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Uncorking greatness

CHAMPAGNES OF THE YEAR
Cabernet beyond Bordeaux | California's new cults
Whisky goes into the stratosphere



The new grand crew of California

Adam Lechmere heads to the US West Coast to meet the next generation of winemakers making waves in the resolutely premium world of California Cabernet (and beyond)

Photography by Meg Smith





SAM SMITH

For ambitious winery owners, the magnetic lure of California is as strong as ever. And while Napa and Sonoma remain pre-eminent, the richness and diversity of the terroir is now becoming more and more apparent right up and down the coast. A decade ago, it might have been difficult to make a case for Paso Robles claiming

a place in collectors' cellars. But if you haven't yet tasted the wines that Justin Smith is making at Saxum, or Stephan Asseo at L'Aventure, it's time to clear some shelf space.

Napa and Sonoma, of course, were the lodestones for the first great wave of pioneers that came out west 50 years ago. In many cases, they still are. Scott Becker and Benoit Touquette, for example, took over Napa's Realm Cellars barely a dozen years ago, and they are now making wines of astonishing calibre. The MacDonald brothers have only a handful of vintages under their belts, but they come from ancient Napa stock. Russell Bevan, whose Tench Vineyard parcels share a boundary with the rather better-known Screaming Eagle, is in the first rank of California winemakers. Claude Blankiet has been in Yountville since the mid-1990s (though it's Dominus, whose land he overlooks, that is the more recognised name).

Here we're presenting a collection of wines with impeccable

credentials from this next generation of California prospectors, right across the state. Our criteria for inclusion are simple: the wines must come from the very best terroir, they must be made with the utmost attention to detail and they must be capable of long ageing; in short, they must be wines that no serious collector should ignore, but that might not yet be on many collectors' radars.

Some producers are conspicuously absent. We haven't profiled Bruce Phillips at Vine Hill Ranch, for example, because the Oakville vineyard's profile is high enough already; likewise the ebullient Daniel Daou in Paso Robles. There's no room to discuss wineries such as the excellent (and already acclaimed) DuMOL in Russian River Valley; then there's Oakville's Futo and St Helena's Dana, both of which are crafting poised and ageworthy Cabernets. There are many more: Luc Morlet (consultant to Peter Michael Winery), whose Oakville Cabernet Coeur de Vallée has, like Andy Erickson's Favia, just been taken on by La Place de Bordeaux; Rosemary Cakebread's fine Gallica; the intriguing Ashes & Diamonds in Napa and Terre et Sang in Santa Barbara.

This is a new golden age for California. As Matt Thompson of UK importer Four Corners Wine says, 'There's a new generation embracing the region's history while forging its own path of innovation and refinement. There's never been such a collective striving for perfection.'

Blankiet Estate, Yountville, Napa Valley

'I'm the thorn in Christian Moueix's side,' Claude Blankiet jokes. His vertiginous Yountville vineyards overlook those of Moueix's Dominus, one of Napa's most exalted wineries, planted by the Bordeaux grandee in 1982. Blankiet's 16 acres (6.5ha) of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc were planted on a mix of sandstone, basalt, white volcanic dust and clay soils by viticulturist David Abreu and the equally renowned winemaker Helen Turley in 1996. The vineyards rise and fall around the Swiss-Burgundian's Gothic mansion with multiple different aspects. Winemaker Graeme MacDonald (one of Napa's rising stars – see MacDonald Vineyards, overleaf) makes six wines here, from the Mythicus Cabernet Sauvignon to the Rive Droite Merlot blend, all showing the hand of an accomplished vigneron who knows his land backwards. Long hot days and cool nights add to the complexity, and – this being Napa – the quality is in the detail: they use not one, but two ultra-accurate optic sorters. 'We harvest up to 30 times, one side of the row, then the other. We pick exactly what we need at any moment,' Blankiet says. Compelling wines from some of the finest terroir in Napa.

