

20 Most Admired Grapegrowers in North America

Ask any winemaker how great wines are produced, and you're likely to receive this answer: They're made in the vineyard. Yet how many wine lovers – consumers or otherwise – know the names of the hardworking, dedicated farmers who plant and tend the vines that produce the grapes for those celebrated wines? Not many. Grapegrowers tend to stand in the background while winemakers are encouraged to take center stage.

This year, we hope to remedy that by recognizing the wine industry's unsung heroes: grapegrowers, viticulturists and vineyard managers.

To compile our list of "The 20 Most Admired Grapegrowers," we assembled a nominating committee of respected winemakers, grapegrowers, wine writers, educators, buyers, sommeliers and consultants across North America. The committee had two rules to follow: 1) nominees must be living; 2) they must be based in North America.

Once the nominations arrived, we reduced the field of contenders to 37 finalists, based on the number of nominations each person received. Names of the finalists were then submitted to the committee for a vote. (Members could vote for as many people as they liked.)

The 20 farmers who made the list represent a wide range of regions, grape varieties and backgrounds. Some own vast vineyard acreage and sell all their fruit to winery clients; some are in-house vineyard managers who work for a single winery; others run vineyard management companies while producing their own wines. The one thing they all have in common is that they inspire the respect and admiration of their peers and others in the industry, not only for the quality of their work but for their leadership and integrity.

We are proud to present, in alphabetical order, the most admired grapegrowers in North America.

Markus Bokisch

Bokisch Ranches



Photo: Sam Harnack

Markus Bokisch is a man who likes to think big. While many view Lodi as a region best suited to growing high-production grapes for low-priced table wines, he has a broader vision – one in which Lodi is also known as a producer of premium wine grapes for boutique wineries.

Bokisch studied viticulture at UC Davis, and in 1989, he became a viticulturist for Joseph Phelps Vineyards in the Napa Valley. While sourcing grapes for Phelps' Rhône-focused Le Mistral program, Bokisch discovered the Lodi appellation.

After three years at Phelps, he moved to Spain and worked in the vineyards of Catalonia. There he fell in love with Albariño and Graciano.

When he returned to California, intent on planting a new vineyard, his search for volcanic soils and reasonable land prices led him back to Lodi. In 1995, he purchased a property in what is now the Clements Hills AVA and planted 17 acres

of Syrah. Before long, he was planting vineyards for his neighbors, too, and the Bokisch Ranches vineyard management company was born.

Today, he farms 2,500 acres of vineyards in Amador, San Joaquin, Sacramento and Solano counties, including 100 acres certified organic, 200 transitioning to certified organic and 1,500 certified green under the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing program. Traditional varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon make up most of the acreage, but smaller parcels of Bokisch's beloved Spanish varieties are also included. The Spanish grapes go into his own 5,000-case brand, Bokisch Vineyards, which focuses exclusively on Iberian-style wines.

Bokisch could easily sell all of his grapes to behemoth producers such as E. & J. Gallo. But because he wants to elevate Lodi's reputation as a wine region, he reserves 20% of his fruit for smaller operations such as Mark Herold Wines, Turley Wine Cellars, Chateau Montelena, Neyers Winery, Odisea Wine Co., Forlorn Hope Wines, the Scholium Project, and others.

Despite the size of his operation, Bokisch has earned a reputation for high-quality farming and his ability to customize practices to fit the protocols of each client.

"Markus has been a great resource and support to me as I took on managing my own vineyard in 2013," said Matthew Rorick of Forlorn Hope and Matthew Rorick Wines. "Already a seasoned grapegrower, he is ever desirous of deepening his viticultural knowledge. His willingness to connect growers and winemakers of all stripes strengthens the viticultural community and fosters more grower dialogue and exchange of information, benefitting all."

Virginie Boone of Wine Enthusiast magazine added, "What I love about Markus is that after traveling the world and working in the Napa Valley, he specifically chose Lodi, a place where he could do something different."

Dick Boushey

Boushey Vineyard



Dick Boushey's estate is comprised of five non-contiguous vineyards planted in the Yakima Valley AVA. With his first vineyard planted in 1980, Boushey is one of the pioneering growers of Washington state and, for that matter, the Pacific Northwest. At the time of his first planting, Yakima Valley wasn't even recognized as an AVA. But his grapes soon earned a reputation not just for quality, but for a distinct regional character.

Boushey was one of the first to plant Syrah and other Rhône varieties in Washington. From the start, he sought out leaner hillside soils to counter Syrah's inherent vigor. The resulting fruit spoke volumes of Syrah's potential in Washington. Much of that early Syrah went into wines made by Doug McCrea of McCrea Cellars, and those Syrahs raised plenty of eyebrows in the 1990s.

In addition to his Yakima Valley sites, Boushey

now manages vineyards in the notable Red Mountain AVA. He owns a total of 160 vineyard acres, 85% of which are devoted to red varieties.

Beyond Syrah, Boushey is known for growing outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Sangiovese, Roussanne, Grenache and more. He also appreciates fine wine, and that's important when you're deciding which winemakers deserve your highly allocated grapes.

As with many noted Washington growers, Boushey sells his grapes to dozens of wineries. Among them are the hallowed names of Betz Family Winery, DeLille Cellars, McCrea Cellars, Chateau Ste. Michelle and Long Shadows Vintners.

An industry leader, he has served on the Washington State Wine Commission board and the Wine Advisory Committee, which oversees grape and wine research programs. In 2007, he was named Grower of the Year by Wine & Spirits magazine.

Boushey deserves a reputation not just as a trailblazer, but also as grower with a keen eye for quality sites and the expertise to extract the best possible results from each one. He is not a well-heeled speculator, but more of a co-conspirator who has shared a vision with many of the state's up-and-coming winemakers, and supported them along the way.

Washington's wine industry is still a work in progress; but if it were frozen today, Boushey would rightly be considered a hero of Rushmore proportion.

"Between Boushey Vineyard and a dozen different Red Mountain vineyards, including Col Solare, Dick Boushey grows some of the best grapes in Washington, both Rhône and Bordeaux varieties," said Andy Perdue, founder of Great Northwest Wine. "He is passionate about searching out new clones and experimenting with different varieties and styles."

