

# The emerging Napa Valley cult contenders



*Winemaker Martha McClellan with owners Dennis O'Neil and Steph Martin of Checkerboard Vineyards on Diamond Mountain.*

## BEN NARASIN

**T**he term “cult wine” polarizes. Some winemakers despise the designation as elitist—which it is—and unfairly biased toward a select group of wines, as one could certainly argue. But whether you detest or embrace the phrase, many consumers go to great lengths to invest in, acquire, and enjoy these wines, particularly California Cabernet Sauvignons. To meet the demand of the connoisseurs who collect such ultra-premium bottlings and, often, convert them into auction assets—not to mention the sommeliers who cellar them to add cachet to restaurant wine lists—a growing segment of high-net-worth individuals is clamoring to create them.

The history of California’s cult Cabernets can be read in three chapters, the last of which may be seen as an introduction to a cast of characters who will be featured in the sequels to come.

## Chapter One

The first chapter was written in the 1990s, when what some call the “first growths” of American wine were identified. Releases from Screaming Eagle, Harlan Estate, Bryant Family Vineyard, Colgin, and a few other producers proved virtually impossible to obtain except at a significant premium over their retail prices; waiting lists for direct purchase grew and grew, and list prices rose accordingly. Of course, a perfect score from a key critic was required to secure this “cult” status—Robert Parker’s 100-point rating of the 1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet being the definitive example.

Typically, about 70% of any cult-wine release goes to mailing-list customers, 30% to restaurants. The profile, as established primarily by Parker, is fruit forward, “hedonistic,” and velvet

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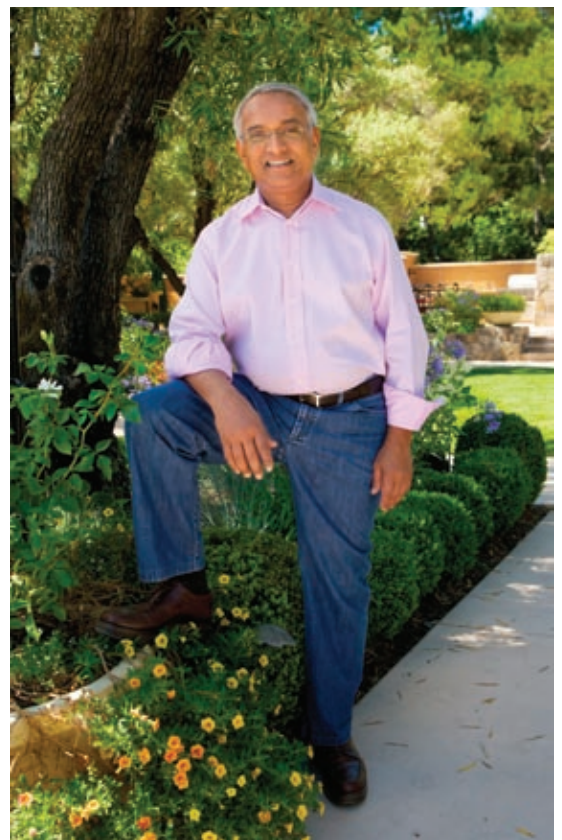
Photo by David Robinson



Winemaker Andy Erickson with Ovid owners Janet Nelson, Mark Nelson, and Dana Johnson on Pritchard Hill (above); go-to winemaking consultant Heidi Peterson Barrett (bottom left); Kenzo Estate owner Kenzo Tsujimoto in Napa (bottom center); Revana Family Vineyard owner Madaiah Revana in St. Helena (bottom right).

textured (with concomitantly high alcohol). The winemaking is the best that money can buy, although the jury is still out on whether the wines themselves will become the stuff of legend, as have some of the earthier, more austere, less alcoholic California Cabernets of the 1970s.

Photos courtesy of Ovid (top), Kenzo Estate (bottom left, center), Revana Family Vineyard (bottom right)



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

**Brand** 2009 \$225  
 Dark garnet with a matte sheen, Brand's current release shows a restrained nose with hints of dark plum. It's much more expressive in the mouth, with a pleasant chocolatey entry followed by a burst of red fruits, ripe pomegranate, tamarind, and baking spice, plus a sprinkle of peppery spice toward the finish. As in many of these wines, the heat from the alcohol is noticeable if not quite unbalanced.