One for the cellar:

**Blankiet Estate, Mythicus,
Paradise Hills Vineyard, Napa Valley 2019**
£250 Four Corners



Claude Blankiet's Bordeaux blends herald from a site overlooking the exalted Dominus Estate

**Long hot days and
cool nights add to the
complexity, and
the quality is in the detail**



MacDonald Vineyards, Oakville, Napa Valley

Graeme MacDonald (who consults at Blankiet, previous page) and his brother Alex are true Napa: they go back. As children, they played in the To Kalon vineyard, at a time when most of the grapes were bought by Robert Mondavi ('He thought this portion was the very best of the vineyard,' Alex claims). Then in 2004, when they were in their 20s, they decided to take up their legacy and make wine. They now produce 500 cases of a single cuvée at John Kongsgaard's winery.

Their corner of To Kalon is next to the Mondavi holdings of the famous vineyard and just across the creek from Opus One. It's been farmed by every generation of the MacDonald family: the oldest plot is half an acre (0.2ha) of fine, gnarly, old Cabernet put in by their grandfather in 1968; their mom's generation planted

in the 1990s, with the help of Mondavi himself; and then there's their own plot from 2015. Each successive planting is a massal selection from existing vines. To Kalon, mired in legal wranglings, is amorphous. Mondavi owns the name, but others have the right to use it on their labels; the MacDonalds don't, but then again, with a 9,000-strong waiting list, they don't need to. This is some of finest vine land in Oakville, at the apex of the alluvial fan, the well-drained gravelly soils producing earthy wines of great delicacy. Rare wine, in every sense of the word.

One for the cellar:

MacDonald Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville 2019
£700 Hedonism Wines

L'Aventure, Paso Robles

Stephan Asseo moved from France to California in the 1990s. Entranced by the hills of Paso Robles, he sold his Bordeaux properties to buy 127 acres (51.5ha) of rolling barley fields. 'I quickly saw the potential for any Rhône or Bordeaux variety in the elevations, exposure and aspect,' he says. But in 1998 there were few vineyards: 'It was cows, horses and cowboys,' Asseo's daughter Chloé says. Today, L'Aventure, now in partnership with the Thiénot family, owner of Bordeaux négociant CVBG, extends to 60 acres (24ha) of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, with Petit Verdot, Grenache and a basket of Rhône varieties, around a dramatic modern winery. The wines are expressive and opulent, with an Old World restraint (Asseo's Bordeaux roots will out); each wine – from the brilliant Syrah/Cabernet Estate Cuvée, to the juicy Grenache/Syrah/Mourvèdre Côte à Côte – carries an imprint of this style in its DNA. It's a masterful range.

One for the cellar:

L'Aventure, Estate Cuvée, Paso Robles 2019
£71 (in bond) Fine+Rare, Four Corners; £82.57 Mann Fine Wine



Graeme MacDonald (seen above left with brother Alex) shows off the soil of the famed To Kalon vineyard

Tench Vineyards, Oakville, Napa Valley

Russell Bevan loves the red earth of Tench Vineyards for its iron, the minerality it imparts to his wines and its lack of nutrients: 'It forces the vine to struggle.' Tench abuts Screaming Eagle, one of California's most renowned vineyards; Bevan manages the site and takes 20 acres (8ha) for himself. At around £175 a bottle, his wines aren't cheap, but they're a snip compared to his neighbour's, which will set you back around £4,000. Since they started in 2004 ('we destemmed by hand'), he and his partner Victoria DeCrescenzo have garnered a clutch of 100-point scores for their concentrated, finely balanced and ageworthy wines, made from vineyards across Napa (Bevan also takes fruit from Screaming Eagle founder Jean Phillips's Wildfoote in Stags Leap District). At Tench, he celebrates Oakville's ripe, intense, sun-baked Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc; low-temperature fermentation and ultra-fine extraction ensure long, elastic tannins. Bevan is a big man with opinions to match, but his claim to 'aim for the highest levels of purity' is backed up by the beautiful precision of his wines.

