

WINE Follow

Could this be California's next most famous vineyard?

By **Jess Lander**, Sta, Writer Nov 23, ^{Gift Article}
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The view west from Montecillo Vineyard on Moon Mountain in Glen Ellen in 2022. Owner Blair Guthrie is on a mission to make the vineyard more famous than Napa Valley's To Kalon.

Ramin Rahimian/For the S.F. Chronicle

Earlier this month, roughly a dozen of California's buzziest new wave winemakers gathered at Wine Country landmark the Glen

Ellen Star to share their wines — all Cabernet Sauvignons made from Montecillo Vineyard — over dinner. “There’s so much talent,” said Montecillo owner Blair Guthrie, gesturing at the table. “You look around and you’re like holy s—.”

It’s rare for a grape grower to throw a party for their winery clients. This year, it feels especially improbable. Relationships between growers and winemakers have become strained by the wine industry’s unprecedented oversupply of wine and grapes. More than 38,000 acres of California vineyards have been ripped out in the past year, with thousands more abandoned. Grapes were left to rot on the vines, as wineries, unable to sell their excess inventory, cut back production and stopped purchasing fruit. Some even refused the fruit they contracted to buy, leaving growers in the lurch.

Yet there was no hint of tension at the Glen Ellen Star. The attendees had swapped their winemaking uniform — boots, a vest and a hat — for collared shirts and sweaters and exchanged hugs and light ribbing instead of perfunctory handshakes.

The vibe is a testament to Guthrie. A winemaker-turned grower — he still makes wine for the Napa Valley-based Stewart Cellars, the winery he co-owns with his wife’s family — he has taken a radically open approach compared to most Napa and Sonoma vineyard owners. “In other high-end, cult-y vineyards,” he said, “it’s uber-competitive. There’s no discussion and sharing.” Guthrie said that he has even signed non-disclosure agreements to work with some vineyards in the past.



Montecillo owner Blair Guthrie, right, shares a bottle of Camino Cabernet made from the vineyard. He sits next to Scribe co-owner Andrew Mariani, center, and Di Costanzo co-owner Massimo Di Costanzo.

Chad Surmick/For the S.F. Chronicle

At Montecillo, all of Guthrie's clients know who else is buying the grapes. He asks for input on the farming, goes out of his way to taste his client's wines, and shares what he's making for Stewart Cellars — all in an attempt to revive the once collaborative culture of California's wine industry. But also Guthrie said he's "been screwed by growers so many times" as a winemaker. Wineries often have little control over the grower's farming approach, and the high cost of grapes are a major reason that bottle prices have skyrocketed in California over the past decade — another contributor to declining sales. Once winemakers sign a contract, their contact with the grower and their vines is typically minimal until it's time to harvest.

“It can so easily just become a transaction,” Guthrie continued. “I don’t want this to be a property where they call me in September, we pick the fruit and then I never hear from them again.”

With this friendlier, more candid approach, Guthrie has assembled a supergroup of winemakers to source grapes from his 51-acre vineyard. By printing Montecillo on their labels, he hopes they can help make it one of the most famous vineyards in California — maybe even “a bigger deal” than Napa Valley’s illustrious To Kalon — and prove that Cabernet Sauvignon from Sonoma is just as good as its neighbor’s. “I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I’ve made wines from some of the best vineyards in Napa and this vineyard hands down deserves to be at the table,” he said. Like the world’s most elite vineyards, he’s treating Montecillo like a brand; it’s one of the only California vineyards with a dedicated Instagram page (albeit with less than 300 followers).

For many years, Montecillo, which has some of the oldest Cabernet Sauvignon vines in California, was a well-kept secret. Just a handful of small, yet notable wineries, such as Arnot Roberts, Turley, Bedrock and Dumol, were granted access. While the old Cabernet vines were planted in 1968, the historic site dates back to 1857 and was one of California’s earliest mountain vineyards. It sits at 1,800 feet in the Mayacamas Mountains, just “800 feet from the Napa border,” said Morgan Twain-Peterson, who has sourced from Montecillo for his winery, Bedrock, for a decade. Yet only recently has the Moon Mountain District, which has cooler temperatures than Napa Valley, started to gain recognition for its

fresh, complex and balanced Cabernets.