Joe & Steve Dutton

Dutton Ranch



Joe and Steve Dutton. Photo: Hawkes Photography

The Dutton family's farming heritage goes back to 1881, when Warren Dutton purchased 200 acres in Santa Rosa, Calif. In 2001, another Warren (the great-grandnephew of the farm's founder) passed away and left his wife, Gail, and sons, Steve and Joe Dutton to carry on the family business.

Steve was born in 1967, the same year his father planted the family's first Chardonnay vineyard in western Russian River Valley. By age 5, he was already helping his dad at the ranch and had developed an early fascination with farm equipment. By the time the brothers were in high school, they were helping oversee the family's expanding vineyards and orchards.

Today, Dutton Ranch farms 1,100 acres of premium wine grapes. About 860 of those acres are

owned or leased by Dutton Ranch, and another 240 are managed. The family's domain includes 74 different vineyard sites, all under 100 acres in size, with some even smaller than an acre. The vast majority of the acreage lies in Russian River Valley, with a little over 50 acres in neighboring Green Valley. The Duttons also manage a couple hundred acres of organic apple orchards.

Steve's younger brother, Joe, also plays a key role in the family enterprise, managing many aspects of the business from equipment and personnel to delivery logistics. Each brother also has an interest in a winery. Joe and Tracy Dutton founded Dutton Estate in 1994, while Steve and his wife Theresa founded Dutton-Goldfield Winery in 1998, in partnership with winemaker Dan Goldfield. Both wineries produce world-class Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Syrah.

Steve and Joe Dutton have played important leadership roles in Russian River Valley and Sonoma County, representing other winegrowers and the long-term interests of those regions.

Dutton Ranch prides itself on native understanding of the land it farms, appreciation of and respect for its employees – many of whom have worked for the family for decades – and a strong commitment to sustainable farming and reinvestment in the local community.

What sets the Dutton brothers apart from other Sonoma growers, according to Patz & Hall co-owner Anne Moses, is "their encyclopedic knowledge of Russian River Valley. They know all the vineyards, whether they farm them or not. They've been very accommodating to us." Moses has worked with the Duttons since 1997, when they provided the winery with a small amount of Sonoma Coast Chardonnay. "They've helped us to get more fruit from sites we work with and have also helped us develop new sites."

Fernando Franco

Barboursville Vineyards



Fernando Franco has been involved in Virginia viticulture for more than three decades, and his tenure as the vineyard manager at Barboursville Vineyards is nearing the 20-year mark. During that time, the perception of the state's wines has gone from skepticism to serious respect – and Franco deserves some of the credit for that shift.

A native of El Salvador with a degree in plant physiology, Franco came to the United States to escape a civil war in his home country. He found work at Virginia's Rapidan River Vineyards in 1983, and later worked under Bordeaux-based consultant Jacques Boissenot at Prince Michel Vineyard. During the 1990s, he managed the vines at Leducq Vineyards in the Napa Valley, and in 1998, he joined Barboursville and set about expanding the winery's 82-acre vineyard holdings.

Today, Franco oversees 182 acres of vines planted to an array of French and Italian varieties, from the Merlot and Petit Verdot that go into the winery's flagship Meritage blend, Octagon, to Viognier, Chardonnay, Nebbiolo and Vermentino.

His extensive experience with grapegrowing in Virginia, his longevity at one of the state's most prominent estate wineries and the loving care with which he tends to each vine have all contributed to Franco's status as an icon of the Virginia wine industry.

As a past president of the Virginia Vineyard Association, he went out of his way to share information with other members about the advanced techniques he's using in Barboursville's vineyards, including mechanization. In February of 2015, the association named Franco its Winegrower of the Year, citing the many awards and medals earned by Barboursville wines in major international wine competitions.

Virginia wines continue to make great strides and are garnering more praise and attention than ever. Among those responsible are Barboursville winemaker Luca Paschina (among V&WM's "20 Most Admired Winemakers" for 2014) and his longtime vineyard manager. "Franco has mastered the ability to take advantage of and adapt to the challenging growing conditions of Virginia," Paschina said.

Dave McIntyre, Washington Post wine columnist and blogger at Dave McIntyre's WineLine, is also an admirer. "Fernando Franco tends the vines with almost as much love and passion as he shows for his two daughters, Alexa and Kiki," he said. "In that way, he has helped nurture Virginia to become one of the world's most fascinating emerging wine regions."

David Hirsch

Hirsch Vineyards



In 1978, David Hirsch purchased a 1,100-acre property near Fort Ross, three miles from the Pacific Ocean. A winegrower friend suggested that the site's 1,500-foot-high ridges might be ideal for Pinot Noir, and that intrigued Hirsch, who was a Burgundy fan. He planted three acres of vines in 1980, and between 1990 and 2003 he put in an additional 69 acres, devoted almost entirely to Pinot Noir, plus a few acres of Chardonnay.

While today the Sonoma Coast is recognized as a prime winegrowing region, it was a new frontier in Hirsch's time. Most people would have avoided the remote site that went on to become one of California's most prized vineyards. Its climate is erratic and can be wet and cold, receiving as much as 80 inches of rain between October and April. Situated a mile from

the San Andreas Fault, the estate's complex soils are a jumbled mix of sandstone, rocks and, in some places, heavier clays that retain more moisture – all a result of two tectonic plates churning against each other.

For the first several years, Hirsch sold his grapes to big wineries intent on creating blends. It wasn't until the early 1990s, after the Sonoma Coast AVA was approved, that wineries began to recognize the true quality of the region. In 1994, heads turned when Williams Selyem, Kistler Vineyards and Littorai bought grapes from Hirsch. It wasn't long before other high-end producers came calling.

Hirsch currently sells his fruit to Failla Wines, Williams Selyem and Siduri Wines, as well as Littorai for vineyard-designated wines that tend to be perfumed, bright and focused. Hirsch also produces about 5,500 cases per year of his own wine, made by Ross Cobb of Cobb Wines.

"David is a phenomenal winegrower," Cobb said. "He has a great intellect, he's very philosophical, and he always challenges everyone around him – and himself – to do better."

One major evolution in Hirsch's viticulture practices was spurred by Ted Lemon of Littorai, who asked Hirsch to farm one his blocks organically. Hirsch loved the results so much that he decided to go a step further, and is now converting all of his acreage to Biodynamic farming.

