

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Don't Sleep on Saint Helena Winery's Napa Cabernets

This tiny winery's Cabernets are still flying under the radar, for now



Saint Helena Winery's Napa Cabernet vineyards are a haven for beneficial wildlife. (Courtesy of Saint Helena Winery)



By James Molesworth

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Napa's modern-day wine scene is being driven by a steadily emerging shift, thanks to a new generation of winemakers. This generation—including the likes of **Meghan Zobeck**, **Natalie Winkler**, **Maya Dalla Valle**, **Graeme MacDonald** and **Jason Exposto**, among others—typically wears two hats, first as winemaker but also as vineyard manager. They're embracing holistic farming practices and employing lighter-handed approaches with their vinifications. They feel that wine should express a sense of place, and to get there, you need a healthy, old vineyard.

You can count Lindsey Wallingford in that camp too. And don't feel bad if you haven't heard the name before. She handles the vineyards and winemaking at Napa's boutique **Saint Helena Winery**, with its tiny 1,200-case annual production winery tucked in at the end of Pratt Avenue in St. Helena. And you won't find any winery signage at the end of the driveway.

"We kind of like it that way," Wallingford says. "We're small, we stay out of the spotlight and we just focus on making really good wine."

The 37-year-old winemaker has been with Saint Helena since 2018, following stints at cult Cabernet icons Bryant Estate and Screaming Eagle, among others. Her background was in vineyards, but as she got deeper into her grapegrowing career, she felt winemaking's pull.

Saint Helena Winery is owned by Federated Insurance, based in Minnesota. The company bought the 17-acre property in 2010 (it was founded in 2000 by Peter Story). The 13.1 acres of vines are planted primarily to Cabernet Sauvignon, along with tiny plots of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Petite Sirah.

One of Wallingford's first initiatives here was converting the vineyard to **organic farming**. "I was working in Washington earlier in my career. The winery I was working for sprayed a vineyard with pesticide and after, when I was walking through it, I saw dead birds, dead rabbits," Wallingford laments. "At that moment I said to myself I would never work that way."

The Saint Helena property is nestled up in a corner where York Creek meets the Napa River. It's an area known to harbor **glassy-winged sharpshooters**, an insect that spreads the vine-killing **Pierce's disease**.

Wallingford's solution in lieu of pesticide? "Bird boxes," she says. "And the birds are doing a great job eating the sharpshooters, because we have no Pierce's disease in the vineyard."

The vineyard includes plantings that date to 1997, getting old by Napa standards. And the property's original on-site vineyard team is still in place. There was trepidation among them when Wallingford started to change the farming approach here, but she says their concerns were allayed when the three-man team saw the vineyard responding positively along with the increase in bird activity.

The farming shifts included **abandoning tilling** in favor of a permanent cover crop to improve water retention and lower soil temperatures. An old block of **See clone Cabernet** sourced from Joseph Phelps' Backus vineyard has struggled with virus over the years, but by employing her TLC, including extra **canopy management** and the organic approach, Wallingford says she's seen the quality of the fruit coming off it improve, to the point where it's become the primary source of the winery's top Grand Reserve bottling.

Wallingford doesn't adhere to a set dogma though, admitting that not everything works, nor is organic guaranteed to result in quality. She points to the 2022 vintage as a case in point, when a heat dome over Labor Day wilted vineyards as they were just nearing harvest.

"At 96° F, a vine shuts down and goes into survival mode, and it was 103° in the vineyard on Labor Day," she says of 2022. "It takes a week for a vine to wake back up after that, and the heat went on for another full week. 2022 was a really tough one. If you managed to make a good wine in that vintage, pat yourself on the back."



Saint Helena Winery's Lindsey Wallingford is as invested in the vines as the wines. (Courtesy of Saint Helena)

Saint Helena Winery Napa Cabernets: Tasting Recent Vintages

The **Saint Helena Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2022** (88 points, \$115) is a more-than-competent wine, with friendly, up-front plum and blackberry compote flavors coated with a warm cocoa note that holds sway through the finish. Wallingford can pat herself on the back.

It's the 2021, however, that caught my eye in my blind tastings. The **Saint Helena Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2021** (92, \$115) is a very solid Cabernet, with a subtle alder frame around a core of gently steeped black currant and blackberry fruit flavors. The finish is underscored by cocoa, licorice root and a subtle tug of warm earth. And at \$115, it's a borderline bargain for outstanding Napa Cabernet.

Tasting through the recently bottled, not-yet-released 2023s shows Wallingford has hit the mark again. The **2023 Saint Helena Napa Valley** bottling is 92 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 5 percent Cabernet Franc, with the remainder coming from a co-fermented lot of Petit Verdot and Petite Sirah. Wallingford says that last 3 percent gives the wine its distinctiveness, adding a pop of exuberant fruit along with tobacco, cassis bush and alder nuances that underscore the Cabernet Sauvignon while defining the house style here.

The **2023 Saint Helena Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Sympa** (\$165) is a step up, showing a touch more polish and depth of fruit. The **2023 Grand Reserve** (\$250) is the darkest and densest of the three, tilting to a more muscular version of Cabernet.

"It's fun to have three distinct expressions of the site," says Wallingford, who gets to play with eight different clones of Cabernet. All the wines are vinified in the same manner—small, stainless steel tanks, **natural yeast**, cool ferments, modest 5- to 7-day post-ferment **macerations** and then 20 months in 50 percent **new oak barrels**. And all three bottlings are made entirely from estate-grown fruit.

Wallingford and Saint Helena Winery might not be tooting their own horn, but the vineyards are farmed holistically and the wines are pretty darn good. And isn't that all that matters?

Read more of James Molesworth's Winery Intels, hear his interviews with leading winemakers on Wine Spectator's Straight Talk podcast, and follow him on Instagram at @jmolesworth1.