

Black History Always: Derek Baljeu Is Tackling The Wine World

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Winemaker for Knights Bridge Winery,
DEREK BALJEU

There's a certain poetry in transforming the gifts of nature into a medium that captures it in a glass. For Derek Baljeu, it's been the essence of his life's work - quite literally. Baljeu's background, deeply rooted in the wonders of the outdoors, transitioned him into the world of winemaking.

"I have a love of the outdoors and a soft spot for places that put your humanity into scale - either surfing in the ocean, exploring and boarding up in the mountains, and everywhere in between," says Baljeu.

His passion for the outdoors started where he grew up in Huntington Beach, CA with his Dutch father and Black mother. There were a few places Baljeu could be found when he was younger: on the beach, on a hiking trail, or on the field playing football. This Zilennial used his skill on the gridiron to play Division I Football at UC Davis. Initially his major was Communications but after taking a winter elective in winemaking, his time in Comms ended. Baljeu entered the famed Viticulture and Enology (V&E) program at Davis while still playing football. For most students the V&E program is extremely challenging. Baljeu was urged to drop football, yet he was determined to succeed at both. He did just that. He was named a team captain and was accepted into the Masters of Viticulture and Enology program during his tenure.

Following three years at Trinchero Family Estate within the Luxury Portfolio, he joined Knight Bridge Winery in 2019 as an Enologist and Wine Production Manager. In 2021 he was promoted to Assistant Winemaker because, "Derek is a skilled winemaker and has proven himself to be an integral member of the Knights Bridge team," said Debi Leal, President and General Manager of Knights Bridge Winery.

I caught up with the busy winemaker before the bottling season to discuss his thoughts on what the wine industry can do to appeal to his generation and ask the hard questions about diversity.

What was your first experience with wine? Were your parents winedrinkers?

We weren't a big wine family, only a couple bottles of cheap wine were brought out around the holidays. I remember as a child, maybe 5 or so years old, wanting to sit with the grown-ups and drink the wine they had, all in the pursuit of being an adult. From a very early age I distinctly remember not liking any of the little sips of wine I was given from my parents or friends of theirs, but always toughed through it and pretended it was enjoyable. Funny how the tables have turned and I am the one bringing a case or two of wine for the holidays and no bottles go to waste, let alone to pretend to be enjoyed.

What's the first bottle you bought with your own money?

My wine journey all started on a college budget. I remember wanting to sit at home and relax after a big game instead of going out to the local dive. I strolled up to the grocery store on the corner and 'splurged' on a bottle of Francis Coppola's Director's Cut Cabernet Sauvignon that did not go to waste that night. The label is what drew me in at the time and the wine was perfect for someone just getting into wine on a tight budget.

When did you decide wine was more than a hobby?

There were a few moments of realization along the way, but the most prominent came at my first internship a few weeks after switching into the Viticulture and Enology program at UC Davis. I looked up 'winery attire' in Google before showing up on my first day at the winery because I was so excited for this internship and wanted to dress for the job. I saw images of people in dresses, collared shirts, khakis, heels, etc. - I didn't know any better so I put on my nicest shirt, dress shoes, and slacks and took off for work ready to taste wine and hang out. Fast forward a couple hours later to riding an ATV in the unforgiving afternoon sun and trekking through a foot of mud in my dress shoes to fix the busted irrigation lines in the vineyard. The hands-on, hard work, connection with the earth, and ability to be outside and play in the mud is what sold me on being in some facet of vineyard work or winemaking for the rest of my life.

What was your first job in wine?

My first job in wine was dragging hoses, washing tanks, packing boxes, driving tractors, and wearing many other hats down at a small family-owned vineyard in Lodi called Jessie's Grove Winery.

What formal education or certifications do you possess? What educational opportunities are you currently pursuing? Any obstacles?

I have my Bachelor's and Master's in Viticulture and Enology from UC Davis. Currently I'm finishing my MBA in Wine Business from Sonoma State University. Most of the obstacles as a student or working professional come from time management - whether it be from hopping from the football field to the vineyard to class or now from the winery to the classroom back to my life at home or on the road, it's all been about prioritizing and allocating time for all the demands that come from multiple responsibilities and passions.

Tell me more about your role. What does it entail? What do you like or love about it?

Lots of hats are worn in my day to day. Being present and making decisions in the vineyard to tasting, deciding, and directing the creative vision of the wines we are producing, to helping with hospitality with guests to traveling across the states to tell the story of the estate, wine, and family. Truly no two days are the same. All the different roles that I play within the winery make the day to day very dynamic and enthralling.

