

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Robb Report

#26

*An epic Central American
odyssey (where you'll plant a
few trees along the way)

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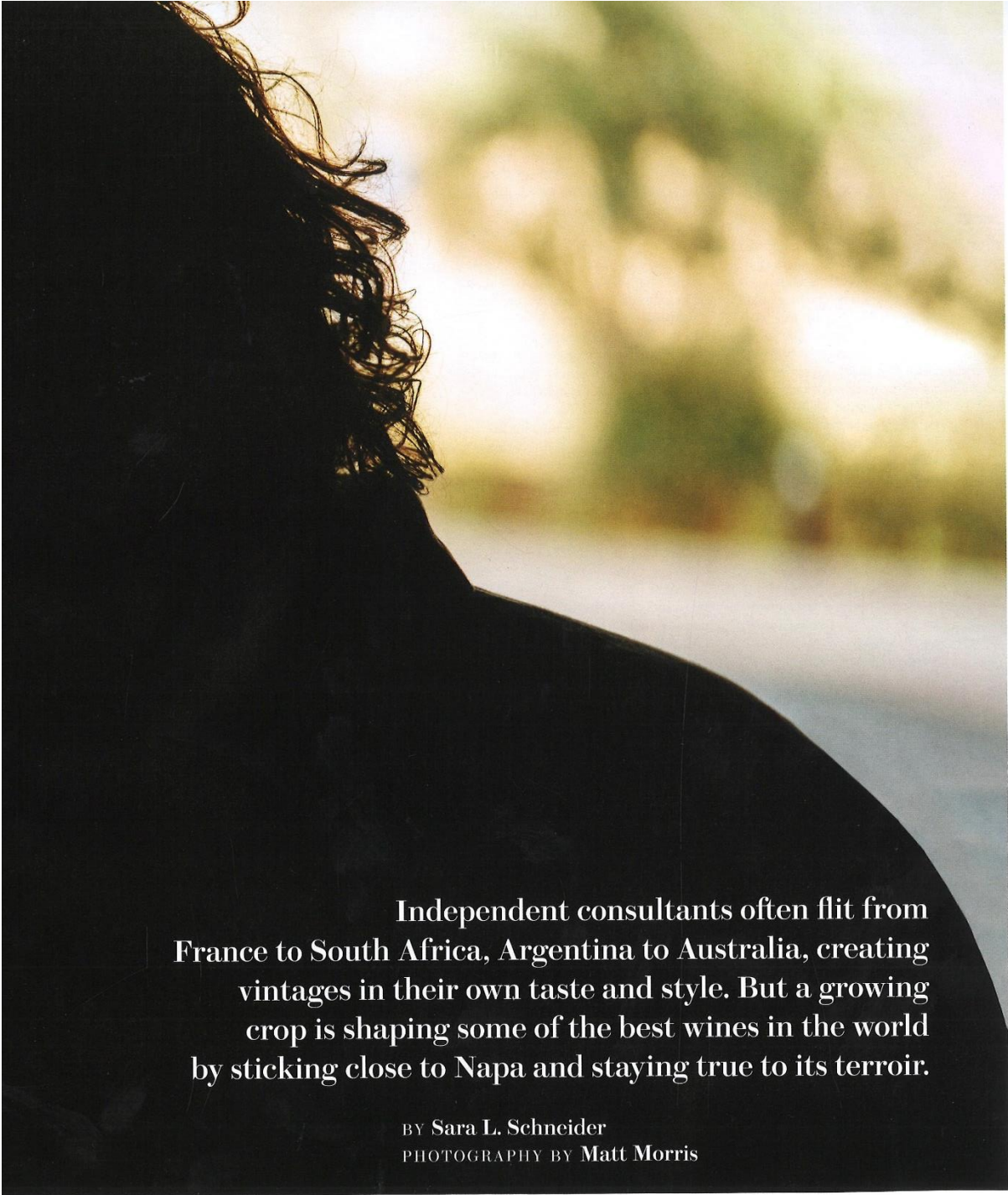


DECEMBER 2019



The Wine Whisperers

Wine consultant
Julien Fayard on
the job

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulder is shown in profile, facing right. The person's hair is dark and curly. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape featuring green foliage and a body of water under a bright sky.

