

INDUSTRY ICONS

written by
Kate Dingwall

published
October 27, 2025

SHARE



The Californian Winemaking Couple That Made Regenerative Agriculture Cool

While their avant-garde approach and firm dedication to organic practices have sometimes left them as outliers in the Napa Valley, there's no doubting the deeply important impact Jill and Steve Matthiasson have had on wine



Through their exploration of what it means to make California wine, Jill and Steve Matthiasson, above, have inspired generations of winemakers. Photo courtesy of Matthiasson Wines.

Jill and Steve Matthiasson's wines are *cool*. They easily fit in with what's served at today's hip wine bars—deep orange wines, vermouth, and light reds best served with a chill. They work with off-the-beaten path varieties like Refosco and Ribolla Gialla. They talk of de rigeur topics, like regenerative viticulture, electric tractors, and cover crops.

But when the partners (in work and in life) started playing with these practices and styles in Napa Valley in the late 1990s, they were considered odd. Napa's vineyards were manicured and maintained, while the Matthiasson's were lush, rampant, and alive. Their Cabernet Sauvignon was lighter, lower alcohol, and avoidant of new oak—an oddity in the bigger-is-better Robert Parker era. "How did the hipster burn his mouth? He drank his coffee before it was cool," Steve laughs.

But their approach isn't antagonistic. It's agrarianism. Jill and Steve Matthiasson are farmers, viticulturalists, and land stewards first. Their wines are exacting and impeccable, but their focus is on making the industry more sustainable and equitable. They've championed climate-resistant grapes and viticultural practices. They're guiding the future generation of farmers through consulting work, teaching organic viticulture at the university level, and offering hands-on internships for underrepresented individuals to enter the industry.

Their work, initially thought of as outlandish, has paved the way for others to follow. Organics are the norm now, as are cover crops and terroir-driven winemaking. “The boundaries that Steve has pushed with his dedication to organic farming and championing of unsung varieties has made California wine culture more vibrant and exciting,” says Duncan Arnot Meyers, the cofounder of [Arnot-Roberts](#).

Falling into Wine

The Matthiassons didn’t set out to work in wine. Steve dreamt of farming. He grew up in an agricultural family in Alberta, Canada. “I loved it,” he says. Farming turned into an interest in homebrewing which bubbled into an intense fascination with yeasts, environments, and how things are produced.

He met Jill, a botany student at UC Davis, when she was studying soil health and working at a nonprofit, educating farmers about regenerative farming practices and reducing pesticide use.

By the ’90s, they were making wine. It wasn’t serious—Steve would bring grapes from the student vineyards home. They’d ferment it in their garage for fun.

Their real goal was to build experience in agriculture, save as they go, and someday buy a farm. Then they started doing the math. “The irony is, farming is about value add,” says Steve. “You make more money making peach jam than selling peaches. The same principles apply to wine. In Napa, you can’t really buy land and just sell the grapes—you buy land and sell wine.” Maybe winemaking was their ticket.



The Matthiassons are known for their adoption of alt-Italian varieties, like Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano, which can be found in their Napa Valley White Wine. Photo courtesy of Matthiasson Wines.

Navigating Napa, New and Old

But Napa, where they moved to for Steve’s consulting work, was a different place to make wine in the late ’90s and early aughts. “Twenty years ago, there were very few people who talked about vineyards, let alone if they were organic or not,” says Jill. “They wanted to know where you made wine before. Who did you work for? What barrels do you use? What score did the wine get?”

They worked vineyard-first, which was nonconformist in the Napa Valley, but a nonnegotiable for Steve and Jill. “I was raised by ‘hippie’ parents, and radicalized at a young age by Greenpeace,” laughs Steve.

In the winery, they're guided by vintage, vineyard, and climate. They often achieve physiological ripeness at lower sugar levels—they don't force it—which means their Cabernet Sauvignon is approached with a lighter touch, rarely creeping up past 13% ABV.

“When I first started working with them, California Cab and Chardonnay drinkers were mostly not interested in these styles of wines,” says Ben Hardy, the founder of [Vintage Selector](#), their Ontario, Canada, importer. “It's been great to see the market catch up to what they've been doing for years.”

Lighter Cabernet Sauvignon was unusual in the 2000s. “But this is how the old Napa Cabs were made,” reasons Steve. “At the [1976 Judgement of] Paris tasting, wines were 12.5% alcohol—red fruit, with acidity, vibrant fruit, active tannins.”

“We're not creating something new,” he continues. “We're going back to the old, but with far superior farming than what they were doing back then. Viticulturally, we can have our cake and eat it too.”

Sharpening Italian Accents

While the Matthiassons do make Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay—they are Napa producers, after all—they're known for their adoption of alt-Italian varieties.

