

# Formal wines, Informal training



*These small, independent winemakers have received acclaim and garnered fans — even though they've never had traditional education in enology*

**By Sally Buffalo Taylor**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Small, independent winemakers continue to make waves on the Central Coast wine scene, earning high marks from critics, media attention and loyal followings.

Spurring that acclaim is the freedom to experiment, unbounded creativity, a fine-tuned palate, heartfelt passion and the drive to work hard and take risks. What's not a critical part of that equation: formal training in enology.

Sure, winemakers need some understanding of chemistry and other textbook basics, but they can't forget the art for the science.

"You don't want to be so technically driven that you forget the really important sensory and pleasurable and enjoyment part of it, too," said Desperada's Vailia Esh. "You've got to have that balance."

Here, then, are four winemakers making their mark in the wine world without traditional education in the subject.



TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON AND DAVID MIDDLECAMP

# A passion for pinot noir — Winemaker makes what he enjoys

## COBY PARKER-GARCIA El Lugar Wines

Coby Parker-Garcia is no stranger to making pinot noir. He produces three or four each year as winemaker at Edna Valley's Claiborne & Churchill winery.

He's also a big fan of drinking it, though not of the hefty price tags that come along with the choice bottles he and his wife, Katie, like to drink.

"How can I get my hands on these \$60 and \$80 bottles of wine and not have to pay that price?" Parker-Garcia found himself asking. The answer was to make it.

"I'd probably be better off if I just went and bought \$60 and \$80 bottles of wine, but, hey, I've got pallets of it now!" he said with a chuckle.

Those pallets are the first vintage of El Lugar Wines, which debuted in March with a pouring at the World of Pinot Noir, on whose board Parker-Garcia also sits. The name means "The Place," and the label aims to showcase pinots from individual vineyards around the state.

"The idea is to have the same winemaker, the same winemaking techniques, the same percentage of oak, so it's all standard across the board, all done in small lots and native fermentation," he said. "It's taking all the obstacles out for a true expression of terroir."

This year's releases come from Hawk's Roost Ranch in the Russian River Valley and Santa Maria's Bien Nacido Vineyards. Coming next year is one from Rincon, the historic vineyard stretching out behind Talley Vineyards' scenic tasting room, and Parker-Garcia soon hopes to include vineyards from Anderson Valley and the Santa Lucia Highlands as well.

"I want to make wines that people can geek out on," he said.

While Parker-Garcia eventually found his calling in wine, his earlier path pointed more toward agriculture. His father, the son of Mexican immigrants, spent his childhood following and working the crops around the state. Parker-Garcia, a San Luis Obispo native, graduated from San Luis Obispo High School, lived for a year in Mexico, then spent six years alternating between taking classes at Cuesta College and traveling across South America and Europe.

He transferred to Cal Poly to study agriculture marketing with dreams of an exotic life traveling and trading bananas and pineapples. But the prospect lost its luster, and Parker-Garcia found his interest piqued by viticulture classes and deepened through an internship at Claiborne & Churchill. After graduation, he was working at a produce company in Santa

**FROM LEFT:** Coby Parker-Garcia with his wife, Katie Noonan, and their daughter, Callie, 18 months. A bottle of El Lugar 2013 pinot noir from Bien Nacido Vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley. Parker-Garcia takes a barrel sample.

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP



## EL LUGAR WINES at a glance

**WINES:** Single-vineyard pinot noirs, \$40-\$60

**FIND EL LUGAR WINES:** Online at [www.ellugarwines.com](http://www.ellugarwines.com)

Maria when Claiborne & Churchill offered him a full-time job.

"It was either sell broccoli or make wine," Parker-Garcia said.

It wasn't a tough choice, and he hasn't looked back since. He became Claiborne & Churchill's head winemaker in 2007 and now produces more than 8,000 cases of 20 or so wines each year for the Edna Valley stalwart.

It's a job he loves, with no designs on leaving, but Parker-Garcia's passion for pinot runs strong. He's excited to be taking on his own project in conjunction with his wife, who runs a flower business called Noonan's Wine Country Designs, making the wines the two of them enjoy most.

"It's a wine that you look at and think it's going to be very thin and almost watery, and you taste it, and there's so much structure and so much seductiveness," he said. "A good bottle of pinot noir is an empty bottle of pinot noir. It just goes down so easy."









# Why sell wine when you can make it?

## VAILIA ESH Desperada

Vailia Esh was working as a wine importer in Toronto when she decided she'd rather make the stuff than sell it.

So she went to Paso Robles and lived in a trailer on a vineyard for two years while she learned the ropes. It sparked her passion from the get-go.

"You get dirty and drag hoses and dig out tanks," Esh said. "It's way more fun than selling wine and filling out submission forms."

She meshed that newfound passion with her sales and marketing experience to create her own label that now produces about 4,000 cases a year. For Esh, Desperada — a feminine take on "desperado" — isn't just a name; it's something she embodies.

"A desperado is someone who marches to their own beat. It's the outlaw; it's the outlier," she said. "I've always kind of felt like that."

Moving to Paso Robles and starting a winery wasn't Esh's first bold move. She was working for a wine broker in her native Southern California when she decided to sell all her things, grab a backpack and head to Central America.

"And then I met all these great Canadians, and I was like, why have I never been to Canada?"

She hopped on a Greyhound, visited some people she met traveling and wound up staying for four years. She landed a job importing wines and later persuaded the distributor to start its own label. She spearheaded the effort but started itching to move to the creative side.

So she headed to the wild west of Paso Robles, where she could oversee the Canadian label and learn to make wine working as a cellar rat for wineries at the bustling Paso Robles Wine Services.

"It was like boot camp," she said of the experience. "You got to see the whole gamut."

She made her first wine in 2009 with one barrel each of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, syrah and grenache — a blend she still

## DESPERADA at a glance

**WINES:** Sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, red blends, \$23-\$50

**FIND DESPERADA WINES:**  
Online at [www.desparada.com](http://www.desparada.com)

**BY APPOINTMENT OR CHANCE:** (with regular hours coming in the near future) at 3060 Limestone Way, Paso Robles.

makes each year as homage to that first foray.

Esh, who took over winemaking for the Canadian label through 2012, is as adventuresome with her wine as she is in life, constantly trying new things, playing with small batches and venturing off the beaten bath.

"If you're not having a really good time doing this and entertaining yourself, then you're not doing it right," she said.

It's a philosophy she extends to every aspect of the business, from fanciful tasting

notes, elaborate wine club packaging and artisanal labels, which are painstakingly cobbled together from nude portraits, photographs, her own handwriting and Gustav Klimt line drawings.

Recent explorations include making wine in amphoras — huge terra cotta vessels that harken back to the early days of winemaking and are widespread in places such as Italy and Austria, though used by only a few winemakers locally.

"They are beautiful, and you smell them and you touch them and they feel old," Esh said. "I like that. They aren't fancy and new and shiny — they're old clay pots."

For Esh — who is expecting her first child with her husband, Russell From, who owns Herman Story Wines — that respect for the old ways informs her entire approach to wine.

"You're not making wine; you're just overseeing it," she said, noting that fermentation happens with or without a winemaker's help. "So your job is to nurture it, and to have fun with it, and to create something out of it that you like and that people like."



**FROM LEFT:** The wines of Desperada Winery in Paso Robles. Winemaker Vailia Esh.

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON







# From the kitchen to the cellar

Winemaker lets flavors develop on their own

## ORION STANG Dilecta Wines

As a kid, Orion Stang recalls being dragged around the wineries of the Central Coast and offered sips of wine at dinner — “I didn’t like it.”

Food was another story. His foodie parents’ lavish, home-prepared meals turned him on to cooking.

“They totally spoiled me with good food,” Stang said. “I was spending all my money on ingredients.”

Stang’s passion for flavors combined with an innate creativity eventually would lead him to winemaking, with a cellar master position at critically acclaimed Law Estates and his own label on the side. But it was a circuitous route that began in the kitchen.

After high school, Stang left Cambria, where he’d lived since age 10, for Florence, Italy, where he spent six months at culinary school. Wanting to expand beyond Italian food, Stang then headed to the Culinary Institute of America, just north of Napa, taking classes and working in the kitchen.