"David Hirsch is a viticultural pioneer in every sense, and the quality of his fruit has been of the highest repute for over two decades," said Tim Marson, MW, buyer at Global Wine Company. "The opportunity to taste wines from this exceptional site from several of the leading Pinot producers in the country – including, of course, Hirsch itself – is tantamount to a masterclass in the meaning and power of *terroir*."

Jim Holmes

Ciel du Cheval Vineyard



Photo: Andrea Johnson

Jim Holmes is revered as the man behind one of Washington state's greatest vineyards, Ciel du Cheval.

The vineyard had its beginning in 1972, when Holmes decided to get into real estate development with his friend and fellow nuclear engineer, John Williams. The partners bought 80 acres of land in what is now the Red Mountain AVA, owned by Williams' father-in-law. After reading a study about the region published by Washington State University, they decided to plant a vineyard. That vineyard was Kiona. Around the same time, the partners recruited investors to fund the planting of a second vineyard across the road, which became Ciel du Cheval.

In 1991, Holmes and Williams bought out their investors and divided up the properties: Williams kept Kiona, Holmes took Ciel du Cheval.

Thanks to its homogenous hillside soils and consistently dry, warm climate, Ciel du Cheval fruit became known as ultra-reliable, flavorful and luscious – the sort of grapes a young winemaker could make a splash with. Soon, it was in high demand.

In 2001, Holmes was able to double his holdings in the now-famous Red Mountain AVA, bringing the total planted land to 102 acres. He also took on another 40 acres of vineyards through partnerships with the Golitzin family of Quilceda Creek and Woodinville's DeLille Cellars, to supply those wineries.

Today, Ciel du Cheval fruit is sold to 25 or so Washington wineries in any given year. Andrew Will Winery, Cadence Winery and Seven Hills Winery are among those making vineyard-designated reds. In 2012, after 38 years of growing grapes at Ciel du Cheval, Holmes finally made some wine of his own under the Côtes de Ciel label.

While the vineyard is certainly special, clients agree that Holmes himself is also a big selling point. "There are a number of Jim's qualities as a grower that make Ciel du Cheval a wonderful vineyard to work with," said Casey McClellan, owner of Seven Hills. "His vast duration and scope of experience on Red Mountain are unmatched. This allows him to respond to vintage variations with wisdom, restraint and foresight in his winegrowing.

"He produces grapes of great flavor and structure, while allowing nuance and complexity to persist. Jim's overall vision for his vineyard and his viticultural approach are impeccable, and he is always open to new ideas that improve on the status quo. Lastly, he is a guy that is just great to work with on a personal and business level. I can't say enough good things about him."

Larry Hyde

Hyde Vineyards



The Hyde Vineyards saga began when Larry Hyde's father, Richard, purchased a piece of land in Carneros in 1979. The region was just starting to develop and most California growers weren't particularly interested in so-called cool climate vineyards.

It was only natural that Hyde would take the lead in developing the site; he had studied chemistry and entomology at UC Berkeley, and his interest in winemaking and viticulture led him to spend a decade working crushes at wineries such as Ridge Vineyards, Cuvaision Winery and Joseph Phelps Vineyards.

After some trial and error – he originally planted all of the vines east-to-west before realizing they weren't getting the right sun exposure – Hyde developed a deep understanding of how

the soils, climate patterns and cultivation practices affect his grapes.

Today, Hyde is perhaps the most respected grower in the Carneros region, and his vineyard has achieved superstar status. The vineyard spans some 179 acres and is planted to 10 clones of Pinot Noir and six clones of Chardonnay. Among them are Hyde-Wente Chardonnay and Hyde-Calera Pinot Noir, two low-yielding clones that Hyde is credited with developing.

Grapes from Hyde's vineyard fetch top dollar from famed winemakers, and he's even proven that he can grow some pretty impressive cool climate Cabernet and Merlot at the foggy southern end of Napa Valley. His love of experimentation, his curiosity and keen observation skills have been key factors in his success, along with his willingness to farm his vineyard blocks according to each client's wishes.

Known as a straight shooter, Hyde likes to socialize and build his network. He has surrounded himself with knowledgeable vintners from wineries including Ramey Wine Cellars, Patz & Hall, Paul Hobbs Wines and Kistler Vineyards – some of whom he's known for as long as 25 years – who tell him exactly what they want from his fruit. Add in Aubert de Villaine, co-owner of Domaine de la Romanée Conti and Hyde's partner in the HdV winery, and you can only imagine the speed of Hyde's feedback loop.

"Larry Hyde and his team farm a miraculous piece of Carneros vineyard," said Donald Patz, co-owner of Patz & Hall. "What makes him so great is that he really cares about his grapes. He anticipates what we want in his vineyard. He wants every winery to be successful with Hyde Vineyards fruit, and he's willing to do whatever is needed to make his grapes the best. Plus, he's a really nice guy."

Ann Kraemer

Shake Ridge Ranch



For 25 years, Ann Kraemer managed vineyards and consulted for some of Napa Valley's finest winegrowers, including Cain Vineyard and Winery, Chimney Rock Winery, Cuvaision Estate Wines, Domaine Chandon, Shafer Vineyards and Swanson Vineyards. Yet, it was a vineyard in not-so-glamorous Amador County that made her famous.

Kraemer grew up on an orange grove in Southern California, and studied pomology at UC Davis. After a stint as the director of fruits and nuts for the California Farm Bureau Federation, she worked in various vineyard roles at Napa Valley wineries before striking out on her own.

She spent years searching for just the right location to plant a vineyard; and in 2001, she decided on a remote piece of land in Amador County, in the Sierra Foothills region. Kraemer

and her family bought the 185-acre property, Shake Ridge Ranch, and planted the first parcel of the now 46-acre vineyard in 2003.

The vineyard includes not only the Zinfandel and Barbera varieties the region is known for, but also small parcels of Petite Sirah, Graciano, Sangiovese and Greco di Tufo. Kraemer uses low-input, organic and Biodynamic methods whenever possible, and no synthetic fertilizer.

