

News (<https://slowinefair.slowfood.it/en/news/>)



MATTHIASSEN WINES: THE VANGUARD OF SUSTAINABLE VITICULTURE IN CALIFORNIA

03 December 2021

FEW PLACES IN THE WHOLE WORLD ARE AS SYNONYMOUS WITH WINE AS THE NAPA VALLEY IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA.

And while the Californian wines we commonly find in Europe come from a small number of industrial-scale vineyards, there are lots of small-scale producers in the region who following a much slower philosophy. [One of the wineries](https://www.matthiasson.com/) (<https://www.matthiasson.com/>) on the vanguard of socially- and environmentally-sustainable viticulture is Matthiasson, run by husband and wife Steve and Jill on the outskirts of the city of Napa.

As one of the first signatories to the Slow Food Manifesto for good, clean and fair wine, we wanted to catch up with Steve to discuss how they have been flying the flag for slow wine for over 20 years both on their own vineyard and beyond.

BEFORE YOU GOT INTO GROWING GRAPES YOU WERE ALREADY INVOLVED IN SUSTAINABLE FARMING OF OTHER FRUITS AND VEGETABLES—WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST AGRICULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND HOW AND WHY DID YOU THEN TRANSITION TO WINE?

After studying the use of cover crops to save energy and fertilizer in an academic setting, Jill worked for over a decade as the Program Director for the [Community Alliance with Family Farmers](https://www.caff.org/) (<https://www.caff.org/>). After that she ran a small non-profit dedicated to pesticide reduction. I worked first in consulting for pesticide reduction in vineyards and fruit orchards, and then for the [Lodi Winegrape Commission](https://www.lodiwine.com/) (<https://www.lodiwine.com/>) on their sustainability program. During that time we grew as much of our own food as possible, and preserved it, including making our own wine every year. As the years went on we became more and more fascinated with wine in particular, though we are still very focused on food.



Jill and Steve Matthiasson. Photo: Marcus Jackson.

SO WHAT ELSE ARE YOU GROWING AT MATTHIASSEN NOWADAYS, BESIDES GRAPES?

We have around 250 trees that grow a variety of peaches, nectarines and plums. Of course this isn't a very significant source of revenue compared to wine, but we sell the fruit at farmers' markets, to local restaurants, and most importantly through our wine club. We'll make jams and fruit preserves with the fruit and send it to the members of our wine club. Then we have around 150 olive trees that we planted 15 years ago, and they thrive in the Napa climate.

HOW DOES YOUR WINE CLUB WORK?

Wine clubs are big part of the business for any American winery, and Matthiasson is no exception: it's a way to connect directly with your customers, without middlemen. We have 1400 members—a number that grew by around a quarter during the pandemic last year—and they all receive two shipments of wine from us a year, in the spring and the fall. It accounts for around a third of our business

nowadays, but it took years to build it up to where it is now. And as I mentioned, it's not just wine we send them: they'll get jars of jam from our homegrown fruit, and even some California lemons which I think are particularly appreciated by our members on the East Coast who don't have easy access to fresh lemons in the winter.

YOU CO-AUTHORED A MANUAL ON SUSTAINABLE VINEYARD PRACTICES IN 1999, AND HAVE CONSULTED FOR MANY OTHER WINERIES OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES. HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED OVER THIS TIME PERIOD?

Things have changed a lot. Back in 1999 the concept of "sustainability" was a tough sell to the farmer community; now it's a no-brainer. The challenge is transforming it from a catchy phrase into real action and progress. I've been very vocal for years, and I think that my credibility as a member of the farming community has helped at least a small amount to move things forward. It's a constant effort, and the definition of sustainability has continued to evolve too: diversity and inclusion were not major parts of the concept 20 years ago, nor was the idea of the carbon footprint.

Consumers are starting to become aware, but in particular it's the wine buyers for restaurants who are now more interested in asking hard questions and supporting sustainable efforts. This mirrors the newer awareness on the part of chefs in how they source their ingredients. In Napa Valley organic farming is now clearly associated with wine quality, and we are seeing some real movement among the top tier of wineries.

THERE IS MUCH TALK OF *REGENERATIVE FARMING* NOWADAYS, BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN IN PRACTICE, FOR MATTHIASSEN?

Regenerative agriculture for us expands upon the modern definition of organic agriculture by also including people, habitat enhancement, soil conservation, and carbon footprint. It creates more challenges for us, which keeps it interesting. We have perennial California native grasses planted for lots of reasons, including rebuilding topsoil, increasing water infiltration, and improving wine quality due to the healthy competition they have with the vines. Hedgerows of native flowering plants increase biodiversity. The increase in wildlife in the vineyards is very noticeable.



Milkweed underneath a Chardonnay vine at Matthiasson. Photo: Matthiasson Wines.

WELL THAT CERTAINLY COVERS THE *GOOD* AND *CLEAN* ASPECTS: HOW DOES YOUR WINERY APPROACH THE CONCEPT OF *FAIR*?

Well, for a start we don't hire seasonal workers. All our 17 members of staff have a stable, year-round job. We've deliberately engineered our business in that way, and it helps that we have different vineyards with different grape varieties that ripen at different times, too. That way the harvest isn't all over in two weeks. Then in terms of bottling, we bottle by hand and we do it slowly; that way we can always go back to bottling when there's not much to do in the vineyard.

HOW DID YOU MANAGE THE PANDEMIC IN TERMS OF YOUR STAFF? DID YOU HAVE TO LET PEOPLE GO?

No: we still have the same 17 people we had before the pandemic; nobody was laid off or furloughed. It was a real effort to be able to do that, but we were creative and found new ways to keep the business going. Around two-thirds of our sales are reliant on restaurants. Indeed, I'd call it restaurant wine, as it's designed to be drunk with food. So when Covid hit and the restaurants shut down

our sales just stopped. Being able to make payroll for our 17 staff was the first that came to mind. Because it's not just those 17 people, but their families too: they're all oriented around the financial stability that their job provides.

We pivoted as fast as we could into doing guided tastings on Zoom, and luckily our initiatives in this arena were quickly picked up and written about by national magazines like Bon Appétit and Food & Wine. That saved our business: we hired sommeliers to help, and though we were suffering from the lack of wholesale we had five sommeliers doing tastings on Zoom all day at one point, which allowed us to ride out the worst phase of the pandemic. Then of course the restaurants reopened and our wholesale business came back. This strategy allowed to retain all of our staff throughout the whole period.



Some of the staff at Matthiasson. Photo: Matthiasson Wines.

NAPA IS FAMOUS FOR ITS CHARDONNAY AND CABERNET SAUVIGNON, BUT MATTHIASSEN GROWS SEVERAL VARIETIES THAT WE ASSOCIATE WITH NORTHEASTERN ITALY: RIBOLLA GIALLA, TOCAI, REFOSCO...

The reason we have grape varieties from northeastern Italy goes back to when I first came to Napa. I was working with a vineyard manager who traveled regularly to Friuli, and had befriended some of the winemakers there like Gravner and Radikon. I traveled with him to Friuli and visited these producers too, and I fell in love with the spirit of the region.

AND WHY WAS THAT?

Wine regions can be oppressively conformist, how producers pressure each other to approach winemaking and farming. One of the reasons that so many producers are stuck in their ways is that they're concerned about how their vineyard looks to their neighbors. But in Friuli it's commonplace for people to stand out from the crowd and go their own path. You couldn't say there's any such thing as a **typical** Ribolla Gialla because the variety of styles being used to make it are all over the board. That variety is inspirational.

HOW HAVE THOSE FRIULI VARIETIES ADAPTED TO NAPA?

All grape varieties make different wine in California than they do in their native countries, and that's a good thing. We would never want to copy wine from somewhere else; part of the magic is finding out what these ancient grape cultivars taste like in our own organic vineyards here in the Napa Valley. It's always a process of discovery.

Compared to Friuli the Napa Valley is much drier—we get no rain at all in the summer. That abundance of sunshine means the ripeness of the grapes progresses quickly. But it's dry farming: the water in the soil from the winter rains carries the entire year. So irrigation is a more pertinent question here, it's part of our terroir. But we don't just do it for the sake of it. Vines that don't need water don't get any additional water. If it's a marginal vine that's just hanging in there then it gets some water. Vines that are truly sick get more water, as do baby plants whose roots still need to extend deep into the soil.

You might expect our Friuli varieties to have a higher alcohol content than their Italian counterparts because of the greater amount of sunshine, but that's actually not the case. That's because we match the vines with cover crops of native grasses that compete with the vine for the groundwater. Because of these cover

crops the grapes can achieve a good level of ripening before the sugar gets too strong. So our Refosco wines generally come in at around 11.5%-12.5% ABV, which is lower than what you'd normally find in Friuli. And that's it: the art of viticulture is trying to grow a balanced vine. Your choice of cover crops is one of the best ways of achieving that.

THE THREE PILLARS OF THE SLOW FOOD MANIFESTO FOR GOOD, CLEAN AND FAIR WINE ARE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY, PROTECTING THE LANDSCAPE AND FOSTERING SOCIAL-CULTURAL GROWTH IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY. HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR BUSINESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR COMMUNITY?

Our context in our local community is everything for us. Jill's work for years, trying to save family farms, reflected those values. How can agriculture be sustainable without people who engage emotionally with the land and with the people who tend the land? The alternative is treating land simply as a commodity.

In concrete terms, that includes simple steps that we'd made, like teaching schoolchildren how to garden, and to cook from the garden, growing tree fruit in a wine region to sell at the farmer's market, or serving on the farmer's market board. Then there are also more industry-focused activities giving lectures to peers on organic and sustainable viticulture. Now we are trying to work on diversity and inclusion, which includes two year-long internship programs we pioneered in 2021, one to provide entry for women into the farming side of our business, and the other to open doors for people of color.

The internship for women entailed starting four women in the vineyard last January and teaching them every viticultural task from pruning to harvest, and then allowing them to follow the fruit into the cellar and make the wines. The program for people of color is called the 280 Project, and for that we convinced a different professional winery and vineyard operation to host the group every week and share complete details of their business, their personal journeys, and how their jobs works. It was a fantastic behind the scenes education and welcoming into our industry.



Vineyard Manager Caleb teaching viticulture to the 280 Project interns. Photo: Matthiasson Wines.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU THINK THERE ARE IN THE SLOW WINE COALITION, BOTH FOR WINEMAKERS LIKE YOURSELVES AND, INDEED, FOR SLOW FOOD?

We have always felt aligned with the values of Slow Food, and we enjoy building community with like-minded folks. So being part of the [Slow Wine Coalition](https://slowwinefair.slowfood.it/en/a-revolution-in-winemaking/) (<https://slowwinefair.slowfood.it/en/a-revolution-in-winemaking/>) is a huge honor for us; we've been fans and believers for as long as we've known about it, around 20 years or so. It's time to shift the focus of the conversation, as although there's a lot of good coming out of the conversation on natural wine, it's too focused on wine as a consumer product sold without additives, rather than an agrarian, community-based, healthier form of engaging with our food and our land. We hope that some of the more holistic, land and culture-based approaches can take a more central role in the discussion around natural wine, and the Slow Wine Coalition has the potential to be a driver of the shift.

by Jack Coulton, info.eventi@slowfood.it (<mailto:info.eventi@slowfood.it>)

TAGS

[California](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/))

[Slow Wine Coalition](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/))

[USA](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/))

TAG POPOLARI

[Slow Wine Coalition](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Coalition-En/))

[Slow Wine Fair](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Fair-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Fair-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-Fair-En/))

[Slow Wine](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Slow-Wine-En/))

[USA](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Usa/))

[California](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/California/))

[Market](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Market/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Market/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Market/))

[Chefs](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Chefs/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Chefs/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Chefs/))

[Veneto](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Veneto-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Veneto-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Veneto-En/))

[Calabria](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Calabria-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Calabria-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Calabria-En/))

[Basilicata](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Basilicata-En/) ([Https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Basilicata-En/](https://Slowinefair.Slowfood.It/En/Tag/Basilicata-En/))

© 2021 COPYRIGHT SLOW WINE FAIR - privacy policy (<https://privacy.slowfood.com/>)

