



SMALL *but* MIGHTY

Fortunati Wines Always Make an Impression

◆ BY FRAN MILLER

The name says it all. Winemaker Gary Luchtel has been called "Lucky" since his days in San Francisco commercial real estate — a nickname that stuck, and eventually inspired the Italian word for fortunate: Fortunati. With wife Ellen, a first-generation American of Italian and German heritage, Gary traded Bay Area offices for vine rows in Napa's Oak Knoll District, turning a shared wine obsession into something extraordinary.

The journey started modestly: college dates where Gary would hide wines in brown, wine shop paper bags and quiz Ellen on the varietal, and adventurous summers tasting through European wine country backroads on a student budget. Experimenting as a home winemaker in the 90's, by 1999, Gary was making wine commercially in Napa. By 2008, Fortunati Vineyards was bonded. By 2012, a wine subscription program had launched and fully allocated within four years.

"I drink and enjoy a lot of diverse styles of wines, says Gary. "A winemaker's dream is to

produce different varietals. Since I work on my own brand, I can create what I want. It's fun! I really respect the vineyards. My style is pure, rich, and well-balanced — drinkable now, but the ageability is there too."

That freedom shows in the portfolio. Fortunati produces an unusually diverse range: whites include estate Viognier and Rosé, Chardonnay, and Reserve Chardonnay. Reds showcase estate Syrah, Malbec, and Cabernet Franc, plus, the Bordeaux blend, Zinfandel from Rockpile, Pinot Noir and a Reserve Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara's Santa Rita Hills, and their flagship Signature and Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. Each is produced in tiny lots of 100 to 250 cases with a few offering 400 cases, sold privately, directly to wine consumers, none distributed through traditional retail channels.

Fans and critics have noticed. Fortunati wines have become the kind of "find" that guests bring to dinner parties or give as gifts precisely because they feel like it's a secret. Wine critic Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW (founder

of The Wine Independent and former lead critic at Robert Parker's Wine Advocate) recently awarded the 2023 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon a remarkable 96 points, along with 94 for the Chardonnay and Syrah, 93 each for Cabernet Franc, and Viognier, the last of which ranks among the highest scores she has given for that varietal.

"We just love the wine," says wine subscriber John Sullivan. "Gary is a special winemaker. His willingness to experiment to this degree is not common in Napa. Just try the Viognier and you will see what we mean."

Behind the wines is a true partnership. Gary walks the vineyards, tending 20-year-old vines and guiding each vintage. Ellen drives sales, marketing, and the subscriber experience, ensuring that members can customize their shipments by selecting from small lots. In the boutique tasting space amongst the vines, visitors experience Fortunati's welcoming atmosphere firsthand and a brand that has long flown quietly under the radar.

As Ellen puts it, Fortunati is "tiny." But with 500+ awards and scores which rival Napa's most celebrated names, tiny has never tasted so good.

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