



Authority Magazine

Wisdom from the Women Leading the Wine & Spirits Industries, with Chris Kajani of Bouchaine Vineyards

BY KELLY REEVES, JANUARY 29, 2023



Credit: Bouchaine Vineyards

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Be flexible. Wine is one of the oldest industries in the world, and yet it is always changing. We are always experimenting at Bouchaine and figuring out new ways to make the best wine possible. Flexibility and a willingness to adapt are how you build a vineyard and a winery that will last.

Less than 20% of winemakers and distillers are women. Traditionally, women were excluded from these industries. This number is slowly rising as more women choose to study this profession and enter the wine and spirits fields. What is it like for those women who work in this male dominated industry? What are some of the challenges that these women face? Is there hope for better representation, and better wages, for women in the wine and spirits industry? As a part of our series about women leading the wine and spirits industries, we had the pleasure of interviewing Chris Kajani.

Chris Kajani started her career in biotech, but a few too many trips to European wine regions led her to pursue a Masters in Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis. After almost a decade working with Carneros Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as Saintsbury's winemaker, she joined Bouchaine Vineyards in 2015 as winemaker and general manager. Chris has led the hospitality, winemaking and sustainability efforts at the property. She updated the winery to implement a variety of new technologies, led the development of Bouchaine's newly opened Hospitality Center and has elevated Bouchaine's sustainable initiatives. She introduced composting as an integral part of the Bouchaine farm plan to offer a rich and diverse set of nutrients for the soil. She also worked with her vineyard management team to establish natural waterways in the vineyard to maximize water conservation by improving natural water flow. Today, her passion and authenticity set the tone for her team. Pick for flavor. Get serious about the details. Don't take shortcuts. And above all, enjoy the wine.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dive in, our readers would love to get to know you a bit. Can you tell us a bit about your origin story, and your childhood?

I am a proud native of Napa where I learned early in life the pleasures of jumping on my neighbors' horse for vineyard rides and raiding my parents' wine cellar (not necessarily in that order). The minute I turned 16, I became the designated driver for family outings up and down the valley, planting the seeds of my future career. I went on to earn a B.S. in Biological Sciences at UC Davis and began working for biotech giants in the Bay Area, but my love of wine never faded.

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Can you tell us the “backstory” about what brought you to the wine and spirits industry?

A chance encounter at a dinner party led to me working a harvest at Testarossa with renowned winemaker and “pinot geek” Ed Kurtzman. Bitten by the winemaking bug, I trekked back to UC Davis where I completed my M.S. in Viticulture and Enology. I was hired by Pahlmeyer in 2004 and was immediately seduced by its newly launched Pinot Noir project. I put my nose in the tank and the layers of wild strawberry, succulent cherry, cardamom, sandalwood, roses and cinnamon hit me like a wave — after my first harvest of Pinot Noir, I was hooked. The Burgundian side of life strongly called to me, and in 2006 I joined Saintsbury and quickly became Associate Winemaker and then Winemaker a few years later. Immersing myself in the nuanced soils and microclimates of Carneros and having the opportunity to build relationships with our outstanding and dedicated grape-growing community, has been an incredibly rewarding experience. In 2015, I became winemaker and general manager at Bouchaine Vineyards, the oldest continuously operating winery in Carneros, where I am able to pursue my passion for farming, vineyard tech and making beautiful wine.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

There are thousands of ways to make wine and when you come to a new vineyard your relationship to it is fresh, but the site has many years of history to consider. You have your own winemaking experience, but you don't know which parts of your vineyards have various environmental pressures from drought to flood to pests. All you can do is keep a sharp eye on the growing season and taste the wines you made from that vintage. So, when you come into a new vineyard like I did at Bouchaine in 2015, that first year is really nerve-racking because you are trying to build a relationship with the site. On top of that, hailstorms made 2015 a very difficult year. Drawing on my experience with past sites in Carneros, I used the traditional method of green thinning during veraison to drop fruit that hadn't gained color. In the process I over-thinned and we had a very light crop that year, 40% down from the usual yield. I realized that I'd approached the Bouchaine vineyard in the way I'd done in the past, not considering the struggles of the vintage due to hail. With what I know now, I would do a better job of exploring the blocks of fruit before making any decisions. I learned to do the research and allow myself the flexibility to do something new and explore the best methods for the situations I'm presented with. Which yes, applies to farming, but also applies to business and any new situation life may present you with.

