



HISTOIRE D'AMOUR

When American coed Élan Schmitt met Julien Fayard while studying in France, it was love at first sight. Today, the couple is quietly, but assuredly, pouring their passion into one of Napa's newest and most talked about wineries—Covert Estate.

STORY BY EMILY MANGINI

Burrowed into the rolling hills of Coombsville, Covert Estate takes to heart the French adage “To live well, live hidden.” Even the typical sounds of winemaking—the rumble of the tractor, the hum of the press—dare not pierce the peaceful California morning. Instead, Covert Estate is the picture of serenity with a vantage point that offers an equally tranquil view of Napa Valley’s newest appellation.

Founded in 2016 by husband and wife Julien and Élan Fayard, Covert Estate is equally committed to environmentally gentle winemaking as it is to crafting elegant Bordeaux-inspired, California-styled wines. The twist is that out of this unobtrusive winery in a sleepy corner of town come some of the most aromatic and expressive wines in the valley.

There are three labels produced at the winery: Covert Estate, Empreinte and Azur. Each has its own focus, and brings to life

winemaker Julien’s mission to strike a harmony between vineyard and winery, science and artistry. The estate label is centered on fruit-forward Cabernet Francs and bold, elegant Cabernet Sauvignons. Empreinte is for the single-varietal, single-vineyard wines, and boasts a Sauvignon Blanc so rich it drinks like a red. The Azur label was built on the unlikely shoulders of a crisp Provençal-style rosé using syrah grapes, complete with measured notes of watermelon and strawberry. With one sniff and swirl, it becomes clear: Covert speaks softly, but its wines carry big sticks.

If wine tells a story, the Fayards and their pioneering spirit is best captured through their rosé. It’s a story that begins a decade ago. Missing a taste of home, Julien set out in search of a quality rosé, and came up empty-handed. “[Back then], ‘quality’ and ‘rosé’ did not go in the same sentence here,” Élan relates. “Julien said to me, if in 10 years I’m not the one making quality rosé, someone else will be.”



Julien and Élan Fayard

PHOTO: JACK HUTCHESON



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So Julien set out to create a Francophile-worthy delicate rosé in a valley of big, bold cabernets. “We were producing something that people didn’t know they wanted,” notes Élan. Much like the Covert wines that followed, the difference in the rosé began in the vineyards. Unlike most winemakers who harvest for red wine and use the leftovers for rosé, Julien and Élan harvest specifically for the wine—a method called direct press. It’s a very deliberate process that allows the focus to remain on fruit expression and ripeness. The beautiful salmon color of the wine, contrasted with the more typical ruby red California rosés, is due to leaving the fruit skins on for a mere hour. “It’s a very intentional and dedicated process,” explains Élan, “the rosé became the backbone of our brand.”

Intentional and dedicated winemaking is in Julien’s blood. Born in St. Etienne, France, Julien grew up in the vineyards of the famed Chateau Sainte Marguerite, now operated by his cousins. He blended his first wine at 16. “Weekend adventures in the vineyard turned into seasonal jobs, then study and more serious internships,” he relates. “I basically grew in the business and made it a career.” His decision to pursue a formal education in viticulture and enology took him to the Loire Valley.

At the same time, Élan (né Schmitt) was an American coed spending her sophomore year abroad. In a scene that could double as the start of a dreamy foreign film, it was Élan who spotted Julien while studying in the library, a moment she describes as love at first sight. “I said to myself, I need to meet this person. I was drawn to him and remember being surprised by that.”

Fifteen years later, it’s easy to see how the two felt an instant connection. There is a warm, natural ease between them, and even what seems like a bit of cultural transference: Élan possesses an unassuming, French-like grace, and Julien embraces an entrepreneurial spirit that rings American.

Before the spark grew into marriage and a business partnership, their love at first sight was buoyed by a mutual love of wine. Élan, who spent part of her childhood in Sonoma County, had grown up visiting wineries with her parents. The experiences had a lasting impact on her and planted the seed for a career in wine sales and marketing. “I learned early on the magnetic powers of wine,” she says. “I remember being so nostalgic of wine country and wine, how it brought people together, and was always a symbol of joy and togetherness.”