One for the cellar:

Bevan Cellars, Tench Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville 2018
£175 (in bond) Four Corners; £252 (2017) Hedonism Wines



Russell Bevan and Victoria DeCrescenzo's vineyard lies next to that of Screaming Eagle

Cornell Vineyards, Spring Mountain, Sonoma

Winemakers love variety, and Henry Cornell's vineyards, high on the Sonoma side of Spring Mountain, are multitudinous in aspect and soil type. 'All our blocks face north, south, east and west,' says winemaker and viticulturist Elizabeth Tangney. 'We see all the aspects in all the wines.' Planted by merchant banker Cornell in 2000, the 20 acres (8ha) of Cabernet Sauvignon (with single acres of the other Bordeaux varieties) are so geologically diverse that Tangney identifies some 20 different vineyard blocks for blending. In the winery, she concentrates on minimal extraction (though this being mountain fruit, 'powerful tannins don't scare me'), with the majority of wine raised in five-year-old barrels, producing two Bordeaux blends and a Chardonnay of exceptional complexity and elegance. This ancient vine land – Cornell found stakes that he reckons date back to the 1850s – was ravaged by the 2020 Glass Fire, and much has been replanted; there's an experimental block of Carmenère, and Tangney has plans for other varieties. One of Sonoma's most dynamic properties continues to evolve.

One for the cellar:

Cornell Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County 2019
£200 Pol Roger UK



Left: owner Henry Cornell and winemaker Elizabeth Tangney (also above, with team) in Cornell's 'multitudinous' vineyards



'All our blocks face north, south, east and west. We see all the aspects in all the wines'

– Elizabeth Tangney, Cornell Vineyards

Saxum Vineyards, Paso Robles

'We sometimes have to wait for the acidity to drop,' Justin Smith tells me. It's not what you expect to hear in Paso Robles, where the air above the vineyards thrums and vibrates in the midday heat. But the Willow Creek AVA is in the Templeton Gap, which funnels cool air from the Pacific, 11 miles away, meaning summer night-time temperatures can be as low as 10°C. Smith, a slight, youthful figure wearing a cap that carries the name of a cattle-feed company, is celebrated for his Rhône blends – his James Berry Vineyard 2020 is a Grenache/Mourvèdre/Syrah that ends with a mouthwatering cascade of sweet juice. Saxum was founded by Smith and his wife Heather in 2002; the solar-powered steel-and-glass winery, its deep caves bored into the limestone, sits in the vineyard planted by his father James Berry Smith in the 1980s. The unyielding nature of the land is echoed in the names Smith gives his parcels – Bone Rock, Rocket Block, Broken Stones, Heart Stone. The wines have splendid precision and acidity. I tasted the 2000 Bone Rock,

from a parcel of old head-trained Syrah. 'We used jackhammers to plant the vines.' It's still beautifully fresh, with a whiff of sandalwood complementing the dark fruit. 'This was the very first vintage we made at Saxum,' Smith tells me. Two decades later, he sells direct to about 10,000 customers, with a similar number on the waiting list.

One for the cellar:

Saxum, James Berry Vineyard, Willow Creek District, Paso Robles 2019
£224 Hedonism Wines



Arista, Russian River Valley, Sonoma

It was in 2012 that Mark and Ben McWilliams bought this Russian River winery from their parents, who had been growing grapes here since the early 1990s and making wine since the 2000s. However, when the brothers tasted their Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, they were disappointed. 'This is grand cru land,' Mark says, 'and our wines weren't up to scratch.' The brothers hired winemaker Matt Courtney from nearby Marcassin, bought their own equipment and moved to a 'truly artisanal model': harvest times are earlier, oak has been dialled back, production reduced from 15,000 to 6,000 cases, and all fermentations are natural. This is a beautiful spot, with rolling vineyards punctuated by stands of oak, beehives, olive groves and paddocks with goats and chickens; a 100-year-old split-rail fence runs through the property. 'When we took over, we had the best material to work with,' McWilliams says, referring to the 9 acres (3.6ha) of Pinot Noir and one (0.4ha) of Chardonnay, all massal selections from historic Russian River Valley vineyards. The wines have power and concentration, with acidity that guarantees decades of ageing.

One for the cellar:

Arista, Two Birds Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley 2019
£109 (in bond) Four Corners



Andremily, Ventura

Jim Binns left Sine Qua Non in 2017 to make Rhône-style reds from some of the best marginal vineyards on the Central Coast – Alta Mesa, Larner and White Hawk, as well as fruit from Bien Nacido and G2 in Paso Robles, a vineyard beloved of Justin Smith at Saxum (see previous page). A burly, quietly spoken figure, Binns is celebrated for the seductiveness of his Mourvèdre and Syrah blends (he's no stranger to 100-point scores). He cold-soaks, uses minimal pump-overs and favours 600-litre barrels 'to limit the profile a bit'. The results are compelling: the 2014 Syrah No.3 is just getting into its stride as it nears its 10th birthday. 'It's got plenty of stuffing,' Binns murmurs. These are big wines, clocking in at 15.5% alcohol and above, but so delicate is their construction, you register not a degree of heat, rather a feeling of latent power, to be released over decades of ageing.

One for the cellar:

Andremily, Syrah No.8, Santa Barbara County 2019
£170 Fine+Rare



Kinsman Eades, Napa Valley

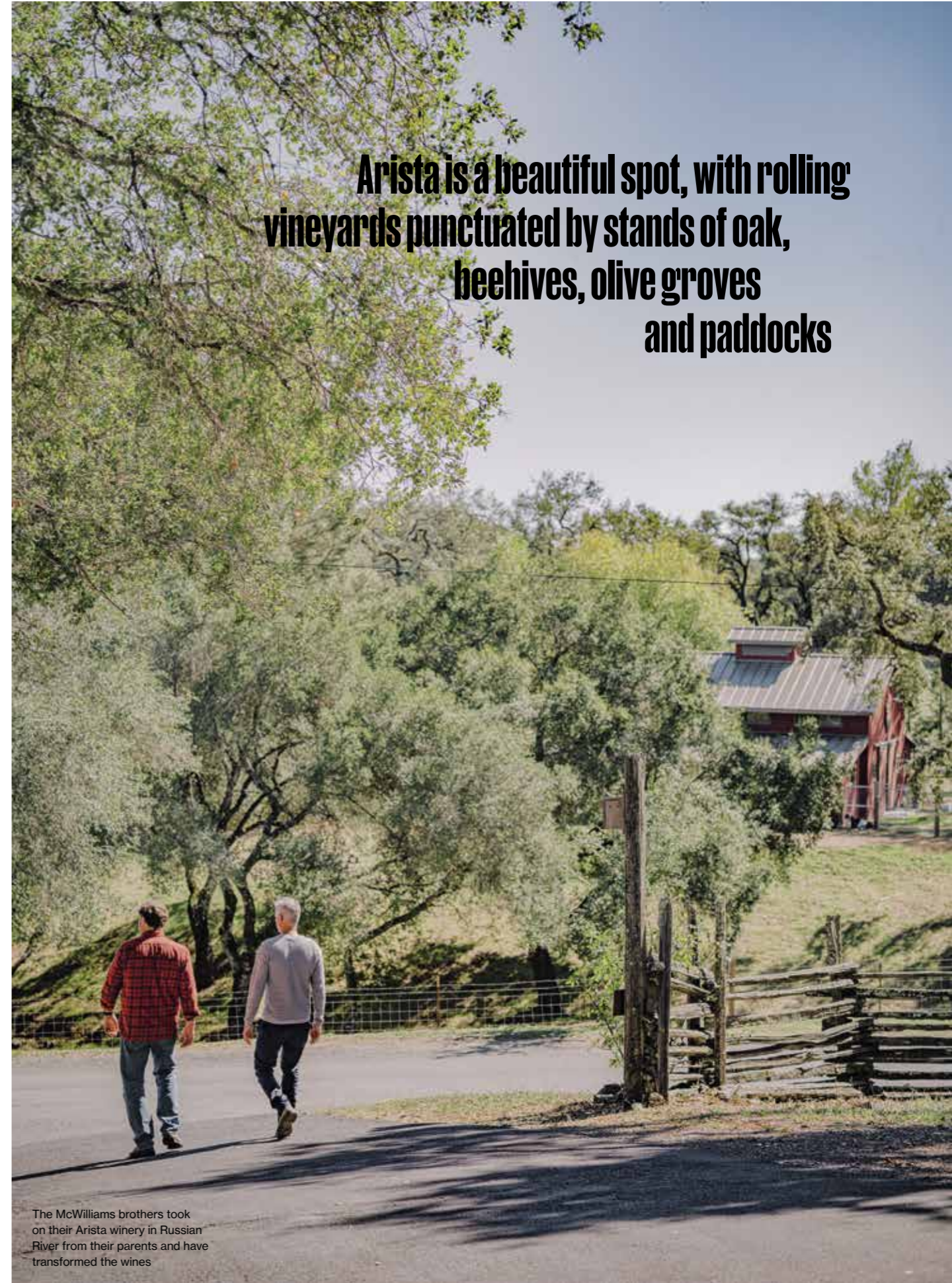
Nigel Kinsman has impeccable credentials. An Adelaide native who fell into wine while pursuing a career in music, he worked at top-end Australian wineries like Nepenthe and Cullen, had a stint in Tuscany and ended up – via consultant Françoise Pechon – as winemaker at Napa's Araujo for six years. He left, disillusioned, after Château Latour owner Artemis took over in 2013. ('I was distraught,' he tells me. 'I thought I was going to be there for good.') No matter; Kinsman now sources the finest Cabernet Sauvignon, plus a small amount of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, from Diamond Mountain, Yountville and Calistoga. Among his wines is La Voleuse du Chagrin, sourced from Calistoga's Geeslin vineyard (the fruit used to go to Araujo, until Araujo was taken over by Artemis, and the wine's name, meaning The Thief of Grief, tells of how upset Kinsman was to leave.) Kinsman's ambition is to make his wines 'sing of their origins': the excellent Anjea Cabernet has a wash of juice, intense acidity and fine-grained tannins, plus the perfume and opulence that can't be denied in this terroir. It is perfectly of its place.

