

FOOD // WINE, BEER &amp; SPIRITS

# 'Cult' Napa wineries rarely allow visitors. But one just opened a tasting room — with a \$125 fee

By **Jess Lander**, Wine reporter

Oct 30, 2024

 Gift Article

Designed like a living room, Realm's new Calistoga tasting room opens up to a dramatic view of the Vaca Mountains' craggy palisades.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Napa Valley's pricey cult wines are nearly impossible to buy, let alone taste. Try making a tasting appointment at Harlan, [Dalle Valle](#) or Screaming Eagle: You can't. But for the first time, one of the region's most sought-after Cabernet brands has opened to the public — not just collectors with deep pockets.

[Realm Cellars](#), whose wines typically sell for \$300 or more a bottle, just launched a new tasting room in Calistoga, and getting access is surprisingly easy: Simply sign up for the mailing list.

Realm North (1171 Tubbs Lane, Calistoga), now the winery's third estate, is designed like a living room and opens up to a dramatic view of the Vaca Mountains' craggy palisades. Tastings for those new to the mailing list are \$125, and free for longtime buyers.

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Wineries like Realm often utilize an [allocation sales model](#). This means most or all of their wines are sold out upon release, as they're reserved for members on a

customer list that usually has a lengthy waiting list. These wineries are notoriously not open to the public either; tastings are only available to members, and sometimes, only the spendiest or longest-running buyers.



Realm Cellars has opened a new tasting room, dubbed Realm North, in Calistoga, and it's open to anyone who signs up for the winery's mailing list.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

But at Realm North, “you don’t have to have a purchase history with us (to visit),” said Realm co-owner Scott Becker. “The whole point is we want to see more people and see new people.”

He conceded that “the wine market is changing, it’s difficult right now,” pointing to the industry’s recent headwinds. “One of the things we need to continue to do a better job of is tell our story, engage people and let them taste our wines in a more accessible way.”

A series of events kept Realm closed for years, even to its top buyers. First, there was construction at its Moonracer Estate in Napa's Stags Leap District. Then, the pandemic hit, followed by devastating wildfires. Realm didn't make any wine in 2020 because of smoke damage to the grapes. "We didn't really have any wine to pour for guests. We needed to sell every bottle we could just to survive," Becker said, admitting that "there was a lot of pent-up demand from members."

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"They were frustrated," he continued, "and they'd say, 'I've been on the list for five years, I've spent thousands of dollars and all I want to do is visit, but you keep saying no.'"



The achromatic tasting room features a pair of massive murals by Bay Area illustrator Craig Frazier that are meant to tell the backstory of Realm.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Last year, Realm opened up appointments at its Stags Leap and Pritchard Hill wineries to members. Yet these lengthy and in-depth visits were extremely limited and would sell out immediately, Becker said. So when the opportunity to move into a Calistoga estate, temporarily occupied by Newton Vineyards, arose, Becker saw the potential to offer a more traditional tasting format.

The sleek and achromatic tasting room features a pair of massive murals by Bay Area illustrator Craig Frazier that are meant to tell the backstory of Realm. Tastings, available indoors or outside on a patio, showcase four wines: three Cabernet Sauvignons, plus Fidelio, a Bordeaux-style Sauvignon Blanc. The current Cabernet lineup includes the current release of the single-vineyard wine from Houyi Vineyard, on Napa's esteemed Pritchard Hill; a library selection of the Bard,

a blend of multiple vineyard sites and one of Realm's least expensive wines; and the Bard Blair, a special-edition wine showcasing the Calistoga vineyard site that forms the backbone of the Bard.

