

Napa's Antihero

Just an average guy bucking the wine country norm.

"Through the rabbit hole" is how Steve Matthiasson describes the path to his home—a drive down an alley in a boring subdivision of the town of Napa that opens up into a wonderland of wildflowers and grapevines. This exploration is like discovering Matthiasson himself, a normal-looking, soft-spoken guy who shows no outward sign of being one of Napa Valley's most buzzed-about winemakers.

In a part of the country that is still best known for the wineries parked along Highway 29 that hawk a mostly homogeneous collection of big, jammy fruit bombs, Matthiasson is making his name for his audaciously subtle touch. He crafts nothing like an inky \$800 cult-wine bottle of Screaming Eagle; in fact, just the opposite. His wines have a focus on structure and acidity that appeals to a growing group of followers, including sommeliers such as Chris Deegan of Nopa and Raj Parr of RN74.

By day, the easygoing Matthiasson is an in-demand and progressive vineyard manager for some of Napa's top estates, such as Araujo and Chappellet. But for his own eponymous, comparatively small label, he champions the underdog grapes, including obscure Italian varieties such as ribolla gialla, tocai friulano, and refosco, as well as underappreciated Napa reds such as cabernet franc. He's part of a tiny but growing cadre of experimental Napa winemakers—including Abe Schoener of Scholium Project and



Steve Matthiasson and his wife, Jill, enjoy the fruits of his labor in their Napa vineyard.

DRINK THIS:

Matthiasson White Blend (\$35)

An idiosyncratic but delicious blend of ribolla, friulano, semillon, sauvignon blanc, and tocai. It's creamy and mineral, with floral and honeyed notes. AT ARLEQUIN, 384A HAYES ST. (NEAR GOUGH ST), 415-863-1104

Dan Petroski of Massiccan—guys who strive to make wines with a sense of independence.

Though Matthiasson has been making tiny amounts of wine for years, he's recently broken through to a more discerning public that craves wines outside California's predictable categories. "These are the new wave—the most exciting wines from Napa in years," says Ian Becker, wine director of the Absinthe Group (Absinthe, Boxing Room, and Arlequin). "But it's only been recently that they've started to sell."

Though Matthiasson's reds, including a cabernet, have a pithiness you won't often find in Napa, the fact that his most successful wine is an esoteric white blend is proof that he's on to something. "We never thought we were going to sell this crazy white," he says. "But don't underestimate people."



Sure Shots Three to Hoist Now

THE WINE Duckhorn Sauvignon Blanc 2011 (\$28)

California sauvignon blancs are a bit of a crapshoot: Some are crisp and steely, while others are creamy and rich. But St. Helena-based winery Duckhorn finds a great compromise, with an S.B. that's zesty with a refreshing zip. AT WINE IMPRESSION, 3461 CALIFORNIA ST. (NEAR LOCUST ST), 415-221-9463

THE BEER Russian River Brewing Row 2, Hill 56 (\$5, 16.9 ounces)

Following the trend of single-vineyard wines and single-cask whiskeys is this gorgeous single-hop-yard beer. The taste is sharp, with pine and mint notes overlaid with bright citrus and a lush texture. AT CITY BEER STORE, 1168 FOLSOM ST. (NEAR 8TH ST), 415-503-1033

THE SPIRIT Bombay Sapphire East (\$11 per glass)

Bombay's newest has an infusion of Vietnamese black peppercorns and lemongrass. The result is spicy gin with citrus notes and an earthy core—perfect with tonic and lime. Not available in stores yet, so you'll have to try it at S & P Brasserie. AT THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL, 222 SANSOME ST. (NEAR CALIFORNIA ST), 415-276-9888