

GENTRY

THE WINE ISSUE


FLAVOR FORWARD

Lohr, Melka, Beckstoffer,
Kenward, and more—the families
and figures behind the wine

✦ The Comforts of Home



THE HEARTS & MINDS OF SILICON VALLEY



THE MAN BEHIND THE WINE

With 25 years of experience in California, legendary wine consultant Philippe Melka is also well positioned to look ahead at the industry's future.

WRITTEN BY EMILY MANGINI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANASTASIA BLACKMAN





Maayan Koschitzky
and Philippe Melka



Philippe Melka, wine consultant and owner of the consulting company Atelier Melka, is the secret in many a winemaker's secret sauce. Named one of the top nine wine consultants in the world by Robert Parker, to have worked with or for Melka is to gain an instant pedigree. His name is rarely uttered without an air of awe and reverence.

But the life of a wine consultant is a behind-the-scenes one, and few outside the industry's insiders know his name—even though 2020 marks Atelier Melka's 25th anniversary of helping winemakers and winery owners manage vineyards, build wineries, perfect wines, and use science and technology to protect their craft and livelihoods in an ever-changing climate. So, a quarter-century in and with no indication of slowing down, it seems like the rest of us should get to know him.

Melka, a native of the Burgundy region, entered the world of wine not through family lineage, but through "the side door." His childhood fascination with soil and the outdoors didn't end in boyhood; it led to a degree in geology and a thesis on the relationship between soil and Cab Franc grape production.

"I ended up talking to a lot of winemakers, and I started to think, this [winemaking] could be for me," Melka says casually, his tousled hair and unbuttoned flannel shirt giving him more of a French-surfer vibe than industry powerhouse. His original interest piqued, Melka decided to add a few winemaking courses to his studies.

Those classes led to a master's in Agronomy and Enology, but trying to break into the French wine industry can seem an impossible feat without a family name or winery for support.

In Melka's eyes, however, it gifted him an open mind and a wide-open path. "Not being from a wine family meant I was able to go straight to the top," he says. Case in point, Melka's first job as a winemaker was at the renowned Château Haut Brion in Bordeaux. "From the beginning, I was able to form my palette on high-end wines," he shares.

His taste and nose for high-end wines prepared Melka perfectly for entry into the Napa Valley wine scene in the mid-'90s. The valley was enjoying a boom in investment real estate and there was an influx of property owners who now had vineyards but no winemaking knowledge. "People wanted to make wine, but they didn't want to hire full-time winemakers to do it," Melka explains. Melka seized the opportunity and capitalized on his Burgundian, terroir-focused sensibilities. "I had the chance to start making high-end wines from very specific estates." It was 1995 and with three clients—two of whom are still on his roster today—Melka was officially in business.

As Melka's status grew, so did his services. In addition to consulting on winemaking, he assists with winery planning and architecture design, vineyard management, and business development. He even hand-selects full-time winemakers for his clients.

With that growth came the inevitable need to restructure his brand and business. Melka found the perfect partner in Israeli winemaker Maayan Koschitzky. Koschitzky and Melka met in the fall of 2014, four years after Koschitzky had arrived in Napa, and right before he had planned to move back home. "I thought, I'll do one last harvest," Koschitzky recalls. "Then I met Philippe."



Similar to Melka, Koschitzky also had a sideways trajectory into the world of wine. After spending four years as a ranger in the Israeli Army, he was backpacking through South America when he first fell in love with wine. He returned to Israel for university, where he studied mechanical engineering. Similar to Melka, Koschitzky's thesis (his was on grape sorting) led to an interest in winemaking.

Another similarity to Melka is that Koschitzky's family was not a wine family, and he too sees this as an opportunity, not an obstacle. After graduating, Koschitzky approached one of Israel's leading winemakers, Doron Rav Hon. "I convinced him to give me an internship," he says with a chuckle. From there it was off to viticulture school, followed by a job offer at Napa's famed Screaming Eagle Winery.

Since 2014, Melka and Koschitzky have grown the Atelier Melka portfolio to include clients in Australia, Canada, and Chile. The two have their share of travel stories that include surfing, navigating the delicate dance of

winemaking in foreign cultures with foreign customs ("The Argentinians are not as relaxed as you'd think," Melka laughs), and of course, epic meals and wine tastings. But when it's time to work, the pressure is on. "When you come in with the Melka name, everyone expects greatness," Koschitzky says.

One area where the pressure has increased is climate change. Fires, unpredictable weather patterns, and new agricultural viruses are fickle enemies that Melka and Koschitzky must help their clients fight. "2017 changed everything," Koschitzky says, referencing the record-shattering heatwave and devastating wildfire. "We thought it would be one time, but it's been every year since." Melka and Koschitzky spent 2018 scouring the limited research from other fire-afflicted wine regions, like Washington State and Australia, but there is still much to learn. "We're lucky that in Napa Valley, the technology comes to us first," Koschitzky says. "But no matter what's happening [with the climate], our clients expect greatness from us."

A virus of a very different kind has become the next challenge for the globe and wine country. "Even as the activities of farming and wine production are still going on in March in Napa, Maayan and I decided to recommend the lockdown to our staff," Melka shares. "We have been exposed to the news from France and Israel and the extreme confinement of all our families and friends, so we felt the urgency of maximum prudence for the safety of our team. We were proactive earlier, making sure that the wines were taken care of; we also canceled all bottling for the month of April. Since early March, our team has been working from home. I have been working from home, too—planning, cleaning, reading, watching the news, and walking the dogs."

Even in the face of these challenges—the seen and unforeseen—Melka wouldn't change anything. "I'd be a terrible winemaker for a big winery," he says, with characteristic good humor. "I love the freedom, the dynamic nature of each day. I can't wait to get back to it again." ●