

It's in the blood

They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.
Johnny Ray prefaces some family stories

THERE ARE EASIER ways of earning a living than making wine, but few are quite as rewarding. Not financially of course (no one becomes a winemaker to get rich), but emotionally rewarding.

There has to be something alluring about producing something you love in a place you adore. Why else would so many dynamic young winemakers – tender shoots branching out from older vines – either take over the family estate or concentrate on their own winemaking projects?

Some years ago I wrote a book about winemaking families called *Bloodlines & Grapevines*, featuring among others such well-established companies as FE Trimbach in Alsace

(founded in 1626 and boasting 13 generations of winemakers) and such fledgling ones as Leeuwin Estate in Western Australia's Margaret River, founded by Denis and Tricia Horgan. All four of their children are involved in the business but not as winemakers, the reason being that Denis didn't relish having to sack one of them if they turned out to be no good.

Over at Weingut J J Prüm in Germany's Mosel, Dr Manfred Prüm told me that his company was in safe hands, with daughter Katharina firmly in line to be the next winemaker (both pictured below). He believed only one person should be in charge and had picked Katharina –

who read law just as Manfred had done – over her two younger

sisters, who were then to be compensated in some other way. There must have been some pressure on Katharina given that the Prüms have been making wine in Wehlen since the 18th century and are documented as living there since 1156. Or did the pressure actually come from her?

It's not always easy following in one's parent's wine-soaked footsteps. My father unexpectedly discovered that he had become a wine writer in his early 50s, and decades later – even more unexpectedly – I found myself pottering down a similar path. I'm all too acutely aware, though, that I'm not and never will be anywhere near my old man's league. That doesn't mean that I don't adore my job and think myself incredibly lucky to be earning a living this way, just that I long ago accepted that I'm Cyril

Ray-lite – a Blossom Hill or Turning Leaf to his Bollinger or Tignanello.

But how does a winemaker fare when following in father's or mother's footsteps? Do they make bigger, bolder wines or lighter, more delicate ones? Do they emulate the house style or stamp their own identity? Do they seek parental advice or demand to be left to get along on their own?

You'll find some of the answers on the following pages. The question is, will their children be among the next crop of talented winemakers?

Johnny Ray is drinks editor of The Spectator, an author and a wine columnist for several magazines

Katharina Prüm

Dr Katharina Prüm has been the face of the J J Prüm estate in the Mosel since 2006 and still works with her 82-year-old father Dr Manfred Prüm.

Katharina, 37, comes across as shy, but this is merely the reserve of someone who prefers to let her wines speak for themselves. Showiness or fanfare could not be further from this petite, sensible woman who, just like her father, holds a doctorate in law.

Growing up as the oldest of three Prüm daughters, neither she nor her sisters were ever pressurised into taking over the family business. 'That was deliberate on my father's part,' she says. 'He knew from his own experience that doing something completely different was a good thing.' Her upbringing at the illustrious estate was 'very low-key'. Her first real brush with winemaking came as a teenager when her father broke his leg during the harvest in 1996. She enjoyed the work, but wanted to study for a law degree.

During a legal work placement in the US she was roped in to see some clients. Things took shape from there. Her real involvement in the cellar began in 2003 while working on her PhD; gradually she became more involved and fully joined the estate after graduating in 2006.

Has she learned winemaking from her father? 'Absolutely!' She was a guest student for 1.5 terms at Geisenheim University, but says 'most of what I've learned, I've learned here. The approach was totally practical. My father wasn't trained in winemaking either, neither was my grandfather – we just handed everything down without formalised training.'

Katharina is clear: 'I never felt I wanted to change everything. On the contrary: there is so much room for creativity – every vintage is different, every Prädikat, every site; so many small things to tweak. No, I see our style as an impetus to fine-tune. I would never claim that I've wrought particular changes; my ego does not need that, it's a constant discourse with my father and our long-standing employees.'

Watching them together shows their closeness. 'In every family business there are tensions,' Katharina concedes, 'but especially in the cellar I appreciate how long my father has been doing this. His experience is the most precious thing; with every vintage I learn so much from him.' The one big change she has made, however, is restructuring and developing distribution. The wines are now exported to 45 markets

and have increased domestic importance, too. Katharina travels a lot; her father dislikes travelling.

The question of where she wants to take the estate stumps her. 'I just want to ensure I preserve and develop its reputation. I want to acquaint more people – even in Germany – with Riesling. It's a total niche, but we have to make sure we reach the people who have that interest.'

Underneath her no-nonsense demeanour twinkles a sense of fun and vivid curiosity: she prefers to observe, listen and absorb. Speaking about places yet to visit and wines yet to be tasted, her zest for life is clearly apparent.

