

# Decanter

the world's best wine magazine

## Arnot-Roberts: producer profile

One of California's most influential wineries...

Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts' winery began life with a 'hobby vintage' in 2001... it now produces more than 7,000 cases a year. Matthew Luczy gets the lowdown



Matthew Luczy

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Of the many start-up California wineries that have risen to prominence in the 2000s, few have achieved the influence, breadth of development and prolific line-up of Arnot-Roberts.

After one hobby vintage in 2001 of old-vine Zinfandel and an additional year getting their fledgling Arnot-Roberts label off the ground, Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts now produce between 7,000 and 8,000 cases a year across 23 different fruit sources.

Through an ever-expanding roster of vineyards throughout California, the pair hang their hats on a pure and seemingly effortless line-up of wines that accurately represent their origins.

Meyers and Roberts have known each other since they were eight years' old, both born and raised in Napa. Meyers grew up around wineries before stints working at Caymus, Groth and Acacia. Roberts drives the business and logistics side of the operation, after helping his father who worked as a barrel cooper. Caitlin Quinn serves as '10 employees in one', coming aboard as assistant winemaker in 2014.

When Meyers and Nathan founded their winery, they were in the middle of educating themselves in wines beyond California. 'Our palates evolved in lock-step,' says Meyers. Kermit Lynch and other San Francisco Bay Area wine merchants became a regular part of their lives, providing exposure to the Jura's Jacques Puffeney and Syrah benchmarks such as Cornas' Thierry Allemand and Côte-Rôtie's Domaine Jamet at a time when their wines were more easily available, not to mention affordable.

Back then, some 20 years ago, much of California – largely deservedly – had a reputation for producing overripe, fruit-driven, high-alcohol wines. On the tail of this peak came a correction of sorts, with the rise of small production wineries focusing on progressively more extreme coastal sites, working towards a more European-influenced balance and grace with their wines.

## 'Quieter' wines

That said, it's easy for the pendulum to swing hard the other way. The mindset of picking early, extracting less and easing up on new oak were initial solutions to counteracting ripeness, but there is a difference between a lean wine and a thin one, a bright wine and a shrill one.

Humans are, to some degree, calibrated to notice and enjoy 'more' as being 'better'. An interesting corollary to this, referred to as The Loudness Wars, occurred in the music industry – at the same time as the ripeness levels in much of popular California wine peaked.

Our ears perceive 'louder' as 'better' as well. When a louder song is played on the heels of a quieter one, the latter song comes across as more impressive,

and its chances of becoming a hit increase. This is achieved through the use of compression, which can raise the overall volume of a song during the mastering process but, in turn, also reduces its dynamic range. Less complexity and nuance, more in-your-face volume.

This is physically fatiguing on the ears as much as hot, unbalanced wines dull the palate. The volume level is locked into the music forever, whereas wine is a living, evolving liquid. As primary fruit flavours evolve into secondary and tertiary ones, a wine that's already warm in alcohol will become downright hot, and the wine will become progressively more and more out of balance as time goes on.

The balance and poise of the Arnot-Roberts wines is a result of careful handling of fruit sourced from vineyards farther and farther west towards the Pacific Ocean. While balance and beauty can still be achieved from warmer sites, the cooler temperatures, diurnal swings and extended hang-time these grapes receive render flavourful, complete wines.

## ‘Fighting fatness’

Meyers' approach in the winery is, as is an increasingly common response across California, ‘hands off’. The white wines are direct-pressed, fermented in stainless steel, transferred directly to neutral wood, then back to tanks for two weeks before bottling.

If the wine's lees haven't settled on their own, they will give a light filtering. The entire 2018 line-up of whites weren't filtered with the exception of the workhorse Watson Ranch Chardonnay. Meyers feels ‘the whites benefit from cross-flow filtration before bottling’, retaining tension, energy and freshness. Excess suspended lees gives an extra fatness to the texture they don't believe is needed in California, where ‘fighting fatness’ is already proactive. ‘It's never going to be Chablis,’ notes Meyers. ‘Let's just make the best version of California that we can.’