Applying Napa Valley viticulture standards and techniques to the Sierra Foothills – from managing crop levels to thinning clusters to getting the right amount of light onto the fruit – has elevated the quality of Kraemer's fruit to near-cult status. So immaculate is her vineyard and so balanced is her fruit, even vintners who never considered making wine from Amador County fruit have been convinced.

Among her impressive list of clients are Favia Wines, Keplinger Wines, Newsome Harlow, Turley, Dirty & Rowdy Family Winery, Gallica, Forlorn Hope and Buccella. Shake Ridge Ranch grapes also go into the Kraemer family's own wine label, Yorba, which includes Zinfandel, Barbera, Syrah, Tempranillo and a red blend.

Experience and customization are the keys to Kraemer's success. Those who purchase her grapes know that they can dictate crop load, canopy management, irrigation, harvest timing and other viticultural factors, and that Kraemer is willing to do whatever hand work is necessary to meet clients' expectations.

"I love Ann Kraemer. She literally and figuratively lives in her vineyard," said Hardy Wallace of Dirty & Rowdy Family Winery. "Ann sets the bar high; she not only works tirelessly to produce the best fruit off of her property, she also strives to meet each of her clients' varied needs in a way I have never experienced with any other grower."

Brad & Randy Lange

LangeTwins Family Winery and Vineyards



Brad and Randy Lange.

Randy and Brad Lange come from a long line of farmers. Their great-grandparents, Johann and Maria, settled in Lodi in the 1870s and began growing grapes in 1916.

Over the years, the family extended their land holdings to River Ranch and DeVries Road Ranch, where fourth-generation Lodi farmers Randy and Brad were raised.

In 1980, the twin brothers bought 186 acres of their parents' Lodi farm to form the LangeTwins Vineyard Management Company. Soon they were managing vineyards for other families in Lodi, Clarksburg and Clements Hills. The business grew at a steady pace, and the Langes gained a reputation for doing quality work and taking care of the land.

Over the decades, the family's vineyard holdings have expanded to 1,800 acres, planted to 21 different grape varieties. Today, the company

owns more than 6,000 acres of owned and managed vineyards.

The brothers also own the LangeTwins Family Winery, launched in 2006 in an effort to derive more value from their grapes, and provide custom crush services to other vintners.

Each brother plays an important role in the operation. As the financial director for the vineyard management and wine companies, Brad establishes and maintains relationships with clients and wineries, oversees vineyard operations and manages new developments. Randy formerly managed vineyard operations and led vineyard development opportunities, and now he heads the family's winery operations. Both are actively involved in industry organizations, including the Lodi Winegrape Commission, California Association of Winegrape Growers and California Agricultural Leadership Program.

Through their vision and hard work, the Lange brothers have become not only major figures in Lodi grapegrowing, but industry leaders in practicing and promoting sustainable viticulture. Their vineyards are certified under the Lodi Rules program, which encompass a range of sustainable practices from water conservation to the employment of renewable energy to the restoration of natural habitat.

"From being focused on tradition and heritage, but always keeping an eye on innovation, these brothers have helped the industry make great strides in sustainability, advocacy and ensuring that all California grapegrowers are able to produce premium winegrapes that are capable of competing on a world stage," said Camron King, executive director of the Lodi Winegrape Commission. "They have held leadership positions in many different organizations and have tirelessly advocated for the prominence of the grower in the industry conversation."

Mary Maher

Harlan Estate



In many people's eyes, Harlan Estate is the closest thing California has to a grand cru. Set in the western hills of Oakville, in the Napa Valley, the estate produces the Bordeaux-style wine that Robert Parker Jr. singled out as perhaps "the single most profound red wine made not just in California, but in the world." It takes an outstanding vineyard to produce such a wine, and so it follows that it takes an exceptional vineyard manager to care for that vineyard. That caretaker is Mary Maher.

Maher was raised in the small farming community of Glenn County, Calif., and studied biology and agriculture at Chico State University and San Jose State University. After moving to the Napa Valley in 1985, she joined Buena Vista Winery and spent the next 10 years honing her skills in the vineyard, gaining extensive knowledge in the areas of organic and sustainable farming.

Her interest in growing high-quality grapes led her to found her own consulting firm in 1995, managing vineyards for wineries such as Acacia Vineyard, Etude Wines and Moraga Vineyards.

In 1997, Bill Harlan hired Maher for a vineyard project, and in 2001, she worked with Harlan winemaker Bob Levy to develop the vineyard at The Napa Valley Reserve. She joined the Harlan team full time in 2002 as vineyard manager for Harlan's 240-acre Oakville estate, and farming director for the Bond project.

Since then she has earned a reputation for taking meticulous care of Harlan's terraced vineyards, which include 40 closely planted acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. She also oversees organic farming and vineyard development for The Napa Valley Reserve and Promontory.

An industry leader, Maher was named Napa Valley Grower of the Year by the Napa Valley Grape-growers in 2014. She held a seat on the Napa Valley Grap growers board of directors for nine years, served on the Napa County Pest & Disease District board and has served as board member and president of the Carneros Quality Alliance and the Napa Valley Vineyard Technical Group.

She is known as a role model and mentor for women in the industry, and continues her work in this area through participation in organizations such as the International Women in Cabernet Association, St. Helena Ag Boosters, and other community endeavors.

"Mary is truly a leader in the vineyard management industry," said Remi Cohen, vice president and general manager of Lede Family Wines. "She is well known for her top-quality viticulture, leading a cohesive, meticulous team to grow the best possible grapes for some of Napa Valley's most illustrious wines. Her passion and dedication are inspirational."

Steve Matthiasson

Premiere Viticultural Services



Photo: Christopher Sawyer

Steve Matthiasson's path to becoming one of California's most respected vineyard managers was a circuitous one. Born in the Canadian province of Manitoba, he studied psychology at Whittier College near Los Angeles before moving to San Francisco in the early 1990s. While participating in a community garden program there, he fell in love with farming and headed off to UC Davis to earn a master's degree in viticulture and pest management.

Matthiasson began his vineyard management career at Four Seasons Ag Consulting in Modesto, where he collaborated with growers who were pioneering organic and sustainable practices. It was during this time that he developed a knack for working with soils, designing healthy vineyards, monitoring diseases, managing irrigation and working with high-quality fruit.