Throughout multiple jobs in France and California, for the film’s second act, the Fayards had fallen in love with each other and the Napa community, and felt an undeniable pull to return to the United States. In 2006, newlyweds Julien and Élan took a leap of faith and moved to Napa. Élan had visions of working in wine marketing, Julien as a winemaker. “Own-



Covet Estate’s subterranean winery minimizes environmental impact while maximizing artistry (opposite). Gravity flow is used from tanks to pumps, and the cave’s corridors (above) are designed to promote natural light and night air cooling.



ing a winery was never a part of our dream, because we never thought it would be possible,” Élan said, smiling and giving a simple shrug.

Instead, the path to Covert and pioneering in Coombsville revealed itself over time. It started with what Julien calls “a series of good timing and accidents” that had nothing to do with the winery, but lead Julien to the famed winemaker and consultant, Philippe Melka. Melka became a mentor to Julien during the seven years he was working with him, honing his philosophy of minimalism in the vineyard to produce structured, aromatic wines.

“There are only a few winemakers of his caliber, and because I was his main guy, I had the opportunity to work with so many vendors and so many different batches of grapes,” remembers Julien. “The learning curve was fantastic.” That learning curve also readied the Fayards to take another leap of faith when they discovered the Coombsville hills and vineyard in which Covert is now embedded.

The quiet, undisturbed peacefulness of the youngest appellation was a natural fit for their personalities. “Julien feels that with his culture—growing up in France—there is still this pioneering nature and ability here,” notes Élan. “It’s so untouched, there is such a wild aspect. It’s still very hidden, even for locals.”

The weather in Coombsville is also a match for Julien’s sensibilities. “Julien really focuses on what typically classifies Bordeaux wines: structure and balance.

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The curveball is making it in Napa,” says Élan. While the hot California sun still shines hotter than in France, Coombsville enjoys a slightly cooler microclimate, an aspect on which vineyard minimalist Julien is glad to capitalize. “The grapes can progress more evenly here,” he explains. “The advantage is that we have more harmony in our fruition, in the ripening process.”

At Covert, its name is not just a moniker, it’s a mission—a guiding principle influencing how the winery was built, the vineyards are farmed, and the wines are crafted. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the winery is built into a hillside. Partnering with Signum Architecture and designer Richard Von Saal, the Fayards designed a state-of-the-art subterranean winery that minimizes environmental impact while maximizing artistry. Gravity flow is used from tanks to pumps, the cave’s corridors are positioned to increase natural light and night air cooling, and there’s an intricate water cycle that starts with collected rainwater and assists with vineyard irrigation. An aesthetic of reclaimed materials, including a chandelier crafted from an obsidian boulder unearthed during construction, welcomes guests and creates an elegant yet relaxed feel.

There’s another environmental motivation for the winery cave, but it is of a different nature. “No one wants to see a winery awkwardly jutting out of a natural landscape,” Julien asserts candidly. “We have to think of our neighbor’s perspective. It’s about being a steward in that sense. Being organic is great—you have a stamp you can wave at people, but being a good neighbor is about investing into the relationship.”

The Fayards’ focus on stewardship—both of the environment and of the community—is their hallmark. Even with a jaw-dropping winery as their backdrop and ultra-premium wines swirling in their glasses, the couple has no pretentious airs about them. To meet them is to wonder if they pinch themselves each morning to make sure the dream they once didn’t dare dream is a reality. As pioneers in Napa’s newest appellation frontier, the husband-and-wife team are right at home in the hills of Coombsville, perfecting the art of living well—and living hidden. ♦

Nestled in the Coombsville Hills (opposite), the winery cave’s aesthetic uses reclaimed materials, including a chandelier crafted from an obsidian boulder unearthed during construction to create an elegant yet relaxed feel.

