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Realm's 2021 Spring Releases

With the upcoming 2021 Realm releases of their single vineyard wines and The Absurd, this is an opportune moment to look back at the story of Realm's dramatic past as well as the impressive changes that are going on now.



Risk

2002-2015 – This blessed plot, this earth, this Realm.

Realm was co-founded by Juan Mercado in the early 2000s. Mercado had been a medic in the army during the Gulf War and then came to work as a nurse at a hospital in Oakland, California, before moving to Napa. He caught the winemaking bug, and in 2002, with the help of friends in the industry, he was able to buy a few tons of Beckstoffer To Kalon fruit plus a little fruit from Dominus to make his own wine. By 2010, production had gone from just a few hundred cases to 2,500 cases.

In 2011, French-born winemaker Benoit Touquette came on board. Touquette had studied Chemistry and Oenology at Bordeaux University and worked at several Bordeaux wineries before arriving in California to work with wine consultant Andy Erickson. In the early 2000s, he quickly made a name for himself, working at Screaming Eagle, Ovid, and Dalla Valle. Realm was less well-known, but Touquette was drawn to the spirit of this project. He brought along his friend and mentor Michel Rolland as a consultant, adding the cherry on top of this emerging recipe for success.



Come 2011, Realm was doing everything right, but it all went horribly wrong. Like so many wineries purchasing fruit and living hand to mouth, the team was one difficult vintage away from disaster. That vintage was the cold, rainy wash-out that was 2011. The business was about to hit a financial wall.

Then, one fateful day in 2011, a young Air Force veteran and Harvard Business School Graduate named Scott Becker walked into a bar and sat down next to Mercado. Becker has been working for Bill Harlan for a few years but dreamt of striking out on his own. Before long, Becker found himself joining forces with Juan Mercado and Benoit Touquette. He had the secret ingredient they were missing—business acumen.

By the end of 2011, debts at Realm were spiraling out of control.

Juan, Benoit, and Scott had to re-start Realm in early 2012. At the time, the business was bankrupt. But, with Scott's financial know-how, they decided it was worth trying to turn things around. Scott bought out Juan's old business partner, but that didn't leave much capital to invest in the company. 2012, '13 and '14 were skinny years. Benoit became active in the vineyards, working with growers to fine-tune farming standards. They were making the wines at Chateau Boswell, which was great, but it wasn't the same as having their own home. Juan and Scott traveled across the country selling wine to whoever they could. There was a lot of back-vintage wine to move, which in theory was good for cash flow, but these were older wines not made by Benoit, wines that didn't necessarily show the future.

"I could tell stories for days about what it was like to try to turn around a brand," said Scott. "Lots of heartache, holding onto hope, cleaning up an old mess, repairing relationships with vendors who weren't paid, earning back trust from consumers who were promised something that never materialized. But through those scrappy years, the thing that kept us going was tasting the wines in barrel from 2012. We thought if we could just hold on until we put those 2012 wines onto the market, there was a chance Realm could turn into something special."



When the moment of truth came, so much was riding on Robert Parker's assessment of Realm's 2012 vintage. His reviews of the 2011s had been disastrously lackluster, with just one wine receiving a 90-point score, and the rest were in the 80s—the kiss of death. At the end of October 2014, Parker published his annual Wine Advocate Napa report, focused on the 2012 new releases. Realm's Dr. Crane Vineyard and The Absurd both received 100 points, with no label scoring below 96.

"The meaning of tasting those 2012 wines with Bob..." Becker said, "...we will never forget that, and we continue to wake up every day trying to live up to the opportunity he gave us."

Realm was back in business.

In 2015, the team at Realm took the next step toward achieving their dream. They purchased a home—the Hartwell Winery and vineyards located just off the Silverado Trail in Stags Leap District, up on Wappo Hill. "To go from struggling for survival to being able to farm our own vineyards, it's hard to overstate the significance of that," Becker said. "We worked our tails off to get here, but we are still constantly humbled by the gravity and responsibility we now carry to be stewards of the land. When you are just buying fruit, you are living year to year. When you plant your own vineyard, you have to be thinking about the next 30 or 40 years."

The team named their new home vineyard "Moonracer," paying homage to the Wappo indigenous people of northern California who once used the hill as a central lookout. Jack London, who wrote about the competitions among Native American tribes that took place during full moons, noted that the Wappos often won. Thus, Moonracer is a reference to this heritage.

"The vineyard is made up of about twelve acres in production at the moment, with another eight acres in the stage of replanting, so ultimately, we will have twenty acres surrounding the winery," Becker informed me at the time of purchase. "The original Hartwell blocks at the top of the hill are planted to two acres today, but we hope to expand that to five acres or more in time."

The acquisition of their new base kick—started a massive project to build a new winery, expand the cellars, and restructure the vineyards. Make no mistake, this was a huge financial bet—all or nothing.



2016 to Now – Beyond the Realm of Possibilities.

In 2018, Juan Mercado parted ways with Realm to start his own new passion project in Paso Robles called RIISE. Since then, Realm has continued to flourish under Becker's and Touquette's management. Its juggernaut rate of development and expansion has been nothing short of jaw-dropping.

