

mad about

MERLOT

AS IT NEARS ITS 45TH ANNIVERSARY, NAPA VALLEY'S
MARKHAM VINEYARDS LOOKS TO THE FUTURE by Deborah Parker Wong

Winemaker Kimberlee Nicholls, center, with the female-led winemaking, operations, and viticulture team at Markham Napa Valley Vineyards.

merlot has been synonymous with Markham Vineyards since its first vintage in Napa Valley in 1980, and the charm of the variety has never been more apparent thanks to winemaker Kimberlee Nicholls. As the 2022 harvest wound its way to a close, she told *The Tasting Panel* that “it has been a fast-paced vintage—one that has allowed me to take lessons learned from prior vintages and make critical decisions at the right time.” With perspective derived from her longevity at the winery, Nicholls is well equipped to guide the portfolio’s style while mentoring her all-female wine-making team on best practices as they deal with the increasing unpredictability of Mother Nature.



Markham Napa Valley Vineyards’ current logo recalls founder Bruce Markham’s passion for cannons: He would use a miniature cannon to salute the start of each harvest.

PHOTO: LUIS ORTIZ/AFFINITY CREATIVE

PHOTO: CLARA RICE

FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

When it comes to sustainability, the trajectory of Markham's star-studded collection of estate vineyards—now under the direction of viticulturist Taylor Abudi, who joined the team early in the 2022 growing season—is impressive. Twelve acres of the winery's Hopper House Vineyard in Yountville, which are serving as a trial space for various sustainability practices, have seen no synthetic inputs since 2021. Named after the family home on Hopper Creek, whose habitat has been restored by neighboring Dominus Estate, this gently sloping benchland at the foot of the Mayacamas was one of first terroirs in the Valley to be planted to vines in the early 19th century.

"Our Hopper House Vineyard is a truly significant place in terms of viticulture in Napa Valley," said Abudi. "It's been farmed conventionally for decades, and now we're pursuing sustainability practices to help replenish our natural resources, improve air and water quality, and protect our ecosystems and wildlife habitats." To that end, farming practices continue to evolve in all of the winery's 260 acres of estate vineyards and land—Yountville's Hopper House Vineyard, Yountville Ranch Vineyard, and Bryan's Block at the Yountville Ranch Vineyard; Little Cannon Vineyard in the Oak Knoll District; and Rockerbox Vineyard in Calistoga—with a long-term focus on better vineyard and soil health. Among other things, the winery is marking its fifth year of drill planting a rotating cover crop of clover mix, brassicas, and insectary rows and is moving to no-till farming for all of its sites.

The vineyards are certified through the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, which ensures sustainable winegrowing practices that benefit the environment, the community, and the development of high-quality grapes and wine. But sustainability involves more than the adoption of innovative technology and setting a timeline for achieving environmental and climate goals: The "people factor" is also an essential part of Markham's ethos.



Markham's The Character is a Right Bank-inspired Bordeaux blend that ages for 30 months in French oak.

A DREAM TEAM

In her role as head winemaker, Nicholls directs an all-female winemaking team that includes assistant winemaker Abigail Horstman and enologist Patricia Sciacca. The collaborative culture that thrives at Markham is a direct result of how she prioritizes the professional growth of her colleagues.

During a technical tasting of the portfolio, the value of empowerment was demonstrated by the fact that everyone had a seat at the table and had an opportunity to offer insights into the winemaking process and the sensory characteristics of the wines. This scenario, which is rarer than you might think, ensures a high level of communication particularly but not only during the hectic months of harvest—it's woven into the fabric of Markham's operations.

As role models go, Nicholls is impressive for reasons well beyond her winemaking talent. In 1989, she was among the first women to enter the Napa Valley wine industry, accepting a position in the laboratory—a place where many women did (and still do) get their start—at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. She joined Markham's founding general manager, Bryan Del Bondio, in 1993 and became one of the first women in Napa Valley to serve as a head winemaker in 2001.

Next year will represent a particularly significant milestone not only for Nicholls—who will celebrate 30 years of an impressive career that has made

her synonymous both with Markham and with the heritage of Merlot in Napa Valley—but also for the winery, which will celebrate its 45th year in operation.

THE RETURN OF THE CANNONEER

Leading up to the anniversary, Nicholls and her team have been revamping Markham's portfolio with an emphasis on Merlot and Cabernet. It now includes four tiers that made their debut in 2021: the Napa Valley Series; the District Series; Marked Parcels; and the winery's Bordeaux-style icon, The Character. The winery's label artwork was also redesigned in a tribute to Markham's historic cannoneer (who first appeared on the label in 1980): Winery founder and U.S. Navy veteran Bruce Markham used to signal the start of harvest by firing a miniature cannon.

