

JAMES LAUBE

The Missing Link

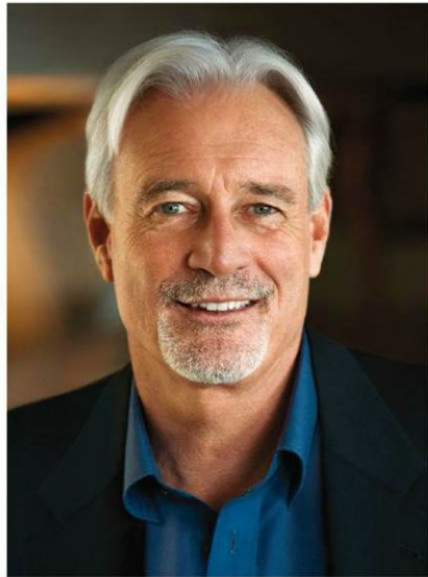
In sports, the expression is *one player away*. It's the missing ingredient separating good teams from great ones. Some teams do cross the line into greatness, but it's often difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when things changed. The same is true for wineries. Yet for Arista's McWilliams brothers—Mark, 37, and Ben, 34—that moment is clear. Both agree that their winery found the missing link in 2012.

That was the year they hired Matt Courtney, 44, to oversee their wine-making operations in Sonoma's Russian River Valley. Arista had been around for a decade, yet before Courtney's arrival the wines had never risen to where they are now. His addition has taken the winery to the next level. Its new wines are among the most exciting I've tried this year.

Arista was founded in 2002 by Al and Janis McWilliams, who bought the 36-acre property on Westside Road near Healdsburg. This is hallowed land for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay; two of the estate's closest neighbors are Rochioli, one of California's marquee vineyards, and Williams Selyem, an iconic Pinot producer that first gained attention using Rochioli grapes. The McWilliamses planted and still own the property; their sons lease the vineyard.

Arista's wines had been improving prior to 2012, but the McWilliams brothers knew they were still one player away. "We saw the opportunity to improve our entire operation," says Mark of hiring Courtney. "We don't profess to come from some old-time family winemakers. We knew we had the vineyards. We're right next to Rochioli and Williams Selyem, and we wanted someone who had been at the top and stayed at the top."

Courtney spent eight years as Helen Turley's assistant at Marcassin. Turley is one of California's most influential winemakers, and Courtney is using her playbook. "A big part of Helen's genius is her ability to understand sites, and the vision that gives her in terms of winemaking," he says. "Helen has an incredible ability to see things from the 20,000-foot level. That translates into great



The arrival of winemaker Matt Courtney at Arista Winery in 2012 has taken this Sonoma producer to the next level.

instinct in assessing potential in vineyards, as well as in forming profound, ageworthy wines. Both require a huge amount of intuition."

Turley's aptitude in recognizing and exploiting high quality sites first became apparent through her work with Colgin and Bryant making Cabernet. Wherever she's gone she has relied on intensive farming, sustainable principles and meticulous cellar practices, applying techniques such as native ferments and zero fining or filtration.

"Every time a wine is handled in the cellar—an acid adjustment, a fining, a racking, an addition—there is a price to be paid," Courtney explains. "We spend so much of our time getting it right in the vineyard so that we're not compelled to make these types of adjustments in the cellar."

Texture and tannin quality are primary considerations. "The goal is a seamless wine that has all of its components in balance," he says. "I'm striving, above all else, for that same balance and texture. For me, the magic of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay is that when

they are great, they can have incredible depth and complexity, and at the same time seem weightless and ethereal."

Courtney joined Arista in time to help with the 2012s, yet 2013 marks his first vintage as winemaker. Both the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs are striking. They are bound to invite comparisons with Marcassin. Each of the wines displays its own personality, with the Chardonnays ranging from an ultraplush Ritchie Vineyard bottling to a silkier, more refined version from Banfield Vineyard. The latter is especially reminiscent of versions from Marcassin, with their generous overlay of toasty oak.

Of the 10 2013 Pinots I reviewed in my recent tastings, the Harper's Rest bottling (94 points, \$78), from Arista's Russian River property, is a particular standout, showing uncommon elegance and finesse. Arista also buys grapes from Ferrington Vineyard (93, \$64), in Anderson Valley, and Perli Vineyard, a newer site in Mendocino Ridge that lies at an elevation of 2,400 feet.

Arista has achieved what many wineries only hope for—to take their game up a notch. With Courtney about to release his own Pinot Noir, called Ferren, there's no telling what he and the McWilliams brothers are set to accomplish next. Stay tuned.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.

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