A new addition to the Arnot-Roberts line-up is Chardonnay sourced from the original vines at Sanford & Benedict Vineyard in the Sta Rita Hills. As a Sonoma-based winery, Meyers and Roberts initially told themselves that working with Santa Cruz Mountains vineyards was ‘as far south as we can go’. That changed when the vineyard manager at Sanford & Benedict called out of the blue, informing them that 0.4ha of the own-rooted, dry-farmed vines planted in 1971 was available.

A poll was taken of some local winemakers to see who would be the best recipient and Arnot-Roberts was chosen. Meyers said he and Roberts jumped at the chance: ‘The vineyard is in such good hands and farmed so impeccably.’ The grapes are picked at midnight, loaded onto a refrigerated truck, and arrive at the Arnot-Roberts facility by 2pm the same day.

## Embracing lighter reds

The red wines are fermented whole-cluster and aged in neutral wood with a few exceptions depending on specific vintage conditions.

While Arnot-Roberts entered the California wine scene making the fuller-bodied, higher-alcohol reds in vogue at the time, they would come to embrace the lighter styles. ‘We haven’t fully realised our potential in California for light-bodied red wine,’ says Meyers.

One of the winery’s most popular releases is the North Coast Trousseau. ‘We started making Trousseau after a long search to find the grape, after really enjoying wines from [Jacques] Puffeney and [Michel] Gahier in the Jura. It lit a fire under us and we asked: “Why isn’t more of this kind of wine made in California?”’

They hunted for two years, asking at wineries, vineyard managers and nurseries. Finally they got the phone number of Bernie Luschinger who was growing what he knew as Bastardo in Clear Lake AVA and selling it to producers for Port-style fortified wines.

Meyers and Roberts convinced him to part with one tonne of fruit at first, and later the whole vineyard, after impressing him with their final product. Arnot-Roberts' North Coast Trousseau is still based on this fruit but now includes other sources, planted in large part due to the wines' popularity.

A cornerstone of the Arnot-Roberts label is the trio of Syrahs. The Sonoma Coast blend is an introduction to a more delicate side of the varietal than many are aware is possible to produce, on either side of the Atlantic.

The two single-vineyard wines are among the finest Syrahs produced in California. The Clary Ranch bottling is a stunning, ethereal, enthralling wine. The fruit is harvested as late as 20 November, with a potential alcohol of just 11%, serving as an extreme example of the importance of hang-time in marginal climates.

## Syrah pinnacle

The winery's 'crown jewel' is the 0.8ha Que Syrah Vineyard site outside Occidental. Planted in 1993 by Erhen Jordan of Failla Wines (and formerly Marcassin), it's the Sonoma Coast's oldest Syrah site.

Arnot-Roberts' Que Syrah bottling exchanges the striking savoury aromas and texture of the Clary Ranch with more floral, dense and flashy notes, showing off its substance, breadth and width. Roberts acquired this parcel in its entirety, and it now functions as his home and the unofficial estate site.



Credit: Arnot-Roberts

The Santa Cruz Mountains AVA is another mainstay for the pair, and some of their workhorse wines are sourced here. These include a Chardonnay from pure sand soils at Trout Gulch Vineyard, and the wild, rustic Peter Martin Ray Pinot Noir from head-trained, own-rooted vines. ‘They’re basically bush vines,’ says Meyers. ‘You would never see another Pinot Noir vineyard like this planted now. It’s a real anomaly.’

The Cabernet Sauvignon from Fellom Vineyard, across the road from Monte Bello, is reminiscent of Cabernet produced in decades past. It shows the consistently wild character of this California terroir.

The breadth of their vineyard contracts shows off the diversity of the state’s subregions, both with classic and esoteric varieties. Half their production goes out to their private mailing list and the other half into global distribution, with 70% of that ending up on restaurant wine lists.

The pair are an integral part of a growing wine movement in California that champions restraint and purity – the momentum of which has shifted both the landscape and expectations of what the state can deliver. Arnot–Roberts represents a forward-thinking era of winemaking in the US and the scramble to secure them on release is testament to their quality and popularity.