It has been said that sometimes our mistakes can be our greatest teachers. Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

We snuck a bottle of Riesling into a movie once and during one of those quiet emotional scenes we knocked it over — with the entire theater listening to it roll down row after row. The people that caught it handed it back to us and the whole theater cheered. I think that energy really speaks to the spirit of the Napa Valley and the wine industry as a whole. At my core, I believe we have to have fun with wine and use it to bring people together.

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None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story?

Winemaker Heidi Barrett has always been an inspiration for me. She was the assistant winemaker at Bouchaine many years before I began working here, but I first met her when I started working at Pahlmeyer in the early 2000s. We both made wine at the Napa Wine Company, and I remember walking into the cellar and her greeting me with such warmth and openness. Even though she had no idea who I was, she asked if I wanted to taste with her. She taught me that it is important to be serious about your craft but that stressing about it won't make better wine. I try my best to stay calm in the storm and stay open to talking to people about wine, with no judgment about their level of knowledge. I have been friends with Heidi ever since.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success?

- Listening to my intuition — I do my best not to second guess myself and go with my gut.
- Doing the work — I am not afraid to get my hands dirty, in fact, I love the hard work of winemaking. I hike the vineyard, meet with growers and the viticultural team and really get to know this piece of land. Good wine is in the details like the aging vessels, and how many days it's in the tank. I pay close attention to every aspect of the wine-making process, there are no cutting corners.
- People management: I don't do this job by myself. I work with a strong team of people from the harvest interns to the all-female vineyard team, my assistant winemaker and everyone on the office side. We all work together to create a work culture where diligence and the pursuit of excellent wine are expected, but where we also have fun.

Are you working on any new or exciting projects now? How do you think that will help people?

In September we planted new chardonnay clones which we'll see the results of in a few years. In 2017, we did a replant with new pinot noir clones, and we are starting to make wines that come from those new blocks. It's exciting to see how those vines have flourished. We've also finalized updated drainage plans for all 87 acres, which took years of working with hydrologists and engineers. It's not the most glamorous thing to be excited about, but it will significantly improve quality and reduce our impact on the planet. Bouchaine is concerned about water in general which has led to us working with Cisco to place sensors throughout the vineyard to monitor soil moisture as well as temperature and light. This will help us preserve water and continue to farm in a more sustainable manner.

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Ok. Thank you for all that. Let's now jump to the main core of our interview. Despite great progress that has been made we still have a lot more work to do to achieve gender parity in this industry. In Napa Valley, the percentage of lead women winemakers or winery owners is about 12%. Overall, men account for about 80% of winemakers and winery owners. In your opinion or experience, what 3 things can be done by a) individuals b) companies and/or c) society as a whole to support greater gender parity moving forward?

It starts at the top — so the people who are overseeing putting teams in place should be cognizant of hiring people that do not look like them, but hiring people based on qualifications and adding different points of view to your team. Diversity in gender, race and class is important to the culture of wine. We must be mentoring people that are underrepresented in the wine industry. Giving people opportunities to learn about wine, winemaking and the business of wine is important to the longevity of wine as an industry. I am part of a Wine Women GM Forum where women who run wineries in Napa and Sonoma meet and hear from people with deep knowledge of their industries that share their knowledge about everything relating to running a winery, from finances to how they have worked to broaden diversity in their fields. Learning what has worked outside of the wine industry is invaluable.

You are a “Wine and Spirits Insider”. If you had to advise someone about 5 non intuitive things one should know to succeed in the wine and spirits industry, what would you say?

