

2021 - The Year In Review

BY ANTONIO GALLONI | DECEMBER 22, 2021

As 2021 draws to a close, it's time to reflect on the year behind and take a look at what lies ahead. There were certainly plenty of ups and downs, but as I write this I am incredibly energized about the future.

Winemaker of the Year - Françoise Peschon, Napa Valley, United States

Each and every year I have the immense privilege – and it is a privilege – to visit leading wineries all over the world and to taste with many talented winemakers. It's a long list. The Winemaker of the Year award is meant to recognize someone whose achievements transcend craft, someone who stands apart from the crowd. This year's winner is Françoise Peschon.

Trained at UC Davis and the University of Bordeaux, Peschon first gained prominence at Araujo Estate, which is where I first met her more than a decade ago. Following the sale of Araujo Estate in 2013, Peschon began working on smaller projects with a very simple philosophy of focusing only on estate wineries. First up was VHR – Vine Hill Ranch, today widely recognized as one of the elite Cabernets in Napa Valley. Peschon then led a massive turnaround at Cornell, taking those wines from not at all interesting to world class in just a handful of years.

Today, Peschon is the winemaker at VHR, Heimark and Matt Morris Wines. She also makes the whites for Bart and Daphne Araujo's Accendo winery. Visit at harvest and you will meet someone whose purplish, stained hands are those of someone who is physically making wine and showing up for 4am picks rather than delegating to assistants. In addition, Peschon is the consultant at Cornell and Almacerro, where she works alongside day-to-day winemakers Elizabeth Tangney and Matilda Scott, respectively, serving as mentor, consigliere and a mother of sorts, all in one.



Françoise Peschon (far right), with Vine Hill Ranch owner Bruce Phillips (far left) and Vineyard Manager Mike Wolf (center) after a complete vertical of the VHR Cabernet Sauvignon. Article to follow in 2022.

Unassuming and always generous in giving credit to her colleagues, Peschon has mentored a number of other winemakers, including Graham Wehmeier who was first at Cornell, then at Futo and is now at Diamond Creek, and Rebecca George, who was previously at Kelly Fleming, where the VHR wines were made up until recently. When she is not working on one of those projects, Peschon finds time to make wine under the Drinkward-Peschon label she shares with Lisa Drinkward.

The world of consulting in Napa Valley is big, big business. Consulting winemakers regularly pull in large checks from their clients. Peschon could easily have a larger roster if she desired, but instead she chooses to focus only on clients who meet her strict criteria, not afraid to let those go who don't. It's an admirable approach that has very quietly made her one of the most influential and highly respected winemakers in Napa Valley, and my Winemaker of the Year.