Sullivan's Second Act_ More 2021 Napa Cabernets to Watch PDF
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NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Sullivan's Second Act

This Rutherford estate won't be under the radar long with its exciting new lineup of 2021 Cabernets from some historic vineyards

The future is bright at Sullivan Rutherford Estate, especially for its 2021 Cabernets. (Courtesy of Sullivan)

By James Molesworth
Jul 16, 2024

In terms of Napa Valley *terroir*, Sullivan Rutherford Estate [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=Sullivan] might be the best-positioned estate you've never heard of.

In 1918, brothers Adolphe and Virgil Galleron acquired more than 400 acres in Rutherford for farming sheep, walnuts, prunes and more. Jump to 1972, when James O'Neil Sullivan arrived as a weekender in the valley and purchased a modest 4-acre parcel on Manley Lane, just across Highway 29 from the Gallerons' spread.

Sullivan, a home winemaking enthusiast, befriended California winemaking legend André Tchelistcheff [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/andre-tchelistcheff-1901-1994-6106] . After a few years of Tchelistcheff's guidance, Sullivan sold his Manley Lane property and traded up, buying 26 acres from the Galleron family [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/napas-galleron-and-galleron-laine-wineries-settle-trademark-lawsuit-20105] to start his namesake winery in 1978.

Sullivan developed his vineyard and quietly made his own wines, relying heavily on Merlot [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/merlot-57809] bottlings (perhaps a reason why the estate isn't that well-known today) before turning the operation over to his children. They eventually sold the estate, and Juan Pablo Torres-Padilla was in the right place at the right time.

"I had been looking," says Torres-Padilla. "I'd done due diligence on 20 wineries, engaged in five negotiations, and then wound up finally succeeding in buying Sullivan in 2018."

Born in Mexico, Torres-Padilla, 46, moved to France as a young adult, where his grandfather turned him onto wine. Years later, he was touring Napa Valley when he stopped in at Sullivan for a tasting. Impressed by the wines and intrigued by the estate's low profile, he took the plunge into winery ownership, joined by his uncle in the purchase. Torres-Padilla then went about researching the property's history.

Juan Pablo Torres-Padilla bought Sullivan in 2018 and has quickly made his mark. (Courtesy of Sullivan)

"I believe in history. If you aren't aware of it, you don't know who you are, or what you can become," he says. "Combine that with the reason I love California—the mix of Old World and New World that it represents in terms of wine—and I believe we can do something special here."

Sullivan Rutherford Estate is located on Galleron Road, sitting along the line that once demarcated the 19th-century Rancho Carne Humana and Rancho Caymus land grants. The property totals 26 acres (22 under vine) spreading out from an impressive ranch house designed by John Marsh Davis, an acolyte of architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Torres-Padilla started by bringing in respected viticulturist Mike Wolf to handle the farming, and retained winemaker Jeff Cole, who's been at Sullivan since 2013. Torres-Padilla also brought in general manager Joshua Lowell, who'd previously been at Peter Michael [https://top100.winespectator.com/2015/article/peter-michaels-quest/] , Futo [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&scope=ratings&winery=futo] and Aubert [https://top100.winespectator.com/2018/article/mark-auberts-ambition/] .

Getting back to that Rutherford *terroir*, the Sullivan home vineyard is on Pleasanton loam, a mix of sandy gravel, though with a decided tilt to gravel that sets it apart. A low-vigor site, it's

ideally suited to both Cabernet Sauvignon [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/cabernet-sauvignon-57803] and Merlot. The oldest vines date to 2002, and there were significant replants in 2012 and 2021, the last coming under Torres-Padilla's ownership.

In 2019, Torres-Padilla added a 9-acre parcel just up Soda Canyon Road, in the broader Napa Valley AVA. The site is planted mostly to Merlot, with some Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, all situated on white rhyolitic soils. Another 9-acre parcel, along Crystal Springs Road in the St. Helena AVA, was purchased in 2021; that one, on red Aiken clay with pieces of obsidian sprinkled in (a rarity), was planted entirely to Cabernet Sauvignon by Tony Soter [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-grower-of-wine-tony-soter-063022] back in 2000.

"We're a Cabernet house, for sure," says Cole. "But we're all in on Merlot, too." (Check my colleague Tim Fish's annual California Merlot reports [https://www.winespectator.com/articles/california-merlot-red-wine-tasting-report-113023] for more on that category.)

Today Sullivan makes about 5,000 cases annually, two-thirds of which is Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine is currently made at custom-crush facilities, though a groundbreaking on a new winery facility on the Rutherford property is imminent. That will eventually bring all the production in house and give the team tighter quality control over the wines.

When it comes to those wines, Cole isn't shy about what he prefers.

"I like tannin," he says with a wide grin. "It gives boundaries to the ripeness we get."

Sullivan Rutherford Estate and its vineyards occupy a special place in Rutherford history. (Courtesy of Sullivan)

2021 Sullivan Rutherford Estate Cabernet Tasting Notes

Cole does a *saignée* [https://www.winespectator.com/glossary/index/word/Saignee] of 10 percent to 20 percent on the vats (bleeding juice off the must [https://www.winespectator.com/glossary/index/word/Must]), "for extraction and tannin," then takes the free-run juice [https://www.winespectator.com/glossary/index/word/Free] to barrel for malo [https://www.winespectator.com/glossary/index/word/Malolactic] and an 18- to 20-month *élevage* [https://www.winespectator.com/glossary/index/word/Elevage] . The **2021 Sullivan Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve** is a large-scaled Cabernet in a classic Rutherford mold. With 11 percent Petit Verdot in the mix, the wine is dark and dense, with a flash of pastis peeking out from a core of black currant and blackberry reduction, while broad graphite girders and warm loam course underneath it all. It has cut and drive, with a buried iron note and a flash of violet adding to its range. It will age slowly.

The **2021 Sullivan Cabernet Franc Rutherford J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve** is no slouch either. A rich and slow-moving wine, it unfurls cassis and plum reduction notes laced with violet, iron and singed alder accents, all backed by a dense yet well-integrated structure. A late echo of warm stone weaves around it all.

Both of the Founder's Reserve Cabernets are in need of bottle time to show their fullest potential, though fans of big wines will find enjoyment now as well; they're also in limited production (500 cases or less) and check in at $320 per bottle.

More approachable and easier to find is the **2021 Sullivan Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford Coeur de Vigne**, with a $130 price tag and an ample 2,600 cases made. The 80/14/6 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot offers a ripe and structured feel, but with a very Rutherford imprint, as its lovely, pure beam of cassis is supported by mouthwatering apple wood, savory and iron details along the way. It has cut and drive, with the fruit lingering the longest thanks to a light hand with the toast.

With all its history fueling a new owner's passion and investment, this is definitely a winery to keep your eye on.

Read more of James Molesworth's Winery Intels [https://www.winespectator.com/display/stirring-the-lees-with-james-molesworth] , hear his interviews with leading winemakers on Wine Spectator's Straight Talk podcast [https://www.winespectator.com/straighttalk] , and follow him on Instagram at @jmolesworth1 [http://instagram.com/jmolesworth1/] .