



How Photography Led To A Winery



Jesse Katz and his dad, Andy. (Image: Aperture Cellars)

Behind every winemaker is a good story and it doesn't get any better than that of Jesse Katz. At age 9 he joined his father – an accomplished photographer – on assignment around the world. One would think he eventually would pursue photography. But the photos of California wine country convinced him otherwise. He pursued wine.

“Dad barely knew the difference between white and red zinfandel,” Katz said of his father Andy. “But I fell in love with the cultures and met some influential people, including Robert Mondavi.”

When it came time to go to college, Katz first pursued business and then caved to his desire to make wine. Soon after getting a degree in viticulture and enology at Fresno State, he was honing his understanding of terroir at Petrus and Haut Brion and developing an appreciation of malbec at Bodega Noemia in Argentina.

About the time he felt he knew enough to make premium wine, you would think he would plant roots in the prestigious Napa Valley. But he chose Sonoma County instead.



Aperture Tasting Room (Image: Aperture Cellars)

“I wanted to showcase an area,” he said. “It’s hard to do that in Napa because of the barrier of entry for new winemakers. That’s one of the faults of Napa – it’s pushing out young winemakers because of the price points. There is a level of discovery in finding new areas in Sonoma County.”

He found choice vineyards in eastern Alexander Valley where nighttime temperatures are cooler than those of Napa Valley. The more temperate, coastal-influenced climate here lengthens the growing season by two weeks and gives him the “balance and elegance” he wants from cabernet sauvignon.

He founded Aperture – a fitting tribute to his photographer father – in 2009 and before he was 30 he was labeled an impressive young winemaker by Forbes. He’s not a maverick anymore, but at a still young 36 he is an accomplished winemaker whose wines are turning heads. There’s a two-year wait to get some of Aperture’s most exclusive wines.

We recently joined Katz for a virtual tasting and was impressed by the unique character of his wine. By commanding control of leased vineyards, Katz is able to apply the viticultural



Aperture Tasting Room (Image: Aperture Cellars)

education he got from his time at Cheval Blanc to extract the expression he seeks from the soil – a commitment so important that his front label indicates if the grapes come from a specific soil type. We don’t know anyone else who does that

“The human touch can only go so far, but the place has so much to do with the wine,” he said.

True to his training, he brings respect to malbec, a grape all but abandoned in Bordeaux and often abused in Argentina.

“It’s the most difficult variety to farm,” he said. “You can have a wine that will give green and jammy flavors all at once.”

Canopy management and thinning the fruit allows him to avoid the traps other winemakers walk into with malbec.



*2017 Aperture
Bordeaux Red Blend*

The **2017 Aperture Bordeaux Red Blend** (\$55) is an almost even blend of cabernet sauvignon and malbec. The vineyard blocks he uses are clay soil type, which Katz believes lengthens the growing season to achieve full phenolic ripeness. It is a very concentrated blend with floral aromas, fresh red berry fruit and a spicy finish. Like all of his red wines, the blend avoids the over-extraction that plagues many California wines and instead strikes a silky elegance.

Equally refined is the **2017 Aperture Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$70), which includes some malbec and merlot. Full-bodied, it shows off ripe blueberry and blackberry fruit and finishes with some nice minerality and a hint of dark chocolate. The soil here is volcanic and the steep hillsides stress the vines to make the grapes smaller and more intense.

Katz admitted his cabernet sauvignon has a “green element,” a term sometimes used derisively to describe a number of under-ripe wines from California and even Bordeaux. But in Aperture’s wines, the greenness gives the wine vibrancy and freshness.

“It’s a natural element in all great cabernets. Most winemakers freak out at greenness, but it fades. Fresh style balances it out,” he said.



*2019 Aperture Sauvignon
Blanc*

We also loved the **2019 Aperture Sauvignon Blanc** (\$40) made from grapes from the Dry Stack Vineyard in Bennett Valley. Katz blends 2 percent of semillon into the wine in true Bordeaux style and ages it in oak for six months. It is an expressive, aromatic sauvignon blanc with mouth-watering flavors of melon, apricot, spice and tropical fruit. This is not your grassy New Zealand sauvignon blanc.

Semillon does wonders to sauvignon blanc, but Katz admitted it is hard to find in California. He’s planting his own with a clone from Chateau d’Yquem – favorite of the estate’s viticulturist. We can’t wait to taste the results.

Normally, his annual production is between 10,000 and 12,000 cases, but this year’s fire is expected to reduce the 2020 production to 5,000 cases. Most of Aperture is sold through its website and some of the single-vineyard wines have a waiting list.

Katz cherishes his business partnership with his father, whose photos grace every label and who likes to be involved in the blending. But despite the relationship, the images aren’t free. When we asked how much the photos cost the winemaker, Katz said “pallets” of wine.

We suspect the elder Katz now knows the difference between red and white zinfandel.

Merlot month

October is merlot month and we’ve spent a lot of time tasting this often-maligned grape variety. We’ll have a more thorough report in a couple of weeks, but for now here are a couple of merlots to honor the occasion:



Barnett Vineyards
Napa Valley Estate
Merlot 2018

Barnett Vineyards Napa Valley Estate Merlot 2018 (\$70). Hal Barnett and crew battled fires surrounding their property on Spring Mountain, but appears to have survived significant damage. What a relief because it would be a shame if Barnett didn't produce this estate-bottled merlot in 2020. The 2018 has ripe black cherry notes with distinctive hints of eucalyptus and chocolate. Soft texture and long finish.

- **Supery Rutherford Estate Merlot 2015** (\$50). St. Supery scores again with one of its underrated grape varieties. With just some cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc in the blend, the wine shows off the bountiful merlot fruit: ripe blackberry, plum and raspberry notes mingle with subtle chocolate, espresso and graphite. Luxurious mouthfeel.

- **Flora Springs Merlot Napa Valley 2017** (\$35). Big pure black cherry elements with a beautiful chocolate finish creates a big complex and satisfying wine. Made entirely of merlot and aged in French oak.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr, MoreAboutWine, posted on SouthFloridaReporter.com, Oct. 26, 2020

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly wine column for more than 30 years. Additional Wine reviews on MoreAboutWine

All photos are randomly selected and do not indicate any preferred wine. Listed prices are subject to change

You can send questions to Tom Marquardt <mailto:marq1948@gmail.com>

Always drink responsibly!