

# DOSSIER *weekly*

TRAVELS, CONVERSATIONS & OTHER NICE THINGS

ISSUE 9 AUG 1, 2024

**Around the Bend**  
Photographer Kat Slootsky takes a vigorous stroll along a mountainside in Scotland and chances upon the past.



**For Your Culinary Files**  
From Lima to Singapore to Genova, a seasoned food journalist reveals five destinations and dishes that are absolutely worth the trip.



**Hidden in Plain Sight**  
On Mexico's majestic Costalegre coastline, an otherworldly biosphere lives in harmony with a variety of immersive retreats.

## UNCORKED

### Much Ado About Napa

*Sophie Mancini*



Courtesy of Sophie Mancini

**Dossier weekly Newsletter**  
**August 1, 2024**

Legacy. Tragedy. Vision. Status. There is something Shakespearean about Napa Valley. People throw around names with hard edges, clipped consonants, their mouthfeel as tannic as the wines this region is known for and emotive to the level of folklore: To Kalon (a vineyard), Screaming Eagle (a winery), Cakebread (the last name of a real person — and his namesake winery). There is an allegorical language here, painting characters and kingdoms like those of the Bard's creation (more on that moniker later). I start my tale with two: Scott Becker and Benoit Touquette of Realm Cellars — one of, if not the, most interesting wineries in the area today.

It would be tough to find two more different fellows (upon first meeting, at least). When I first encountered the American Becker, Realm's CEO, I thought he'd gotten lost on his way to a hedge fund office. The straightest of shooters, he's all pressed shirts, firm speaking voice, tight brow — a former U.S. Air Force Officer and Harvard MBA. The French Touquette, Realm's winemaker, seems more like a director who wandered off the set of a music video. He likes streetwear sneakers and bucket hats, and is as irreverent and cheeky as his business partner is measured and resolute. They're two sides of one brilliant coin.

We met atop Pritchard Hill, the location of one of their three properties. It's a mythical plot of land, known as the "Rodeo Drive of Napa," I was told while taking in the golden expanse of rolling vine-lined plots below — the valley stretching far and wide like a sea. This particular property, Realm's Houyi Vineyard, is a state-of-the-art affair. Glassy, glossy, with modern metal sculptures dotting the land and cavernous slate-gray cellars as hushed as mausoleums. Affluence is everywhere you look. The irony? Realm was once bankrupt.

When Becker and Touquette acquired Realm in 2012, it was in dire financial shape. The wines showed promise, but over the next two years the business barrelled towards closure (made all the worse by having to pour 250 cases of wine down the drain due to inconsistencies — quirks some vintners might've ignored, but Realm could not). After writing personal checks to cover costs, fielding looming bank calls, and calming partners requesting their money back, the tides finally began to turn when Realm released perfect-score wines.

The Realm I encountered was a strong one, underpinned by an almost punk spirit in a sea of what many consider to be Napa's sameness. While many of the top producers in the area play nice together, riding on the coattails of their trailblazing cult winery forefathers (Opus One, Harlan, and, yes, Screaming Eagle, to name just a few) through a carbon copy of their models, Realm seems be hustling off in the corner, doing things its own way. The winery once rejected a selection of grapes from To Kalon, a vineyard steeped in prestige and run by a real godfather of the valley. It wasn't up to their standards.



(Left) Courtesy of Sophie Mancini  
(Right) Photography by Scott Chebegia

Realm's label art is sexy and cerebral, poppy and weird. Where most vineyards depicted their chateaux, Realm slapped punk art on their bottles. "We didn't have a chateau!" Becker laughed. With multiple properties to their names today, it's incredible to imagine this origin story: a winery with no land of its own. (In the beginning, Realm would buy its grapes off other vineyards.) The blueprints I viewed on the winery's walls during my visit — intricate sprawling maps depicting hieroglyphic directions for soil and vines, topographical detailing — made it clear that Becker and Touquette are now custodians of their own land, and they're planning decades down the line.

One of their most elusive wines, The Absurd, is a true embodiment of Realm's punk spirit. Its art features cutouts from vintage *Playboy* magazines. And as for the juice: Well, they don't actually tell you what's inside. Their philosophy is that its exquisite quality transcends classification. Unbound, avant-garde, the vintage is true to its name.

"The Absurd could be one varietal, or it could be five. It could come from one vineyard lot, or it could come from a dozen. Each time we make The Absurd we start with a blank canvas. Our sole guideline is our palate ... We never assign descriptors to The Absurd because it is beyond description. Or at least beyond our description, beyond the simplicity of the vineyards or varietals that go into it," reads its bio on Realm's website.

The one descriptor I was given by Becker and Touquette was "hedonistic." A 2019 bottle is priced at \$1,075, with allocations offered to winery members by invitation only. Its retail and secondary market prices can reach as high as \$2,500. I tried some. My impression was something between dialed and bombastic, of clenching a bundle of oxblood velvet in a vein-popping fist — then releasing. It tasted like fucking power.

Realm's flagship wine is a more grounded blend, with Cabernet Sauvignon as the dominant varietal. Weighty, with notes of red and black fruit, the bottle is curious. Its label outlines a passage from *Richard III*: "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm..." The bottle's name? The Bard.