

# BARRON'S PENTA

## SULLIVAN RUTHERFORD ESTATE CELEBRATES 50 YEARS IN NAPA VALLEY

By Abby Schultz | May 20, 2022



Sullivan Rutherford Estate property and residence.

Juan Pablo Torres-Padilla recalls tasting Sullivan Rutherford Estate's premier Merlot for the first time on June 6, 2016—yes, he remembers the exact date. The vintage was 2013.

The experience came about as Torres-Padilla visited more than 120 wineries in Napa Valley in a two-year search for a property to buy, while also educating himself on the region. After sampling the James O'Neil Merlot, as it was called then, he asked: "How come no one knows about these wines? I believe these are the best wines in the world."

Two years later, a family firm led by this former CEO of a Paris-based artificial intelligence company, owned Sullivan Rutherford Estate, named for James O'Neil Sullivan, who founded it in 1972. Although Torres-Padilla's career had nothing

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to do with wine, he began cultivating a love for it at a young age with tastes first offered by his maternal grandfather.



2019 J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Merlot.

“I have been very lucky and spoiled in life, because my family, and my grandfather, [had] us tasting great wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Napa Valley,” Torres-Padilla says. By comparison, Sullivan Rutherford’s wines were similar or better, he says.

Since taking over the estate, Torres-Padilla has focused on creating a cohesive team of veterans in the wine business to build on Sullivan’s legacy. He also set his sights on developing what he calls a “first-growth” Merlot—referring to France’s Bordeaux wines classified as the best-of-the-best since the late 1800s.

It’s a surprising goal in a wine region famous for its Cabernet Sauvignon, which can go for upwards of US\$700 a bottle at the most famous Napa estates. But wine lovers and collectors familiar with wines from the right bank of Bordeaux or of the Super Tuscans of Italy realize Merlot has the potential to be as “noble, age-worthy, and compelling,” as Cabernet, says Joshua Lowell, general manager of the estate.

“We think it’s an opportunity to regain some of Merlot’s noble characters,” Lowell says.

The intense floral aromas of the 2019 J.O. Sullivan Founder’s Reserve Merlot are evident as soon as the bottle is opened. It’s still a young wine, full of dark fruit flavors, but balanced to age well.

## Building on History

Sullivan Rutherford’s legacy, and the history of Napa Valley, are themes that Torres-Padilla reiterates again and again in a conversation with Lowell about his vision for the estate and the wines. This Saturday, the winery is celebrating its 50th anniversary since Sullivan’s purchase, yet Torres-Padilla looks back more than 200

years when he considers the property’s heritage. That’s because 1821 marked the end of the Mexican War of Independence, when Spain transferred ownership of California, and Napa Valley, to Mexico.

“Having Mexican roots, that fact was quite relevant,” Torres-Padilla says. Napa was divided at that time into two “ranchos,” north-to-south, with the dividing line crossing through the property of what today is Sullivan Rutherford Estate. That history conveys “a meaningful message of being at the geographic and historical center of Napa,” Torres-Padilla says.

Sullivan purposefully chose this land in the center of the valley with the assistance of an influential winemaker at the time, André Tchelistcheff. What drew them was the soil quality, which, surprisingly given the area’s location away from the hills and famous benches of the valley, is comprised of gravelly, well-drained soils,

Lowell, who had helped build Napa labels Peter Michael, Futo, and Aubert, joined Sullivan Rutherford to lead the winery in April 2018 after several months of discussions with Torres-Padilla. Like the new owner, Lowell knew the wines produced from the estate were “spectacular,” he says, but it wasn’t until he walked the land and got his hands dirty that he understood “the special nature of this property.”



Juan Pablo Torres Padilla, managing partner of Sullivan Rutherford Estate in Napa Valley.

Soil pits dug throughout the estate led by veteran vineyard manager Mike Wolf—who began farming the property in September 2018—proved the point, that the land sat on “an enormous amount of gravel,” likely because of its position near the intersection of the Napa River to the east, and the Bale Slough, a stream that comes down from the mountains to the west of the estate, Lowell says.

The 2013 single-varietal Merlot that Torres-Padilla had tasted was among a small bottling of reserve wines that the Sullivan family produced. A Cabernet Sauvignon

reserve was produced from a single block, a gravelly site where the previous owners kept yields low to produce a higher quality wine, Lowell says.

Given the quality of the land, Lowell and the new Sullivan Rutherford team—which included the estate’s winemaker since 2013, Jeff Cole—realized that if set up and farmed correctly, there was “potential to make that reserve quality wine from most of the property not just from a few isolated blocks,” Lowell says.

The estate was originally planted with Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon vines, but as Cabernet Sauvignon’s success in the valley gained traction, the Sullivans replanted the Merlot with Cabernet. “What Merlot we had left was producing excellent wine, but in small quantities,” Lowell says.

Under Wolf, 8 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon vines have been replanted with Merlot. The vineyard manager is training the leaf canopies of these vines to protect the fruit, which is not necessary with Cabernet. Cole, the winemaker, is also fine-tuning practices such as temperature control and skin contact, and the use of particular barrels, in the cellar to elevate the quality.

“It’s a bit of a risk, of course—we know Cabernet Sauvignon is a given in Rutherford—but we have the historical Merlots, and the more recent vintages, and we believe we can make very high quality Merlot and make enough of it to have it have a viable place in business,” Lowell says.

During the Sullivan family’s tenure, the reserve Cabernet and Merlot—which was produced as a single varietal only in exceptional years, were labeled “James O’Neil.” Beginning in 2017, the new team under Torres-Padilla renamed the top wines J.O. Sullivan Founder’s Reserve. Both Founder’s Reserve varieties—each priced at \$280 a bottle—are produced from grapes grown on the Sullivan Rutherford Estate.

## **The Birth of PA Vinea**

On Saturday, the estate will reveal plans for a new wine it’s calling PA Vinea Family Reserve. The announcement is also a way to bring the property’s new name—PA Vinea—into the world. It comes from *proportion aurea*, or the “golden ratio” in Latin—signifying balance—and the Latin word for vines.

The Family Reserve will be a Merlot-dominant “first-growth” Bordeaux-style blend that will be made in extremely small quantities for the estate’s best customers, friends, and family. Although a price hasn’t been determined, PA Vinea will be more than \$500 a bottle. The first release of the 2019 vintage will be in September 2023.

Grapes for PA Vinea will come from the Rutherford estate, but also from two properties bought by Torres-Padilla in recent years. A 12-acre undeveloped plot in the Soda Canyon area of Napa Valley, with white volcanic ash soil, has been planted with Merlot and Cabernet Franc since it was bought in 2019. Last year the estate also bought Criscione Vineyard, a 9-acre well-regarded Cabernet Sauvignon property with fruit that has been sold over the years to the region’s top producers.

The anniversary is also an opportunity for the Torres-Padilla team to reveal drawings for a new winery that will allow them to realize their ambitions of creating the best wines in the world. The estate will formally evolve to PA Vinea after the new structure is completed, sometime in 2024.

Designed by San Francisco architect Hans Baldauf, founding principal of BCV Architecture + Interiors, the winery will include small tasting areas overlooking different parts of the wine-making process—from vineyard to cellar—and will be large enough to allow each vineyard lot to be fermented in separate tanks.

“It’s really building a Napa Valley first growth based on 200 years of history—That’s what we believe is happening,” Padilla says.