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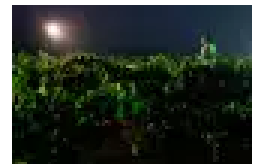
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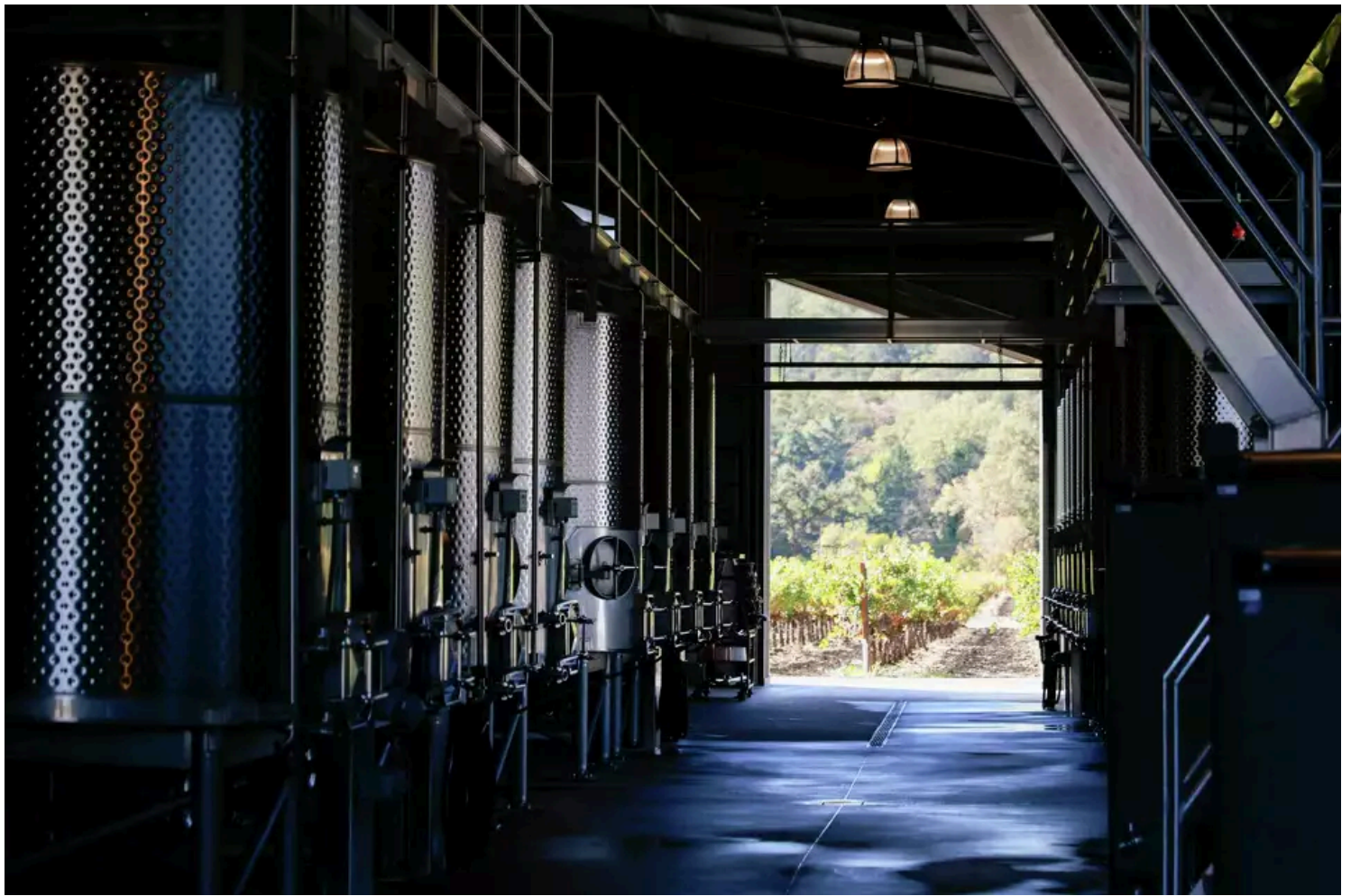
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Of the \$125 tasting fee, Becker said: "That's not crazy in Napa, but that's also not cheap. There are many other places you can go and taste for less, but it's more about finding the balance of being taken seriously and somewhat approachable." The average Napa Valley tasting fee is \$75, according to Silicon Valley Bank's most recent [State of the U.S. Wine Industry Report](#).

After the tasting, guests can extend their stay by ordering a glass or bottle from an addendum list, which features library vintages from Realm and other producers the owners love, like 2013 Rare Champagne for \$30 a glass. A sampling of Realm's 2016 Cabernet from Beckstoffer To Kalon, arguably Napa Valley's most famous vineyard, goes for \$60. "That's a wine that you wouldn't get access to for at least a few years on the list," Becker said, "but you can go into Realm North, order a glass of it, and at \$60, I think it's approachable for what that is and what it typically sells for at restaurants and retail." (Realm's latest release of the To Kalon Cabernet sold for \$475 a bottle.)



The tasting room adjoins a winery, which will exclusively be used to make the Bard, Realm's most accessible wine, which makes up half of the winery's 20,000-case production.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Yet ultimately, Becker said the tasting room is simply a bonus of the Realm North property, which the winery leased because it needed more production space. This site is exclusively dedicated to making the Bard (\$165), which makes up roughly half of the winery's 20,000-case production. Becker said the additional tank space enables Realm to maintain the quality of the Bard even as its production grows; it gives the winemaking team more flexibility to pick grapes at the most optimal time and pivot in the face of an extreme weather event, like a heat wave or wildfire.

Those production volumes mean Realm is now making significantly more wine than other cult Napa brands, like Harlan, which is typically under 2,000 cases. But Becker doesn't view that as a disadvantage.

“There tends to be a consumer perception that the smaller the volume, the better the quality,” Becker said. “I find the reverse is true up to a point. I think we’re making way better wine today at 20,000 cases than we ever made at 2,000 because of the investment we’ve been able to make at this scale.”

*Realm North. Tastings \$125, by appointment. 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. 1171 Tubbs Lane, Calistoga. [realmcellars.com](https://realmcellars.com)*

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Oct 30, 2024



**Jess Lander**

WINE REPORTER



Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at the San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Her writing encompasses the California wine industry — from Santa Barbara to Mendocino — with a focus on Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Jess reports on winery and vineyard acquisitions; controversial Napa land use debates; wildfires; a growing farmworker rights movement; and Wine Country’s most exciting restaurant and tasting room openings. Occasionally, Jess also writes about her favorite food: cheese.

Originally from Boston, Jess moved to Napa Valley in 2010 and has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications. In 2021, Jess published “The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook,” a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic.