

**ROBERT CAMUTO MEETS...**

## Thinking Other-wise in Napa and Sonoma

With their hunt for alternative grapes, Steve Matthiasson and like-minded winemakers show that California can do so much more than it's known for



Megan and Ryan Glaab of Ryme Cellars are among the California winemakers inspired by Steve Matthiasson to work with white Italian grape varieties, such as Ribolla Gialla and Vermentino, in areas better known for Cabernet, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. (Courtesy of Ryme Cellars)



**By Robert Camuto**

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I'd been wanting to meet Steve Matthiasson ever since I interviewed him over the phone a decade ago about a wine inspired by the newly discovered Higgs Boson subatomic particle (aka "the God particle").

Matthiasson made Higgs Boson Pinot Noir with Samantha Sheehan of [Poe Wines](https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=Poe) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=Poe] for only a few vintages before moving on to other projects. But I remember his soulful enthusiasm.

"It comes down to awe, really," he'd explained, correlating particle physics with his own journey in winemaking.

On my recent trip to California, I finally did meet Matthiasson at his no-frills winery in Napa.

At 53, he's a man who likes to run down rabbit holes, making quirky wines from European varieties that are alien in Cabernet and Chardonnay country. Now more than 20 years into winemaking, he's nearly an elder statesman in California's niche movement of *other* winemakers who live for learning about and experimenting with obscure vines and wines.

"We got a little earlier start in breaking out of the state of California viticulture [being] dominated by seven grapes," says Matthiasson with a shrug. He's tall and soft-spoken, with bright blue eyes and a white-flecked beard. He directs me to his makeshift tasting area: an open-air loading dock and crush pad where a picnic table is set with bottles and wine-filled test tubes.

"But," he adds, "it's been a big effort to communicate that there are different expressions of California."

In the vineyard around his winery in Napa's West Oak Knoll, he has planted a collection of Italian varieties from the Friuli region: red Refosco and Schioppettino and white Ribolla Gialla and [Friuliano](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/italian-grapes-to-know) [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/italian-grapes-to-know], along with the more common Bordeaux varieties Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot.

Matthiasson farms another eight vineyards for himself and scavenges for small batches of *other* grapes where they are available. He thinks of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon for his label as something like his day job.

"It's what keeps the lights on," he says.

After that is his wine passion: "We do about 25 varieties a year." "Do" doesn't do justice to Matthiasson's meticulous experimentation and winemaking.



The wine that first earned him renown is his **White Napa Valley** [[https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=Matthiasson+White+Napa+Valley&text\\_search\\_flag=everyt](https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=Matthiasson+White+Napa+Valley&text_search_flag=everyt)], which he has made since 2005 from a blend of Sémillon, Ribolla Gialla, **Sauvignon Blanc** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/sauvignon-blanc-57815>] and Friulano grapes.



Steve Matthiasson, who started out as a viticulturist, became interested in alternative grapes that could succeed in Napa and Sonoma after being asked to plant a vineyard of Ribolla Gialla from Friuli. (Robert Camuto)

At **Matthiasson** [<https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=Matthiasson>] winery, I was impressed by a lot of what I tasted—from the Ribolla Gialla (I had been skeptical about this Italo-Slovenian variety in California) to a light sparkler made by **co-fermenting** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/how-can-i-tell-if-a-wine-has-been-co-fermented-50361>] Chardonnay and peaches to his savory, textured and bright Vermentino Los Carneros Cressida Vineyard.

“Vermentino practically grows itself in California,” he quips. “It’s unbelievable.”

**Vermentino** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/vermentino-57633>] —which can keep its bright acidity under a punishing summer sun—is a star among *other* winemakers. But for some reason, it has yet to catch on in the mainstream.

Matthiasson found his place in winemaking working from the ground up. In the early 1990s, he earned a master’s degree in organic agriculture and worked for

years as a farming consultant before setting up his own Napa sustainable viticulture consultancy in 2002.

