

{ farming }

# GROWING RELATIONSHIPS

HOW THE PRISONER WINE  
COMPANY MAKES ITS  
GROWER PARTNERS  
“PART OF THE FAMILY”

STORY BY JESS LANDER / PHOTOS BY TED  
THOMAS

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### A BRAND BORN ON THE PREMISE

of being atypical, The Prisoner Wine Company is celebrated for its bold and creative blends that utilize a wide range of grapes—many of which are more uncommon varieties like Viognier, Zinfandel, Chenin Blanc, Tempranillo, and Muscat. “We lean toward the unordinary,” says Director of Winemaking Chrissy Wittmann, who joined the team in 2016 following years spent making wine in Paso Robles.

While blending from over 200 lots is a major challenge in itself, working with these unconventional grapes can be an equally demanding task, requiring expert sourcing from a huge network of roughly 130 vineyards (owned by more than 100 growers) spanning the Central Coast as far north as Mendocino. These partnerships may exist behind the scenes, but they’re the meat and potatoes that give each of these wines a distinct voice.



*Above, Director of Winemaking Chrissy Wittmann and Anna Hickey, CEO of Rodgers Vineyards, stride between the vines. Located in Napa’s Oak Knoll District, Rodgers Vineyards represents just one of the quality relationships that The Prisoner Wine Company maintains with its grower partners.*



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*Anna Hickey, CEO of Rodgers Vineyards (pictured at right), made the decision to plant Zinfandel based on her successful relationship with The Prisoner Wine Company and its employees, among them Director of Winemaking Chrissy Wittmann (left).*

## EXPERTS IN GROWER RELATIONS

Whether it's acquiring a couple tons of fruit or a couple hundred, The Prisoner Wine Company values the relationship it has with each grower. That said, Wittmann can't possibly visit all of them during the busy harvest months, so the company has established grower-relations teams that split up between regions; one, for example, covers the Sierra Foothills and Lodi, while another covers Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino. "It's extremely helpful. There are so many places to see throughout the year. It's tough to keep up with it," Wittmann says. "You end up being a road warrior for a certain part of harvest to get to all these places."

In addition to holding post-harvest check-ins and tastings, the teams host grower lunches in Napa Valley and the Central Coast. According to Wittmann, small efforts like this stand out to their partners and help facilitate lasting relation-

ships. "Our partnerships are a little bit different because we're all passionate about varieties other than Cab," says Wittmann, adding that because Cabernet tends to fetch a higher price, many vineyard owners focus on it exclusively in lieu of experimenting with different grapes. "It makes for a relationship—we have the same interests, so we've had quite a bit of luck with planting contracts and people working with us to plant other varieties."

## LONG-TERM LOYALTY

Rodgers Vineyards, a grower in Napa's Oak Knoll District, serves as a prime example of this willingness to venture from the norm. When it came time to replant some Chardonnay vines that were producing award-winning wines for other clients, the company's leadership asked the Prisoner Wine Company team if they had something else in mind. Their response? Zinfandel.

"They've built such a great relationship with us that when they knew I was going to replant, we started discussing, 'If you could have your dream variety out here, what would it be?' And Zinfandel was one of those," says Anna Hickey, CEO of Rodgers Vineyards. "They really have worked very hard at making us feel like part of the family and much less like an operation—like you're as important as anyone else. I can't imagine the time that goes into that, so the decision to plant Zinfandel was based solely on that relationship."

The variety is a first for the 144-acre ranch, which Hickey says has "the perfect microclimate." "We're pretty fortunate that we're able to grow just about anything beautifully," she adds. "We're not tied down to a specific variety and we do them all well, so it gives us an advantage. I lovingly call our ranch here a quilt."

Rodgers Vineyards currently grows Merlot, Syrah, and Viognier for The Prisoner Wine Company and will soon plant

Cabernet as well. The Viognier goes into Blindfold, a distinctive white blend made with an unlikely combination of grapes: The 2017 vintage also features Chardonnay, Roussanne, and Muscat. Before planting the aforementioned Zinfandel, Hickey enlisted the help of Bob Biale, Napa's "Godfather of Zin," and they eventually settled on the Primitivo clone as the best fit for the terroir.

The historic property was originally founded as a cattle ranch in the 1940s before transitioning into grape-growing in the '70s. It's been with The Prisoner Wine Company since Dave Phinney launched the label in 2000, and it's hardly alone: The company continues to work with more than 90% of its original partners.

Hickey admits she was initially concerned about the future of the relationship when Constellation Brands purchased The Prisoner Wine Company in 2016, but if anything, things have improved. "They didn't come in and start to try to change it or manipulate it," she says. "I think they worked very hard to keep that core group of original growers—they knew they were key to the brand. I see this huge effort to make sure they stay loyal, and that is not a cheap effort. I love being a part of that story." 



*SOMM Journal contributing photographer Ted Thomas takes a quick break to admire the vines.*



**The Prisoner 2017 Red, Napa Valley (\$47)** Blending Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Syrah, and Charbono makes for a wine with big, broad strokes. From its royal-purple hue to its aromas of creamy plum and vanilla, it makes a long-lasting impression. Rich waves of plum pudding glide across the palate as spiced cinnamon and dried lavender accent the round tannins. Dark chocolate dries the mouth, but a balanced acidity keeps the tones of cherry and fig fresh on the finish. **95**

**Saldo 2017 Zinfandel, California (\$32)** This deep and dense red has 15% Petite Sirah and Syrah blended in. The brambly perfume of licorice, black pepper, blackberry, and espresso is a nod to the grapes sourced from top Northern California vineyards. The plush entry is significant. Elegance ensues with layers of dark chocolate surrounding concentrated black and purple fruit. **93**

**The Snitch 2017 Chardonnay, Napa Valley (\$35)** After undergoing 100% malolactic fermentation, this expression aged in 35% new French oak for ten months. Honeyed apples and lemon tart are sensational scents, and the addition of 3% Viognier offers a floral quality on the nose and palate. Charred tangerine peel, lemon oil, and cashew add texture to a bright acidity as creaminess ensues with a pleasurable touch of salinity on the finish. The Chardonnay hails from sites in the Stags Leap District and Carneros. **94**

**Blindfold 2017 White, California (\$32)** This creamy, spiced charmer combines Chardonnay, Roussanne, Viognier, and Muscat. Chamomile, oregano, macadamia nuts, and oatmeal offer complexity to a broad mouthfeel. It aged for ten months: 80% in a combination of French and Hungarian oak (25% new) and 20% in stainless steel. **93**

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN