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'It changed everything': North Coast Wine Challenge winners reflect on past recognition



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For Gary and Ellen Luchtel of [Fortunati Vineyards](#) — a modest, family-run winery far from the glitz in Napa Valley — [winning](#) the North Coast Wine Challenge was “life changing.”

Last year, their 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon beat more than 1,100 wines to win “[Best of the Best](#),” the local wine competition’s top honor. Producing fewer than 3,000 cases a year and open only by appointment, the couple said they were stunned.

“We ended up limiting how much wine people could buy because they wanted it by the caseload,” said Ellen Luchtel, who oversees operations. “As a small boutique winery, that really moved the needle for us.”

Since the big win, “[Fortunati’s](#)” tasting room traffic and sales have steadily increased, particularly among locals who heard about the winery in the community.

“People are always surprised to see how authentic and down-to-earth we are,” Luchtel said. “We’re just a couple of kids from the Midwest who love to share our wine.”