## Arnot–Roberts: a timeline

**2001** Arnot–Roberts founded; Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts produce one ‘hobby’ vintage of old-vine Zinfandel

**2002** First commercial vintage released

**2003** Production moves to Pax Wine Cellars in Santa Rosa where it remains until 2007

**2006** First vintage of Clary Ranch Syrah; interest in Trousseau begins

**2008** Production moves to their own facility in Forestville

**2009** First vintage of Trousseau

**2011** Production moves to current location in Healdsburg

**2013** First vintage of Que Syrah Vineyard Syrah; vineyard bought in 2016

**2014** Caitlinn Quinn hired as assistant winemaker

**2018** ‘Elected’ to receive fruit to produce their first vintage of Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Chardonnay

## Arnot–Roberts: the facts

**Owners** Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts

**Founded** 2001

**Winery HQ** Healdsburg, California

**Production** 7,000–8,000 cases

**Vineyards** 19ha of long-term leases across 23 sources. Que Syrah Vineyard is owned by Roberts.

**Wines** 20 labels across many varieties: Chardonnay, Ribolla Gialla, Falanghina, Rosé of Touriga Nacional, Trousseau, Gamay, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

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# Arnot-Roberts: 14 top wines



## Arnot-Roberts, Trout Gulch Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains, California, 2012

Just 6.5km inland from the Pacific Ocean, Trout Gulch Vineyard was planted to Chardonnay (Wente clone) on pure sand in 1980. As is standard practice for the Arnot-Roberts whites, it was fermented in stainless steel and aged for 10 months in neutral barriques. At eight years old it's in the secondary phase of its life: aromas of saffron, cinnamon and hazelnuts then flavours of parmesan, yellow apples and honeyed pastries which transition into a soft, delectable finish.

94

Drinking Window 2020 - 2027



## Arnot-Roberts, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County, California, 2018

In 2018 just one tonne of the original, own-rooted, dry-farmed Chardonnay vines planted at Sanford & Benedict Vineyard in 1971 became available for lease, and Arnot-Roberts was 'elected' by a local producers to be the recipients of this prized fruit. The nose immediately shows off the signature mossy, river-rock minerality this site exudes. This tension carries through the palate, melding citrus and stone-fruit flavours with a subtle, creamy power. 93

Drinking Window 2020 - 2040



## Arnot-Roberts, Watson Ranch Chardonnay, Napa Valley, 2018

Sourced from the southernmost vineyard in Napa County, often tapped as a source for sparkling wines, Arnot-Roberts' bottling of Watson Ranch Chardonnay was fermented in stainless steel and aged in neutral French oak for 10 months. The nose is clean and focused, showing jasmine, lemon meringue and freshly baked pastries that lead to a taught, structured palate. Hold this wine for the next couple of years for a touch more richness to come to the fore. 92

Drinking Window 2022 - 2032



## Arnot-Roberts, Vare Vineyard Ribolla Gialla, Napa Valley, California, 2018

Planted in 2001 by George Vare at the eastern base of Mount Veeder in the Mayacamas Range, with suitcase-cuttings sourced from Friuli's legendary Josko Gravner. Fermented in stainless steel and aged for 10 months in neutral French oak. Aromas of dried apricots, orchids and pine sap. The palate combines softness with a fine, centred lift. Firm, brambly flavours of anise and tonic appear on the finish. Will come into its own in a few years after it puts on some weight. 93

Drinking Window 2022 - 2032



## Arnot-Roberts, Heinstein Vineyard Old Vine White, Sonoma Valley, California, 2018

This site, planted in 1954, is a dry-farmed field blend of predominantly Riesling mixed with Sylvaner, Colombard, Gewurztraminer and Trousseau Gris, as well as a small portion of unidentified vines. The Heinstein vineyard was rescued by a small group of winemakers to prevent these old vines from being ripped up. Aromas of orange oil and honeysuckle give way to flavours of salted marcona almonds and lavender. Simultaneously both old-school and new-school California. 92