One for the cellar:

Kinsman Eades, Anjea Cabernet Sauvignon, Yountville 2017
£494 Hedonism Wines



Arista is a beautiful spot, with rolling vineyards punctuated by stands of oak, beehives, olive groves and paddocks



The McWilliams brothers took on their Arista winery in Russian River from their parents and have transformed the wines

Winemaker Benoit Touquette (left) previously worked at Harlan Estate; Scott Becker was in military counterintelligence. Now they run Realm Cellars (also seen on opening spread)

**'The era of not
owning vineyards
is winding down. You
need to own the land'**

— Scott Becker

Realm Cellars, Napa Valley

'It's all about time and gravity,' winemaker Benoit Touquette says. He might add the words precision and control. At Realm Cellars nothing is left to chance, which is understandable when you're farming land worth \$1.5m an acre. Every vine counts. Scott Becker (whose first career was in military counterintelligence, and who was taken on by Bill Harlan when he first came to Napa) and Touquette took on the failing Realm Cellars in 2012. The company had started in 2002, buying fruit from top-end growers like Andy Beckstoffer at To Kalon; by 2011 it was facing bankruptcy. In ten years, this impressive pair has rebuilt Realm into a triumvirate of fine estates in three Napa regions via a mantra of 'control, control, control'.

'The era of not owning vineyards is winding down,' Becker says. 'You need to own the land.' Their purchases – Hartwell in Stags Leap District, Nine Suns on Pritchard Hill and Farella in Coombsville – share a common model. In each case, they were bought after a long relationship with the owners: Touquette had been consulting at Hartwell since 2007; they had been buying fruit from Nine Suns' vineyards 'for several years'; and Becker had known Frank Farella in Coombsville since

2006. There's a self-conscious style to Realm – the website shows a bookshelf with volumes by Emerson, E.E. Cummings, Coleridge, Machiavelli, David Hume and (worryingly) Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* – and Napa old-timers have been known to purse their lips at the slickness of its operation. But so what? They make 15-odd wines, all Bordeaux blends and a Sauvignon Blanc, from their owned estates and from fine vineyards like Beckstoffer's To Kalon and Dr Crane (these guys are ninjas of networking). They are pre-eminent examples of the finest modern Napa: marvels of precision, intensity and balance. Robert Parker gave them a boost with a 100-point score for the 2012 vintage of flagship wine *The Bard*, a Bordeaux blend from multiple Napa terroirs that will stay pin-sharp for decades. Realm's holdings are about 80 acres (32.5ha) – for now. 'We're always looking for more land. We're not done yet,' Becker says with a smile.

One for the cellar:

Realm Cellars, *The Bard*, Napa Valley 2019

£125 (in bond) Four Corners ○