

# The Press Democrat

## Football player finds his passion in winemaking, lands role at award-winning Calistoga winery

After learning about wine at UC Davis, Derek Baljeu aims to pave the way for a more inclusive industry.



Derek Baljeu is the winemaker at Knights Bridge Winery in Calistoga. (John Bedell)

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT  
June 17, 2024, 7:35PM

When Derek Baljeu discovered the beer-brewing class at UC Davis was full, he was forced to settle for his second choice: Winemaking 101. A college student on a football scholarship, he had registered as a communications major — the default “athlete major” for those who were unsure of the career path they wanted to pursue.

Baljeu had been disheartened to see few communications students show up for class when attendance numbers should have hovered around 400. The winemaking students, however, were a different breed.

“Their passion and commitment to learning was different from anything I’d ever experienced,” said Baljeu, winemaker at Knights Bridge Winery in Calistoga. “They were engaged and showed up to every single class. That drew me in from the start.”

Once Baljeu dived further into winemaking, he became engrossed in its multilayered complexity — one he said “fires on all cylinders.”

“Winemaking is deeply connected to nature so you get to be outside. It also has an artistic aspect, a scientific side and a social part that connects you to the community,” said Baljeu. “I don’t do the same thing two days in a row, and that keeps me engaged.”

### A wine epiphany

Raised in Huntington Beach, Baljeu didn’t grow up with wine on the table. So changing his major to viticulture and enology involved a steep learning curve.

During college, he headed to Napa Valley to do some wine tasting at Clos du Val winery, where he had his first wine epiphany.

“They ended up pulling out some older vintages and I tried an awesome 1995 Cabernet Sauvignon,” said Baljeu. “It completely opened my eyes. I understood what good wine was and gained a real appreciation for it.”

After graduation, Baljeu landed a job as an enologist at Trinchero Family Estates in Napa Valley, but soon he yearned for more responsibility.

“I applied for a bunch of winemaker jobs and everyone told me I didn’t have enough experience,” he said. “I was like, ‘I think I do!’ So, finally, I landed a winemaking role at Knights Bridge, where I knew I could make more of an impact.”

Located in Knights Valley, the warmest, most remote appellation in Sonoma County, Knights Bridge Winery is recognized for producing Chardonnay and Bordeaux varietals that take full advantage of the region's volcanic soils and high elevation.

“The terroir in Knights Valley has so much raw potential. The wines are very horizontally expressive — they have both sweet and savory elements, which make them really distinctive,” said Baljeu. “The region is also cooler than Napa, so that gives the wines some beautiful restraint and balance.”

## The value of mentorship

While being a winemaker is a role Baljeu finds very rewarding, in 2021 he began to wonder how he could feel more fulfilled and make a greater impact in the community.

That's when he came across The Roots Fund, a nonprofit that provides mentorship, financial support and other resources to people of color in the wine industry.

Born to a Black mother and Dutch father, Baljeu became a mentor through The Roots Fund, where he provides guidance to people at the start of their wine career.

“Mentorship is hugely important for increasing diversity in the wine industry because it gives people access to resources and a network that's unavailable to those trying to break in from the outside,” he said. “It gives people more opportunities and makes the barrier for entry a lot lower.”

Baljeu feels the wine industry has a long way to go toward improving inclusivity for women and people of color. But he's been encouraged by the efforts of organizations like The Roots Fund, Association of African American Vintners and The Hue Society, which are all working diligently to create change.

“Those organizations are gaining a ton of momentum, which is a beautiful thing,” he said. “Where I've seen the greatest change is at a lower level. The younger generation is really pushing diversity and inclusion and making it a priority. I think there's a shifting tide so that makes me optimistic.”

Elsewhere in the community, Baljeu recently helped launch Volunteer Napa, an initiative through the Napa Valley Vintners that encourages wineries to donate 24 hours of volunteer time to local nonprofits.

He's also completing his MBA in Wine Business from Sonoma State University, which he hopes will broaden his knowledge of different aspects of the wine industry.

“It's been a really exciting program that has already made an impact in my daily life at the winery,” said Baljeu. “At the end of the day, I get to choose who I want to be — the winemaker or the MBA guy. In certain situations, it's healthy to have both those perspectives.”

