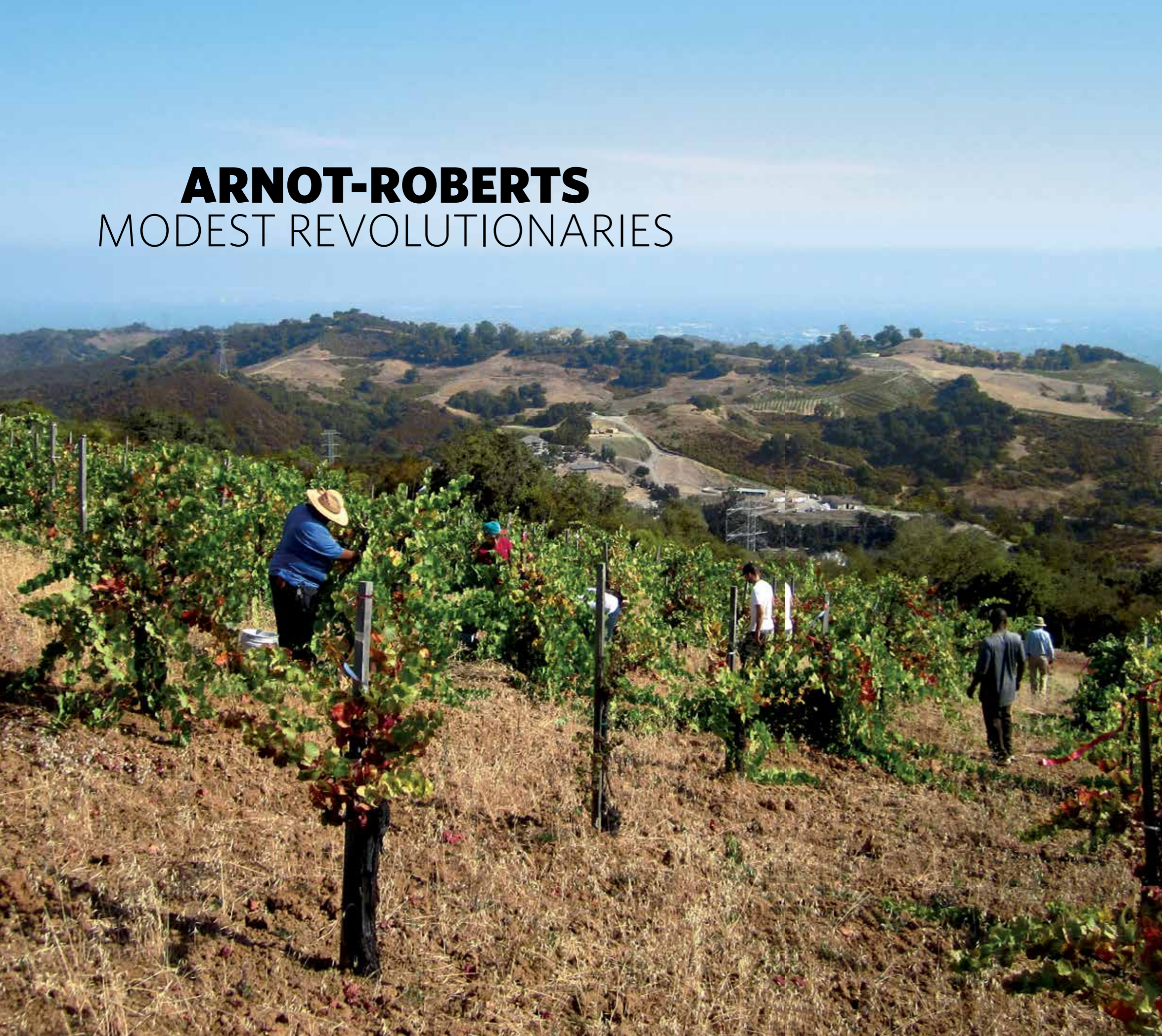


ARNOT-ROBERTS

MODEST REVOLUTIONARIES



Experimental winemakers Duncan Meyers and Nathan Roberts have been friends since childhood. Adam Lechmere went to California to find out why they're rapidly garnering a reputation as two of the state's most exciting winemakers

Conversations with winemakers often turn to the conundrum of intervention and non-intervention. The American philosopher-turned-winemaker Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project has some interesting things to say on the subject. His basic premise (he was a teacher and knows how to put ideas across) is that deciding to do nothing is just as much a decision as deciding to do something. When he leaves a barrel of Chardonnay fermenting in the sun for two years, then that is a form of intervention. The wine is always under his control. The same goes for vineyards. Any good modern winemaker will spend many hours, at all seasons, kicking dirt, talking trellising and cover crops with the vineyard manager. "To make good wine, you need good soils, a good grower, and good weather," Nathan Roberts told me on a fine spring morning in Sonoma.

Roberts and Duncan Meyers have been friends ever since fifth grade, ten or eleven years old, and have been making wine together for the best part of 15 years. Arnot-Roberts has had a slow gestation: "We had seven years with no pay," Meyers says. They kept their day jobs for those years: Meyers—whose grandfather was an RAF man from Fife in Scotland—working for John Kongsgaard and then at Pax Wine Cellars; and Roberts—a grandson of Robert Mondavi's widow Margrit—following his father into the family cooperage. The firm has since been sold, but he still hand-makes all the barrels they use with oak sourced direct from Alliers.

Their first commercial vintage as Arnot-Roberts was 2002, but their first wine was a 2001, "a barrel of old-vine field-blend red from Dry Creek Valley, which we made for ourselves." In 2002 they made a barrel of Cabernet Sauvignon from Sonoma Mountain and a "red table wine," a blend of Syrah, Sangiovese, and Zinfandel. The wines sold: They knew the wine buyer at Whole Foods in Santa Rosa, and they also secured a listing at the Oakville Grocery in Healdsburg.

Diversity in marginality

Now operating out of a well-appointed shed in Healdsburg, Arnot-Roberts produces 17 wines (in tiny quantities—three to five barrels at most, 5,000 cases across the range) from

Sonoma, Napa, and beyond. They source grapes from some 20 vineyards, all of them marginal in their way—"the more marginal the site, the longer the growing season, the more complex the wine." The result is a diverse portfolio, which they deem "a nice side effect of searching out extreme vineyards." They currently work with Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Syrah, Trousseau and Ribolla Gialla, Gamay, Pinot Noir, and Zinfandel, and field blends of mixed white varieties from Sylvaner to Riesling.

I arrive in Healdsburg early, and—as with any serious winery visit—the intention is to spend the best part of the day in the vineyards. We head west, toward the Pacific Ocean, to the tiny town of Occidental, about 10 miles (16km) inland from Bodega Bay. The scenery here is unspoiled, western bucolic: farmsteads nestled among trees, horses grazing in wooden-fenced paddocks.

"California is a relatively easy place to grow grapes," Meyers says, "and California winemakers tend not to push themselves to search hard for the more difficult sites." Our first stop, the 2-acre (0.8ha) Que Syrah vineyard, is a beautiful spot. The air is redolent of California *garrigue*, that pungent mix of pine resin and ocean salinity, and a potent minty whiff of bay laurel. It's one of the coolest vineyards they run, the fog coming in from the ocean lifts around noon, shortening the hours of sunlight. Moreover, it's surrounded by forest, and you can feel the cool air coming out of the shadowy green depths of the trees. "We're crazy to do it," Roberts says. "It's late ripening, but I think it's the most exciting Syrah we've ever produced."

Both of them are strolling down the rows in the sun, exclaiming about new growth (it's early May) and stooping to examine the wealth of wild flowers that grow around the edge of the vineyard and between the rows. There's vetch, clover, wild mustard, orange California poppy, wild iris, and a dozen other varieties that I'm sure Roberts and Meyers could name but I can't.

Que Syrah is marginal not only in terms of terroir but economics as well. The point, as Roberts says, is that planting it to Syrah really made no economic sense. "They could have planted Pinot Noir here and made far more money. If it was Pinot then everyone would be interested in it."