While there, he participated in a wine immersion program, tasting 1,500 wines in the course of a single month. But it wasn’t until he was working in a Palm Springs-area restaurant and befriended a sommelier that Stang decided to abandon a culinary career for one in wine.

“We were tasting through all these old Napa cabs and different things that I could never afford,” Stang recalled. “It was life-changing.”

He soon quit the kitchen and started waiting tables so he could pick up sommelier shifts. He was working toward his certification when he decided in 2006 to return to San Luis Obispo County to learn how to make wine.

Stang credits his palate for landing him a job in the tasting room at Booker Wines, and then for getting him off the ground. But even without any winemaking experience, Stang wasn’t content with simply pouring

the wines.

“I would come in on my days off, before work, after work,” Stang said. “I was begging to drive the tractor, asking what they doing out in the vineyard.”

After months of working for free, Stang made his way into the cellar, where he worked alongside winemaker Eric Jenson on Booker’s acclaimed wines. After a few years, Stang decided to strike out on his own.

Though still relatively inexperienced, the former chef was confident he would succeed. He just needed good ingredients.

Syrah from Caliza and Alta Colina and grenache from Russell Family Vineyard got Dilecta off the ground in 2011 with 150 cases. Now producing 750 cases of a syrah and a red Rhône blend — with labels designed by his mother, an artist — he’s added grapes from other sought-after vineyards, including Bien Nacido, Ballard Canyon and Shadow Canyon on top of York Mountain.

“I couldn’t go wrong as long as I was getting good fruit,” Stang explained. And once he gets that fruit, he mostly lets it take its course. “I don’t add anything; it’s native everything,” he said. “I just let them do what they are going to do.”

Despite plans for growing Dilecta — the Latin root of which means “love” — Stang jumped when the chance arose to work alongside the accomplished Scott Hawley getting an ambitious new winery, Law Estates, off the ground.

Not only is it an amazing team, Stang said, but he also gets to drive a tractor and continue exploring the farming side of winemaking, using organic and sustainable methods as much as possible. Instead of buying ingredients, Stang is now fascinated by everything that goes into growing them.

“Learning how to make the best fruit possible with the land you’re given — that’s the toughest thing because it’s ever-changing.”

## DILECTA WINES *at a glance*

**WINES:** Syrah and a red Rhône blend, \$46

**FIND DILECTA WINES:**  
Online at [www.dilectawines.com](http://www.dilectawines.com)

**BY PHONE:** 805-369-9129

**AT PASO UNDERGROUND:**  
1140 Pine St., Paso Robles,  
1 to 7 p.m. Fridays through Saturdays;  
1 to 5 p.m. Sundays;  
and by appointment



TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON

**FROM LEFT:** Two bottles of Dilecta Wines.  
Winemaker Orion Stang.







# Cal Poly graduate grows the right wine

**ANDREW JONES**  
**Field Recordings Wine**

By his count, Andrew Jones has stood in nearly every vineyard on the Central Coast.

He's planned, planted, expanded and renewed vineyards spanning the region in his job at a Bakersfield grapevine nursery, working alongside the area's grape growers, landowners and winemakers.

To Jones, the wines he now makes with grapes picked up along the way are his expression of the places he's been and the people he's met. His wines are his Field Recordings — which is what he named his burgeoning winery and first label.

On top of a job that keeps him on the road 60,000 miles each year, as well as a wife and three boys younger than 6 at home, the 34-year-old Ventura native now pours five labels from the new tasting room of his Paso Robles winery.

Jones, who graduated from Cal Poly with a major in ag-business and a minor in viticulture, first forayed into winemaking in 2007, when he got his hands on some chenin blanc from Firestone's Jurassic Park vineyard. Soon after, he made a Paso Robles field blend as part of a retirement project for his mentor in the nursery business.

"It's four varietals, picked on the same day, and co-fermented," Jones said of the blend, called Chorus Effect. "It's together as one wine its whole life."

Jones turned next to creating multi-vineyard blends, calling them Fiction in contrast to the single-vineyard wines of Field Recordings. He launched Almanac after procuring some zinfandel from the Potrero Vineyard, a dry-farmed plateau near Lopez Lake in Rancho Arroyo Grande.