In 1999, he joined the Lodi-Woodbridge Wine-grape Commission to co-author, with Dr. Cliff

Ohmart, the groundbreaking "Lodi Winegrower's Workbook: A Self Assessment of Integrated Vineyard Practices." This work formed the basis for the Wine Institute's "Code of Sustainable Wine-growing Practices Self-Assessment Workbook," which has since been used by more than 1,400 vineyards and wineries.

After finishing the "Lodi Winegrower's Workbook," Matthiasson put his skills to use as research viticulturalist for R.H. Phillips Winery in Yolo County, where he helped develop experimental vineyard blocks and innovative farming practices.

In 2002, he and his wife, Jill, moved to Napa Valley, where Matthiasson began to develop his own viticulture techniques as part-owner of Premiere Viticultural Services. Since then, Matthiasson has worked with an all-star list of clients, including Araujo Estate, Chappellet, David Arthur Vineyards, Duckhorn Wine Company, Spottswoode, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Trefethen, Arcadia Vineyards and Limerick Lane, among others. He also makes his own wines under the Matthiasson label, known for their freshness and moderate alcohol levels.

In addition to his role as a consultant, Matthiasson also acts as a teacher. Rather than simply telling workers how to do something in the vineyard, he prefers to teach them how to read the plant and make the right decisions.

"What makes Steve such a gifted vineyardist is his incredible mix of intellect, intellectual curiosity and hands-on experience," said P.J. Alviso, director of estate viticulture for Duckhorn Wine Company. "The way he combines his academic background with a pragmatic, boots-on-the-ground know-how allows him to identify problems and find solutions in a way that very few others can. Steve is a master at what he does, and he does it without ego. He is an awesome person – always humble, super-approachable and easy to work with."

The Miller Family

Bien Nacido Vineyards



Nicholas, Steve and Marshall Miller.

In 1969, the Millers, a fifth-generation California farming family, purchased the property now known as Bien Nacido, in the Santa Maria appellation of Santa Barbara County. The family also purchased an adjacent parcel that had been part of the same 1837 land grant, and reunited the two properties as a single 2,000-acre ranch.

Although the Millers had previously grown avocados and lemons in Ventura County, they had no particular crop in mind for Rancho Tepusquet, as the property was then called. However, in the early 1970s, they realized that the soils and climate were ideal for growing grapes; and from that point on, they dove head-first into the winegrowing business.

While the mentality of the time favored quantity over quality, the Millers took a different approach: From the outset, they sought to create a top-quality vineyard, planted to pre-

mium Burgundian varieties. In 1973, brothers Stephen (Steve) and Bob Miller founded Bien Nacido Vineyards.

Rather than relying on North Coast buyers, the Millers worked to incubate the wine industry in Santa Barbara County and the Central Coast, partnering with artisan winemakers such as Qupé's Bob Lindquist to champion the region. They also launched two custom crush facilities in Paso Robles – Central Coast Wine Services and Paso Robles Wine Services – to help the local wineries thrive.

Their strategy worked, and today Bien Nacido is known as one of California's finest vineyards. Planted primarily to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc and Syrah, the vineyard covers nearly 900 acres. The Millers also own Solomon Hills Vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley AVA and French Camp Vineyards in the Paso Robles AVA.

The company today is run by Steve Miller, president and CEO; Marshall Miller, Steve's son, who works in the family operations connected with wine grapes, lemons and avocados; and Steve's other son, Nicholas Miller, vice president of sales and marketing.

Along with the family's vision and dedication to quality, one of the keys to the company's success has been its "white glove" approach to farming, in which everything from clones to vine spacing to vineyard practices gets tailored to clients' specifications.

"I've worked with the Millers since 1986 when we worked out a deal to graft some Riesling at Bien Nacido to Syrah," said Bob Lindquist of Qupé. "We got the first crop of true cool climate Syrah in 1987, and I've been making it every year since. In 1989, Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat and I formed a partnership to build a winery at Bien Nacido with the Millers' support. Been there since! They've always put quality first and have done what it takes to constantly improve."

Lucie Morton

Viticulture Consultant and Ampelographer



Photo: Tina Caputo

When East Coast vintners want to plant a new vineyard or have a problem to solve in an existing one, they call Lucie Morton. Morton is an authority on viticulture, not just in her home state of Virginia, but throughout the world.

Educated at the University of Montpellier in France, Morton worked with influential French researcher Pierre Galet, and she adapted his book, "A Practical Ampelography: Grapevine Identification," in English.

While her early career concentrated on ampelography – the identifying of grape varieties based on the physical traits of their leaves – Morton's focus broadened over the years to embrace multiple subjects, including rootstocks, vine spacing, vineyard design, trunk disease, vineyard pathogens and nutritional deficiencies.

She is largely credited with adapting Bordeaux and West Coast viticulture practices to the humid, wet Atlantic seaboard, enabling wineries to miti-

gate rot and avoid the underripe, herbaceous characters that previously marred their wines. She has assisted with the East Coast transition from native American grape varieties to vinifera and hybrids, and wine drinkers are better for it.

Morton advocates vigorous canopy management and crop control, including vertical shoot positioning and dense vine spacing, so that grapes ripen and accumulate the appropriate sugars. Her advice has worked magic for Boxwood Estate and Virginia peer Ankida Ridge, Maryland's Sugarloaf Mountain Vineyard and Black Ankle Vineyards, and Galer Estate in Pennsylvania, among others.

"Lucie's guidance in choosing the vineyard site, in analyzing the soil and insisting on the best varieties, clones and rootstock – plus being available every day during the past 14 years – has made Boxwood a success," said John Kent Cooke, president of Boxwood Estate.

Original views on East Coast viticulture held that vine spacings of 800 vines per acre would allow for enough airflow to prevent rot. Vineyards developed by Morton typically are planted to as many as 2,000 vines per acre, based on her thinking that dense plantings promote even ripening by reducing the number of clusters per vine. Hers is an expensive way to grow grapes, yet her clients accept the cost as a route to producing high-caliber wine.

Not limited to the East, Morton advises on grapegrowing throughout the world and has written numerous international papers. As long ago as the mid-1980s, a group of Napa Valley winegrowers hired Morton to review French literature on possible rootstock replacements for the widely planted AXR-1, which proved susceptible to phylloxera.