From there, we move on to the Chalk Hill AVA and the Clajeaux Vineyard, which is on the eastern edge of Russian River Valley. Meyers tells me, "This pocket is really special." We're driving through dense hills of oak, sage, and broom, manzanita and madrone, unlocking swaying chain-link gates as we go. "Cool breezes, rock soil—perfect for Cabernet," Meyers says. The vines are very neat, their spring-green livery perfectly uniform. They have worked the same 12 rows in a cooler section at the bottom of the hill—"so we can let them hang longer"—since 2003.

Scouring dryness

A lineup of Arnot-Roberts wines takes you on a tour of "really special pockets" of vines covering a vast swathe of California—from the Santa Cruz Mountains, to Clear Lake AVA east of Mendocino, west to Sonoma Coast and east to Napa. We stop for lunch in the tiny, hippyishly upmarket town of Graton

Previous spread: Peter Martin Ray Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains, planted in 1979. Right: Nathan Roberts (left) and Duncan Meyers (right) in their Healdsburg winery.

I've described exponents of the new California style as "structuralists," in that their primary concern is the scaffold and girders that support the fruit, rather than the fruit itself. Acidity and tannin are given obsessive focus. "We're not so interested in fruit," Meyers says

(population 1,707), and the table is quickly covered with bottles. First, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay 2011—"4 miles [6.5km] from the Pacific; it's cold, windy, and marginal" (that word again). The 2011 was picked "just before Halloween," on October 27, at 12.5% potential alcohol. That's late: In Carneros, which is one of the coolest Chardonnay sites in Napa and Sonoma, leaving the grapes till the first week of October is considered a long hang-time. The wine has a splendid sour-pear and umami savoriness and a tannic heft. Then there's Ribolla Gialla 2009 from Vare Vineyard at the foot of Napa's Mount Veeder. It's tongue-scouring; Meyers says, "It tastes like tonic water at the end," and indeed it has a bitterness reminiscent of quinine. "I love how it gains weight over time," he adds. "It's got waxy flowers now—camellias and lilies."

Then we have what could be considered an Arnot-Roberts "signature" wine: the Trousseau. Inspired by Jura veteran Jacques Puffeney, it caused the biggest buzz at a "New California" tasting organized by London merchant Roberson at the beginning of 2014. It hits the palate with a light tread and leaves you teetering on the edge of worry (where is this going to take me?) for a split second, until the core reveals itself, a dryness shot through with strawberry compote and essence of raspberry, finishing in gouts of juice.

"We made it for ourselves," Meyers says, "and we were worried how it would turn out in California. But then New York, San Francisco, the rest of California—they all went bonkers for it." Everyone's going bonkers for Arnot-Roberts, it seems. The *San Francisco Chronicle* made them Winemakers of the Year in 2012; Antonio Galloni reckons they're the most exciting young winemakers (they're in their 30s) "anywhere."

Back to the table and more scouring dryness with the Old Vine White, a field blend of Sylvaner, Riesling, Gewurztraminer, and heaven knows what else. This is from one of Count Harozthy's original vineyards; it's dry and dense, with a graininess to the acidity and fresh juice at the end.

Experimental and structural

I've described exponents of the new California style—a group including veterans like Stuart Smith of Smith-Madrone, or Napa's Cathy Corison, as well as relative newcomers like Arnot-Roberts—as "structuralists," in that their primary concern is the scaffold and girders that support the fruit, rather than the fruit itself. Acidity and tannin are given obsessive focus. "We're not so interested in fruit," Meyers says.





TASTING

Arnot-Roberts Watson Ranch Chardonnay 2012 Napa Valley

Herb and grapefruit on the nose; hint of hay lying in field slightly damp. Surprising rush of sweet honeyed fruit (peach and pineapple) on the palate, over structured, intense, nervy acidity and tannic definition. Tightly wound.

Arnot-Roberts Bugay Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 Sonoma County

Sweet red fruit on the nose, lovely structure and grip; earthy open palate with light stink of river mud, salinity, and ozone, ferocious textured licorice and spicy blackcurrant and damson palate, giving place to structured tannin and ripe acidity. Elegant and delicate. A triumphant modern classic.

Arnot-Roberts North Coast Syrah 2012

From four vineyards in cool-climate zones of Sonoma and Sierra Foothills. Elegant decay on the nose, a lovely hint of compost and new grass. Fruit is wide open, sour plum and sloe, damson and black pepper. Tannins are dry and bright, and they dissolve to sweet juice very quickly. Charming and textured.

Arnot-Roberts Luchsinger Trousseau 2012 Clear Lake

Incredible bright hue more akin to rosé. Earthy, savory nose shot through with bright cherry,

like sun coming through clouds. Tropical character at first, followed by a ghostly hint of strawberry compote and essence of raspberry. Acidity and tannin in perfect order; overall impression of controlled intensity. Finishes in delicate tannic dryness dissolving to juice. Superb.

Arnot-Roberts Vare Vineyard Ribolla Gialla 2009 Napa Valley

From the foot of Mount Veeder, a rich light gold color. Intense, concentrated, lovely quinine bitterness (tonic water), intense zest of lime spiced with clove; superb dry finish scouring the tongue. Will develop exotic-fruit character as it ages. A keeper.

Arnot-Roberts Trout Gulch Chardonnay 2011 Santa Cruz

Cut pear and sliced Granny Smith on the nose; mineral intensity, fresh almost tannic heft, with sour-pear and umami notes, high notes of peach, and then undertow of Seville orange zest, herb, brine, and a bitter tang to the finish. Superb with grouse.

RPM Gamay Noir 2012

Ineffably stylish Sierra Foothills collaboration between Roberts, Meyers, and Rajat Parr, an homage to Beaujolais. Wonderful bright strawberry and balsamic, rose-petal-infused nose, a textured aroma, raspberry and red-

cherry fruit, intense and primary, bright and fresh tannins. Utterly beguiling.

Arnot-Roberts Legan Vineyard Pinot Noir Santa Cruz

Unexpectedly dark-fruit-accented nose—atypical. Then a palate with velvety cedar and clear, juicy, almost candied-fruit, savory notes, ripe cherry, and fine tannic weight, releasing juice at the end—juice that continues to tingle for a good five minutes after swallowing. Perhaps slightly overpolished?

Arnot-Roberts Fellom Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon 2011 Santa Cruz

Wonderfully fresh impression on the attack, then dryness and steely grip to the tannins, with promise of luscious blackcurrant and blueberry, licorice and cassis to come. A charming voluptuous body tightly buttoned in. The tannins will loosen and release steady gouts of juice; the fruit will burst out. Delicious 2016 onward.

Arnot-Roberts Syrah Clary Ranch 2012 Sonoma Coast

Clary is “at the absolute edge of where Syrah will ripen in California.” Very fine violet perfume on the nose, then dense, uncompromising, and dry, chalky grainy tannins holding up lovely black-olive freshness, exotic spice, mint and black pepper. Mouthwatering acidity. Tightly wound—a supremely confident balancing act.

They are experimenters and pioneers, but they are also very much part of a winemaking tradition. The word “classic” takes on a new meaning around them. In that sense, there is nothing new about Arnot-Roberts; they are a continuation of a grand tradition

Vinification regimes reflect this. All yeasts are natural; reds are fermented in whole clusters; minimal SO₂ is used; and there’s little or no fining or filtration. The only wines to see new oak are the Cabernets, which get 20–30 percent. They pick at extremely low levels of potential alcohol and can have difficulty getting levels up to 12%. The 2011 Clary Ranch Syrah barely got its nose over the bar, while the 2008 was 11.5%. There’s never any problem with acidity, of course. Intervention and non-intervention: “If you want to do nothing, you have to have something on your side. We have acidity,” Roberts says. The Que Syrah 2013 was picked at 22.8° Brix and a whopping 9.1g/l acidity, with a pH of 3.16—all values that are somewhat off the scale of typical California Syrah.

The winemakers—they share the tasks in the winery, though “Nathan’s better at Excel”—may have a good 14 vintages under their belts, but they give the impression of coming at everything as if it’s the first time. It’s an attitude that fosters experimentation—they’ve put part of the 2013 Ribolla and some Trousseau into 350-liter clay amphorae for extended maceration, for example. Clay has the same porosity as wood but none of the tannins, and the Priorat pioneer René Barbier points out that it is ideal for unstabilized “natural” winemaking because Brettanomyces won’t live in clay. Roberts thinks the Ribolla’s “doing well [...] but I still feel like the wines we have made in amphora are experimental. They are wines we can make in small amounts and learn from each year, and not necessarily wines that we want to be known for.”