Independent consultants often flit from France to South Africa, Argentina to Australia, creating vintages in their own taste and style. But a growing crop is shaping some of the best wines in the world by sticking close to Napa and staying true to its terroir.

BY Sara L. Schneider
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Matt Morris



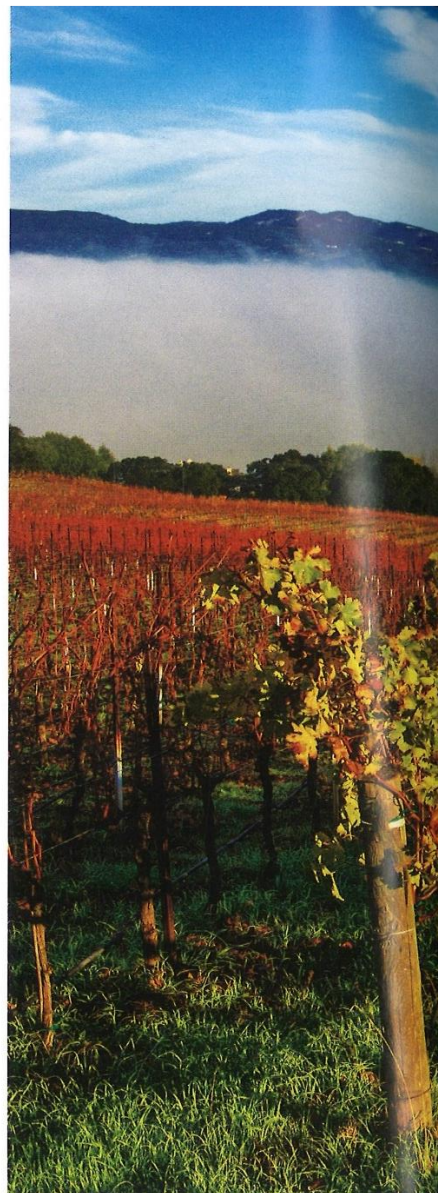
When Robin Lail launched her namesake Napa Valley vineyard nearly 25 years ago, her most critical decision was whom to bring on as winemaker. The choice would be closely scrutinized, as Lail was not only a prominent figure in the wine community, having been a partner at top-tier Dominus Estate, but also a keeper of the valley's history: Her great-great-uncle was Gustave Niebaum, founder of legendary Inglenook Estate. Sought-after winemaking consultants, with world-class labels on their résumés, weren't hard to come by, but Lail says she wanted someone "who would make wine to match our vision and involve us in the blending process." In fact, she started with three winemakers collaborating during that first vintage, in 1995. The competition of sorts was over within months. By January, with that first wine in barrel, she recalls, "I had made the decision that Philippe Melka would be our winemaker." She was convinced that the French-born and -trained vintner, then still in his 20s and a recent Napa transplant, would create wines tailored to

her preferences and vineyards, not mere copycats of wines he'd already made.

Lail Vineyards became Melka's first custom-crush client, meaning he took the fruit under his wing and turned it into wine elsewhere, since the brand lacked a physical winery of its own. But Melka had an estate-winery client in those early days, too—the now iconic Seavey Vineyard—and to this day, the two wines are a study in contrast. Lail's 2016 J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon is full-bodied and rich, with fine-grained tannins (and a perfect 100 points from *The Wine Advocate*), while Seavey's 2016 Cabernet is somewhat more austere, if powerful and complex, with tighter tannins that need a few years to unwind. Each is a product of owner preference and terroir—the French term for the unique character in a wine that comes from the given soil, climate and farming choices—over any hallmark of a consultant's often homogeneous style.