A variety of wines wait to be tasted during a dinner for Montecillo Vineyard winemakers at the Glen Ellen Star.

Chad Surmick/For the S.F. Chronicle

Stewart Cellars purchased Montecillo in 2022. Guthrie, tasked with managing the vineyard, switched to regenerative practices and dialed in the farming, which Twain-Peterson said was previously “more old school” and has since “gotten a lot more detailed.”

Whenever a vineyard is sold, winemakers fear they’ll lose access once their contract expires. Guthrie instead opened up Montecillo to more producers. “I tried for a long time to get in the vineyard and basically got what I like to call the Heisman,” said Dan O’Brien, founder of Gail Wines. “I feel like this is the most undervalued (region) in the state. This place is smashed in between Sonoma Coast and Napa, and it’s not in any way (recognized) on that level.”

As of the 2025 harvest, 15 wineries were sourcing from Montecillo, eight of which are new since the acquisition, including Sonoma's original cool-kid winery, Scribe. Outside of two Montecillo veterans — St. Francis Winery and Turley Wine Cellars — they aren't mainstream names: They're small brands with limited distribution, beloved within geeky wine circles and found at hip wine bars or independent shops. Some are side projects, such as the eponymous brand from Meghan Zobeck, Opus One's director of winemaking.

"I'm really pushing for the next guard of winemakers coming up through the industry," said Guthrie, noting that he's purposely not trying to recruit Napa's top wine consultants. "When I think years in the future, I'm thinking, 'Who's going to be the new famous winemaker, the next Thomas River Brown and Philippe Melka?' I'm trying to chase those kinds of people."



Because Guthrie was a winemaker first, he feels uniquely suited to disrupt the status quo relationship between growers and wineries. To land clients, he has aims to meet wineries “in the middle” on pricing so that he can cover his farming costs and they can make a reasonable profit. While his prices are higher than what the previous owner charged, he said nearby vineyards of lesser quality “charge \$5,000 more a ton more than we do.”

The pricing enables the winemakers to “take more risks” and experiment, said Twain-Peterson; paying Napa Cabernet prices, which he said could be as much as three times more, would force them to play it safe. Guthrie believes his strategy is more sustainable than the traditional, hardball approach to contracting with wineries. His Stewart Cellars recently parted ways with a few vineyards because “they were asking exorbitant amounts of money for fruit I didn’t think was good enough.” Not a single producer canceled their grape contract with Montecillo over the past year, he said. His goal is that his clients will still be there “in 20 years,” rather than “having to find new ones every 12- 24 months.”

As the winemakers tasted and compared one another’s wines at dinner, they readily shared information, such as harvest dates, sugar levels and winemaking techniques. These close interactions “makes the wines better,” said Scribe co-founder Andrew Mariani. “There are so many little things you can pick up in casual conversations that

you don't get from other growers.”

Still, things do get a little competitive. Recently, Napa's Di Costanzo Wine got a major nod from two noted wine critics for its Montecillo Cabernet. The recognition is good for Guthrie as a grower, he acknowledged at the dinner, but less so for Guthrie as the Stewart Cellars winemaker.

“I'm happy for Massimo,” he said, shooting a grin towards Di Costanzo co-founder and winemaker Massimo Di Costanzo, seated two chairs away. “I also want to beat him.”

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Jess Lander

WINE REPORTER

Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at the San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Her writing encompasses the California wine industry — from Santa Barbara to Mendocino — with a focus on Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Jess reports on winery and vineyard acquisitions; controversial Napa land use debates; wild[fire]; a growing farmworker rights movement; and Wine Country's most exciting restaurant and tasting room openings. Occasionally, Jess also writes about her favorite food: cheese.

Originally from Boston, Jess moved to Napa Valley in 2010 and has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications. In 2021, Jess published “The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook,” a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic.