoted to Cabernet.

**Star Sip: 2007 Bolen Legacy Merlot, Oak Knoll District Napa Valley \$60.** Pure Merlot, pure pleasure from the world-class Beckstoffer Orchard Vineyard. [www.bolenlegacy.com](http://www.bolenlegacy.com)

### **C. Donatiello Winery:**

For those wanting to visit California soon, put C. Donatiello on your itinerary. An in-the-know spot in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, the estate has wine-inspired aroma gardens, an intimate concert series and most importantly, killer wine. Owner Chris Donatiello, a young vintner with a rich background in the business, along with winemaker Webster Marquez, craft elegant Chardonnay and terroir-driven Pinot Noir.

**Star Sip: 2008 C. Donatiello Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley \$38.** Silky, sexy and complex, a Pinot to embrace full on. [www.cdonatiello.com](http://www.cdonatiello.com)

## Arista Winery:

This destination winery with Japanese -inspired landscaping, beautiful hillside panoramas and scenic picnic areas, is another Russian River Valley treasure. The real treasure, though, is what's in the bottle. Focused on Pinot Noir including their signature "Longbow" Pinot, the winery started in 2002 by the McWilliams family also produces swoon-worthy aromatic whites. In addition to Arista, owner Mark McWilliams has a miniscule-production brand that makes some of the best Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc I've ever sampled. Named Mark David, it's a discovery not to be missed.

**Star Sip: 2009 Arista Gewurztraminer "Ferrington Vineyard" Anderson Valley \$24.** Spicy, sultry, and still crisp, a top example of New World Gewurz. [www.aristawinery.com](http://www.aristawinery.com)  
**Star Sip: 2009 Mark David Sauvignon Blanc "Skellenger Vineyard" Oakville, Napa Valley \$30.** If I gave points to wine, this Sauvignon would be a perfect 100. [www.markdavidwinery.com](http://www.markdavidwinery.com)

## Jorian Hill Vineyards:

Focused on Rhone varieties such as Viognier and Syrah, this family-owned winery is one to watch. Gary and Jeanne Newman (he president of 20th Century Fox television and she an entertainment attorney) named the brand for their three kids. When the duo were looking for a retreat north of Los Angeles in bucolic Santa Barbara County, the property they found already had vineyards so instead of just a home they found a new passion – wine.

**Star Sip: 2007 Jorian Hill "BEEspoke" Santa Ynez Valley \$38.** A Rhone blend of equal parts Grenache and Syrah, this intensely juicy, peppery red has celebrity status. [www.jorianhill.com](http://www.jorianhill.com)

## Longoria Wines:

Well-respected winemaker Rick Longoria began his eponymous winery in 1982 focusing on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from the Santa Maria Valley. He is known for Pinot, but today his entire portfolio is world class. My favorites are Rick's esoteric Spanish varietals. Making California Albarino and Tempranillo has brought him well-deserved attention and acclaim.

**Star Sip: 2007 Longoria Tempranillo "Clover Creek Vineyard" Santa Ynez Valley \$36.** The best version of the variety I've ever sipped outside of Spain. A stunning red with layers of flavor and loads of character. [www.longoriawine.com](http://www.longoriawine.com)

## Bien Nacido Vineyards:

If we had grand cru vineyards in this country, Bien Nacido would rank at the top. Located in the Santa Maria Valley of California's southern/central coast, the historic vineyard been the source of cult wines from the likes of Au Bon Climat and Sine Qua Non. In 1969, the Miller family purchased the property and only now is launching their own wine from the famous plot of land.

**Star Sip: 2007 Bien Nacido Vineyards Syrah \$52.** Deeply-hued, licorice-scented red that captures the power-packed intensity of Syrah. [www.biennacidovineyards.com](http://www.biennacidovineyards.com)



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