As it turns out, Melka was to become one of a handful of winemaking consultants in Napa Valley whose relationships with clients bucked a trend. Along with Heidi Barrett, Julien Fayard and Thomas Rivers Brown, among others, Melka has decided to stay mostly local, absorbing all he could about Northern California's soil and climate and about his clients' businesses. Charting the annual travels of some of the world's other top winemaking consultants, by contrast, would require the same skill set as drawing an airline's route map for its in-flight magazine. From Europe's old-world wine-growing regions to South America, back to South Africa and, of course, over to our own West

BELOW: Philippe Melka at Dana Estates Lotus Vineyard. RIGHT: Melka and his peers have stayed true to each distinct terroir.



Coast, their aerial paths crisscross the globe as they fulfill typical contracts for dozens upon dozens of winery clients: Fly in twice a year for tasting sessions, and weigh in on blending decisions.

"Weigh in" is an understatement. When the consultant is a world-renowned master, the influence is more than considerable. And, in fact, through the 1990s and the early aughts, when critics began rewarding richer red wines with higher scores on the 100-point scale and American palates acquired a taste for lush, über-ripe reds, those consultants were roundly blamed for chasing that result and, in doing so, of flattening fascinating regional differences into a generic international style. Or their own personal style.

REED KASTNER (GETTY IMAGES (VINEYARD))



Melka, now 54, rejects both a single style of wine and a full-on globe-trotting schedule. With Atelier Melka—the consulting company he launched almost 25 years ago—he committed to building deep, long-term relationships (you can read a lot of face time into that) and to hands-on winemaking by his team of talented young winemakers, including his new partner, Maayan Koschitzky. There's no “Melka style,” Melka says, no formula. “Every wine has a different voice, and each client

is independent, even though they're part of the Atelier family. Our goal is always to make a very specific wine reflecting the geology, topography and microclimate of each site or, if we're blending different sites, work toward a style based on the philosophy of the venture.”

In fact, Melka appears to find the voice of each wine through his relationships, embedding himself and his team in the culture of a winery. Instead of semianual drop-ins, he promises easy accessi-

bility, and Lail confirms: “They respond to questions within the day.” That level of attention, Melka says, gives him better insight into the proprietors' goals. Beyond vintners' preferences and personalities, though, the diversity across the wines in his portfolio is distinctly soil-driven. Put simply, Melka is a dirt guy: He studied geology in Bordeaux before moving on to agronomy and oenology.

Soil analysis, then, is high on the list of services that Atelier Melka offers clients, in the cause of creating wines with a sense of place. But the menu is long and complicated: It begins with winery design and personnel recruitment (if there's an estate winery in the picture) and encompasses finding great fruit sources, as well

“Every wine has a different voice, and each client is independent.”

as putting Melka's own team on the wine-making (for those vintners who have no estate vineyards and winery of their own) and even guiding a winery's brand messaging and marketing. Atelier Melka can help get the word out.

The consultant now has some 30 clients, all but six in Northern California. Both Lail and Seavey are still with him, and if you consider how green he was when he started, that's saying something. During his initial harvest at Seavey Vineyard, in 1995, after Melka pressed the Chardonnay, the owner suggested he feed the residue skins and seeds, known as pomace, to the cows. When it came time to press the reds, Melka recalls, "without thinking, I did the same—gave the pomace to the cows." The glitch: White grapes are pressed before fermentation and red ones after, so the pomace was full of alcohol. "They had the party of their lives. The day after, they were all of them on their backs, legs up. After a few hours of sweet dreams, though, they were able to stumble to their feet and zigzag around the fields."

Melka estimates that he and his team oversee about 150 wines each year. That's quite a reach, to be sure. But there's also a less visible influence growing in Napa Valley and beyond from the Melka orbit, in the form of the talented young wine-makers he has handpicked for his team, then wished well as they moved on.

Robb Recommends

With dozens, even hundreds, of wines on each consultant's roster, selecting a few to try isn't always easy. Here, some of Sara L. Schneider's favorites.

**PHILIPPE
MELKA**



Lail Vineyards 2016 J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$275)

Named for proprietor Robin Lail's father, who inherited historic Inglenook Vineyard, this Cab shows the generous ripe fruit Melka is capable of coaxing into a wine. But a savory vein of minerality adds an earthy quality, layered with cedar, spice, mocha and supple tannins.