

THE VINTAGE

By Dana Rebmann



Wine on the Wild Side

Sonoma County vintners are letting natural yeast run wild in their wines

Many words are used to describe wine, but *wild* isn't typically one of them. In Sonoma County, however, a growing number of winemakers are starting to change that.

What's wild about these wines is how they're fermented. The majority of wine grapes in the U.S., you see, are inoculated with commercial yeast from a laboratory to start them fermenting. An alternative, however, is to let the natural yeast that lives on the grapes' skins take control. This process is known as wild fermentation, and among its champions is Jesse Katz, the founder of Healdsburg's Aperture Cellars and the first winemaker to be named to the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list.

"Grapes come in with a full package ready to make wine," says Katz, who uses



natural yeast to make nearly all of his sought-after wines. "[The yeast] doesn't have nearly the same effect as the vineyard, the oak, the winemaking, or the vintage, even—it's more of a subtle characteristic that adds to the wine's complexity."

The Sonoma Mountain vineyard Belden Barns has also taken a shine to wild fermentation, employing the technique in eight of the 10 estate wines it has produced since 2012. Co-owner Nate Belden notes that natural yeast gives the wines "more complexity and character." There are risks, however. Wild yeast can be unpredictable and must be monitored more closely than a cultured variety. Belden Barns, in fact, lost its 2014 chardonnay to a problematic fermentation. Still, Belden asserts that it's worth the gamble.

From above: harvested grapes at Belden Barns; the tasting room at Aperture Cellars

"Out of the box, our wines were getting a great response," he says. "So we felt like we wanted to stick to our guns."

Zeke Neeley, the winemaker at the Sonoma Valley fixture Kenwood Vineyards, also found the process tricky at first. "I started thinking about alternate career paths," he jokes. He persisted, though, and Kenwood recently released its first wild-fermented wine, a 2018 cabernet sauvignon made with grapes grown on a property that was once farmed by Jack London. Moving forward, Neeley hopes to do one or two such wines each year.

"Wild fermentation was how all fermentations were done before commercial yeast came along, so it's got a historic and sort of pioneer aspect to it," Neeley says. "To me, that kind of typifies Sonoma County."



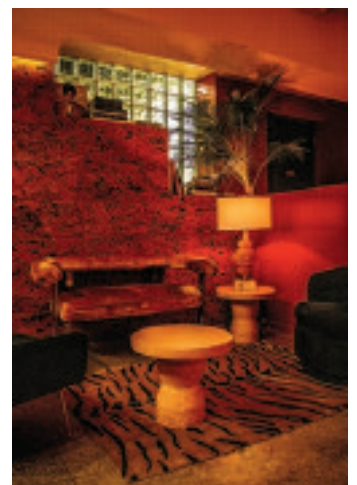
THE HOT SPOT

New York City's La Noxe

If you see stylish folks heading down the stairs to the 1 train's 28th Street station in Manhattan, don't assume they're going for a subway ride. They may just be grabbing a drink.

Last October, Jey Perie opened La Noxe, a bar whose entrance is in that station's stairwell. "I didn't want it to feel gimmicky," he says, "but the fact is we're small and there's no sign on the street. You have to know we're here." Bargoers entering the 500-square-foot space will find velvet banquettes, tapas-style food (*tiraditos*, arepas), creative cocktails (try the Secret Garden, with mezcal, kale, lemon, agave, and chili salt), and an exclusive crowd (maximum occupancy 30). But the real star is the ambience.

"When someone who lives here says it feels like a true New York experience," Perie says, "that's the best compliment I could receive." lanoxenyc.com —LAURIE BROOKINS



Adam Decker (grapes); Joe Fletcher/Photography (Aperture); courtesy of La Noxe (La Noxe)