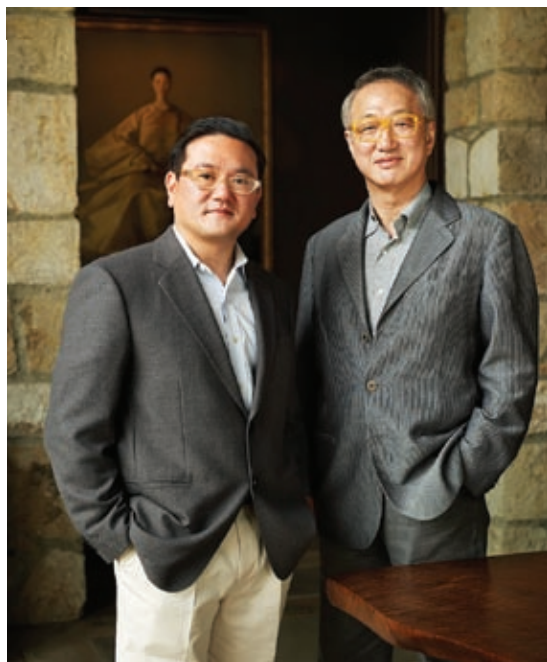
**Checkerboard** 2008 \$175  
 Dark garnet, almost prune colored. The reserved nose reveals notes of cocoa powder and black cherry; the palate is not so modest, opening assertively with dark-chocolate and cherry-pudding flavors. A creamy texture is balanced by a touch of tart pomegranate, slightly bitter cacao, and chocolate-pudding skin. There's a maturity to this wine that augurs well for long-term aging.

**Dana Lotus** 2009 \$325  
 My top pick from this group is also the darkest in the glass, showing as polished black garnet. It's rich and brothy on the nose, with a hint of tomato as well as bright, fully ripe red cherry and juicy wild plum. A smooth entry, rich with mocha flavor, is immediately followed by drying tannins and notes of dark chocolate, red cherry sprinkled with cacao dust, and tamarind; the finish features spice, *crème brûlée*, and a haunting glimpse of tropical fruit. Built to age and develop, this wine is enjoyable now.

**Entre Nous** 2009 \$155  
 Bright as a ripe pomegranate seed in color, Entre Nous has a Bordeaux-style nose marked by a range of dusty red fruits such as cherry and wild plum. In the mouth, a burst of ripe cherry mixes with slightly underripe pomegranate and suggestions of dry spice, as well as a touch of mocha and a vegetal quality. Dry yet silky tannins come through immediately, but dark red fruit lingers on a pleasant, lasting finish with only mild heat.

**Ovid** 2009 \$195  
 Dark as wild-plum skin. Bright cherry and plum aromas are followed by a note of vanilla. The soft, luscious palate is well developed, sophisticated, and nicely layered with red fruits, vanilla, *crème brûlée*, and the tiniest pinch of spice; a peppery warmth builds through the finish. This smooth, contemplative wine is already fully realized, though it may evolve even further with time.

**Tusk** 2008 \$370  
 A bright plum-skin color fades to garnet at the rim. The creamy nose evinces cherry *crème brûlée* dusted with baking spice, accompanied by aromas of plum, mocha, and dark chocolate and a note of star anise. The rich, lush palate comprises flavors of dark chocolate, roasted cacao, plum, slightly underripe dried cherry, roasted mocha, espresso bean, pomegranate seeds and pith, and a subtle, gradually emerging note of Maduro cigar leaf. Alcohol makes its presence felt through the finish. Luxuriance with an edge—a thick velvet robe wrapped around oxidized iron.



Dana Estates representative Jae Chun and founder Hi Sang Lee (right) and salon (far right) in Rutherford.



Photo courtesy of Dana Estates (left); photo by Erhard Pfeiffer (right)

## Chapter Two

The success of these early cult wines inspired a second wave of producers whose bottlings were being added to collectors' wish lists by the early 2000s. Founded in 1994 by Manfred Krankl, down south in Ventura County, Sine Qua Non came into fame with its Rhône-varietal collectibles. Sloan Estate (established by Seattle businessman Stuart Sloan in Rutherford) and Hundred Acre (founded by Canadian investment banker Jayson Woodbridge east of St. Helena) both achieved cult status after their 2000 debut vintages were widely acclaimed. Their wines maintained the style developed by

their predecessors: fruit forward, even jammy, and high in alcohol.