That Meyers and Roberts are still feeling their way is evident in their attitude to Pinot Noir. “It took us a long time to make it, to have the clout to command some of the best vineyards,” Roberts says. They have three Pinots, from high, arid vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA. The wines are finely structured but, for me, don’t show the unique character of the best of their portfolio: You can’t say, “This is an Arnot-Roberts wine,” as you can with many of the others. They are also feeling their way into Napa. They already have a Chardonnay from Watson Ranch, south of Carneros, and the Vare vineyard Ribolla, and are now on the waiting list for Cabernet from the MacDonald vineyard next door to To Kalon in Oakville. “It’s a huge leap and a big expense, but we grew up in Napa. We would need a historical site.”

Left: The Arnot-Roberts barrels are all handmade by Roberts, whose family owned a cooperage, but there are only a few barrels of each of the 17 wines in the range.

This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world’s finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 1795 414 681

Classicists at the forefront of a revolution

History is important. They are experimenters and pioneers, but they are also very much part of a winemaking tradition. The word “classic” takes on a new meaning around them (just as when Steve Matthiasson described his 2011 as “classic Napa Valley Cabernet,” insisting that he used the word advisedly, to distinguish his from more “classic” classics of the past 15 years). They search for the extreme in their vineyards, but “I don’t see our wines as extreme,” Roberts told Jon Bonné for *The New California*. “I consider our wines to be made in a classic style.”

In that sense, there is nothing new about Arnot-Roberts; they are a continuation of a grand tradition. Consider their influences. In an email, Roberts starts with the Jura and Jacques Puffeney, and then, in an effortless, vertiginous sweep around the globe, he goes on: “Puffeney for sure, but also Tissot, Overnoy, and Ganevat in the Jura. Allemand, Jamet, Gonon, Clape in the Rhône. Dauvissat, Picq, Piuze, Raveneau in Chablis. Lafarge, Fichet, Roumier, and old Dujac in Burgundy. Ridge, Mayacamas, Heitz, Dominus, Mondavi, Mount Eden, Spottswoode in Napa, and others from around the world: Julien Sunier, Chamonard from Beaujolais. Souhaut from St-Joseph, Bartolo Mascarello in Piemonte. Agrapart, Bérèche, Prévost in Champagne—to name a few.”

What unites this disparate list? What does the young Julien Sunier of Beaujolais have in common with Joe Heitz—or Christian Moueix at Dominus, for that matter? I imagine that if you scratch the surface of any of these winemakers, a consummate controller would be revealed. Here, for example, is Clive Coates MW summing up Christophe Roumier’s approach: “The vigneron’s duty is to allow the vines to produce fruit that, when vinified, will be unmistakably typical of its origins. The winemaker’s job is to effect this translation from fruit into wine. But it is a question of control rather than creativity. The creation is being done by the vine, by its location, by Mother Nature—not by man.”

I’m sure Meyers and Roberts would concur; they like to be in control. One of the attractions of cool marginal sites, they say, is that “there’s an inherent natural balance; you can let the grapes hang as long as possible, and there’s no panic picking.” And that long and gentle ripening brings focus: “Grapes grown at the margins of where they can ripen tend to show more detail. The slow accumulation of sugar and natural acid retention go hand in hand, producing wines of more delicate nuance and added layers of complexity.”

Winemakers always search for nuance and complexity, but Roberts and Meyers take that quest to its extreme. “Texture,” “structure,” “definition,” and “control” are words that crop up again and again in notes. These are wines stripped to their essence, all extraneous components removed to reveal the bare brickwork beneath. It’s exhilarating—as all upheavals must be.

Roberts and Meyers are classicists, but all the same they are at the forefront of a revolution in California wine. The wheel is coming full circle, to a time before the great injection of cash and ambition of the 1980s turned California outré. They are modest revolutionaries—even their labels are nicely restrained—but serenely confident. “We’re not trying to change anyone’s opinion, but there seems to be more demand for the kind of wine we’re making,” Roberts says. As the number of red “Sold Out” banners on their website suggests, that’s an understatement. ■