In the relaxed atmosphere of the dining room of the family home overlooking the Wehlener Sonnenuhr vineyard, trying countless bottles, both blind and open, she seems a different person from the cool businesswoman who hosts wine dinners across the globe. Here, she laughs and jokes, evidently in her element, albeit a quiet one. It seems excitement is something the Prüms prefer to have in their glass.

Two to try

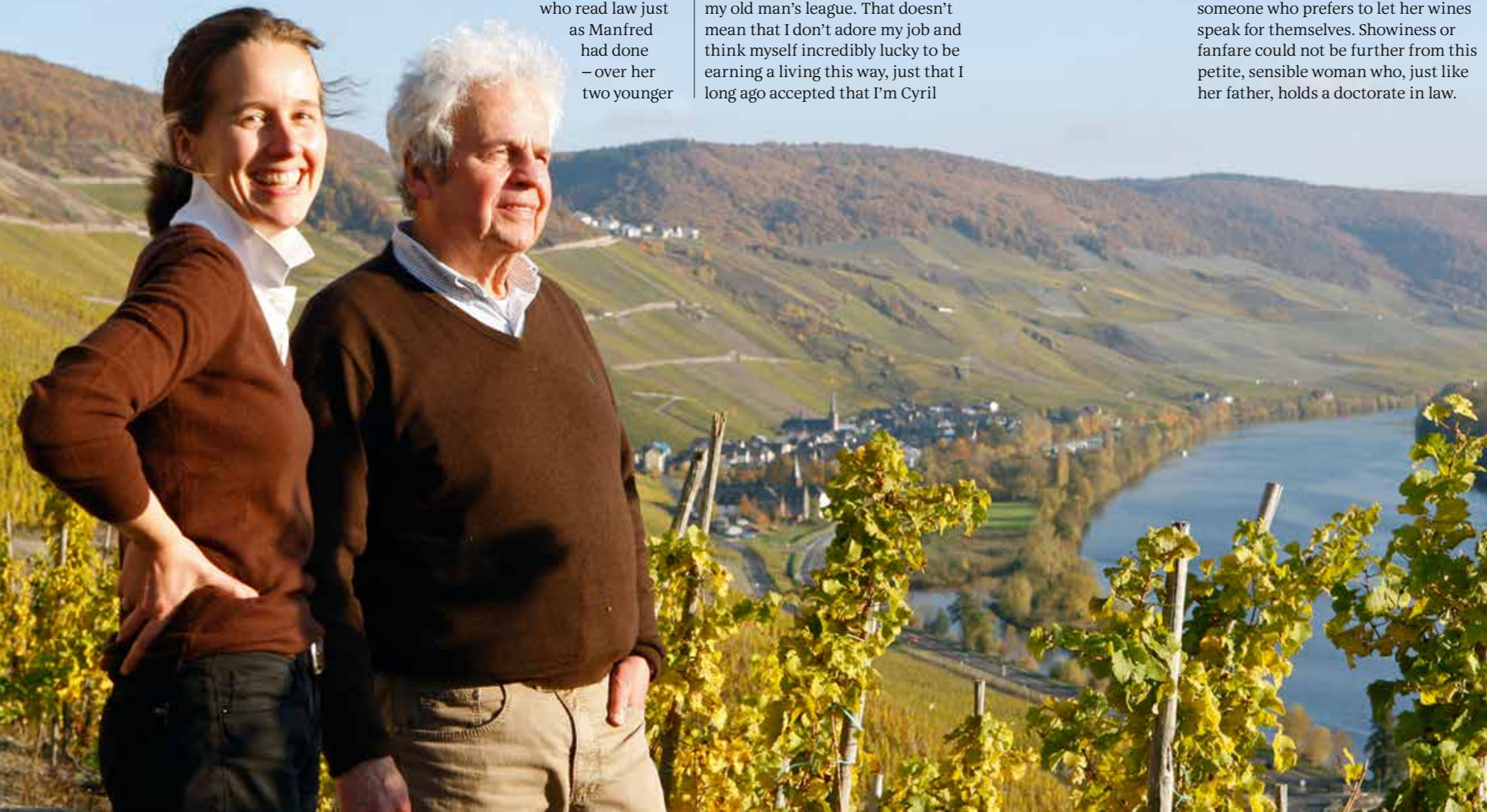
Joh Jos Prüm, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Riesling Auslese, Mosel, Germany, 2004 95

£33 Corney & Barrow, Fine & Rare
Like smelling or tasting brilliance. Radiant and pure, shimmering with dried white currant, and the lifted, ethereal headiness of still-green Seville orange peel. There is great clarity and impact. The sweetness is worn very lightly and brought to brilliance by razor-sharp acidity. **Drink** 2016-2030 **Alc** 7%

Joh Jos Prüm, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Riesling Spätlese, Mosel, Germany 2008 95

£24.50-£30.10 Howard Ripley, Justerini & Brooks, OW Loeb
A little restraint on the nose, with lift and development of Meyer lemon peel and camomile. On the palate, as befits this cooler year, a marvel of crystalline slenderness. So much flavour in such an elfin profile. **Drink** 2016-2035 **Alc** 7%

German-born Anne Krebiehl MW is a freelance wine writer, lecturer and judge >





'We noticed a long time ago that it is better to work next to each other than together!'