It wasn't intentional. “They find you,” says Steve. Ribolla Gialla came to them by way of George Vare, a client who was passionate about the variety and had cuttings from [Gravner](#). Then came Schioppettino. An interest in Refosco was sparked by an Italian innkeeper, who gave Steve a bottle to bring back for Jill. They now work with 31 different varieties.

“There was resistance,” says Jill. “It was a lot of—what is this? What are you doing? Why are you trying to make fake European wines?”

Similar to their style of Cabernet Sauvignon, this approach is also rooted in California heritage. When Italian and German immigrants came to California in the 1800s and 1900s, they planted their home varieties. “This narrowing of varietal choice is relatively new,” Jill continues. “It just happened in the last 30 years.”

“At one point, To Kalon had 100 different varieties, with Refosco being one of their top five, along with Cabernet Sauvignon,” says Steve. “Thinking outside the box is really California’s heritage.”

Those who got it, got it. The Matthiassons turned Arnot Meyers onto Ribolla Gialla. “We both had fairly young wineries at the time and we had a shared, keen interest in exploring different varieties and terroirs in California,” he says. “It didn’t matter that we had only tasted one or two Ribolla Gialla wines in our life—we knew that going on a journey with Steve and Jill would be exciting, and would open new doors for us. Fast forward 16 years and both of those things have proven to be true.”

That work mattered deeply to consumers who didn’t subscribe to the more-is-more style of Napa at the time. Their approach also resonated with California’s viticultural altruists and alt-thinkers, who looked to them for advice, inspiration, and friendship.

“What I love about Steve is his enthusiasm for wine, an infectious sense of wonder that hasn’t faded,” says Dan Petroski, the founder and winemaker of [Massican](#), and an equally fervent fan of Italian grapes. “We’ve been in a tasting group together for 15 years, and every glass he approaches with incredible curiosity and thoughtfulness. That rare combination is what makes Steve so special, both as a winemaker and wine professional.”



Through his work in sustainable winemaking, Steve has become a sought-after consultant for global wine regions looking to raise their viticultural standards. Photo courtesy of Matthiasson Wines.

Leading Future Generations

While their wines have gained a following, the Matthiassons are focused on not just making great wine, but building better systems for the entire industry.

In 1999, Steve was hired to help write the Lodi Winegrower's Workbook. "That was the first iteration of sustainability that became the foundation for the California Code of Sustainable Winemaking," says Stuart Spencer, Lodi Wine's executive director, who worked with Matthiasson at the time.

“Steve had a small office filled with giant plants—it looked like a jungle,” says Spencer. “I remember thinking, what’s going on here? As he explained, the plants were giving him fresh oxygen. That’s Steve—he wasn’t just into viticulture and wine, he’s into living things.”

Following the release of the Wine Institute’s California Code of Sustainable Winemaking, Matthiasson became a sought-after consultant for global wine regions looking to raise their viticultural standards. He flies to Japan and [Armenia](#) to teach winemakers and wineries how to better take care of the land. (Brad Pitt also hired him to consult on [Miraval](#), the actor’s Provence project.)

Today, Steve and Jill are up for anything that helps spread the gospel of regenerative viticulture. Steve teaches organic viticulture at UC Davis and is a sought-after vineyard management consultant. They helped get the [Two Eighty Project](#), an urban agriculture project focused on equity and diversity, off the ground.

Kashy Khaledi, the owner of [Ashes & Diamonds](#), one of Matthiasson’s collaborators, describes him as a little punk rock, rooted in DIY, self-expression, and critical thinking.

Their vineyards are testing grounds for innovation, trials, and experimentations. UC Davis and Cal Poly are currently studying how song birds are affected by sound in the vineyard, while the Matthiassons are exploring things like how trash plants like coyote bush can help dissuade leaf hoppers from landing.

But ask the Matthiassons to name their proudest moment, and it’s none of the above. It’s when they were first able to offer employees health insurance. Or, it may be when they stopped growing as a winery—they hit the ceiling of what they could handle as a business operated sustainably.

“This whole thing was always a dream,” says Steve. “It’s never been about the money. We’re working with a sustainable vineyard on a model we aspired to for growing grapes. Our team is well compensated, has a good life, and we feel proud of the way we grow our grapes. That’s enough. We’re good.”

And their outlier status? They’re working on it. “We make wine from varieties that are very atypical of Napa,” says Jill. “We make wine in a style that’s not typical of Napa. A lot of people have respect for what we’re doing, but we’re still seen as different.”

But look around California and their influence is apparent. More winemakers are shifting to terroir-expressive Cabernet Sauvignon. Manicured vineyards are less common—cultivating a vineyard that’s biodiverse and blooming with life is now the gold standard.

“Napa Valley is better with [Steve and Jill] Matthiasson as part of its legacy—and by definition, more punk,” says Khaledi.