## Chapter Three

In summary, these cult pioneers not only secured renown for themselves, but also established a formula by which aspiring vintners could create wines of a similar caliber. Resource-rich entrepreneurs traveled diverse paths to California from as far away as Korea, India, Japan, and Portugal on their quest for the vinous grail. They include the inevitable wealth managers and bankers, like Futo's Tom Futo and Checkerboard Vineyards' Dennis O'Neil, as well as doctors (Revana Family Vineyard's Madaiah Revana and

### NAPA VALLEY CULT CONTENDERS

*Checkerboard Vineyards' Aurora Vineyard (below left), winemaker Martha McClellan (below right), and winery (middle right); Brand's Pritchard Hill vineyard (bottom left).*



Photos by David Peterson (top left, top right, middle right); photo courtesy of Brand (bottom left)



*Entre Nous owner Kristine Ashe (above) and organic estate vineyards in Oakville (top right).*



*Kenzo Estate vineyard-management consultant David Abreu (below), tasting room (bottom left), and winery (bottom right).*



Entre Nous's Kristine Ashe) and exporters of California wine (Dana Estates' Jae Chun and Tusk Estates' Michael Uytensu). But despite their different professions and nationalities, the owners of Napa's up-and-coming cult wineries are united by their desire to make transcendent wines. For all the polish of their facilities—most of which are open only to private customers—the new cult owners tend to be far more humble, or at least amiable, than one might expect. They share an almost reverent fascination for the wine they seek to produce; arrogance is the exception rather than the norm.

To be a cult-wine contender, you need to start with a staggeringly beautiful estate, preferably secluded and tied to some ancient plot in the Napa Valley foothills. The scarcity of adequate vineyard acreage and the difficulty of obtaining necessary permits may push you into relatively uncharted territory, such as Pritchard Hill. You

need to carve out a cave in which your new barriques can be stored in neat rows no more than one barrel high. You need a well-known architect to design a winery as spacious and luxurious as your mansion. You will probably want to hire a viticulture expert who has already achieved cult-wine fame to assess your property's ability to produce exceptional grapes and, in many cases, to develop or replant the vineyard. David Abreu and Jim Barbour, for example, are in such high demand as viticulturists and vineyard managers that they occasionally warrant mention on back labels (see Kenzo Estate and Entre Nous, respectively).

Unless you have a winemaking background, which is rare among this class, you will need to bring in a consultant. Heidi Peterson Barrett, who made her name at Screaming Eagle, was long the most sought-after authority and remains influential today. Revana, who not only hired her for his launch but built her a facility to make her own wines (called La Sirena), recently disclosed that he has hired Thomas Brown to consult as of the 2011 vintage. Meanwhile, with her husband Bo (of Chateau Montelena), Barrett has founded Barrett & Barrett; the current vin-



*Photos courtesy of Entre Nous (top), Kenzo Estate (middle, bottom)*



Michael Uytengsu, Philippe Melka, and Tim Martin of Tusk Estates in Oakville.

tage, 2008, is openly available on their website for \$250—a democratic gesture somehow foreign to the concept of cult wine. Barrett's even more widely available, lower-priced La Sirena wines continue to deliver impressive results, representing another counter-trend among top-

## NAPA VALLEY CULT CONTENDERS



shelf winemakers: producing their own wines at a fraction of the cost of the premium labels for which they consult.

Bordeaux-trained winemaker Philippe Melka is clearly in the ascendancy. While he works on a significant number of projects—12 were represented at this year's Atelier Melka Portfolio Tasting—and has a joint venture in the newly launched Tusk, he continues to evolve his style and has even started his own eponymous label. One of his clients, Dana, would be my pick for

## TOP CULT CONTENDERS

### Brand

90 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-1199

brandnapavalley.com

For his newest clients, Brand owners Ed Fitts and Deb Whitman, Philippe Melka uses Pritchard Hill fruit to make a single Cabernet Sauvignon.

**First vintage:** 2009  
**Consulting winemaker:** Philippe Melka  
**Current price:** \$225

### Checkerboard Vineyards

4331 Azalea Springs Way  
Calistoga, CA 94515  
(707) 942-4112  
www.checkerboardvineyards.com

Banking entrepreneur Dennis O'Neil's winery also produces a more approachable second label, Kings Row, from its 300-acre estate on the southeastern slopes of

Diamond Mountain.  
**First vintage:** 2006  
**Consulting winemaker:** Martha McClellan  
**Current price:** \$175