Filipa Pato

If you have heard of Bairrada or its leading grape, Baga, chances are you've encountered Luis Pato. The globe-trotting winemaker practically put the Portuguese Atlantic region on the map with tannin-taming innovations such as green harvesting, de-stemming and French oak.

These days, he is not the only Pato banging the Baga drum, or showing it in a fresh light. His daughter Filipa continues the winemaking tradition, and the group of seven leading Baga specialists that she co-founded – Baga Friends – has, he says, 'in a short time put Baga in the world's mind'.

Her Nossa White and Red, flagships of the eponymous brand she created in 2001, are in Michelin-starred restaurants across France. 'We could not imagine this five years ago!' says Filipa, the 'we' being Filipa and husband, Belgian sommelier William Wouters (since 2006, the brand features both of their names).

She attributes the growth of interest in their range to making 'very drinkable' styles of Baga and white grape, Bical. Aiming for 'straightforward, low-alcohol, aromatic, characterful wines', the labels bear her mission statement: 'Authentic wines, without make-up.' Naturally, it all starts in the vineyard. While her father's generation made



great strides in the cellar, Filipa has been at the vanguard of a group of Portuguese winemakers whom you are more likely to find in the vineyard than the winery or on the road.

Today she lives above the renovated 19th-century winery in Ois do Bairro where she grew up. Hanging around her father's workplace in this sleepy village as a youngster, she recalls 'always asking questions' and what 'a big privilege' it was to meet his 'funny' visitors from abroad. Though she studied chemical engineering like her father, her curiosity about the wider world of wine took her overseas to learn winemaking first-hand in Bordeaux, Australia and Argentina.

Keen to keep spreading her wings upon her return to Portugal, Filipa forged her own path with family support – equipment loans and an old winery rent-free. Much as she and her father appreciated one another (and still love exchanging ideas), 'we noticed a long time ago that it is better to work next to each other than together!' They are, she jokes, just like Baga, with big personalities – 'very stubborn and passionate'.

Although her father gave her 2ha of vines, Filipa also bought grapes 'to understand locations, their potential and different expressions of Baga'. She and Wouters have since accumulated 15ha of diverse sites, all on ancient limestone, including old-vine Baga

vineyards due south of her parents' land. Everything is chemical free and, since 2014, biodynamic. Filipa even uses horsetail plants in a spray to advance Baga's veraison, resulting in even ripening and better-balanced tannins that mature at lower alcohols.

In the winery, she maximises site expression through minimal intervention, with no additions other than (minimal) sulphur. While her father is a modernist, she looks to the past for inspiration, using an element of whole-bunch fruit in lagares for gentle extraction, and little or no oak.

Two to try

Filipa Pato & William Wouters, Post-Quercus Branco, Bairrada, Portugal 2014 93

£13.50 (500ml) **Bottle Apostle**
Fermented and aged in amphorae, this gentle, unforced Bical is dry with spicy orange peel and honeyed layers to its delicate white peach fruit. Stony acidity and well honed. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 11%

Filipa Pato & William Wouters, Nossa Calcário Tinto, Bairrada, Portugal 2013 95

£28 **The Wine Society**
Elegant Baga with fragrant violets and a hint of pine to its lively, sappy berry and plum fruit. Powdery tannins with smoky, iodine tones and a hint of dark chocolate on a long, mineral finish. Lovely restraint. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alc** 13%

Sarah Ahmed is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Portugal >

Peter-Allan Finlayson

It's hard to move around the Cape without bumping into a Finlayson. Members of the extended family are in charge at Creation, Edgebaston and Bouchard Finlayson, as well as at Crystallum and Gabriëlskloof. There's also an historic connection with Hartenberg (where the first generation of the Finlayson winemaking dynasty, Dr Maurice and Eleanor, started in 1948) and Glen Carlou, founded by yet another Finlayson.

The family tree is actually a little simpler than it sounds. Maurice and Eleanor had two children (Walter and Peter), whose offspring (Carolyn and David in the first instance, Peter-Allan and Andrew in the second) have continued the winemaking tradition.

Peter-Allan is the baby of the family, born in Hermanus in 1981, when his father was the first winemaker at Hamilton Russell. 'I grew up around wine and saw how much fun it was,' he says, 'although then I was mostly interested in its effects rather than making it.'