Today, Realm has an impressive winery and underground cellar facility in Stags Leap. Surrounding this is the Moonracer vineyard, which underwent a costly redevelopment project that involved shifting a literal mountain of topsoil to install a state-of-the-art drainage system. Not forgetting the old Hartwell Estate vineyard on top of the hill, which is in the process of replanting. And, from 2018, Becker and Touquette entered into an agreement with Farella Vineyard in Coombsville, taking over the farming and management of the site, rendering it, for all intents and purposes, an estate vineyard.

In 2022, Realm purchased Houyi Vineyard and the accompanying Nine Suns Winery with the illustrious neighborhood of Pritchard Hill, placing them in the big leagues. I recently tasted the newly bottled Realm 2021s with Benoit and Scott at their new Nine Suns Winery on Pritchard Hill.

"We were purchasing fruit from Houyi Vineyard for years (since 2013), but the previous owners would keep the blocks they wanted for their label, and we got what they gave us," said Scott. "We only ever got Cabernet Sauvignon. When we purchased the vineyard, there were 21 acres planted here, with one-acre fallow. We've since grafted over three acres to Cabernet Franc. We have 18 acres producing this year."

Realm continues to outsource some fruit for a few top labels, most notably from Beckstoffer's Dr. Crane and To Kalon vineyards, but they are increasingly becoming estate-driven. As for quality, after a non-existent 2020 vintage (they took the difficult decision not to bottle and sell any reds because of potential smoke taint), with 2021, the team is firing on all cylinders again.

"In 2021, gentle extraction was key," said Benoit. "It was easy for the wine to go too far, to be too much. Ripe but not over-ripe, that's 2021."

A couple of wines not made in 2021 are the Cabernet Franc-based wines. Falstaff is only made occasionally and was not made in 2020, 2021, or 2022. Meanwhile, the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Franc label will not be made anymore.

“We only used to make about 100 cases of To Kalon Cabernet Franc, but now we have decided to blend this in with the To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon,” said Scott.

Also, the last vintage of the Beckstoffer’s Bourn Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon label is 2021.



A new wine in the 2021 line-up is the Nine Suns label, named after the former winery. This is a one-time wine, made only in 2021 to commemorate the Realm purchase. Nine Suns’ former winemaking consultant, Philippe Melka, crafted the wine, and the Realm team blended and bottled it. “Our first instinct was to blend it in with our Houyi Vineyard wine,” said Scott. “But this wine is constructed so differently. We wanted to honor what Philippe did. So, this is a one-off label.” Only 500 cases were made, and the fruit is all off the Houyi vineyard.

Realm has finished preexisting contracts to sell fruit from Farella and Houyi Vineyards, keeping the production for Realm’s wines.

“It’s an important part of our business plan,” said Scott. “Now, we’re making wines with more freshness, precision, and structure because we’re now in control of all the variables. We’re more in control of our winemaking and fruit sources.”

This impressive set of 2021 new releases showcases what this expanded, newly fortified Realm is now capable of producing in a great vintage. Call it a game of Risk well played. Bravo!

2021 Realm Cellars

The Bard

2021 ↕

97

A blend of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot, and 1% Petite Sirah, the fruit for the 2021 The Bard comes from sites across the valley, including some estate fruit and some sourced fruit. Deep garnet-purple colored, it shoots from the glass with vibrant notions of crushed black currants, red currant jelly, black raspberries, and pencil shavings, giving way to notes of lilacs, dark chocolate, and a waft of spearmint. The full-bodied palate is firm with ripe, fine-grained tannins and a lively backbone framing the tightly wound red, black, and blue fruit flavors, finishing with great length and a real skip in its step.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2023-09-07**

Source: **Realm's Fall Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

The Tempest

2021 ↕

97

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2021 The Tempest comes bounding out with exuberant notes of wild blueberries, juicy plums, and boysenberry preserves, leading to a core of warm cassis, spice cake, aniseed, and menthol. The full-bodied palate is chock-full of black and blue fruit layers, framed by firm, grainy tannins, and bold freshness, finishing with lingering mineral sparks and a refreshing lift. It is delicious right now, though has the structure and muscle to age a good 20+ years in cellar. With this 2021 vintage fresher, more vibrant style change, Realm is presenting a bright, modern new label for The Tempest, created by the UK artist Richard Twose. The blend this year is 75% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 5% Malbec.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2023-09-07**

Source: **Realm's Fall Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

The Absurd

2021 ↕

99

Deep garnet-purple in color, the 2021 The Absurd needs a fair bit of swirling to unlock notes of blueberry compote, chocolate-covered cherries, mulberries, and blackcurrant cordial giving way to scents of rose oil, cinnamon stick, and sandalwood plus a touch of garrigue. Full-bodied and jam packed with black fruit and exotic spice layers, the palate has a rock-solid structure of firm, grainy tannins and just enough freshness, finishing long and layered.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Nine Suns

