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TASTING REPORT | CALIFORNIA CABERNET

NEW DIRECTIONS IN NAPA CABERNET

A ROUNDUP OF THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

BY JAMES MOLESWORTH
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The Napa Valley winemaking scene remains dynamic and forward-looking, with new projects emerging each year while established estates make notable shifts in their operations. Here are some of the most exciting investments, advances and revivals in the world of Napa Cabernet.

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Annulus Cellars

Annulus is the ultimate limited-production, family-run Napa label. Founders Luke Evnin and Deann Wright first met as students at the University of California, San Francisco, in the 1980s, then got married in Napa in 1990 and purchased a home in Rutherford in 2000.

"We always had a special place in our heart for Napa," Evnin says. "I originally trained as a scientist and spent my professional career investing in startup biotech companies." Wright, who was an attorney for biotech startups, likewise has a background in science. But the couple were always enamored with their Napa neighbors and dreamed of launching a wine brand for their family to work on together.

They looked for a vineyard to purchase, but most of what they found on the market required replanting, which meant years of delay before their first wines could be released. Instead, they turned their focus to finding the right winemaker, who had access to the sort of grapes they would be excited to make wine from. That led them to Nigel Kinsman—winemaker for his own Kinsman Eades, along with Accendo and Bella Oaks, among others—who has quickly risen among the ranks of Napa's most sought-after winemakers.

The couple were new to the wine industry, but they weren't coming into this project blind. "We had been in Napa Valley for 20 years," Evnin says. "We collected Napa Valley Cabernet for most of that time, and we got to know a decent number of the vintners and sat at their tables and heard their stories and what they were trying to do."

The couple's background in startups was handy as well—they knew how to get talented people to work together to execute a vision and they weren't afraid to jump into a new business. There are currently two vineyard-designated wines from grower Andy Beckstoffer's Las Piedras and

Las Piedras vineyard in St. Helena is one of the top sites sourced by newcomer Annulus Cellars for its inaugural Cabernets, which are already achieving excellent scores.

Bruce and Heather Phillips' Vine Hill Ranch. A Napa Valley blend from those two sites and an additional vineyard on Diamond Mountain round out the portfolio. While the couple still hopes to find an estate vineyard that works for their project, they are gathering valuable experience by making wine with purchased grapes, which is sharpening their focus in terms of what they hope to accomplish with their own piece of land.

According to Wright, Annulus is derived from the Latin word for "ring": "The symbolism of the ring, the cycles of seasons and links to winemaking—particularly the circle of gathering people—is what really resonated with all of us." Daughters Alexandra and Elena are included in the family business.

96 ANNULUS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Vine Hill Ranch 2021	\$250
94 ANNULUS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer Las Piedras Vineyard 2021	\$250
92 ANNULUS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2021	\$175

DAVID SAWYER