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Wander + Ivy Founder and CEO Dana Spaulding at the Oxford Hotel in Denver, CO.

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THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

{ winery spotlight }

The Remaking of

Merlot

THE GRAPE PLAYS A KEY
ROLE IN **JORDAN VINEYARD
& WINERY'S** MAJOR
REPLANTING PROJECT

by **Virginie Boone**

*Planting Merlot UberVines—a type of
vine with an extra-long rootstock cane—
on the Jordan estate's River Block.*

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The Jordan Winery Chateau in the Alexander Valley.



Jordan's replanting project began in 2017 and will be completed this year. ▶



Jordan winemaker Maggie Kruse.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



Since its founding in 1972, Jordan Vineyard & Winery has produced just one red wine in every single vintage: a Cabernet Sauvignon. The fruit comes from the Alexander Valley in Sonoma County, where the Jordan Winery Chateau sits amid 1,200 acres of rolling hills and vineyards. With roughly 120 of those acres currently planted to grapevines, the property also includes groves of olive trees, gardens, two lakes, grazing pastures, and woodlands; 900 acres have been left wild. The resulting biodiversity contributes to a healthy ecosystem.

Divided into 18 individual blocks, the certified sustainable vineyard and another recently purchased property located just north of Geyserville will contain roughly 110 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, 25.85 acres of Merlot, 7.5 acres of Petit Verdot and 5.5 acres of Malbec when a replanting process that began in 2017 is completed later this year. What is planted where is

guided by extensive maps that detail soil type, texture, and water-holding capacity.

The majority of Jordan's acreage has always been planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, on estate blocks set deep in clay-rich soils that echo the Right Bank of Bordeaux. (The winery also works with numerous grower-partners to source additional grapes, many of which come from well-drained, mid-slope parcels that contribute more of a Left Bank character to the wine.) That's because Jordan's winemaking philosophy has been French-inspired from the beginning, reflecting the producer's belief that Cabernet would be the future of the Alexander Valley. That was prescient: When much of the appellation, which as a whole encompasses 15,000 planted acres, was hit by phylloxera in the 1990s, replants became widely necessary. With an opportunity to start again and plan smarter, many growers chose to plant more Cabernet Sauvignon in lieu of a greater diversity of Bordeaux reds such as Merlot,

Petit Verdot, and Malbec, as Cabernet commanded and continues to command a higher price in the marketplace.

The gap between grape prices can feel cavernous. For example, Sonoma County's Merlot plantings in 2021 totaled 4,140 acres and were worth an average of \$1,961.36 per ton, according to the USDA's annual Grape Crush Report. Its Cabernet Sauvignon, on the other hand, totaled about 12,293 acres and was worth an average of \$2,728.69 per ton. Smart business means planting Cabernet.

This was not always so. Back in 2004, the year a movie called *Sideways* maligned Merlot, plantings of the variety in Sonoma County totaled 6,873 acres and were worth \$1,663.90 per ton, while Cabernet Sauvignon accounted for 10,216 acres and was worth \$2,397.71 per ton—not that big a difference. But Cabernet continued to rise in acreage and value; Merlot did not.

At Jordan, the combination of vineyard location and soil type certainly gives wine-



PHOTO: JAMES ESCOBAR



PHOTO: MARC OLIVIER LE BLANC

Jordan director of agricultural operations Brent Young.

maker Maggie Kruse the tools to produce a complex Cabernet Sauvignon. But, she says, “the Merlot is essential in making our style of Cab. It offers soft, silky tannins [and] structure.”

Jordan director of agricultural operations Brent Young began a deep analysis of the soils on the Jordan estate in 2012, and his findings prompted the winery to sell some of its original valley-floor vineyard to focus on its hillside blocks and to work further with grower-partners in the region that were growing great fruit. Then red blotch was diagnosed in 2016, forcing Jordan into the replant that is still underway. In the process, the winery is also taking the time to change row orientations, while new rootstock and clonal selections have been made to optimize each vine.

Along the way, Jordan underwent a struggle to find exceptional Merlot in the Alexander Valley due to the aforementioned replants across the appellation.

Because of this scarcity, Young and his team decided to plant two new Merlot vineyard blocks in 2021 and 2022 in an effort to be proactive regarding its most important blending grape. “We are hedging our bet to always have good Merlot,” Kruse says. “Merlot is a beautiful grape, and so many people use it; I hope more people will put Merlot back in. The Alexander Valley is ideal [for growing it].”

Kruse and Young worked with Duarte’s Nursery, tasting through 15 different clones of Merlot. Their top picks were 181, a longtime favorite at Jordan, and 8, which is originally from Argentina; Kruse describes it as soft and juicy with beautiful tannins.

“[The new blocks] have been great Cabernet spots but will be even greater for Merlot, in [slightly] cooler soils, rocky, well draining—the drainability is crucial,” she adds. “We are taking some of the best spots on the property for Merlot and giving it its best shot of being amazing.” ❧