For The Character's second vintage, 2018 (\$135), only seven barrels were sourced from Markham's Yountville estate vineyards. The wine is framed around Merlot (65%) and Cabernet Sauvignon (21%), with Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc completing the blend. Nicholls and her team fermented the wine in stainless steel, allowing it a generous amount of time on the skins, after which it spent 30 months in 100% new French oak. Prior to release, it showed a seductive and generous depth of flavor and freshness along with secondary notes of coffee and black pepper.

Markham's newly renovated tasting room, now open to visitors, honors the brand's history in a warm, contemporary space.

At the other end of the pricing spectrum is the Napa Valley Series, among them a 2019 Merlot (\$29) that punched far above its weight with cherry blossoms, sapid red plums and cherries, black tea, star anise, and vanilla as well as a fresh, savory finish.

In between, you'll find the District Series, including wines from select Napa Valley sub-AVAs such as the 2019 Yountville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65), a cool, floral expression of lavender-scented red and black currants; blackberries; and lush, resolved tannins. The Marked Parcels series, meanwhile, represents Nicholls' selections from each estate vineyard, of which the 2019 Yountville Ranch Merlot (\$65) was a standout with notes of cherries, raspberries, dark chocolate, and caramelized toast as well as the chalky tannins so often cited as a marker of benchland terroirs.

