

GENTRY DESTINATIONS

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DECEMBER/JANUARY 2017



GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Risk taking pays off
at Alpha Omega Winery.

Alpha Omega is a family-owned boutique winery located on Highway 29 in the legendary Rutherford Bench. Founded in 2006 by vintners Robin and Michelle Baggett, the winery has developed a reputation for world-class, Bordeaux-style wines that uniquely express the terroir of Napa Valley's most famous grape-growing lots (think Thomas Vineyard in Rutherford, Beckstoffer To Kalon in Oakville, and Stagecoach in Atlas Peak).

The handcrafted wines are the work of Alpha Omega's talented winemaker, Jean Hoefliger, and eminent winemaking consultant Michel Rolland. The two men have been at the helm since just after the winery's debut, having come from a similar collaboration at Newton Vineyard down the road.

Born and raised in Switzerland, Jean Hoefliger gained global winemaking experience in Bordeaux, at the esteemed estates of Chateau Lynch-Bages and Chateau Carbonnieux, and at Meerlust in South Africa. He likes pushing the envelope, and thinks it's a good thing to reinvent the wheel. He exhibits a "high-risk" winemaking style, characterized by long, natural barrel fermentation that takes an average of 10 months and often leaves red wines on skins for up to 90 days (most winemakers opt for 21 to 30 days). The gambles tend to pay off with an award-winning portfolio of wines as intriguing as they are delicious.

Hoefliger and Rolland have different styles. The Swiss gentleman likes his wines naturally fermented and unfiltered, while the French-born is renowned for his propensity to tinker and adjust.

They balance each other, though, and the resulting wines are a beautiful blend of the Old World and the New World.

A *Gentry* favorite is the ERA 2014, the flagship wine and a Cabernet blend that boasts a hue of deep, dark black ink. It has hints of ruby on the rim and a soft, velvety entrance, with touches of dark cherry, blueberry, and clay. We also love the 2013 Chardonnay, a very expressive wine that smells of brioche, gingerbread, and apricot, with a palate of salted caramel, nutmeg, and fresh pears.

The Alpha Omega property is a stunner, with fountains, a tranquil pond, and dramatic views of the Mayacamas Mountains. Visitors can choose between a 60-minute immersive tasting experience (\$65), which includes samples of wine as you tour the property and production areas, or a private tasting with a wine educator for groups of up to 10 guests (\$75). For wine enthusiasts who appreciate history and terroir, there's the unparalleled "Taste of To Kalon" (\$150), a sampling of three vintages of Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon, which takes place in a secluded Library room, the same behind-the-scenes space where Alpha Omega's talented winemaking team comes together to blend its terrific wines.

Open to the public daily from 10AM – 6PM. Reservations required for non-Wine Club members on Saturdays after 2PM and for groups of six or larger at all times. Private tastings available by appointment.

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Q&A WITH
WINEMAKER
JEAN
HOEFLIGER

Describe your winemaking philosophy.

My winemaking philosophy is to always make the most with what you have. Wine is determined by the influence of the climate on the soil, and it's the winemaker's job to follow where the product takes you. Often you can do non-interventionist winemaking with indigenous yeast, non-fined and unfiltered. I say 'often' and not 'always' because I think a winemaker who says 'always' is lying. It is our responsibility to adapt and be flexible. I also believe that nothing is as good as the next vintage. It's so important to learn every year, to try to improve and better the product.

You have made wine in South Africa, France, Italy, and Switzerland but could have gone anywhere. What made you choose California?

The field of wine is inherently conservative, but in California you're not as limited by laws, regulations, or traditions. So I was definitely drawn to this region's entrepreneurial and creative approach to winemaking.

You work with the famous wine consultant Michel Rolland. Can you tell us a bit about that relationship, and what it brings to Alpha Omega wines?

When I met him 16 years ago I said, 'Do you think you've homogenized the wine of the world?' A bit of a gutsy move on my part. We had a two-hour discussion, and he convinced me—with the help of a few blind tastings with others later—that he had not. I really enjoy Michel's honesty. When we first started Alpha Omega, I was working with a different consultant. Every time I would make a wine, the guy would tell me, 'Oh, it's great.' I would go back and remake it, rework it, and the guy would say, 'Oh, it's great' again. I trust Michel. I trust the fact that he will criticize me. I think people, especially in a field like winemaking, grow more from criticism than they do from praise. I trust that Michel will tell me when I've made a mistake and we need to course-correct. He doesn't make the wine. He's a wonderful doubter, so I've dubbed him, 'The Doubter'. We doubt what we do, and we're always trying to perfect the wine.

Cabernet is king in Rutherford. What compelled you to grow Sauvignon Blanc? Rutherford is probably one of the most complicated, uneven appellations of Napa Valley, with lots of different types of soils. When we started Alpha Omega in 2006, my instinct was to rip out the Sauvignon Blanc and plant Cabernet but we didn't have the time. So instead we let it grow, and the result pleased me. When I finally had time to give it my full attention and do soil profiles, I discovered that we have 12 feet of

heavy clay in that area. Clay is not draining enough for red varietals, so I pulled up everything on the property to plant even more Sauvignon Blanc. There's a strip of clay that goes through several vineyards in Rutherford and every single person or winemaker whom I've talked to over the years has, at one point or another, replaced Cabernet Sauvignon with Sauvignon Blanc because that clay content there retains moisture so well.

What is one aspect of your job that might surprise people?

For starters, I don't drink my own wine outside of work. I drink other people's wine. Why do I do that? It is very important to stay aware and sharp when you taste wines. It's good to keep tasting wines from other wineries and regions so you don't develop a 'house palate.' The other surprising part of my job is the fact that every morning I drink—or 'taste,' I should say, since I finally learned to spit—280 wines. We do this to understand the wine and adapt the extraction profile as needed. Big companies, or people who have learned to make wine only in a certain way, won't adapt their methodology to suit the wine. I follow the lead of the product, which means there's much tasting to be done.

What characteristics do you think we can expect in wine coming from the most recent harvest?

2016 was quite an interesting year. It was still an early year. But from late July to August we had six weeks of fairly cold weather with low clouds and occasional fog that slowed everything down and protected the acidity of the grapes quite well. After those six weeks we had four days of 100-plus degree heat that suddenly accelerated the process. We were able to maintain a really good aromatic ripeness with a high acidity. I think that 2016 is going to be quite an amazing vintage but with slightly higher overall acidity, more similar to 2012 and 2014 than 2013 and 2015.

Do you have any advice for someone who thinks he or she might want to work with wine?

The advice is quite simple: follow your heart and your passion. It's good to go to school and learn all of the science and data, but it has to come back to art and emotion. It is very hard work, so don't go into this field if you're not extremely passionate about what you do.

What's the happiest part of your day? I would probably say tasting wines in the morning. When you taste the product of your labor, the product of the soil, the product of the climate, it's extremely special. ♦

