

UPFRONT

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THE PRISONER
WINE COMPANY
TAKES UP
RESIDENCE IN
NAPA VALLEY
AT ITS NEW
40,000-SQUARE-
FOOT FACILITY

The impressive covered entrance into The Prisoner Wine Company's new winery just south of St. Helena, CA.

by Deborah Parker Wong / photos by Alexander Rubin



The Prisoner has led the way in the unconventional blends category since the turn of the 21st century.



The interior of the new winery was designed by Richard Von Saal, a Napa Valley native.

From the moment its first 385-case lot was labeled, The Prisoner has been an outlier in the California wine industry. A leading representative of the shift starting in the late 1990s from single-varietal wines to unconventional blends, the brand and its dark, brooding label served as an antidote to the brighter imagery galling across bottles when The Prisoner made its debut in 2000.

Given its track record and staying power, The Prisoner has long been primed for a dedicated winery to accommodate its growth: Since being acquired in 2016, The Prisoner Wine Company's portfolio has more than doubled its offerings from its original five labels. Last month, the company formally put down roots at last at its new Napa Valley facility, located on Highway 29 just south of St. Helena. Transforming an existing structure on the property, San Francisco architect Matt Hollis imbued the 40,000-square-foot space with an industrial aesthetic featuring high ceilings, a mix of metal finishes, and an 8-by-57-foot skylight in The Makery, a collection of four light-filled studios for local artists and artisans.

For many of the design elements, Hollis and interior designer Richard Von Saal, a Napa Valley native, drew inspiration from the distinctive branding that spans the company's portfolio. Their interpretation of the label for the Zinfandel-dominant blend Saldo, for example, can be seen in the red accents interspersed throughout the space. Graphic wallcoverings reminiscent of vines reference cuttings, a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon blend, while the intricate wire sculpture suspended over the center island of the gender-neutral bathroom echoes the label for Thorn, a Napa Valley Merlot blend. Reclaimed wood from the Bay Bridge is also cleverly utilized throughout the building.

As they explore the new winery, those familiar with the look and feel of The Prisoner Wine Company's branding will find themselves immersed as never before in the company's ethos. First-timers, meanwhile, will experience a stylish departure from Napa's typical rough-luxe décor.

Meet the Makers

Beyond the large tasting lounge and the open-view exhibition kitchen, the center of the new facility has been configured into the aforementioned studio space called The Makery, where various pieces have been commissioned exclusively for the space. Conceived to unite craftsmanship and wine appreciation, The Makery will offer several experiences to consumers that incorporate close interaction with the artists and their respective wares, which, according to Property Director Brigid Harris, are inspired by Napa Valley and The Prisoner Wine Company's wines.



In his role as Executive Chef for The Prisoner Wine Company, Brett Young has created The Makery Experience, a 90-minute food and wine pairing available to winery guests.

These guest immersions include The Makery Journey, a 75-minute tour of the vineyard and culinary garden that concludes with a tasting of five wines in The Makery. From Thursday through Sunday, the winery also hosts a food and wine pairing aptly named The Makery Experience, which spans 90 minutes and couples small bites prepared by Executive Chef Brett Young with limited-release wines.

The initial lineup of makers occupying The Makery includes designers Aplat and Carrie Saxl; sculptor Agelio Batle; Napa-based Amanda Wright Pottery; ceramicist Holly McVeigh of RBW Handmade; Melanie Abrantes Designs, which specializes in items made from cork and wood; and Soap Cauldron, an artisanal bath and skincare company. Among the artisanal food offerings, meanwhile, are organic, hand-milled pastas from Joshua Felciano of Bayview Pasta; Wine Lover's Jelly, which sources Napa Valley wines for its products; and Tsalt Seasoning, which crafts salts seasoned with various ingredients, including Prisoner Wine Company wines.

Bold Cuisine for Bold Wines

In keeping with The Prisoner Wine Company's contemporary approach to design and Director of Winemaking Chrissy Wittmann's distinctive blends, Young has taken a bold approach to crafting the winery's signature cuisine. A Lodi

native who trained in Singapore, Young brings an East-meets-West sensibility to local ingredients and isn't shy when it comes to drawing out the flavors of his various dishes.

At the winery, guests will have the option of tasting al fresco in The Yard, where Young's wood-fired oven will crank out flatbreads, smoked meats, and a variety of savory grilled offerings; the culinary garden, meanwhile, will ensure access to seasonal herbs and produce year-round. The Prisoner Wine Company's ultimate food-pairing experience, The Makery: Unbound, will launch in spring 2019 at \$300 per person and give Young free rein to indulge his creativity.

With Young in charge of the kitchen, the tasting room serves as a showcase for Wittmann, who relocated to Napa Valley in 2016 and just completed her third vintage for the company. Having found her way to winemaking after a lab stint analyzing water and soil samples, Wittmann spent more than a decade making wine on the Central Coast for Scheid Family Wines and Paso Robles' Wild Horse Winery and Vineyard.

Producing wines with grapes harvested from more than 100 vineyards is no small task, and Wittmann's talent for sourcing and blending lesser-known varieties means plenty of tasting room-only pours now round out the company's offerings. In addition to the inaugural release of the 2015

Dérangé, a blockbuster blend showcasing several iconic vineyards, she's added five small-lot wines, including a blanc de blancs sparkling wine, ERASED, to the portfolio. Exclusively available at the winery, they flesh out the lighter side of the brand's offerings.

For Syndrome, Wittmann's popular rosé made from Grenache, Syrah, Pinot Noir, Sangiovese, and Mourvèdre, the winemaker sources fruit from Calistoga, Napa Valley, and Carneros, direct pressing and fermenting the wine in stainless steel to preserve aromas and flavors. The result is a coppery, salmon-colored release with a spicy and generous flavor profile.

In another new expression, No. 39007, Chenin Blanc from Mendocino's Norgard Vineyard on the Talmage Bench east of the Russian River finds a willing partner in Viognier from Rodgers Vineyard in Oak Knoll. The wine underwent neutral barrel ferments for each variety combined with weekly rounds of bâtonnage before entering the bottle unfinned. The Viognier lends floral aromas as the Chenin Blanc's varietal character shines through with honey, melon, Golden Delicious apple, and a touch of sweet coconut.

Calistoga, where most of California's approximated 75 acres of the Italian variety Charbono can be found, also serves as Wittmann's source for the winery's Headlock expression. Charbono thrives under the region's environmental conditions, which include rich volcanic soils and a steep diurnal



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shift. This dark, high-acid grape exudes a smoky quality and emerges in this wine in the form of root beer and graphite. Blended with Petite Sirah from Lake County and Syrah from Oak Knoll, the grapes spend time cold-soaking before resting for a year in a mélange of new and neutral French, American, and Hungarian oak. ■■



Chrissy Wittman, Director of Winemaking for The Prisoner Wine Company, is known for her bold, distinctive blends.