

At Napa's Matthiasson Winery, UC Davis Connections Age Well

Napa Winemakers — and Alumni — Cultivate Close Ties to UC Davis

by Bill Kisliuk | November 17, 2025



It's an autumn day at Matthiasson Winery, and the place is humming. Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson are coordinating the delivery of freshly harvested grapes, crews are prepping the gear needed to crush, destem and begin fermentation, and guests are arriving to taste already bottled vintages while seated at outdoor tables overlooking the Napa Valley.

On one wall of the winery is a 10-by-6-foot mural made by students of UC Davis entomology and nematology professors Diane Ullman and Emily Meineke and retired graphic design lecturer Gale Okumura. "The Secret Life of Vineyards" depicts the bugs, birds and cycle of life of a healthy vineyard.

The mural is a ceramic representation of the Matthiassons' professional passions: The sustainable vineyard management and organic farming techniques they have used for 22 years to make an innovative portfolio of California wines, from Napa's standout variety, cabernet sauvignon, to little-known, little-grown winegrapes such as schioppettino and ribolla gialla.

Along the way, the Matthiassons have cultivated close ties to UC Davis and to UC Agriculture and Natural Resources continuing education programs, collaborating with researchers, hosting student field trips and more. In recent years, Steve Matthiasson has been a UC Davis guest lecturer in organic viticulture.

He said the connection with UC Davis is "a really long, deep relationship that's been integral to the growth and development of our business over the years, and also our attempt to participate in building healthier agriculture in California."

Steve earned his master's degree in horticulture in 1996. He co-edited the *Lodi Winegrowers Workbook*, published in 2008, which helped open eyes to sustainable practices in California vineyards. He has since applied that knowledge as a consultant to dozens of Northern California wineries.

Jill Klein Matthiasson, M.S. '91, was focused on organic and sustainable farming before coming to UC Davis, and once here earned a grant to research regenerative agricultural practices. She performed much of that work at the UC Davis Student Farm. "I learned to drive a tractor, learned to do a lot of things in agricultural research methodology, was hands-on in the field," she said. "The role that UC Davis played for me was huge."

The two co-founded Matthiasson Winery in 2003.

Today, wooden bird boxes are perched at the end of the rows on their hillside vineyard in the Oak Knoll District American Viticultural Area, just northwest of the city of Napa. Cal Poly Humboldt Professor Matthew Johnson, joined by UC Davis Professor Daniel Karp and colleagues at UC Riverside, uses the boxes to examine the role of songbirds in controlling vineyard pests such as vine mealybugs and the blue-green sharpshooter. The work, funded by the Agricultural Research Institute, has found that bird boxes are quickly occupied, the birds effectively reduce the populations of many pests, and the benefits of songbirds are greatest when there is nearby natural habitat, such as the oak woodlands that rim Napa Valley.

Johnson said he is grateful for all 20 Napa Valley vineyards accommodating the research, but the Matthiassons in particular "are very innovative winegrape growers, committed to understanding how biodiversity and farmers can not just coexist, but mutually benefit each other. Having such well-known and highly regarded winegrape growers and winemakers receptive to biodiversity conservation goes a long way to help advance the cause with other growers throughout the state."

A Matthiasson vineyard is also home to U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded research led by UC Davis' Meineke into the impact of spiders on vineyard pests. Meineke enthusiastically reports that "spiders are incredibly diverse on their vineyard, which reflects their support of native plants and abundant vegetation. Those spiders are protecting their grape crops."

Steve Matthiasson said university research is vital, and not just to the family operation. “It’s fundamental to maintaining our productive industry here. We get these challenges that are essentially existential,” he said. He and Jill list vineyard threats, such as smoke taint from wildfires that had devastating industry impacts in 2017 and 2020, as well as the importance to the industry of research in fields as far flung as AI and labor policy.

Their efforts at sustainability go beyond the vines. Steve spent part of this year’s frantic harvest sourcing organic sauvignon blanc grapes for a former staffer, and the Matthiassons often help people land jobs, launch wine labels and encourage those from underrepresented backgrounds to get a start in the industry.

“We try to help people as they enter the business,” Jill said. “We want to use the position that we’ve attained to encourage our own industry to practice business in a sustainable, just and equitable way.”

Professor Ben Montpetit, UC Davis’ Marvin Sands Chair of the Department of Viticulture and Enology, recognized the Matthiassons’ vital work with grapes and Aggies. “Our alumni represent us in the community, so when our students see the Matthiassons’ engaging, teaching and giving back, it sets a standard for them.”

Primary Category

UC Davis Magazine