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# Decanter



## Napa's new elegance

In search of wines with a lighter touch, Adam Lechmere encounters a trend-setting breed of Napa winemaker. A diverse bunch, they are all following a path that favours restraint over opulence, and all are worth searching out.

AMONG A CERTAIN sector of the wine cognoscenti, Napa's stock is low. Alongside its hipper neighbor, freewheeling, experimental Sonoma, Napa looks strait-laced; paralyzed by excessive prices and overblown wines. One is untamed, the other regimented. In the wilder parts of Sonoma you might expect to find a mountain lion asleep in your vat room; in Napa, the only cougars you're likely to see with have arrived in a Cadillac Eldorado.

All stereotypes are based in truth, of course, but

there is far more to Napa than unattainable cults, and winemakers who abandon restraint in the chase for 100-point scores. Napa has achieved fame because of its wonderful terroir, and all over the appellation there are those for whom the commercial imperative is trumped by other considerations.

Some, like Aimee Sunseri and Tom Garrett, are direct descendants of 19th-century pioneers; some, like Austin Peterson, are driven young winemakers working for wealthy patrons; others are recent

arrivals but dedicated experimentalists nevertheless. Still others are those who have been making the same sort of wine for decades and see no reason to stop, especially now that leanness, high acidity and structure are in fashion again.

They are a diverse bunch; they work with Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but also with varieties considered more obscure in Napa: Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petite Sirah, Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel. But they are united by a common belief, that over-ripeness and high alcohol obscure terroir.

They instinctively pursue balance, and for that they may be considered anomalies in a region noted for excess. The wines are difficult to get hold of (in many cases there simply isn't enough wine to export), but they represent an ideal of Napa that was nearly lost. They are worth searching out.

‘I want consumer appeal and the respect of my peers’

Dan Petroski (above)

## **Dan Petroski** **Larkmead Vineyards**

Calistoga's Larkmead is possibly one of the most celebrated but least known of Napa wineries. Founded in 1895 by the eccentric socialite Lillie Hitchcock Coit, it was for decades regarded as the equal of Beringer, BV and Inglenook (a display of dusty bottles of 'Larkmead Burgundy' bears witness to its illustrious past). Dan Petroski, a New York publisher turned winemaker, joined in 2007, after present owners Cam Baker and Kate Solari Baker revived the label. An aficionado of Friuli, he makes Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano under his Massican label, and at Larkmead has 45ha of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Sauvignon Blanc ('it makes no economic sense but was want to exalt our diversity').

Petroski's winemaking selection is on the Burgundian model: 'parcel-based winemaking to

express the variation of soils we get up here'; in his Sauvignon Blanc, he's looking for 'gravitas, a cleaner version of Dogeneau'. He aims for markedly different expressions from different soils, whether the sweet briar of the gravel-based Dr Olmo or the savory intensity of The Lark, grown on loamy soils. Petroski has the inspired winemaker's mix of restlessness and self-assurance: 'I want consumer appeal and the respect of my peers'.