Morton even has a fungus named for her – *Phaeoacremonium mortoniae* – in honor of her research on the vine trunk disease she coined "black goo," which causes vines to wither and die.

Mark Pisoni

Pisoni Estate



Photo: Rachel Balunsat

Mark Pisoni is something of a rarity in the winegrowing world: In addition to cultivating some of the most sought-after Pinot Noir grapes in California's Santa Lucia Highlands AVA, he oversees 500 acres of lettuce, celery, broccoli and cauliflower on his family's Salinas Valley vegetable farm.

While he loves to farm all sorts of crops, Pisoni has a special appreciation for wine grapes' ability to reflect the land on which they were grown – or what he calls "being able to taste our vineyard in a glass of wine."

Pisoni grew up in the agriculture business. As a child, he walked the rows each morning with his grandfather to check on the crops, and he learned to manage the family vineyards working alongside his larger-than-life father, Gary.

To supplement this hands-on experience, he earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics from UC Davis, and a master's degree in farm business management from Cornell University. After graduation he became Pisoni Estate's full-time vineyard manager, and now farms the Pisoni, Garys' and Soberanes vineyards – a total of 124 acres planted mostly to Pinot Noir, with smaller amounts of Chardonnay and Syrah.

Sustainability isn't a buzz word to Pisoni; it's a way of life passed down through three generations. This is reflected in his respect for the environment, for the vineyards and for his crew – many of whom have been with the family since Pisoni's boyhood.

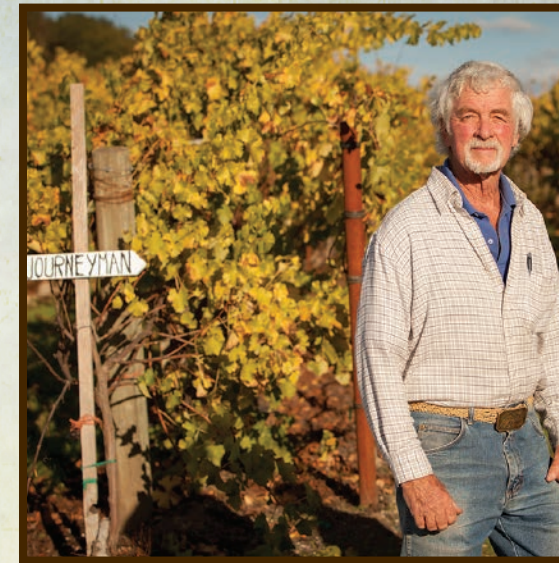
His skill and passion have not gone unnoticed by the family's winery clients, which include Siduri Wines, Kosta Browne Winery, Peter Michael Winery, Patz & Hall, Roar Wines, Paul Lato Wines, and Capioux Cellars, among others. Some of the grapes also go into the family's Pisoni Estate and Lucia wines, made by his brother Jeff.

Deals are still sealed with handshakes, rather than written contracts, and Pisoni has a reputation not only as a great grower, but also as a friend.

"I've known Mark Pisoni for many years, and I can unequivocally say that he is one of the finest grapegrowers I know," said Adam Lee of Siduri Wines. "He's remarkably committed to doing whatever is necessary to grow the finest grapes possible; and yet, he's also equally committed to encouraging and listening to wine-makers' input. In addition to growing fantastic grapes, Mark is also an all-around great guy. He's part of a large, caring family, and those family values are reflected in the way he works and lives."

Kent Ritchie

Ritchie Vineyard



Kent Ritchie grows stellar Chardonnay, and his fruit tends to find its way into the hands of some of California's most talented winemakers. David Ramey, Paul Hobbs, La Follette and DeLoach are just a few of the labels that look to Ritchie Vineyard for unusually concentrated juice with a signature Meyer lemon profile.

Ritchie moved from Detroit to California while working for 3M Company, and decided to put down roots – literally and figuratively. A self-described "bootstrap guy," Ritchie learned the ins and outs of viticulture on his own.

It is undoubtedly a combination of factors that make Ritchie Vineyard fruit special. The northwest-facing bench in the heart of Russian River Valley was planted to a mixture of workday clones and field selections in 1971 – mostly

Wente (Clone 4), See and Rudd selections. "Back then, you just bought what you could – nobody knew anything about clones," explained Ramey, who has been working with Ritchie since 2002.

The age of the vines, the quality of the site and the skill with which the property is farmed are probably vastly more important to the distinguished character of Ritchie Chardonnay.

"Our block of Chardonnay was planted in 1972, which means this year's harvest is from 44-year-old vines," Ramey said. "The site is benchland with great drainage and gravelly Goldridge loam, right in the heart of the Russian River Valley AVA. And Kent's a sweetheart."

DeLoach has made a Ritchie Vineyard Chardonnay sourced from the same 10 rows of grapes since 2009; and Eric Pooler, director of winegrowing for the winery's parent company, Boisset Collection, likewise has a very high opinion not only of the site, but of Ritchie's work tending the vines. "Over the past 30 years, the Ritchie Vineyard has emerged as champion for Chardonnay in the Russian River Valley," he said. "There are many location-specific factors, like the unique volcanic soils and the ideal climatic conditions that influence the quality of the fruit at Ritchie. As important, though, is Kent's experience with this terroir."

"Every day, without fail, Kent walks his vine rows," Pooler continued. "He perpetually observes the intricacies of his site from the soil to the sky. Whether planting or picking, it's Kent's seasoned acuity that gives basis for the brilliant wines produced from his grapes vintage after vintage. I've often heard Kent described as a 'salt of the earth' type of guy. While this statement is every bit true, in my opinion, 'nectar of the earth' is a much better description."

Steve & Mike Sangiacomo

Sangiacomo Family Vineyards



Steve and Mike Sangiacomo.

As California's family wineries and vineyards are gobbled up by large corporations, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards remain a shining example of a successful and adaptable family winegrowing operation.

After emigrating from Genoa, Italy, in 1927, Vittorio and Maria Sangiacomo bought a ranch near the town of Sonoma, where they grew pears, apples and prunes. In 1969, the family planted its first vineyard.

In the 1970s, the expansion of the grape program was led by the second generation of Sangiacomos: siblings Angelo, Bob, Buck and Lorraine. During the next 25 years, they continued to update their farming practices and increased the quality of their grapes as they developed each new vineyard block.

