

## THINGS TO DO

# ‘It’s like winning the lottery’: Tiny Napa Valley winery wins big at North Coast Wine Challenge



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Liz Accardo could hardly speak.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in early April, and the hospitality manager at Fortunati Vineyards in Napa Valley had just phoned the winery’s owners — Ellen and Gary Luchtel — with some startling news.

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# Watch Taste Makers with Fortunati Vineyards' Ellen and Gary Luchtel and chef Dustin Valette from Valette and The Matheson

At noon on Wednesday, June 4, Fortunati Vineyards' Ellen and Gary Luchtel will join The Press Democrat's Sarah Doyle and chef Dustin Valette from Valette and The Matheson for a virtual "Taste Makers" interview ahead of the North Coast Wine & Food Festival.

Expect insider stories, expert pairing tips and a sneak peek at what the chefs will be serving at the main event. To sign up, visit

[pressdemocrat.com/tastemakers](https://pressdemocrat.com/tastemakers).



"Ellen had to tell me to take a couple breaths," said Accardo, who'd interrupted the couple on vacation in Italy. "I told them our Cabernet Sauvignon had just won best of show at the North Coast Wine Challenge. I was so excited — I had goose bumps!"

The Luchtels were stunned.

"We looked at each other and said, 'seriously?'" recalled Ellen Luchtel. "We're such a tiny little business. Does this really happen to small boutique wineries like us?"

## The competition

On April 2, [Fortunati Vineyard's](#) memorable 2021 Signature Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley won “Best of the Best” at The Press Democrat’s 13th annual North Coast Wine Challenge, beating out 1,146 other wines to clinch the top spot.

Focusing exclusively on wines from the North Coast appellation, which encompasses Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Lake, Marin and Solano counties, it’s a competition that’s uniquely meaningful to the broad North Bay community.

A record number of wines was entered into this year’s competition, where 34 judges and three associate judges blind-tasted and assessed over 1,000 entries from a total of 223 wineries — including 98 that had never entered before.

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This is the first time a Cabernet Sauvignon has won the Best of the Best award in the final sweepstakes round, which chief judge Daryl Groom called “tense and exciting.”

“The sweepstakes round had the most wines I can remember in recent years, with the judges only having one vote to decide which wine will win,” he said. “We’ve had Pinot Noirs, Chardonnay and Zinfandels win — but never a Cabernet Sauvignon.”

"It was really nice to see the judges jump out of their comfort zone and unanimously choose this orphan variety," he said. "Riesling has been getting a lot of attention lately as consumers trend to crisper, lighter styles."

Alexandria Sarovich, a sommelier and judge at this year's competition, was particularly impressed by Dot Wine, a boutique producer in Healdsburg that had three wines in the final sweepstakes round.

"Lise Asimont is an incredible winemaker, so it was exciting to see her Sauvignon Blanc, Rosé and Grenache all make sweepstakes," said Sarovich, owner of Own Rooted Hospitality. "I think the judges did a great job narrowing down the winners."

Among the other judges was local celebrity winemaker Matt Duffy of Vaughn Duffy Wines, whose Pinot Noir from Bacigalupi Vineyard took home the top prize in 2023.

"Since we won the competition, I've been so curious to see how it works," said Duffy, who was a first-time judge. "Lightning really does need to strike twice. Not only does your wine need to beat out all the others in its category, it needs to beat out all the other sweepstakes wines. I've always felt it's a miracle we won."

The Luchtels would likely agree with Duffy's sentiment.

## A shared passion

Both born in the Midwest, Ellen and Gary Luchtel met in San Francisco while studying business at San Francisco State University.

"Gary was a wine geek from the moment I met him," said Ellen. "He'd pick me up for a date with a wine bottle hidden in a paper bag, and I'd have to guess the varietal."

"If I was going to date this woman, I had to get her up to speed," added Gary, laughing.

[These local wines were named best on the North Coast. See if your favorite made the cut](#)

In the early 1990s, Gary took up home winemaking as a hobby, focusing on reds like Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon, which he sourced from Sonoma and Napa counties.

"The Tedeschis used to drive down to San Francisco in their big truck and drop off tons of grapes to home winemakers," said Gary. "It was really great fruit."

While Gary wasn't legally allowed to sell the wine, his friends and family donated to his "hobby gone wild," with the funds reinvested in upgraded winemaking equipment.

Ellen remembers feeling relieved her new husband's wine was actually drinkable.

"It turned out he was really good at winemaking," said Ellen. "Thank God the wine was good."

## Six years

One evening in the early 2000s, Ellen had just arrived home when Gary blurted out "OK! Six years!"

"I asked, 'what do you mean 'six years'?' He told me that's the ROI (return on investment) from when you plant a vineyard to when it becomes profitable," she said. "I thought, oh my, here we go."

In 2003, the Luchtels put an offer on a 10.2-acre property in what would soon become the Oak Knoll District, a cooler sub-appellation of Napa Valley. Initially, they had an investor on board to help with the purchase, but that person pulled out weeks before the sale closed.

In the end, the couple sold everything they owned, including their San Francisco home, to buy the "fixer-upper" property.

While Gary didn't know how to grow grapes, he knew plenty of people who did. Among them was Doug Hill, a veteran vineyard manager in Napa Valley, who helped plant the new vineyard to Syrah and Viognier. After initially selling the fruit, the couple officially launched Fortunati Vineyards winery in 2008.

Today, Fortunati produces about 3,000 cases of wine per year, such as

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A small production facility allows Gary to make some wine on-site, but the majority is produced at Materra Cunit Family Vineyards nearby. Ellen oversees sales, marketing and everything else.

"My job is to fill the warehouse with wine, and Ellen's job is to empty it," joked Gary. "She has the much harder job."

## The winning wine

To produce this year's top-winning wine at the North Coast Wine Challenge, Gary sourced his 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon from Lamoreaux Vineyard in the Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley.

Here, the cooling marine influence of San Pablo Bay extends hang time for grapes on the vine, resulting in fruit with depth and complexity.

Luchtel has purchased Cabernet Sauvignon from the vineyard's same two acres since 2013, which he blends with 14% Cabernet Franc and 6% Malbec from Fortunati's estate vineyard.

## Don't Miss: the North Coast Wine & Food Festival

To sample this year's Double Gold and Gold-winning wines from the North Coast Wine Challenge, don't miss the [North Coast Wine & Food Festival](#) on June 14 at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa.

Hosted by The Press Democrat, the event will offer plenty of food to accompany the winning wines, including plates from Lo & Behold, Goldfinch, Slanted Door, Arandas, Wit & Wisdom and other local restaurants.

For tickets and information, visit [northcoastwineandfood.com](https://northcoastwineandfood.com).

"Lamoreaux Vineyard produces Cabernet Sauvignon with these beautiful rich plum flavors that aren't overripe," he said. "The 2021 vintage was extra special — the wines are beautifully balanced, with great fruit, acidity and length. It's a well-built wine that will stand the test of time."

“Some of them are renowned winemakers I’ve aspired to be like,” he said. “I finally feel like I have a place at the table.”

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