

The Proverbial Radical

A “SOMMELIER’S WINEMAKER” SHARES HIS PHILOSOPHY

by Randy Caparoso

YOU WOULDN'T HAVE thought Steve Matthiasson would become a sommelier's idea of a “wine god” had you met him in 2000, when he was still applying his master's in horticulture to a grant for Biologically Integrated Farming Systems (BIFS) in Lodi. This work morphed into one of the country's first books on sustainable winegrowing, *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook*, which Matthiasson co-authored with Clifford Ohmart.

Back then, Matthiasson was a grape savant who turned his compulsion into a career when he moved to Napa Valley, taking vineyard-management jobs for names like Araujo, Spottswoode, David Arthur, Chappellet, Stag's Leap, Dalla Valle, and others. But a funny thing happened on the way: The viticulturist decided to make his own wine.

Perhaps it was his philosophy background (he earned his bachelor's degree at Whittier College), but Matthiasson began to apply a strict set of ethics to his own conception of “wine.” First, “Thou shalt not make *big* wine.” Second, “Thou shalt respect the purity of a grape.” He's never actually said that, but it's implied in conversations and, of course, in his wines.

For instance, in his current release, the 2016 Matthiasson Ribolla Gialla, there's a gold tint that's not nearly as brassy as one would expect in a skin-contact/barrel-fermented white. The violet and citrus notes, meanwhile, are more about texture and viscosity than the sheer intensity of fruit or acidity by which white wines are normally judged. “Ribolla Gialla tastes terrible when it is fermenting—flat, like a cold, unripe banana, and then VA [vinegary notes] pop up in the barrel,” says Matthiasson. “But in the end, it's a beautiful wine”—just maybe not what you'd expect from a wine that typically carries that descriptor.

Like the Ribolla Gialla, the soft, unabashedly plummy, and peppery 2015 Matthiasson Refosco would be lauded by new-gen sommeliers for its lightness at 12.6% ABV (compared to the Ribolla's 11.2%) and obvious freedom from oak—as such, as un-Napa (or “un-big”) as you can get. But like the proverbial radical, it's with predictable varieties that Matthiasson is, well, the most unpredictable, like someone trying to change the “system” from within.

ing them into a svelte, compact package.

“I'm not so much a terroir geek as a plant guy,” Matthiasson admits, “but these are wines made in the vineyard.” His use of the old cliché, however, is more in reference to the work put *into* vineyards, like sending his team out to pick Chardonnay at 18 degrees Brix, then 18.5, 19, and so on up to 22 degrees. “That's how you get the most dynamic range of flavors—lemon, grapefruit, pear, green apple, Golden Deli-



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Clifford Ohmart and Steve Matthiasson proudly display the first Lodi Winegrower's Workbook in 1999.

Lemony, feathery light, flowery, and racy, the 2016 Matthiasson Chardonnay from his home estate, Linda Vista Vineyard, is wound tight as a clock. Another release, the 2015 Matthiasson Cabernet Sauvignon, combines the scrubby/tobacco/pyrazine/burnt-nut notes of Coombsville-grown fruit with the classic floral/dusty cedar-box character of Rutherford, meld-

ing them into a svelte, compact package. “I think the old way of making wine was great with heavy foods and highly seasoned sauces, but today's chefs are highlighting lighter foods with fresh, organic ingredients. That's why, just a few years ago, we could barely get in the door of a lot of restaurants. It's good to be finally appreciated!”