My brain fires on many different cylinders throughout the week, but the most enjoyable piece of my work is surrendering to a force bigger than myself. As a winemaker you are making the best decision around the vineyard and the wines according to what Mother Nature is giving you. With no true control, it's an exhilarating dance riding the waves that nature is throwing at you to create something beautiful and unique to that place and moment in time. Ironically, my favorite piece is also the biggest challenge.

Do you feel things in the wine industry are improving for people of color?

From a very high-level view, no. The statistics relating to inclusion and diversity are still very telling of the entire story. I am very optimistic on the medium and small-scale side of this topic. There are so many good conversations about change happening and like-minded people in the industry just bringing social awareness to their experiences and how things can be improved. Taking one step back, there are so many organizations that are coming together to promote D&I and the wind is in their sails to make a change like the Association of African American Vintners (AAAV) and The Roots Fund (TRF). As history would exemplify, change is slow but with the consistent efforts and momentum behind this specific conversation I believe that things will and are improving.

What can gatekeepers do to make the wine industry more inclusive for people of color?

There are so many ways in which people can help. Gatekeepers in the wine industry can enhance inclusivity by implementing diverse hiring practices, ensuring representation in marketing, offering education and training programs, fostering networking and mentorship, supporting supplier diversity, disclosing transparent diversity metrics, collaborating on inclusive events, advocating for diversity initiatives, and addressing bias and discrimination through clear policies. If everyone adopted some, if not all of these practices, we'd have a much more diverse and inclusive industry.

What specifically could have been done to make your initial experience better?

As a person of color coming up in the wine industry, I feel like I was missing mentorship and a sense of community. Just being able to look up to someone that looks like you is an extremely powerful tool and inspiration for a career path. I am elated that this is something that is becoming more readily available as the industry gets more progressive for younger people of color coming into the industry.

Spirits does a better job of advertising to young, diverse 21+ consumers in the U.S. As an insider what are tangible actions to promote to a broader demographic of wine consumers?

To expand wine consumption among diverse young adults (21+) in the US, implement inclusive marketing, leverage social media and influencers, host interactive events, and maintain accessible pricing. Emphasize sustainability, encourage user-generated content, explore mobile apps, and stay adaptable to emerging trends. I think regularly assessing and refining strategies based on consumer feedback for a resonant and authentic brand is the most important piece.

What's next for you in your career?

Honestly, I am light years beyond where I thought I would've been a decade ago so I feel very blessed every day to be where I am. Outside of finishing up with my MBA, I plan to continue learning and building the network around me and to continue to make myself available and give back to the community that has supported me.

What is it REALLY like living in the Napa Valley?

I love living in Napa Valley, I currently live up in Calistoga and couldn't ask for anything more at the moment. The scenery as you go up valley and the surrounding areas are stunning and there are so many hikes and excuses to get outside. From a more lifestyle perspective, it's a tight knit community with a huge appreciation for getting together over some food or to crack a bottle of wine, so there is always an excuse to connect with someone and you are always within a person or two of anyone you would want to talk to. The restaurants and bars all over the valley have been vastly expanding along with the cocktail culture, and has gone from a sleepy town that would shut down around 10PM to having lots of fun options for a night out downtown. Overall I love living in the valley, and enjoy the space that the north valley has to offer.

If you could only drink one varietal for the rest of this year, what would it be?

This is a question I battle with often, but would have to land on Chardonnay - from Tasmanian bubbles to White Burgundy to Knights Valley Chardonnay and everywhere in between, I believe it's so expressive of the place it is grown, you can get a pulse on the global wine industry through a study in chardonnay.

If you weren't working in wine, what would be your profession?

I'd most likely be in a small, sleepy, warm surf town - barista by morning, working in a surf shop in the afternoon, and a wine bar by night.

Besides where you work what are some of your favorite wines?

The first place my mind goes is to Anderson and Willamette Valley for Chardonnay - for the price I think they are some of the best wines in the market. It's hard to pass up grower champagne and I constantly have a bottle or two in the fridge for good times and bad. Cool climate Syrah from Santa Rita Hill, Mornington Peninsula, or Northern Rhoneall have a special place in my heart and cellar as well.

Where are you getting your wine news or information from?

I get almost all of my information on wine from social media. Along with all the writers, producers, and people I follow for more first-hand information.

Favorite wine region outside of California?

Champagne, both for the wines they are producing and how the region brands itself. They are such a great example of a region making phenomenal wines from a tiny scale to a large scale, and the luxury image associated with the wine is something no one else has been able to reproduce.

What celebrity do you think has the best wine brand? Why?

Dwayne Wade, I love how accessible and fun the Wade Cellars brand is all while bringing lots of attention to Chenin Blanc as well.



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