- Travel everywhere. Wine is made in every corner of the world. You should know about the wine in your area and travel to as many wine regions as you can. Experiencing wine from different perspectives helps you become a better winemaker and wine drinker.
- Working in wine doesn't require an official education. You don't need a master's degree, you just need the excitement and interest to jump right in. That may be attending tastings, being a harvest intern or making wine in your own home. Learn about wine by doing.
- There is no one right way to make wine. Recognize that there are thousands of people all over the world making wine and they all do it differently. It doesn't matter if you're drinking boxed wine or Château Margaux, I am just excited people continue to explore wine.
- Be flexible. Wine is one of the oldest industries in the world, and yet it is always changing. We are always experimenting at Bouchaine and figuring out new ways to make the best wine possible. Flexibility and a willingness to adapt are how you build a vineyard and a winery that will last.
- Don't be afraid to march to the beat of your own drum. I am so proud of my team at Bouchaine for always coming up with the most fun and truly unique tasting experiences. These are things that really set us apart in the valley. Whether it's performances from members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, tastings that pair wine with your Meyer's Briggs type, falconry experiences, or our new vessel tasting which allows people to compare wine aged in different vessels. We are always trying things that no one else in the valley is doing, and it has allowed us to be a place guests are always returning to try something new.

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Can you share 3 things that most excite you about the industry?

The exciting thing about working in wine is that each day brings new lessons and challenges. On the Bouchaine Vineyard property we are growing many different pinot noir clones and each time I bottle a new clone, I taste the possibilities of a fresh expression of a grape that I thought I knew so well. We're also experimenting with a range of fermentation vessels like concrete egg, large French oak cask and clay amphora to see how each affects the aroma and flavor of the wines. Innovations in vineyard technology is something that excites me for the future of winemaking. In 2021 Bouchaine installed Cisco Industrial Asset Vision sensor technology to be more precise not just in our water use, but in all the growing decisions. I have been implementing sustainability practices in the vineyard since I started at Bouchaine and with the technology that is being developed I am hopeful that we can continue to make wine into the future while contributing to the preservation of our ecosystem. Lastly mentoring the next generation of female winemakers fills me with hope and excitement. I work with an all-female vineyard crew that does everything from being crew leaders and field scouts to performing detailed vine work and driving tractors. I am inspired by working with such an accomplished and detail-oriented group of women. My assistant winemaker Emily Weimer is a part of the next generation of women winemakers. I hope the knowledge that I impart to her and the opportunities that I share will make her vintner journey that much easier.

Can you share 3 things that most concern you about the industry? If you had the ability to implement 3 ways to reform or improve the industry, what would you suggest?

Climate change is definitely top of mind. Not just the warming of areas but the significance of swings in mother nature from rain to drought to hailstorms to heat spikes. That is why we have continued to work with Cisco sensors, which provide data so that we can follow what the vines are doing for years to come. Tracking these data patterns will allow us to better adapt to a changing environment.

I am concerned with diversity in the wine industry. I work for a female owned and run winery. We've been around for 40 years, and the proprietor Mrs. Tatiana Copeland has been such a force. I am fortunate to work in a culture that respects women and diversity. Our assistant winemaker is a woman and this year we had an all-female intern class. We've seen so many more women apply to be interns in the last few years and that's great.

As the winemaker and general manager of a small family-owned winery the consolidation of distributors and corporate-owned wineries is concerning. It's difficult to get the attention of larger distributors which is why so many of us focus on DTC sales. I am happy that it has also led us to build our hospitality center to draw in new wine lovers and where we are able to bring people to Carneros to share the history of the region.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

“Enjoy the ride” — A lot about life is being present, having fun and finding joy in the journey and not the destination. As I get older and watch my kiddo grow up, time moves faster every year and it’s important to enjoy the journey. This also relates to the act of making wine, which is a long process. From the start of the growing season to picking grapes, fermentation, blending and bottling it’s important to enjoy each step as that is where most of your time is spent.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the greatest amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

I would build a movement around labor and creating a work culture that treats people well. We are creating a product that people can enjoy for decades so how we treat each other and inspire teams and take care of employees is important. Each harvest I work with the same vineyard crew. I have invested time into each of the people on my team and they return year after year. I am proud of the fact that many people left the workforce or changed positions in the last few years and yet we have retained the same sales team since 2018. Investing in your people and fostering a culture of respect allows us to build a work culture where we all thrive.

Thank you so much for the time you spent with this. We wish you only continued success!