The natural progression was to study oenology at Stellenbosch University, but in year three of a six-year course, Peter-Allan dropped out and switched to philosophy and economics. 'That's when I really got interested in wine,' he jokes. 'An arts degree gives you more perspective on the world. Also, a lot of the stuff you learn about oenology at university isn't that useful when it comes to making small quantities of fine wine. But if I'd gone on with the course, it would have saved me from some horrible mistakes.'

Some people assumed that, after graduation, Peter-Allan would join his dad, Peter, at Bouchard Finlayson, the Hermanus winery the latter helped to create after he left Hamilton Russell in 1990, and where he is still cellar master. But given that Peter had sold his shares in the business in 2000, this was a less appealing option for Peter-Allan than setting up his own business, Crystallum.

The first wines, made at

Creation – where owners, cousin Carolyn Finlayson and her husband Jean-Claude Martin, gave him free cellar space – were mostly a 'total f*** up'. Both the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were poured down the drain, although Peter-Allan did make 4,134 bottles of Sauvignon Blanc. In 2008, he tried again with much greater success, using purchased fruit to make one Chardonnay (Clay Shales) and two Pinot Noirs (Peter Max and Cuvée Cinéma). Suddenly, there was a buzz about another Finlayson project.

Eight years on, Crystallum has established itself as one of the best cool-climate producers in the Cape, adding a further four wines to its line-up: a Chardonnay called Agnes, two single-vineyard Pinot Noirs, Mabalel and Bona Fide, and a Rhône blend, Paradisum, that Peter-Allan makes with his architect brother Andrew. Like many in South Africa's self-styled 'Zoo Biscuits' group of producers, he does not own vineyard land, preferring to source fruit from nine separate parcels in various parts of Walker Bay, covering 9.5 hectares.

In 2010, Peter-Allan met his now wife, Nicolene, whose father, Bernhard Heyns, had established Gabriëlskloof in Bot River in 2002. After a period sharing a cellar with university friend Chris Alheit of Alheit Vineyards, he now has a more permanent home at Gabriëlskloof, where he is also the cellar master, effectively combining two jobs. 'I don't have time for long lunches any more,' he says.

And what of his own father? Is Peter proud of what Peter-Allan has achieved with the two grapes that he helped to establish in Walker Bay? 'Every now and then, he'll say I've done OK. He's a man of few words, but it's great to be working in the same industry. I think he's secretly very happy about that.'



Two to try

Crystallum, The Agnes Chardonnay, Western Cape, South Africa, 2015 94

£20.99-£22.99

Liberty Wines, The Wine Reserve, The Wright Wine Co, Winedirect

From vineyards in Greyton and Overberg, this is the best Agnes release yet, combining zesty citrus peel notes with subtle oaking and a creamy texture. **Drink** 2016-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

Crystallum, Peter Max Pinot Noir, Western Cape, South Africa 2015 92

£22.99-£24.99 Liberty Wines,

The Wine Reserve, The Vineking

This is always the earliest release of the Crystallum Pinots, and it's made in a juicy, fragrant, crowd-pleasing style, with summer berry sweetness and whole-bunch spice. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 14%

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'Every now and then, he'll say I've done OK. He's a man of few words, but it's great to be working in the same industry'



José Lovaglio

It may be the leisurely tone of his voice or his direct look, but nothing seems to be hidden behind the eyes of 31-year-old José Lovaglio, who is Susana Balbo's right arm at her eponymous winery. He also happens to be her son.

Balbo is one of the key figures in the Argentinian wine revolution of the past two decades, arguably at the same level as José Zuccardi or Nicolás Catena. Lovaglio, like many other young winemakers, learned with them and was inspired to make wines after seeing – from a close perspective – how things were changing, sometimes in a super-fast and radical way.

In 2002, aged 17, he decided to follow in his mother's path and devote himself to wine. But instead of staying in Mendoza, he opted for a change of air (and perhaps distance) by studying at UC Davis in California. Lovaglio says it was a time of great learning, but also a realisation that theory was just one part of winemaking. 'I learned that to focus too much on theory is like spending years studying for a PhD in geology, when what you really want to be is a sculptor,' he explains.

On his return, in 2007, he worked for various Argentinian wineries until finally, in 2011, he returned to his mother's winery, *Dominio del Plata*, established in 1999 and today known as *Susana Balbo Wines*. 'The most important things I learned from my mother are to recover from failures,

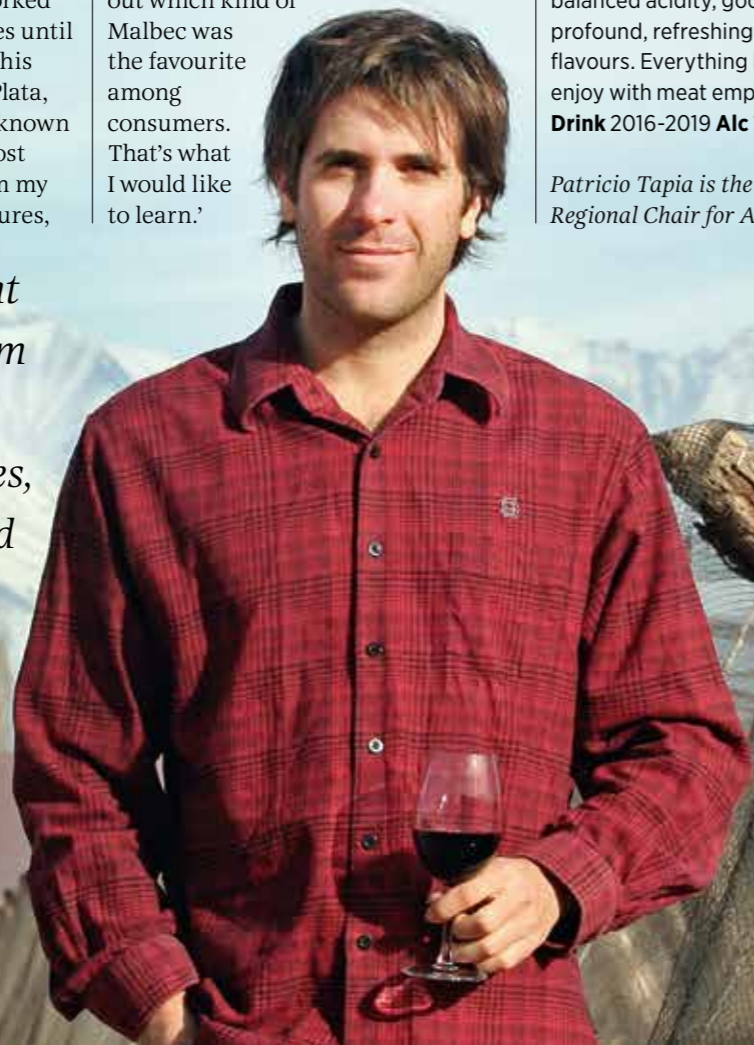
'The most important things I learned from my mother are to recover from failures, to look forward, and to trust my palate'

to look forward and to trust my palate,' he says. 'But I've also learned from her that no one can teach you a style, because that style will only come from your own personal experiences.'

Perhaps this last lesson is the one that Lovaglio has used the most for his own project, *Vaglio Wines*: four wines that in total are no more than 24,000 bottles – very few when compared with the three million-plus that *Susana Balbo Wines* produces annually. 'It all started with the 2012 harvest, as a way of giving myself my own personal creative space,' he says.

Gradually, however, he realised that *Vaglio* could also be a way of telling stories of his own life. From being born in Salta, in northern Argentina (Chango), through his adolescence in *Agrelo* in Mendoza (Chacra), to his experiences at UC Davis (Aggie) and spending just over a year in China (Temple). These wines represent a timeline, featuring the key places in his personal history and the grapes that grow in those places.

'Although all four wines are based on Malbec, they come from very different areas, very different soils. A premise of the project was to find out which kind of Malbec was the favourite among consumers. That's what I would like to learn.'



At the moment, the *Vaglio Wines* project is made in a small winery in the Uco Valley. But that's just a fraction of his time. The rest of his energy is devoted to *Susana Balbo Wines*: visiting vineyards and importers, defining final blends, going to fairs: in short, preparing for continuity.

Two to try

Susana Balbo Wines, BenMarco Cabernet Sauvignon, Tunuyán, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina 2014 94

£19.50 (2012) **Good Wine Online**

A collaboration between Susana Balbo, Edgardo del Popolo and José Lovaglio. This is one of the clearest expressions in Mendoza of Cabernet Sauvignon (90%) blended with Malbec, with its generous herbal and red fruit, details of flowers and a firm, electric, tannic structure.