2021 ↕

97

The 2021 Nine Suns is composed of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Cabernet Franc, and 10% Merlot. Deep garnet-purple in color, it storms out of the glass with powerful notes of baked plums, boysenberry preserves, and creme de cassis followed by suggestions of tar, wet slate, unsmoked cigars, and tapenade. The full-bodied palate is packed with concentrated black fruit and earthy flavors, supported by firm, grainy tannins and just enough freshness, finishing long with a peppery lift. This Nine Suns label, named after the former winery, is a one-time wine made only in 2021, following the Realm purchase of the Nine Suns Winery and the surrounding Houyi Vineyard in 2022. The former winemaking consultant, Philippe Melka, made the wine and the Realm team blended and bottled it. "Our first instinct was to blend it in with our Houyi Vineyard wine," said owner Scott Becker. "But this constructed so differently. We wanted to honor what Philippe did. So, this is a one-off label." Only 500 cases were made, and the fruit is all off the Houyi vineyard.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Moonracer Cabernet Sauvignon

2021 ↕

96 +

The 2021 Moonracer is a single vineyard wine from Realm's vineyard in Stags Leap District. "The wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon this year because the vineyard is being replanted," said winemaker Benoit Touquette. "The Merlot and Cabernet Franc were pulled, and the new plantings aren't in production yet. By the time we're done, we will have replanted all this vineyard. Then a true footprint of the place will be in this wine." Deep garnet-purple colored, gregarious notes of blackberry pie, black cherries, and black currant pastilles prance out of the glass, leading to fragrant wafts of lavender, chocolate mint, and cinnamon stick. Full-bodied, the palate is taut with ripe, crunchy black fruits, supported by a solid frame of grainy tannins and compelling tension, finishing long with loads of mineral and baking spice sparks. 720 cases were made.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2023-09-07**

Source: **Realm's Fall Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Houyi Vineyard

2021 ↕

98

The 2021 Houyi Vineyard, 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, is deep garnet-purple in color. It comes barreling out with powerful notes of blackcurrant jelly, stewed plums, and fruitcake followed by hints of charcoal, wild sage, mossy tree bark, and black olives. The full-bodied palate delivers a rock-solid frame of firm, grainy tannins and plenty of freshness to support the densely packed black fruits, finishing long and earthy. Just under 1,000 cases were made.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Farella Cabernet Sauvignon

2021 ↕

97 +

The 2021 Farella Cabernet Sauvignon, with 5% Merlot in the blend, is deep garnet-purple in color. It rolls out with playful notes of blueberry compote, chocolate mint, and blackcurrant jelly followed by hints of iris bulb, allspice, and vanilla pod. The full-bodied palate offers chunky, rounded tannins and just enough freshness to support the spicy black fruits, finishing long and perfumed.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Hartwell XX Cabernet Sauvignon

2021 ↕

98 +

The jewel sitting atop of the Moonracer Vineyard is the 1.5-acre estate owned Hartwell Vineyard. Only 150 cases were made of the 2021 Hartwell XX Cabernet Sauvignon. This the former Hartwell property, purchased by Realm in 2020, constituting the highest blocks above their Stags Leap District vineyard. The vines originate from budwood acquired by Bob Hartwell from Dick Grace of Grace Family Vineyards in the 1980s. "This is the first year of us getting out hands around the farming," commented owner Scott Becker. Deep garnet-purple colored, it sashays out with flamboyant notions of roses, clove oil, and juicy plums, leading to a core of warm cassis, cedar chest, and fragrant earth, plus a waft of camphor. Full-bodied, the palate bursts with expressive blackberry and baking spices flavors, supported by super-fine, silt-like tannins and seamless freshness, finishing long and mineraly.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2023-09-07**

Source: **Realm's Fall Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard

2021 ↕

100

The 2021 Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard, with 5% Petit Verdot in the blend, is deep garnet-purple in color. Quite closed to start off, it requires a lot of shaking to wake up notes of blackcurrant pastilles, juicy blackberries, and fresh plums plus suggestions of crushed rocks, candied violets, dark chocolate, and licorice with a touch of iron ore. The full-bodied palate delivers a firm, fine-grained texture and seamless freshness supporting the taut, muscular black fruits, finishing with a firework display of mineral, floral and chocolate notes.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

2021 ↕

98

The 2021 Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon has 5% Cabernet Franc in the blend. Deep garnet-purple in color, it explodes with a mushroom cloud of plum preserves, boysenberries, and creme de cassis with an undercurrent of Chinese five spice, cast-iron pan, and aniseed plus a waft of dusty soil. The full-bodied palate is rich and seductive, with firm, grainy tannins and plenty of freshness to support the generous black fruit layers, finishing long and spicy.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**

2021 Realm Cellars

Beckstoffer Bourn Cabernet Sauvignon

2021 ↕

96

The 2021 Beckstoffer Bourn Cabernet Sauvignon, the last vintage of this label, has 5% Petite Sirah in the blend. Deep garnet-purple in color, it charges out of the gate with notes of black cherries, crushed blueberries, Indian spices, and dusty soil leading to wafts of potpourri and star anise. The full-bodied palate is rich, concentrated, and impactful, delivering mouthcoating black and blue fruit preserves supported by a refreshing backbone and velvety tannins, finishing long and opulent.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2024-02-01**

Source: **Realm's 2021 Spring Releases**