

The Grapemakers: People Behind Napa Valley Harvest

Posted by JILL BARTH on SEPTEMBER 12, 2017



During a recent trip to Napa, I heard this phrase frequently: in the industry – Some of us in the industry get together for a tasting. We offer a special price for others in the industry. My husband and I are both in the industry.

People in Napa Valley wine country associate with one another on these terms, sharing experiences and sips with others that earn a living in the wine world. The overall payroll is no small number; approximately 46,000 Napa County residents* are employed with the local wine industry. The economic impact of these jobs is significant: more than \$13 billion locally and more than \$50 billion in the U.S*. September is California Wine Month – a busy month with harvest and crush and lots of capable hands at work. While the Napa-effect of perfection in hospitality, style and world-class wine may appear at times effortless, it is the creative and physical energy of many minds and hands – in the vines, in the cellar, in the office, in the kitchen and in the trucks. Here we meet a few of the professionals that bring Napa wine to life:



Gabriela Solano Castillo is a Vineyard Worker at Rudd Oakville Estate, Courtesy: Napa Valley Vintners

Gabriela Solano Castillo is the first place winner of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers' (NVG) and Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation's 16th Annual Napa County Pruning Contest held earlier this year at Beringer's Gamble Ranch. 2017 marks her 12th harvest; she's been in Napa for about 11 years, previously she resided in Lod. Rudd Oakville Estates says of their people, "We celebrate value creation, innovation, continuous improvement, hard work, integrity and results." Of her work, Solano Castillo shares, "Working in the vineyard can be challenging and tiring, but overall it's a wonderful experience. All that hard work shows in the bottle of wine. It makes us feel very proud when we see the final result of quality not quantity."

Joel Antonio was brought to California by his brother at the age of 17. He'd grown up in a small village in Oaxaca, Mexico, but earned an American education – on which he continues to focus – after arriving in California. Antonio has been with Alpha Omega since 2014, an estate with a focus on philanthropy, including support for Jameson Animal Rescue Ranch, Rutherford Dust Society, Auction Napa Valley and many more. Of his work, Antonio shares, "How the vines are managed affects how hard the winemakers will work later. They say wine is made on the vine, and I work hard to bring forth the best fruit possible. My team and I call ourselves 'the grapemakers,' and we truly try to live up to that."



Joel Antonio is a Viticulturist at Alpha Omega, Courtesy: Napa Valley Vintners



James Revie is Assistant Winemaker at Spottswoode Estate, Courtesy: Napa Valley Vintners

James Revie hails from Australia, where he first fell in love with winemaking after working a harvest. He couldn't get enough of Spottswoode's Cabernet Sauvignons and made it his goal to learn how they did it. Now he knows for sure – in the position of assistant winemaker. "Spottswoode Estate's success is due in large part to a dedicated group of individuals who share a passion for producing exceptional wine," say the leaders at the winery. Of the harvest, Revie shares, "Every harvest thrills me. If a winemaker didn't love harvest, they would be in the wrong business. Each year you work from a blank slate with a fun, fresh set of challenges to solve. We work hard to realize what Mother Nature has given us, and figure out the best way to optimize it to create something beautiful."

The website for Stony Hill Vineyards has a section titled "Team". Found there is a picture of the leadership group at the winery. It's a telling shot of everyone that works there – some are seated on a piece of equipment. Other stand nearby under the shade old tree. The group looks natural, as if each person has their own story to tell in the production of Stony Hill Vineyards' wine. José Rodríguez works in Vineyard and Production and has been a resident of St. Helena since 1983; his family joined him 10 years later from their hometown of Michoacán, México. "I enjoy everything about working with vines but my favorite time of the year is harvest because we work in groups and I enjoy seeing the fruit get picked. While I don't work in the winery, whenever I see a bottle of our wine, I feel proud to have been a part of that process. I cared for those grapes," says José,

While 46,000 people at work leave the impression of a movement, of something big pulsating behind the scenes – it is these individual stories that bring true flavor to Napa Valley wines.



José Rodríguez works in Vineyard and Production at Stony Hill Vineyard, Courtesy: Napa Valley Vintners