Drink 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

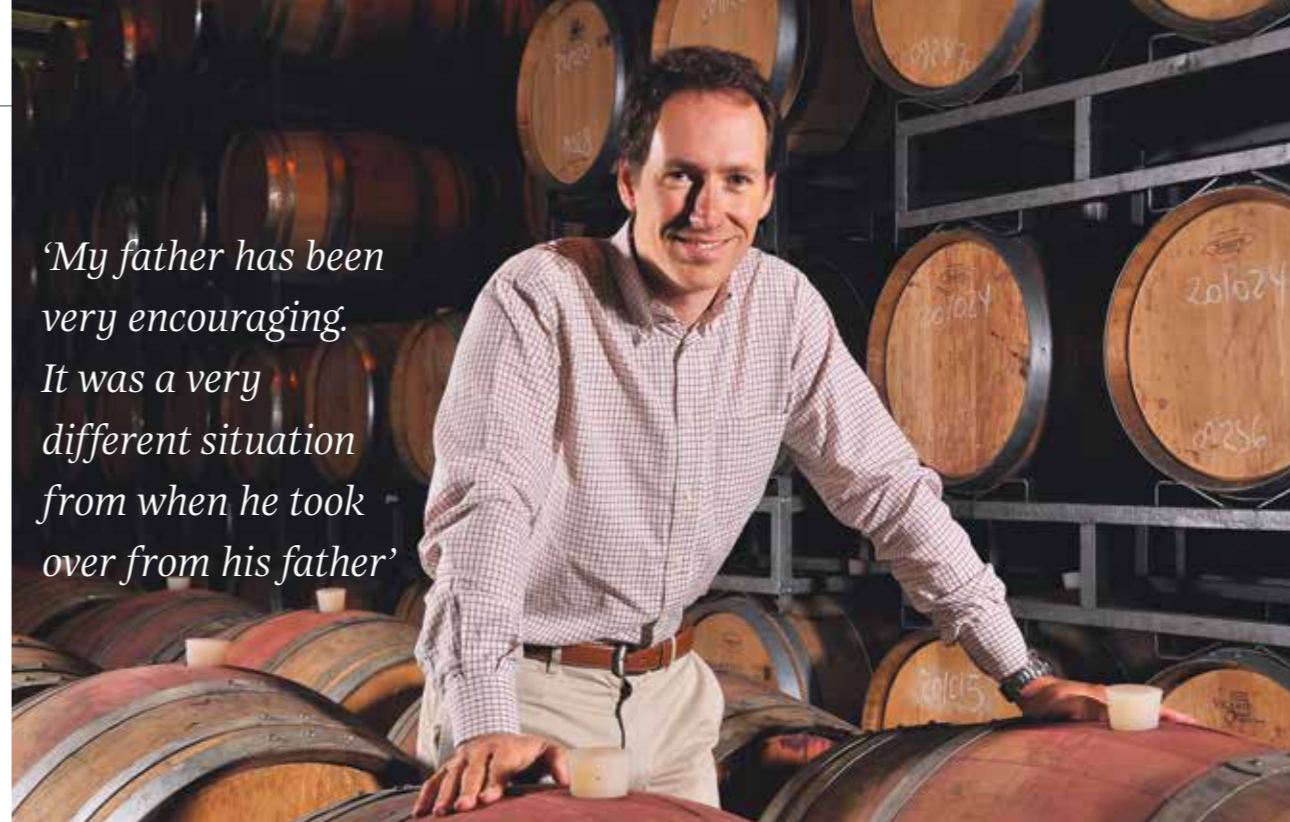
Vaglio Wines, Aggie, Gualtallary, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina 2014 93

N/A UK **www.josevaglio.com**

Filled with violet tones and cherry aromas, this is a clear picture of Gualtallary Malbec, with its firm tannins, well-balanced acidity, good grip and profound, refreshing red fruit flavours. Everything is there to enjoy with meat empanadas.

Drink 2016-2019 **Alc** 14%

Patricio Tapia is the DWWA Regional Chair for Argentina



'My father has been very encouraging. It was a very different situation from when he took over from his father'

Miguel Torres Maczassek

With an enviable level of worldwide brand recognition – they are found everywhere from Michelin-starred restaurants to the social centre at the UN compound in Kabul – the wines of Torres are the essential definition of modern Spanish wine.

Founded in 1870, Torres has weathered many a storm, including an aerial bombing during the Spanish Civil War. But it was Miguel A Torres (Miguel Sr) that brought about major change. Miguel Sr, who ushered in the fourth generation when he joined the Penedès-based family business in 1962, pushed the approach of not only his own winery into the modern era, but also that of winemaking in Spain.

He saw great, untapped potential in Catalonia and introduced temperature-controlled fermentation tanks and modern winemaking techniques to a region dominated by basic wines made in co-ops and sold off in bulk.

Growing the company, Miguel Sr looked towards the future and his children. Two of them, Mireia and Miguel Jr (Miguel Torres Maczassak), have decided to follow in their father's steps, with Miguel Jr taking over as general manager in 2012.

He says: 'My father has been very encouraging with myself and Mireia. It was a very different situation from when he took over from his father.' Despite the relative ease of the

handover, Miguel Jr had to prove his mettle by running Miguel Torres Chile for three years before he was given the keys to the Penedès kingdom.

Miguel Jr has continued and greatly expanded upon the work his father did future-proofing the winery against climate change. 'We've observed a 1°C rise in temperatures in Penedès over the last 25 years,' he says. 'It's an undeniable fact and it's affecting our production, as it's increasingly difficult to wait long enough for maturity without having wines that are too alcoholic and lacking in acidity. We've found that small changes such as shifting the trellis height from 60cm to 90cm have allowed us to pick a week later.'

One of the most newsworthy changes in the last few years has been the company's planting of vines near the town of *Tremp* in the Catalan Pyrenees, at 900m altitude. 'Tremp will be a key region in Catalonia's future. The acidity and balance we're getting from these grapes is absolutely stunning. I'm personally very excited by what we're seeing there.'