Now, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards is run by the third generation, led by brothers Mike and Steve Sangiacomo. Together, they farm 1,600

acres of vineyards and more than 100 sites in the Carneros, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Coast regions.

With most of their business coming via word-of-mouth recommendations and handshake deals, the Sangiacomos have never needed to advertise their fruit. They're known for never cutting corners, and constantly striving to deliver the best-possible grapes to their clients.

Sonoma's Gundlach Bundschu winery was the first to bottle a vineyard-designated Sangiacomo wine, in 1979, and Joseph Phelps Vineyards followed in 1981. Today, more than 50 producers purchase Sangiacomo grapes and 35 produce vineyard-designated wines bearing the family name. These include La Follette Wines, Steele Wines, Ram's Gate Winery, Ten Acre, Neyers Vineyards and Eric Kent Wine Cellars, among others.

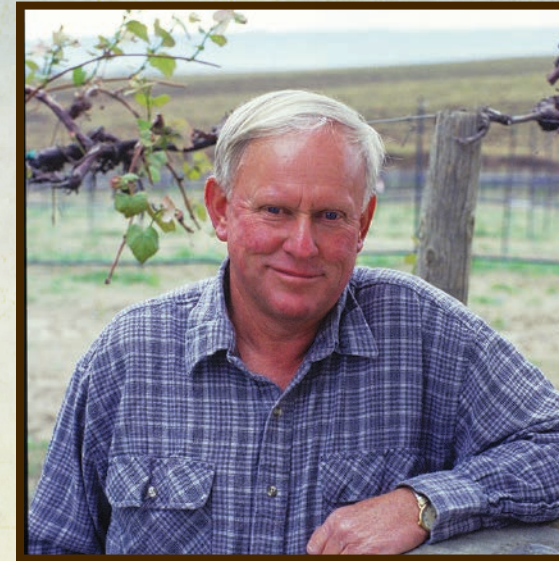
Blocks are custom-farmed to meet the needs of individual clients, whether they're looking to showcase distinctive flavor profiles through vineyard-designated wines, or to create a consistent core of complex flavors from vintage to vintage by blending fruit from multiple blocks.

Even with the company's long history, the Sangiacomos' farming practices are not stuck in the past. The family continuously conducts vineyard trials on everything from clone and rootstock combinations to vine spacing to advanced trellis systems. Through the decades, the family has changed its methods from straight cultivation to sustainable farming, reducing the use of pesticides, planting cover crops between rows and utilizing owl boxes for rodent control.

"The Sangiacomos have always made me feel like an important partner, even though I am one of the smaller guys," said Greg La Follette of La Follette Wines. "I have always truly appreciated their care and attention. Perhaps the best thing about them is that they are the most integrity-filled family I have ever met. They are among the best people in our industry."

Mike Sauer

Red Willow Vineyard



In 1971, Mike Sauer planted the first grape vines on his in-laws' fourth-generation farm in Washington's Yakima Valley. Those early Chenin Blanc and Semillon vines set the stage for the property's first block of Cabernet Sauvignon, planted in 1973, which grew into the famous Red Willow Vineyard.

Located in the northwest corner of the Yakima Valley on the south slopes of Ahtanum Ridge, the vineyard lies within the bounds of the Yakama Indian Reservation, and it has to be seen to be fully appreciated. Red Willow is a gorgeous vineyard, immaculately maintained and capped with a small ridge-top chapel that Sauer built in the mid-1990s. As pretty as any vineyard in France, Red Willow has played an invaluable role in the progress of Washington viticulture.

The hillsides of Red Willow rise out of the lowlands of Yakima, where apple trees and all

sorts of other fruit are preferred to grapes. Up on the hillsides of the vineyard, at elevations over 1,000 feet, the soils are older and leaner and don't have the silt and sand deposited at lower strata by the Missoula Floods at the end of the ice age.

It is one of the oldest vineyards in Washington, and it supplies fruit to more than 15 wineries in Washington and Oregon, including DeLille Cellars, Betz Family Winery and EFESTE. Many varieties were planted for the first time in Washington at Red Willow, in large part because of Sauer's collaboration with Dr. Walter Clore, a respected viticulturist at Washington State University, and with David Lake, a master of wine and winemaker for Associated Vintners (later renamed Columbia Winery).

Sauer assisted Clore and WSU by planting a test plot with 20 different varieties, and he agreed to install a weather station. Lake wanted some Syrah for his winery, so Sauer planted Washington's first Syrah grapes. In 1981, Lake was the first to vineyard-designate a Cabernet Sauvignon from Red Willow, in tribute to the pioneer grower.

"Mike grew the first Syrah in Washington, the first Tempranillo in the Pacific Northwest, and some of the first Viognier in the region," said wine writer Andy Perdue of Great Northwest Wine. "He's been running the vineyard for more than 40 years and remains passionate about what he does."

Sauer's admirers are not limited to wine professionals in the Pacific Northwest. "Early on, he worked with his winemaker customers to craft the product they wanted," said Sara Spayd, professor of horticulture at North Carolina State University. "Mike is one of the nicest, most honorable and decent people that I have had the pleasure to know."

Dick Shea

Shea Vineyard



Dick Shea was an outlier in his day. When grapegrowers and winemakers began focusing on the Dundee Hills area of Oregon's Willamette Valley in the late 1980s, Shea was staking out his turf in the hard-packed sedimentary soils of what would later become the Yamhill-Carlton AVA. Once he decided to plant there, he went all in with 100 acres. The vineyard now includes 135 acres of Pinot Noir and five acres of Chardonnay.

Comprised of two different hills, separated by a steep ravine, the Shea Vineyard sits on ancient marine seabeds uplifted by volcanic activity. It has very thin soils, with sandstone bedrock lying just below the surface in some areas.

During the vineyard's early years, the grapes were farmed for higher yields, leading vintners to blend them with fruit from other sites. But

the tide turned in 1994, when Shea and vineyard manager Javier Marin committed to raising the quality bar, reducing crop levels and farming to individual winemakers' specifications. That same year, Ken Wright Cellars and Panther Creek Cellars bottled Shea Vineyard Pinot Noirs, which earned 90-plus scores in *The Wine Advocate*.

