

CUISINE, DRINKS, HAUTE WINE, WINE COUNTRY, WINE COUNTRY, WINE REVIEWS, WINEMAKER INTERVIEWS — JULY 30, 2024

Iconic Vineyards and a Cult Winemaker: Napa Valley's Annulus Wines

by FRAN MILLER

After years of living in the Napa Valley and working within non-wine related industries, Luke Evnin and Deann Wright have heeded the region's vinous lure. Luke, a life science venture capitalist focused on cancer eradication, and Deann, an attorney and medical researcher focused on the clinical study of rare autoimmune diseases, long dreamt of launching a family wine effort. Inspired by their time-honored Rutherford way of life, in which friends and family gather to share conversation and world-class wines, yet dedicated to their respective careers, their wine dream was kept at bay, until now.



Luke Evnin and Deann Wright of Annulus

As the duo readies to launch their debut wines under their 2020-founded Annulus label, they give credit to their stellar winemaking team and to their prized vineyard sources for allowing their winemaking dream to become reality. They also recognize those who've inspired and guided them along the way, such as their late neighbor Barbara Eisele, and their friends and colleagues who made an introduction to critically acclaimed winemaker Nigel Kinsman, whose shared passion for historic, family-owned vineyard sites led to a serendipitous meeting of the minds.



Annulus Winemaker Nigel Kinsman (left) and Consulting Oenologist Michel Rolland

Kinsman's classical approach is just what Evnin and Wright envisioned for their wines. His focus on highlighting purity of fruit and vineyard expression leads to beautifully balanced, complex wines with great aging potential. Kinsman's wines express vineyard, block, and growing conditions rather than an overriding house style. The wines he has crafted for Annulus are pure expressions of two of Evnin and Wright's favorite but very different heritage vineyard sites: the Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, first planted to wine grapes in 1884, and the Beckstoffer Las Piedras Vineyard, which traces its history to the original Mexican land grants.

Since 1978, the Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard has been meticulously farmed by successive generations of the Phillips family. It sits in a beautiful southwestern corner of Oakville and rolls up the gentle foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains. The Annulus fruit is selected from the eastern-facing Block 2, one of the lower blocks of the 70-acre vineyard, which benefits from well-draining, loamy, and alluvial soils. Planted in 1999 and farmed by Mike Wolf, this block is planted to clone four on 101-14 rootstock and yields fruit with fine tannins and lush aromatics.



Annulus' Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard

The Beckstoffer Las Piedras Vineyard, planted in the 1840s and the first vineyard in the St. Helena AVA, is located at the foot of Spring Mountain. In 1983, California's grape-growing trailblazer Andy Beckstoffer purchased the property and planted it to Cabernet Sauvignon. The quality of the gravelly, fast-draining soil, led farmworkers to name it Las Piedras, which means "the stones." The Annulus fruit comes from Block D1, which was planted to clone 47 on 110R rootstock in 2014.

The two vineyards have produced Annulus' three extremely limited production debut wines: 2021 Beckstoffer Las Piedras Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$250), the profile of which is powerful, with dark fruit notes that rest on a backbone of minerality, 2021 Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$250), featuring bright aromatics of cranberries and chocolate, and a palate packed with blue and black fruit, accented by cigar box and spice, and 2021 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$175) with its decadent nose of blueberries, plums, graphite, and sage.



ANNULUS

Kinsman's artful touch in the cellar (the wines are crafted at green-certified Wheeler Farms in St. Helena) is complemented by Consulting Oenologist Michel Rolland's blending prowess. World-renowned Rolland joined the team in 2023; he collaborates with Kinsman to masterfully synthesize Annulus' blends and limited-edition bottlings. Evnin and Wright plan to maintain Annulus as a family-run business with their daughters Alexandra and Elena, each of whom has taken a keen interest in all things wine after having been raised in Napa. Alexandra has worked harvest at Napa's Seavey Vineyard and Sonoma's Hirsch Vineyards. She has also spent time in the sales side of the business at Flatiron Wine and Spirits in Manhattan. Elena has guided the visual aspects of the brand and wine label, the logo of which was inspired by a striking public sculpture by Andrea Roggi in Florence, where Elena recently studied. The logo is a perfect graphic representation of the Annulus name, Latin for "ring," and refers to the winegrowing cycle that extends from dormancy to bud break to veraison to harvest.



Nigel Kinsman, Deann Wright, Michel Rolland, Luke Evnin, Elena Evnin & Alexandra Evnin

"As our daughters grew up and both showed interest in wine and the industry, we couldn't think of anything better than working collaboratively as a family to develop a wine venture together," says Wright. "Alexandra is a sponge for learning all she can about the industry, and has worked in almost every facet, from the vineyards and cellar to retail, tasting room, and an online venture. Elena is a multimedia artist and has led the visual identity of Annulus, and guides all aspects of the visual brand elements to represent our collective vision. Her passion is to find ways to infuse the everyday with beauty and magnificence. To work together as a family and have our daughters play an integral part in an effort that we will expand and mature for years to come has been a dream come true."



Taste Annulus wines at Wheeler Farms, by appointment only

90 minute tastings of Annulus wines are held by appointment at Wheeler Farms; \$150 per person includes samples of three Cabernet Sauvignons served with artisan cheeses.

Photos courtesy of Annulus