### Dana Estates

P.O. Box 153  
Rutherford, CA 94573  
(707) 963-4365  
danaestates.com  
Owned by Jae Chun, founder of Nara Food—the third-largest food-importing company in Korea—Dana produces three single-vineyard Cabernets from the western slopes of the Rutherford Bench.  
**First vintage:** 2005  
**Consulting winemaker:** Philippe Melka  
**Current price:** \$325

### Entre Nous

7668 St. Helena Highway  
Oakville, CA 94558  
(707) 982-8000  
www.entrenouswines.com  
Kristine Ashe's Oakville brand turns out a

Sauvignon Blanc and a serious rosé as well as a Cabernet Sauvignon.  
**First vintage:** 2007  
**Consulting winemaker:** Philippe Melka  
**Current price:** \$155 (Cabernet Sauvignon)

### Kenzo Estate

3200 Monticello Road  
Napa, CA 94558  
(707) 254-7572  
www.kenzoestate.com  
Kenzo Tsujimoto—founder of gaming company Capcom, best known for Street Fighter—produces six different wines with a significant focus on exports to his home market of Japan.  
**First vintage:** 2006  
**Winemaker:** Heidi Peterson Barrett  
**Current price:** \$80-250

### Ovid

255 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-3850

ovidvineyards.com  
Launched by software entrepreneurs Dana Johnson and Mark Nelson, Ovid makes a top-of-the-line Cabernet from Pritchard Hill and an annually released but ever-changing single-varietal wine known as Experiment.  
**First vintage:** 2005  
**Consulting winemaker:** Andy Erickson  
**Current price:** \$195

### Revana Family Vineyard

2930 St. Helena Highway N.  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 967-8814  
www.revanawine.com  
Owner Madaiah Revana offers a single Cabernet bottling from St. Helena, but he's expanding into other regions with Oregon's Alexana Winery and a project in the Uco Valley of Mendoza, Argentina—Corazón del Sol—whose first wines

will be released in the spring of 2013.  
**First vintage:** 2002  
**Consulting winemaker:** Heidi Peterson Barrett through the 2010 vintage; Thomas Brown as of 2011  
**Current price:** \$150

### Tusk Estates

P.O. Box 126  
Oakville, CA 94562  
(707) 944-8355  
www.tuskestates.com  
This collaboration among food entrepreneur Michael Uytengsu, marketing maven Timothy Martin, and winemaker Philippe Melka produces just one wine that's sold only in three-packs, one per customer. It's made at Dana Estates with grapes from seven vineyards scattered across five Napa subappellations.  
**First vintage:** 2008  
**Winemaker:** Philippe Melka  
**Current price:** \$370



*Vine rows (top) and tank room (above) at Revana Family Vineyard.*

the new winery most likely to attain cult status; its offerings perform exceptionally well in blind tastings, such as the recent Napa Valley Reserve tasting in which the 2008 Dana Cabernet Sauvignon Lotus won out against a number of cult pioneers. (For more on Dana Estates, see “Winery Spotlight” in the Jan. 15, 2012, issue.) And Melka’s efforts for *Entre Nous* (\$155) and *Brand* (\$225) deliver some of the best results for the price in this illustrious company.

Andy Erickson, who replaced Barrett at Screaming Eagle after the brand was acquired by Stan Kroenke in 2006, is a more recent entrant in the field of star consultants. At Ovid, his use of concrete in combination with new oak barrels provides a clean, fresh take on the expected lush profile of the cult-wine contender.

Martha McClellan is another rising star. Her work at Harlan and then at Sloan secured her reputation; her current project, Checkerboard Vineyards, is yielding results that continue to trend in the right

direction. Since 2004, with husband Bob Levy (also of Harlan fame), she has produced Levy & McClellan Cabernet Sauvignon, a cult-wine candidate in its own right.

## Epilogue

Ironically, the success of these consulting winemakers has spawned a generation of young and talented assistant winemakers who now handle much of the day-to-day work for their potential competitors. For instance, Dana director of production Cameron Vawter’s résumé shows his passion for premium wines: a degree in viticulture and enology from the University of California-Davis; internships at William Hill Winery, Spring Mountain Vineyards, and Domaine Carneros; travels through Burgundy and the Rhône Valley; a stint at Valdivieso in Chile and another as assistant winemaker of Diamond Oaks in Napa. Revana general manager and managing winemaker Tom Garrett and Ovid winemaker Austin Peterson have similarly promising backgrounds.

These Renaissance men (and women) symbolize the meritocracy of the American wine industry. The future stars of the Napa Valley cult saga are already playing supporting roles in the current story. 🍷