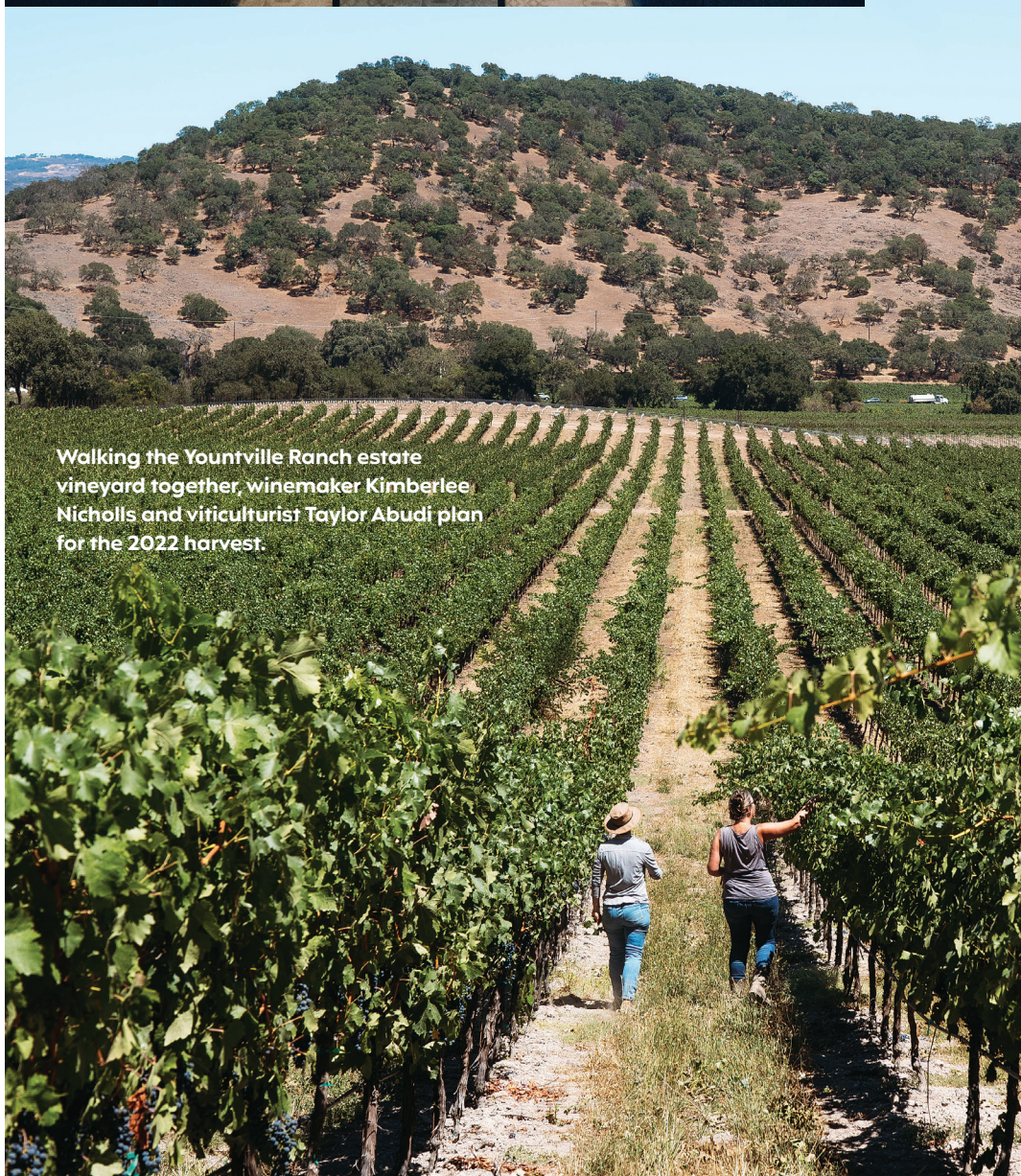
AN ANNIVERSARY MAKEOVER

While Markham's vineyards and stone cellar—which was built by Bordeaux immigrant Jean Laurent in 1879—together represent the soul of its estate, the property has recently been renovated with an eye toward the future. Investments in the winery include the addition of modernized crush equipment, new presses, and smaller tanks. Nicholls explains that the latter amount to “a winery within a winery” for special projects that explore prized small lots to develop unique wine expressions.

The tasting room has also undergone a major renovation that showcases the talents of the winemaking team and their Merlot-centric identity. The space has been artfully upcycled, building on existing materials to give it and the surrounding courtyard and patios a warm, contemporary vibe. The interior design leans toward the mid-century modern and Bauhaus styles, featuring soothing neutral colors and statement artwork under soaring ceilings. Against this backdrop,



PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN




Walking the Yountville Ranch estate vineyard together, winemaker Kimberlee Nicholls and viticulturist Taylor Abudi plan for the 2022 harvest.

PHOTO: CLARA RICE

flights of Markham's District Series and Marked Parcels wines can be customized according to guest preference and optionally paired with cheese.

Meanwhile, the adjacent historic barrel cellar can accommodate private functions for up to 175 people; it has been redesigned to provide a front-row view into where all the magic happens. The winery's generous grounds have also undergone a makeover that resulted in intimate outdoor seating areas with soothing water features and water-efficient plantings, while outdoor fire tables invite visitors to linger even in cooler weather.

Between the portfolio revamp and the winery renovation, Markham has been polished to perfection for its 45th vintage and for decades to come. 

TASTING NOTES



Markham Vineyards 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$48) Fruit from three estate vineyards—Rockerbox, Hopper House, and Yountville Ranch—have created

a lush Cab that romances the nose with deep, dark aromas of black currant and espresso. Blended with fractions of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot and aged just over a year in (39% new) French oak, it releases a rush of plum jam, tobacco, and leather that coincides with beefy, round tannins and balanced acidity. Bold and luxurious notes of vanilla bean and crushed almond accent cedar and pencil lead on the broad finish. **95** —*Meridith May*

Markham Vineyards 2018 The Altruist, Napa Valley (\$29) This Right Bank-style blend of

61% Merlot and 24% Cabernet Sauvignon with smaller portions of Cab Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot aged in French and American oak for over 16 months. Bright coffee, cherry, and dark chocolate illuminate the well-built frame. Dynamic and luscious, with finely grained tannins and a toasty finish of plum and cedar. **93** —*M.M.*



Markham Vineyards 2019 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$29) Five estate vineyards add texture, color, and a plethora of flavors to this juicy red. Rich aromas of ripe plum and coffee open up to black cherry, mocha latte, and heather. Midpalate weight joins raspberry jam to set the stage for the toasty, round finish. **92** —*M.M.*

Markham Vineyards 2019 Marked Parcels Merlot, Yountville Ranch Vineyard, Yountville District, Napa Valley (\$65) This 100% Clone

181 Merlot hails from the estate's original 86-acre vineyard. Markham, known to us as a master of this variety, has created a work of liquid art in the form of this red, aged 20 months in French oak. Thanks to its depth of color, dense mouthfeel, bright acid structure, and earthy notes of dark soil bathed in melted baker's chocolate, there's no doubt about its aging potential. Cigar leaf, blackberry, and bay leaf add power to chewy tannins. **95** —*M.M.*



Markham Vineyards 2018 The Character, Napa Valley (\$135) Seven barrels were hand-selected and aged over 30 months to create this blend of 65% Merlot, 21%

Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Malbec, 4% Petit Verdot, and 1% Cab Franc. It's ripe and juicy, with thrilling aromas of violets blooming on both the nose and palate, where sweet beet and mocha parade with spiced cranberry and oak. Its athletic body shows this individualist's star power—and the plot thickens with generous strokes of dark chocolate-covered cherry on the finish. **97** —*M.M.*

Markham Vineyards 2018 Marked Parcels Cabernet Sauvignon, Yountville Ranch Vineyard, Yountville District, Napa Valley (\$80) A salty wave of pomegranate and plum is backed by blackberry licorice and surrounded by chewy tannins. Silky and elegant, this wine delivers a flow of sweet meats, dark cherry, and cinnamon tea that's glorious to the finish. **95** —*M.M.*