Things took a turn that year after he was hired by Napa vintner and businessman George Vare [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/napa-vintner-george-vare-dies-at-76-48320>], who had a groundbreaking idea. Vare had brought back from Friuli a dozen vine cuttings given to him by Ribolla maestro Josko Gravner [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/the-wizard-of-oslavia-winemaker-josko-gravner>] and asked Matthiasson to use them to propagate a vineyard in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley.

"I'd never even heard of Ribolla," says Matthiasson, who grew the Vare vineyard (now called the Bengier vineyard) to more than three acres and still farms it organically.

That vineyard not only inspired Matthiasson to start making his own wines and to buy and plant his own vineyards, it also became a symbol of new, no-limits winemaking.

Matthiasson didn't just make his own Ribolla Gialla—which he does with light *skin contact* [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=skin+contact>] during fermentation, followed by barrel aging—but has also regularly sold parts of the Bengier harvest to a handful of *other* compatriots.

Among them are Healdsburg wine duo Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts of Arnot-Roberts. Now in their 23rd vintage and both 50, these Napa high-school classmates have made a specialty of cool-climate Syrahs, but have moved into working with a broad palate of *other* varieties, ranging from a fresh, lively version of Ribolla Gialla to a light, earthy Trousseau, a variety from France's Jura region.

"We work backwards from what we like to drink," says Roberts. "It's a really exciting time to be in California."





At Arnot-Roberts, co-founders Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts have expanded from classic California varieties into more experimental offerings. (Robert Camuto)

The Ribolla cultivated by Matthiasson also inspired another pair of Sonoma winemakers: Ryan and Megan Glaab, forty-somethings who met as cellar hands at Torbreck [<https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=Torbreck>] in Australia. They launched Ryme Cellars in 2007 with a barrel of Aglianico [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/aglianico-57634>] , a red variety of Southern Italian origin.

Today, Ryme specializes in rare-to-California Italian varieties, from Fiano [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/getting-down-with-fiano>] to Frappato. The Glaabs' version of Ribolla is a deeply hued orange wine [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=orange+wine>] made by fermenting on the skins and aging in amphorae [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=amphora>] for six months.

Their most intriguing *other* project, however, is pair of varietal Vermentino wines from Las Brisas Vineyard in Carneros. Labeled “His” and “Hers,” they are based on their two preferred styles of the grape.

“His” Vermentino is a richer, orange version made from foot-trodden grapes that are fermented on their skins before being pressed to barrel. “Hers” is a fresh, fruit-

driven and aromatic classic white wine. The couple currently produces about 1,300 cases between the two bottlings, but Megan says “we could sell 20 times that” were there more good Vermentino grapes available.

Recalling their start more than 15 years ago, Ryan says, “California wines were kind of boring to us at the time. There wasn’t a lot of diversity. We said, ‘There’s so much to explore here. There’s got to be a lot of opportunity.’”

I grew up thinking of California as the land of mind-expanding alternatives to everything that was staid everywhere else. In the decades since, its wine community has found success and joined the establishment. But isn’t this free-wheeling *other* vibe something we want and expect above all from California?

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*Read Robert Camuto's 2022 series on other Italian grapes—from Aglianico and Montepulciano to Nebbiolo and Sangiovese—in California:*

- Part 1: [A Slice of Southern Italy in Paso Robles](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/italian-grapes-in-california-part-1-a-slice-of-southern-italy-in-paso-robles)  
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[<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/italian-grapes-in-california-part-2-portraits-from-sonoma-and-mendocino>]
- Part 3: [Capitalist Kevin and Doomsday Dan](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/capitalist-kevin-and-doomsday-dan-italian-grapes-in-california-part-3)  
[<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/capitalist-kevin-and-doomsday-dan-italian-grapes-in-california-part-3>]
- Part 4: [A Pair of Pioneers Translate Northern Italy into Santa Barbara](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-pair-of-pioneers-translate-northern-italy-into-santa-barbara)  
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