

THINGS TO DO > EAT & DRINK

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



Dot Wine winemaker Lise Asimont and her husband/co-owner Shawn Phillips walk in a Shone Farm vineyard July 22, 2025 where they source some of their grapes for their 2025 North Coast Wine Challenge Sweepstakes winners. (John Burgess / The Press Democrat)



PUBLISHED: March 16, 2026 at 11:10 AM PDT | UPDATED: March 18, 2026 at 12:11 PM PDT

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.



Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat

Husband-and-wife team Gary and Ellen Luchtel with their dogs at Fortunati Vineyards and Winery in Napa Tuesday, May 13, 2025. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

“We ended up limiting how much wine people could buy because they wanted

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."

A dedication to local

Now in its 14th year, the North Coast Wine Challenge returns April 7-8 when about 30 judges will convene at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa to blind-taste over 1,000 wines.

Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat

Judges vote during the sweepstakes round of the North Coast Wine Challenge at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa Wednesday, April 2, 2025. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

Focusing exclusively on wines from the North Coast appellation—including Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Lake, Marin and Solano counties—the competition is deeply rooted in the North Bay community, including its roster of judges.

"In the early years, we invited judges from out of the area, but decided it was important to emphasize the competition's local aspect," said Daryl Groom, who has served as chief judge since the contest began. "We have so many great palates right in our backyard."

Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat

As the competition's reputation has grown, Groom said he receives more inquiries from aspiring judges. But with many judges returning each year, the roster is often full.

"All of our judges are hand-selected — not just because they have great palates and wine expertise — but because they add value, whether they're a buyer, restaurateur or (a member of the) media who loves to write about the wines they taste," he said. "Nearly everyone wants to come back, which means we must be doing something right. That's very rewarding."

'It changed everything'

Presented by The Press Democrat, the North Coast Wine Challenge received a record 1,147 entries last year, a 43% increase since its launch in 2012.

Despite the ongoing challenges in the wine industry, many local wineries still see value in entering the competition.

For Lise Asimont of [Dot Wine](#) in Healdsburg, the investment was returned in spades. In 2025, she was named the competition's inaugural [Winemaker of the Year](#) — an honor she said "changed everything."

Last year's North Coast Wine Challenge Winemaker of the Year, Lise Asimont shares her Dot Wines tasting room space with two other wineries at Bacchus Landing Friday, March 13, 2026 in Healdsburg. (John Burgess/The Press Democrat)

Dot Wine winemaker Lise Asimont won Double Gold for three of her wines she creates at J. Rickards Winery in Cloverdale Tuesday July 22, 2025. (John Burgess / The Press Democrat)

"Our sales increased over 50%, which helped us buck the downturn," said Asimont, who founded [Dot Wine](#) with her husband, Shawn Philips, in 2016. "We had to hire more people in the tasting room and saw a big increase in wine club membership. It completely took us by storm."

Out of the 1,147 wines entered into last year's competition, 38 advanced to the final sweepstakes round. Three were from Dot Wine — a Rosé of Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and Grenache — all of which earned Double Gold and scored 95 points or higher.

With the award came a [feature story](#) in The Press Democrat and [Groom](#)

"We actually got the most attention from the story being printed in the physical paper," Asimont said, laughing. "We're just a small family business. We have no investors and do all of this ourselves. As a small guy, it made a huge difference to our business."

A chance at recognition

Although it has been six years since [Sangiaco Family Wine](#)'s Sonoma Coast Chardonnay was named the top wine at the North Coast Wine Challenge, co-owner Steve Sangiacomo recalls how significant the award was for the company's then-fledgling label.

Although the Sangiacomo family has been farming in Sonoma since 1927, they had launched their own wine label only four years earlier, in 2016, with James MacPhail as winemaker.

"As a newer wine brand, the timing couldn't have been more perfect," said Sangiacomo, a third-generation partner. "There is no better way to be recognized than amongst your peers in your local community. It was great to see our wine stacked up against the best of the best."

Steve Sangiacomo, Mia Pucci and Mike Sangiacomo, third-generation owner-operators of Sonoma Valley wine grape grower Sangiacomo Family Vineyards on Aug. 18, 2020. (Sangiaco Family Vineyards)

Groom believes every wine entered into the North Coast Wine Challenge has "a huge chance of success, regardless of style."

"Wine quality has greatly increased across the board, so more wines are getting medals than ever before," he said. "Entering is low-cost marketing that has the potential to give a big return."

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