The high-altitude vines are tied in with another long-term project. 'Mireia and I have been investing a great deal of energy in finding old pre-phylloxera varieties in Catalonia, and so far we've isolated 46, with six we feel have great potential.' People might wonder why they would

bother, given that many old varieties were abandoned due to being less than suitable. 'Everything we do today has to be focused on climate change, and we hope some of these grapes, once approved for production, will be well-suited to a warmer planet. I'm not looking to grow the company any more in terms of size. My focus is on the wines, and our work with variety recuperation is a large part of this.'

Much like his father, Miguel Jr is looking to the future for his children: 'If I can leave the company to them in an even better state than I found it, I will consider my time here well spent.'

Two to try

Torres, Reserva Real, Penedès, Spain 2010 93

£99.99 **Vintage Marque**

Rich, dark plum aromas with a touch of earthiness, cigar and vanilla. Medium body and acidity with lovely harmony across the palate. Finish lingers forever. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Torres, Mas La Plana, Penedès, Spain 2010 92

£38.90-£44.99 **Handford, Hedonism, The Oxford Wine Co, Waitrose** Herbal notes along with cured cherries and a hint of vanilla. Weighty, rich and textured with excellent integration at this point. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Miquel Hudin is a wine writer, certified sommelier and tour guide based in Catalonia >

Mike Dunn

‘This wine is a homage to my father Randy’, Mike Dunn explains, as he pipettes a sample of 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon. ‘The Trailer Vineyard was planted in 1972, and it’s been at the core of our wines from the start. When we had to replant in 2014, I decided we should bottle this separately.’

Even after 30 months in barrel, the resulting wine remains massive and untamed: inky, uncompromisingly structured, intense. It represents the essence of the brooding, long-lived wines Dunn Vineyards have crafted on Napa Valley’s Howell Mountain ever since Randy Dunn’s debut vintage in 1979. It might be one of the greatest wines the Dunns have made.

‘My dad likes things to be done his way. He’d always say, “You don’t want to work for me!”’

Such a serious a vinous tribute gives some idea of how much Mike respects and admires his stepfather (he typically omits the prefix). And as Mike takes over the reins from Randy in the vineyard and the cellar, he is intent on honouring everything Dunn Vineyards has come to stand for.

Working with his notoriously stubborn stepfather, however, hasn’t always been easy. As a boy, Mike never shared his contemporaries’ eager anticipation of the summer vacation: all he had to look forward to were long hours of hard work during harvest. And throughout the rest of the year there were always vines to be trained and pruned. He never

envisaged working at the winery. ‘I guess I didn’t feel there was space for me,’ he admits. ‘My dad likes things to be done his way. And to be fair, he’d always say, “You don’t want to work for me!”’

So, after graduating from UC Davis with an anthropology major, Mike set up a bike shop in the sleepy resort town of Calistoga. It was only after the premature passing of his sister Jenny in 1999 that he decided to come home to Dunn Vineyards, signing up as a ‘cellar grunt’ – a designation his business card bears to this day. ‘I started on \$15 an hour. Of course, Randy wanted to start me on \$10.’

Mike’s unpretentiously perfectionist and inquisitive temperament soon had him taking an increasing role in decision-making. The spoilage yeast *brettanomyces*, for example, had infiltrated the cellar with the 1998 vintage, and he devoted considerable energy to taming it, changing sanitation protocols and replacing contaminated barrels.

And the choice of new barrels also aroused his curiosity. ‘Randy’s consideration when it came to new oak was always cost-effectiveness,’ Mike explains. ‘He’d only use 50% new, but seek out the most impactful, wide-grain barrels possible: it was about maximum value for money.’

Under Mike, that has changed: the Dunns use more new wood, but choose less aggressive, tight-grain wood, and coopers (from Bordeaux, Burgundy and even Italy) whose styles synergise with their mountain fruit. The resulting wines are just as structured, but more refined; a change that has surprised some long-time customers accustomed to Randy’s sometimes brutally tannic bottlings.

Of course, there have been conflicts between father and son over the years. ‘Buying a forklift and bin-dumper was like passing an Act of Congress,’ Mike recalls, as the

always-parsimonious Randy believed in doing everything by hand to cut costs. ‘And I have to do all the work de-alcoholising [to below 14%. I’d rather let the wine be what it is.]’

Mike would simply pick earlier than Randy opts to. Experimenting with his own Petite Sirah label, Retro Cellars, Mike has found that in vintages when he had to harvest earlier than he’d intended, the resulting wines have become more interesting with age. So though alcohol-reduction will be consigned to history when Mike takes charge entirely, the Dunns’ classically balanced, ageworthy style is not going to change any time soon.