Wonderwall sprung forth when fruit suddenly became available from Spanish Springs, the Price Canyon vineyard Jones had worked on for three years. For his latest label, Cane & Fable, he collaborated with Sans Liege winemaker Curt Schalchlin.

"Curt and I wanted to make the best \$20 bottle of cab that we possibly could," Jones explained. When the fruit is picked from the Hinterlands Vineyards in Paso Robles, half goes to Schalchlin and half to Jones. "He makes his half his way, I make my half my way, and then we get back together eight months later and work the blend."

Jones' explorations don't end with esoteric vari-

## **FIELD RECORDINGS** *at a glance*

**WINES:** Cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, pinot noir, zinfandel, cab franc and red blends, \$18-\$29

### **FIND FIELD RECORDINGS WINES:**

Online at [www.fieldrecordingswine.com](http://www.fieldrecordingswine.com)

### **AT THE TASTING ROOM AT:**

460 Marquita Ave., Paso Robles  
11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday  
and by appointment

etals, unique blends, and playful partnerships. He's now experimenting with canning his wine rather than bottling it — something only a couple of other wineries nationwide are doing.

"I like what the craft beer guys are doing in cans," Jones explained. "It's super economical, and by textbook, it should be a better storage vessel than a bottle, because there's no light transferred."

A preholidays 400-case test run of Fiction Red 500-milliliter tall-boy cans — at \$10 a pop compared to a 750-milliliter bottle at \$18 — sold out in less than two months. With white and pink joining the lineup this spring, Jones is hoping to convince people that canned wine is more than just a novelty.

"I want them to buy into the idea that cans actually are practical and useful as a wine container," he said.

But for all Jones' ventures, be it format or ferment, his approach to making wine is simple. He's trained in grape-growing, not winemaking, he points out, and aims to be as hands-off as possible.

"If you get it from the right spot, the work is already done for you in the vineyard," Jones asserts. "It's the winemaker's responsibility to not screw it up."



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Andrew Jones of Field Recordings Wines in Paso Robles. A breakdown of some of the wine blends from Field Recordings. Oak barrels.

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON





# TION

# FIELD RECORDINGS.

What is Reality?

31% Zinfandel  
26% Tempranillo  
10% Syrah  
8% Touriga Nacional  
15% Mourvedre  
10% Grenache  
25% New  
75% Old

Heady aromas of  
pie, luxurious su  
ham paninis a  
menthol cig

think  
mango

22% Mourvedre  
22% Syrah  
18% Grenache  
18% Cab Sauv  
13% Zin



Old Patrero Red Blend

Smells like crushed wild  
cherries, violets, tapenade,  
and wintergreen, with a  
provençal-like palate:  
juicy red fruits, dusty  
earth, round tannins  
and a zesty Finish

15% New  
French  
15% New  
American  
70% Neutral  
French

83% Cab  
Sauv  
17% Tempranillo



McMahon Vineyard

Smoked cherries on  
ripe cheese next  
to grass Fed Steak  
followed by dulce  
de leche.

89% New  
French  
11% New  
American

53% Cab  
Sauv  
20% Petit  
Verdot  
4% Cab  
Franc  
1% Tannat

Chorus Effect  
Kohigan Vineyard

Dark cherry and currant  
pie after a cedar plank  
pork in herb de provençe.  
Bombastic fruit, full-bodied,  
delicately layered with a  
hint of graphite.



22% Mourvedre  
22% Syrah  
18% Grenache  
18% Cab Sauv  
13% Zin



Old Patrero Red Blend

Smells like crushed wild  
cherries, violets, tapenade,  
and wintergreen, with a  
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15% New  
French  
15% New  
American  
70% Neutral  
French

83% Cab  
Sauv  
17% Tempranillo



McMahon Vineyard

Smoked cherries on  
ripe cheese next  
to grass Fed Steak  
followed by dulce  
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89% New  
French  
11% New  
American

53% Cab  
Sauv  
20% Petit  
Verdot  
4% Cab  
Franc  
1% Tannat



Chorus Effect  
Kohigan Vineyard

Dark cherry and currant  
pie after a cedar plank  
pork in herb de provençe.  
Bombastic fruit, full-bodied,  
delicately layered with a  
hint of graphite.

86% New  
French  
14% New  
American