

MEET THE AMERICAN VIGNERONS

The concept of a solitary winegrower tending vines and making wines is French in origin, but these pioneers have made the practice their own.

When you hear the word *vigneron*, your mind may wander to a vineyard in rural France where a figure in a dark beret and wine-stained apron works the grapevines with pruning shears in one hand and a *Gaulois* in the other. Or maybe the character is in a cellar, pouring liquid from a wine thief into a *tastevin* over a candlelit barrel.

That classic style of vigneron, or winegrower, tended to the grapes and made wine with minimal family or outside assistance. Their main companion in the vineyard was often a plow horse. There were no crews, no enologists, no laboratory or vast array of cellar equipment, only oak barrels.

While only a handful of modern winemakers mirror that profile, American winemakers who embody the spirit and work ethic of the classic vigneron do exist. Here are a few of them.

—Roger Morris



1. Dawnine & Bill Dyer

Dyer Vineyards and Dyer Straits Wine Co.
Calistoga, CA

The Dyers are high-profile winemakers who switched to small-volume, hands-on winemaking in 1993, when they planted just over two acres of vines on Napa Valley's Diamond Mountain. Today, Dyer Vineyards specializes in a Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated blend and an occasional varietal Cabernet Franc. The couple handles all the most important vineyard functions, like pruning, as well as the winemaking. Hands-on work in the vineyard creates a better understanding of the grapes, says Dawnine. "You get better and better in understanding how far you can push the fruit and to control tannins," she says. "Our goal is to harvest in one go, and to make that happen starts with pruning."

2. Jim Pfeiffer

Turtle Run Winery
Corydon, IN

Pfeiffer's first vines were planted on his Indiana Uplands AVA property in 1998, but he says that the maturation of his 12-acre vineyard "has certainly been an evolution." Severe winter conditions in 2012 prompted him to replant the decimated vinifera vines with more cold-hardy hybrids. Now, he and just one assistant begin winter pruning two weeks after the first hard freeze, though he does hire student labor during the summer. Once those hybrid grapes are harvested, he seeks alternative methods to avoid too much manipulation. "I discovered that freezing dry reds, really freezing them, does drive out tannin content. I also use sur-lees stirring of spent yeast cells, including those from white wines, to achieve a similar effect."

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3. Jason Murray

Arterra Wines
Delaplane, VA

"I have one other guy who helps me out in the vineyards and the winery," says Murray, co-owner of Arterra Wines, with its eight-acre plot dedicated to mainly Tannat, Petite Sirah and Cabernet Sauvignon. "I can't just tell him, 'Go do what we did last year,' because each year is different. So we work in the vineyard side-by-side until he understands what I want done. In the cellar, I personally do all the racking, stirring of lees and most other things." Murray started Arterra with fruit purchased from nearby vineyards until his property became fruitful last year.

4. Anthony Vietri

Va La Vineyards
Avondale, PA

Vietri may be the best Nebbiolo specialist outside of Piemonte. From a farming family, he is a prototypical vigneron. With the help of a lone assistant, he's farmed about six acres of mainly Italian varieties since the 1990s, and today, Vietri makes four terroir-specific field-blend wines whose identity—varieties, rootstocks, clones, spacing, trellising—he's been tweaking since he first began to make wine. Top sommeliers from Philadelphia will even drive to his Chester County vineyard to carry back wines for their lists. "I just like to stand in the rows staring at it," he says. "It feels very right."

5. James Lester

Wyncroft Wines
Pullman, MI

For years, Lester tasted great Bordeaux wine, courtesy of a friend with a large cellar. He then decided to plant his own vineyard in the warmer climes of Lake Michigan's east side, and made his first Cabernet Sauvignon in 1983. "I was dumbfounded how good it was," says Lester. "I didn't know anything about winemaking, so it had to be the terror." In the 35 years since, Lester has made many critically acclaimed wines from mainly Bordeaux varieties on a 14-acre plot he farms with his wife and one assistant. Lester realizes most people don't believe Michigan can make quality European-style wines, but, as he says, "a vine doesn't understand political boundaries."