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Matthiasson prunes some Merlot vines on his property. Steve Matthiasson works for other wineries by day but makes his own special red and white blends that have been well received.

Call it the revenge of the vineyard guy.

Before his own wines got attention, **Steve Matthiasson** was already established as a thinking man's viticulturist, as the pruning shears on his wine labels attest. In 2006 he was hired by one of Napa's most thoughtful types, **Warren Winiarski** of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Not for hard and fast answers but for his willingness to avoid them.

"The people I work with like gray areas," he says.

Matthiasson, 40, is equally adept at winemaking. His wines occupy an unpredictable space. There is a Bordeaux-style red blend and a Merlot filled with scents of tea and mint leaf that evoke the grape's

noble bones.

But his star achievement is a white that combines the spirit of Bordeaux and northern Italy's Friuli region - a mix of **Sauvignon Blanc**, Semillon, Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano, the latter two almost nonexistent in California. It has quickly become one of California's best white blends.

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More than that, it is a template for a new style of white winemaking that flies without a varietal net.

Matthiasson favors vibrancy over impact. He insists on lower fermentation temperatures and picks up to three weeks earlier than his counterparts in the handful of alluvial vineyards he uses in Napa's Oak Knoll District, all of which are within two miles of the turn-of-the-century farmhouse he renovated with his wife, **Jill Klein**. Reds are often in barrel by the time his vineyard-mates are beginning to harvest.

Born in Winnipeg to two anthropologists, Matthiasson frequented his family's farms in Manitoba and North Dakota. After a punk-rock phase, he studied philosophy at Whittier **College**, worked as a San Francisco bike messenger and volunteered at community gardens.

He headed for UC Davis to study international agricultural development, but he really wanted to farm. So he took an internship in Merced, where he monitored insects and earthworms for a sustainable orchard program. In 1994 he met Jill, who worked at the time for **Community Alliance** with Family Farmers. Both were captivated by local, organic farming - and winemaking. "We started dating in August and we made wine together in September," he says.

After school, he began consulting and was hired by the **Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission** to develop a sustainability program that has since become a statewide model. In 2002, he finally headed to Napa Valley.

The client roster grew. It now includes Araujo, Spottswoode, **David Arthur** and Chappellet, in addition to Stag's Leap. But the Matthiassons had been making wine all along. As the vineyardist, Steve could sit in on tastings of some of Napa's top wines and absorb advice from the other side.

"If I were the consulting winemaker, I'd tell them what to do," he says. "But I'm the vineyard guy, so I get to go in and see what they're doing."

His moment of reckoning came during a 2005 trip to Friuli organized by **George Vare**, co-founder of Luna Vineyards. Though his fellow travelers (notably Abe Schoener of Scholium Project) were intrigued by the region's radical techniques - skin fermentations and archaic vessels - Matthiasson was captivated by producers like Miani. He realized he could make a wine with searing acidity and freshness, but also a rich texture that played to California's bold fruit.

"In Friuli," he says, "I realized that I didn't have to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Upon returning he and Jill hunted down special texture-enhancing Boutes barrels and located some of the smidgen of Ribolla Gialla being grown in California. That, plus some ripe Semillon, allowed him to pick earlier without sacrificing depth.

In December 2006, they took their wine plans another step forward and bought a small parcel tucked behind a subdivision just west of the city of Napa. They began refurbishing their yellow 1903 farmhouse, planting fruit trees and acquiring sheep and chickens. Steve is turning a drainage ditch into a wildlife corridor to attract beneficial insects.

In addition to running their wine business and keeping an eye on their two sons, Jill grows organic stone fruit and sells it at the Napa farmers' market.

The couple also began replanting the property's 3 1/2 acres of vineyard. An initial lot of Ribolla Gialla - traced back to Josko Gravner's vineyard in Friuli - is being replanted with more robust material, and in addition to Merlot, Steve is beginning to work with a Friulian red variety, Refosco.

None of which leaves much free time. Matthiasson is often on his tractor at 9 p.m. "He does the consulting during the day, the winemaking at night and the farming on the weekends," Jill says.

"For me, it's sanity," Steve adds. "Because I spend all day every day helping other people do what they want to do, saying, 'I might do it a little differently.' "

What he does: Makes complex red and white blends that show the potential for rich, lower-alcohol wines from Napa Valley.

Weeknight wine: Vinho Verde, or an inexpensive Alpine white.

Quote: "People like Mondavi were always admired for trying to beat the drum for wine as part of the table. It's a great theory, but you can actually practice it."

From the notebook: 2007 Matthiasson Napa Valley White Wine (\$35). If you can find the '07, it currently shows more rich fruit and less oak than the (also excellent) 2008. Lemon confit, rich beeswax and green almond are lifted by dramatic acidity.

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