‘My intention has never been to change the style’, Mike reaffirms. And as one generation gives way to another, there is something reassuring about the sense of continuity that pervades this family-run, low-tech but deeply compelling Napa Valley winery.

Two to try

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2000 95
£129.99 **The Winery**

As it reaches 16 years of age, the 2000 Howell Mountain Cabernet is beginning to blossom, its expressive and savoury bouquet brimming with cool cassis, liquorice, cigar box and grilled meat. Juicy, complex and authoritative on the palate, it is underpinned by bright acids and classic mountain tannins. Decant for a few hours to let it really expatiate.

Drink 2016-2040 **Aic** 13.6%

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA 2011 94
£74.99 **The Winery**

Aromas of crushed blackcurrant, woodsmoke, graphite and rich earth introduce a fresh, supple and intense wine structured around refined tannins. Mike Dunn really triumphed in the challenging 2011 vintage, producing this elegant but powerful bottling entirely from Howell Mountain grapes.

Drink 2016-2033 **Aic** 14%

William Kelley is the former president of the Oxford University Wine Circle, and now lives and works in the Napa Valley, California



‘My parents worked for 10 years to put Cornas on the wine map – I’m going to do the same with St-Péray’

Laure Colombo

‘The year I was born, my parents began their winemaking project,’ says Laure Colombo. ‘As an only child, the cellar was my playground. The oldest memory I have is playing in the cellar with tanks, tasting the juice, tasting the grapes.’ As she grew up, her father Jean-Luc Colombo built up an enviable estate and négociant business from Cornas in the northern Rhône, and she joined the operation in 2011.

She worked on the commercial side to begin with, but had already started making her own range of wines under the Colombo & Fille label while still at college in Montpellier. At this stage she had no vines of her own, so used fruit from her father’s vineyards and bought grapes. Being responsible for winemaking and blending, Laure could put her stamp on the wines. Colombo & Fille focuses on northern Rhône appellations like Crozes-Hermitage, St-Joseph and Cornas, made in an accessible, ready-to-drink style – the kind of wines her friends want.

She describes her parents as ‘tough people’ who started their business from scratch, following their passion to make a success of it. From the start she has been keen to follow her own path too. ‘I couldn’t just walk in my father’s footsteps,’ she explains. While Colombo & Fille is ‘a fun project’, Laure has been developing another project that she takes more seriously.

Her father moved from Marseille to the northern Rhône in 1982. Cornas

was little-known as a fine wine region at that time, and Jean-Luc proved to be a modernising (if controversial) force who helped raise the appellation’s reputation. With similar resolve, Laure has set her sights on the white wine appellation next door. ‘My parents worked for 10 years to put Cornas on the wine map – I’m going to do the same with St-Péray,’ she affirms, ‘I really believe in this appellation.’

It took her five years to find the right property, but she has bought a 17-hectare farm in the hills above the village and planted several hectares of Roussanne and Marsanne vines. Though not quite the backwater that Cornas was when her father arrived, it’s fair to say that St-Péray still lacks the recognition it deserves. There are already some excellent producers, such as Bernard Gripa, Alain Voge and Domaine Clape, but it could certainly use an injection of youthful energy and drive by someone like Laure.

Being part of a winemaking family has its benefits – she can use the family winery and access the commercial structure and distribution networks to sell it. ‘It’s not competition with my parents, it’s complementing it,’ she says, ‘I don’t care about having my name on the bottle.’ The wine, Lorient, will be released under her father’s label, the first vintage being 2017.

But it’s not just Laure who

benefits from her father’s hard work; it goes both ways. Her other passion is helping him develop a vineyard west of Marseille. Since the area is mainly national park, the administrative battle has lasted 15 years. ‘My goal is to bring back some energy to this project, to finalise it... to try to give some motivation to my dad,’ she says.

And they’ve done it; the first few vintages of Les Anthénors, a 100% Clairette, are coming onto the market. Jean-Luc has long been admired for his dynamism and energy. Fortunately for the Rhône, it runs in the family. **■**

Two to try

Jean-Luc Colombo, Les Anthénors, IGP Méditerranée, France 2014 89
£29.95 **Edencroft, Islington Wine**

100% Clairette. Gentle nose of grapefruit pith, pear and fennel. Full and round with an attractive bitter twist on the finish. Discreet in flavour but big on texture and body. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Aic** 13%

Colombo & Fille, St-Péray, Northern Rhône, France 2014 88

£18.95 **Campbell Moore, Cotswold Vintners, D Vine Cellars, Fountainhill Wines, Haywood Wines, Planet of the Grapes, Polygon Wines, The Halifax Wine Co, The Vineyard** 60% Roussanne, 40% Marsanne. Subtle old oak, fresh apricot, citrus, good texture. Garrigue herbs on the finish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Aic** 14%

Matt Walls is a wine writer and author with an interest in the Rhône

