

FOOD

Wineries are luring top chefs with better work conditions — competing with Wine Country's finest restaurants



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For the first course, the chef has prepared a grilled golden beet with roasted shallot and collard soubise. Next comes a maple glazed pork belly with roasted radicchio and ice wine vinegar. Each course is designed to pair with a carefully selected wine and showcase the drink's depth of flavor.

It's a familiar scene from the tasting menus of the Bay Area's top fine dining establishments, but this meal is not at a traditional restaurant. The table looks out on a serene panorama of vineyards and mountains, and the wine pairings don't come at an extra cost. This is Hamel Family Wines, a winery in Sonoma.

Hamel is one of a few dozen wineries in Napa and Sonoma offering elaborate food and wine pairings from fine dining chefs — increasingly moving away from the days where the only option at a winery was some cheese and crackers. While the movement has been unfolding for several years, it picked up speed in 2020 because wineries needed to serve food to operate during the pandemic. But another factor plays into not just the quantity but the quality of menus: A mass exodus of fed-up hospital-ity employees, including restaurant workers, have been drawn by the better conditions of being a winery chef.

The gig is far cushier than working in a traditional kitchen, promising better hours, as well as less stress. Wineries have been able to attract top-tier talent like Sean Massey, who joined Napa's Darioush in 2021 after more than a decade under chef Masaharu Morimoto at Morimoto Napa. Others have come from Thomas Keller's the French Laundry and Bouchon or the kitchens of Wine Country's top luxury resorts, like Meadowood.

The result: Food at wineries is getting better, and more complex.

“COVID kind of illuminated the extreme fragility of the industry I'd dedicated my life to for so long,” said Massey. “Darioush has given me stability and a sense of security that I rarely felt in the restaurant world.”

During Napa's wine boom in the 1970s and '80s, the region was often described as a culinary desert. There were no restaurants, and it was up to the wineries to provide meals. But once the Wine Country dining scene arrived, wineries reverted to simple bar tastings. For decades, a cheese plate was considered a nice bonus.

That all started to change a few years ago; needing to stand out in a sea of hundreds, wineries started to level up their hospitality game and food was the magic bullet. The chef at Hamel, Clinton Huntsman, joined in 2014 after years spent working at high-end restaurants like Bouchon. Back then, though, it was uncommon for people with his credentials to be at wineries. “Until about 2018, I would say winery chefs weren't really on the map,” Huntsman said.

Out of necessity, the push for more winery food programs intensified at the onset of COVID-19 when Gov. Gavin Newsom decreed that alcohol establishments, including wineries, could only operate if they served food. The silver lining: Huntsman said it showed wineries the light, that food and creating a more immersive tasting experience often leads to higher wine sales. It's also a great tool for selling younger wines, he said, softening the high tannins typically present in young reds, like Cabernet.

“We have seen revenue per visitor grow, likely a result of this elevated tasting format and the ways that wine and food enhance one another,” said Alessandra Murillo, Darioush's director of marketing. “It's a classic example of the whole being more than the sum of its parts.”

Many Napa and Sonoma visitors now skip the typical mid-day lunch stop, opting instead for a filling, multi-course pairing at a winery backed by quintessential Wine Country scenery. Working with more land and experienced chefs on a small scale, some wineries can do practically everything in house, just like top restaurants. Many, like Darioush, have their own gardens from which chefs can pull fresh ingredients daily. Wheeler Farms in St. Helena has chickens and makes honey from their own hives and Theorem Vineyards has a cattle ranch in Montana. Theorem chef Josh Mitchell, who also raises his own pigs, works closely with the ranch and later dry ages and cures the meat himself.

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Still, Mitchell believes that winery chefs will start drawing attention for their work, making these job openings even more attractive to Bay Area chefs. He thinks that the coveted Michelin Guide should poke around wineries for its next wave of ratings.

“A lot of chefs are kind of undercover in wineries right now,” said Massey. “People don't know it, but you have a lot of talented guys working behind the scenes. So I hope in a couple of years, chefs are getting some recognition within the wineries for what they're doing.”