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030



## Arnot-Roberts, Clary Ranch Syrah, Sonoma Coast, 2018

The 2018 Clary Ranch Syrah was harvested on 9 November and has just 11% alcohol! This is perhaps the most extreme Syrah site in California, and the resulting wine a world-class one. Its nose is extremely savoury and definitive of the variety, with notes of beef jerky, mesquite and cardamom that continue on the palate, which simultaneously has the weight of a feather but lasting substance and structure. This wine perpetually evolved and unfolded over 72 hours, and is a great example of what is now being achieved with Syrah in California. 96

Drinking Window 2020 - 2035



## Arnot-Roberts, Que Syrah Vineyard Syrah, Sonoma Coast, 2018

Que Syrah Vineyard was planted in 1993 6.5km off the Pacific near Occidental, and is now owned by Nathan Roberts. It was 25% destemmed, basket-pressed and aged in neutral French oak for 11 months. Compared to the Clary Ranch bottling, this is a deeper, broader Syrah but sacrifices none of that same grace, nuance or detail. A knockout nose of charcoal embers, blackberry compote, conifer and hibiscus and the palate continuously bounces between juicy, succulent, floral and roasted notes. A truly remarkable Syrah! 96

Drinking Window 2020 - 2040



## Arnot-Roberts, Syrah, Sonoma Coast, California, 2018

This Sonoma Coast Syrah is a blend of four sites, all fermented whole cluster and aged half in concrete tanks and half in neutral barriques for 10 months. The nose shows high-toned red plums, black cherries and allspice. The palate is precise and savoury, full of leather, sage and espresso characters. A charming Syrah with a Pinot Noir heart. 93

Drinking Window 2020 - 2032



## Arnot-Roberts, Peter Martin Ray Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains, 2018

Dry-farmed, head-trained Pinot Noir was planted at 430m in the Peter Martin Ray Vineyard in the late 1970s. This vintage shows notes of dried leaves, red liquorice and tobacco. There is a rich, burliness to the texture that I find consistent throughout Santa Cruz Mountain Pinots, of which this is a definitive example. This bottle was delicious well into its third day of being open – a sure sign of a long, vibrant life ahead. 95

Drinking Window 2020 - 2035



## Arnot-Roberts, Trousseau, North Coast, California, 2018

The Trousseau for this vintage mainly comes from the Clear Lake AVA, with smaller portions from Fort Ross-Seaview and Green Valley. It's fermented whole cluster, basket-pressed and aged in neutral barriques for eight months. Aromas of dried fruit, brown sugar and rust lead to a fine-grained, weightless palate of golden raisins, white pepper and cranberry skins. A poised, rustic and beautiful example of a variety gaining ground in California, in large part due to Arnot-Roberts. 93

Drinking Window 2020 - 2028



## Arnot-Roberts, Gamay Noir, Sierra Foothills, El Dorado, California, 2018

A blend of two high-elevation sites in the Sierra Foothills: Barsotti Vineyard (795m) and Witters Vineyard (1,005m). Wild, rustic nose of red plums, pepper and dried flowers then svelte palate that is broad and subtly tannic on the finish. These mountainous sites bring a sturdy, brambly quality to what is an often underrated variety. Singular and delicious. 92

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030



## Arnot-Roberts, Clajeaux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Chalk Hill, California, 2017

About 15% of the fruit was left on stems during fermentation and the wine was aged for 22 months in 20% new French oak. The Clajeaux Vineyard is on volcanic soil above the Russian River Valley in the Chalk Hill AVA. The nose is dusty and loaded with dried herb and flower notes, while the palate is supple, round and expansive, with lavender and damp earth on the finish. A classic cool-climate Cabernet made with restraint. 95

Drinking Window 2020 - 2050



## Arnot-Roberts, Fellom Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains, California, 2017

Across the road from the Ridge's famous Monte Bello Vineyard, Fellom Ranch was planted in 1979 on shale and loam. This 2017 vintage was basket pressed and aged in 15% new French oak for 22 months. An earthy nose of sage, oregano and tobacco leads to a palate that is dark-fruited and powerful. This is a rich California Cabernet that still finds a happy home in a portfolio of understated, nuanced wines. 94

Drinking Window 2020 - 2045