

WINE TALK

Derek Baljeu Hopes Wine Will Speak to More People

The Knights Bridge winemaker chats about his journey into wine and efforts to mentor aspiring vintners of color

By Virginie Boone

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Winemaker Derek Baljeu fell in love with the volcanic terroir of Sonoma County's Knights Valley and how it shapes Cabernet Sauvignon.

Winemaker Derek Baljeu grew up surfing and skateboarding in Southern California, where he took an early interest in cooking, and wine was a familiar sight on the family dinner table. A high school football standout, he chose to attend the University of California, Davis, to play for the team—but also because the campus somehow felt right. That intuition ended up being on the money, as midway through his studies he realized winemaking was an actual job and the career for him. A fateful dinner drinking Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 1996 with a tomahawk ribeye sealed the deal.

Before long, he was interning in Lodi at Jessie's Grove Winery and researching phenolic development in To Kalon Vineyard. Those experiences led to career-defining jobs in Napa Valley: first as assistant viticulturist with Silverado Farming, followed by an enologist stint for Trinchero Family Estates' luxury portfolio.

In 2019, Baljeu was hired to be the assistant winemaker at Knights Bridge Winery, a family-owned estate winery in Sonoma County's Knights Valley AVA that predominantly makes Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. In 2021, he was promoted to winemaker.

When he's not making wine, Baljeu mentors for The Roots Fund, an organization founded in 2020 by Tahira Habibi, Carlton McCoy Jr. and Ikimi Dubose-Woodson to bring communities of color into wine through scholarships and mentorships. A big believer in understanding all that the wine industry has to offer, he's also earning his MBA in executive wine business from Sonoma State University.

Wine Spectator: You grew up in Huntington Beach. How did your family end up there?

By chance. My dad is a Dutch immigrant, and my grandparents somehow ended up moving to Orange County. My dad went to USC [University of Southern California] and met my mom, who ran track. Once you live by the ocean, it's hard to live anywhere else.

Tell me about your Dutch heritage. Did it inform the cooking that happened in your house?

My dad's side is Dutch, and my mom is African American. Her family started out in Texas. The cooking comes from my mom's side. I remember always being in the kitchen with her from an early age. My mom is able to cook up anything at a moment's notice. I remember coming in one morning after a late night feeling pretty rough. I mentioned something about wanting biscuits and gravy. About an hour and a half later, she had whipped some up.

And there was often wine at the table?

My mom loves wine, but it was never anything super notable—a step up from box wine, 1.5-liter Rossi red or white, something to put in the glass. My dad being a surfer, he always had tequila, a margarita or beer.

In high school you started as a defensive player and were good at that. How did you end up a tight end in college?

I was recruited size-wise as a fullback, but I was more athletic than the position [called for]. Tight ends are the most connected community. They stick together; they're goofy guys.

How did playing college football prepare you for life as a winemaker?

Winemaking is so hands on. At the end of a day, you're sore, you're tired—I love that side of winemaking. There's a line of true physical nature in each of those areas. Everybody's got a job to do. It takes a ton of individuals doing a great job. I think football has helped me as a leader, as a team worker. The basis is the same—to bring forward one vision to life.

You went to U.C., Davis, for football, not for wine, but stumbled upon wine anyway. Does that make perfect sense given the way you grew up around food?

Even in my selection of colleges, I could have gone to USC or other Pac-12 schools, but something about Davis felt right. A lot of fate pushed me there. I stumbled into an intro to winemaking class, but once I started learning about wine, that's when it made sense. Career-wise, I didn't want to sit at a desk. I have an artistic side, a love of science, and I'm a sucker for a good origin story.

Cabernet Sauvignon was the gateway wine for you and is still your main focus. What is it about Cab?

From Davis, I would go wine tasting in the Napa Valley. Cabernet showed me one of the first senses of place. People talk about terroir, and Cabernet very much does that. It's beautiful and represents that sense of place from all around the world. At Knights Bridge, with Cabernet, it's the different clones, exposures, soils that provide a wide sense of place and keep me enthralled down to the one-acre blocks on the property.

You clearly feel strongly about terroir and place. How did you know Knights Bridge was the right place for you?

Prior to taking the job, I had only driven through Knights Valley on the way to Healdsburg [from Calistoga, where he lives]. I loved Knights Bridge's commitment to the region and the AVA and of putting it on the map—creating a legacy of a region. It was an exciting opportunity, and I was just drooling over the volcanic soils, the elevations, the raw materials that can't be changed, the beauty of this vineyard.

You're a mentor with The Roots Fund. Do you feel that your contributions have made a difference with your mentees?

I would hope so. They have been looking for different things. For one [of them], it was like being a tutor: connecting the dots on how to learn within Davis' wine certificate program [and] helping her be more familiar with the information she was receiving.

The other interned in Burgundy and was trying to break into the industry in the Napa Valley. Having a first-person perspective was helpful particularly from a person who looks like you—what I wished that I had. To see a winemaker that's of color, subconsciously it helps you feel that you can also take that risk.

Do you feel the wine industry has been making progress in being more diverse and inclusive? Where have the biggest impacts occurred?

It's multifaceted. From a statistic side, it's telling. There are not a ton of women and people of color in the wine industry in general. But with The Roots Fund and the Association of African American Vintners, I feel more optimistic. Here's more buy-in from wineries and media just building outreach, so on a medium scale, there's a lot of steam being built there. Small-scale, the conversations people are having, I feel we're on the precipice of those making an impact. It's only uphill from here.

You're getting an MBA in wine business at Sonoma State University. Why did this interest you? What parts of the wine business do you want to be more involved in?

I've always had an MBA on my radar. I want the full understanding of a closed loop system. My inspiration is a mastery of the medium- and short-term goals, to master and learn all aspects of the wine industry, gain more insights, connections. Long-term, to make the path easier and bring more people along.

What would you like to see more of in the wine industry?

I heard a great quote: "The wine industry likes to talk to itself." And that resonated with me. There's so much more room for growth. I didn't even know winemaking was a profession growing up. We need to widen wine for people not already exposed to it.

Less of?

Less gatekeeping for breaking into the wine industry, less branding of rarity and scarcity to drive insanely high prices of wine, and less ego in the industry in general.

What do you think is missing when it comes to reaching younger consumers—your peers? There are so many dynamic winemakers, viticulturalists and chefs coming into wine, but it's not always translating.

What's missing for the younger generation is they want to feel a connection to the land, to the maker. There's a disconnect in marketing, communication and social media. The walls are a little high. That focus on rarity, scarcity is a big miss for us. The new breed of wine drinker wants you to tell a story. That breed is growing—it's why they connect to the natural wine movement and to chef-driven restaurants. They want a story that goes with the product.



Knights Bridge Winery farms a beautiful stretch of Sonoma's Knights Valley AVA.