Replanting due to phylloxera in the mid-1990s through 2005 allowed Shea to further refine his farming practices. Thanks to the newly planted Dijon clones and grafted vines, Shea's fruit developed new depth and power, for which it has become renowned.

Today, there's a waiting list for Shea's fruit. His lucky clients include Elk Cove Vineyards, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars, Beaux Frères, Bergström Wines, Ken Wright Cellars, Rex Hill, Walt and St. Innocent Winery, among others. He also reserves about 25% of his grapes for his own label, Shea Wine Cellars, which includes five Pinot Noirs and one Chardonnay.

Shea has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for his conservation efforts and environmental stewardship, and he is known for taking care of his workers. He provides health insurance for his entire year-round vineyard crew, and their families.

"Yamhill-Carlton was a promising, but as-yet-unproven subzone in 1989, so it took a lot of chutzpah for Dick and Dierdre Shea to plant 100 acres. That was a massive vineyard for Oregon in the late 1980s," said Katherine Cole, wine columnist at *The Oregonian*. "Now, looking back, we can all agree that their bold stroke was brilliant."

"The wines that come out of that vineyard are bold as well. Despite the diversity of soil types, Shea Vineyard wines tend to be dense and powerful."

Ulises Valdez

Valdez & Sons Vineyard Management



Photo: Craig Lee

When Ulises Valdez crossed the U.S. border in 1985, his goal was to work hard and make enough money to start a small business back in Mexico – perhaps as a grocery store owner. He didn't imagine that he would come to manage 1,000 acres of prime Sonoma County vineyards as the owner of a successful vineyard management company, or that his own wine one day would be served at the White House. Yet, he accomplished all of this by age 41.

Valdez grew up in a small village in Michoacan, Mexico. At age 16, he headed for Sonoma County in search of vineyard work. He didn't speak English, and had never before tended a grapevine.

Even so, Valdez was hired by Jack Florence Jr. to prune his father's vineyard in Dry Creek Valley, and he quickly picked up the skills need-

ed to do the job. In 1986, he received an even bigger break: Thanks to the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which provided a path toward legalization for seasonal agricultural workers, Valdez became a legal temporary resident of the United States.

That same year, he struck a deal with Florence: Valdez would work without pay for the entire season and at the end of harvest, Florence would make him a partner in the Florence Vineyard Management company. Valdez got his wish in 1987. Nine years later, he became a U.S. citizen.

As co-owner of the company, Valdez expanded the business and began acquiring long-term vineyard leases. By the early 2000s, Valdez was working with some of California's top vintners. In 2003, Valdez bought Florence out and changed the company name to Valdez & Sons Vineyard Management.

Today Valdez has more than 50 clients and farms just over 1,000 acres of vineyards in Sonoma County, including more than 100 acres that he leases or owns. His skill and dedication to quality have earned him a reputation as one of Sonoma County's best vineyard managers and growers.

One of the keys to Valdez's success has been his ability to collaborate with his clients to decide what's best for the vineyards, along with his work ethic and positive attitude. He's also known for being good to his employees, and in return they reward him with their dedication and loyalty.

"First and foremost, Ulises is a man of his word, a man of passion," said Paul Hobbs of Paul Hobbs Winery. "He's a very hard worker, 100% reliable, and has a remarkably keen and exacting eye for quality and how to achieve it in the vineyard. Beyond that, he's exceedingly personable and tremendous fun to work with – always ready with a joke and a laugh."

Michael Wolf

Michael Wolf Vineyard Services



Michael Wolf has been involved with developing and managing California vineyards for more than 35 years. Raised just outside of New York City, he was first exposed to agriculture in 1972, when he joined a friend in Mendocino County to “get back to the land,” growing pears, prunes and grapes on a family farm.

His first winery experience came in 1976, when he landed a job with Mendocino Vineyard Company in Ukiah, owned by the Beckstoffer family. In 1981, he moved to Napa County to become a vineyard supervisor for a large agricultural development company in Pope Valley, where he spent 12 years managing vineyard operations and development.

Wolf worked with the Beckstoffers again in 1994, when he accepted a position overseeing

500 acres for Beckstoffer Vineyards in the Napa Valley. This role gave him the opportunity to farm some remarkable vineyards, and introduced him to many of the region’s top winemakers.

In 1997, he launched Michael Wolf Vineyard Services. Today, Wolf has more than 30 clients, including many of Napa Valley’s leading independent growers and ultra-premium wineries.

Specializing in sustainable vineyard development, from the planning phase to maintenance, Wolf currently farms more than 800 acres across Napa County.

In addition to building a reputation as a top-notch vineyard manager and developer, he has earned the respect of his colleagues for his commitment to Napa Valley farming and the community. Earlier this year, Wolf received the prestigious Napa Valley Grower of the Year award from the Napa Valley Grapegrowers.

“Mike is the best. He has many decades of experience growing some of the best wines in Napa, and he has very high standards,” said Cathy Corison, owner and winemaker of Corison Winery in the Napa Valley. “He’s also down to earth and humble, and I’m especially impressed by how well he takes care of his crew.”

Active in many grower organizations, Wolf has been a board trustee of the California Grower Foundation since 1987. He was a member of the Napa Valley Viticultural Technical Group’s executive committee from 1995-1996; director of the Napa County Farm Bureau from 1986-1998; president of the Farm Bureau from 1990-1992; and vice president from 1988-1989.

He continues to be a strong advocate for Napa Valley farm workers, actively supporting the Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation and the annual Napa Valley Pruning Contest.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

With so many fine grape-growers in North America, it wasn’t easy to narrow the field to 20. Several nominees missed making the final list by a small number of votes, and we feel they should be acknowledged. They include:

- + John Balletto, Balletto Vineyards
- + Andy Beckstoffer, Beckstoffer Vineyards
- + Chris Bowland, Bowland Vineyard Management
- + Tony Bugica, Bacchus Vineyard Management
- + Todd Newhouse, Upland Estate
- + Davie Piña, Piña Vineyard Management
- + Tim Rodgers & Brian Shepard, Walsh Vineyards Management
- + Peter Stolpman, Stolpman Vineyards
- + Kent Waliser, Sagemoor Vineyards