

Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Realm Cellars has become one of California's most coveted producers — and it might just be the last great luxury Napa Valley wine brand to bootstrap its way to stardom. Jonathan Cristaldi reports for Decanter.



Jonathan Cristaldi July 10, 2024



Benoit Touquette (left) and Scott Becker of Realm. Credit: Realm. Credit: Realm

The days of valley-newcomer and family-founded winery projects like Warren Winiarski's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars or Jim Barrett's Chateau Montelena and their self-made tales of slow growth into the storied brands of Napa seem about as anachronistic today as an eight-track cassette player. The door for such start-up wineries in Napa has been slowly closing over the last two decades, making Realm Cellars' success seem more like a Cinderella fairy tale with each passing year. A final bugle call to Napa's mythical founding era.

Established in 2002 by Juan Mercado, an army medic and nurse by trade who worked stints as a cellar rat for Pax Mahle and John Konnsgaard, and Wendell Laidley, an investment banker, Realm got by for nearly a decade on early critical successes while enduring some setbacks.

But the brand slowly and quietly made its mark on Napa Valley and inched its way onto the shortlist of Napa's upper echelon of icon producers.



Realm's Moonracer Vineyard. Credit: Realm.

In the beginning

The Realm wines were initially crafted by Michael Hirby and produced at Sherwin Family Vineyards on Spring Mountain. Co-founders Mercado and Laidley set about trying to make great wines in Napa Valley, just not as landowners. They were part of a growing brigade of buyers of premium grapes – almost like a négociant but with a singular brand and vision. They amassed contracts from highly reputable Napa sites, including Andy Beckstoffer's To Kalon in Oakville, the Beckstoffer Dr. Crane in St. Helena, and Farella Vineyard in Coombsville.

They bought expensive Taransaud and Darnajou barrels and continued pouring in cash for their second vintage (2003), which was later lost in a warehouse fire. By 2007, production was moved to Chateau Boswell north of St. Helena. Then, in 2010, Hirby resigned, leaving Realm in limbo.

Mercado was introduced to Lyonnaise native and Bordeaux-trained winemaker Benoit Touquette, who agreed to finish the 2009 vintage. The fast-talking, charismatic Touquette brought his mentor – Michel Rolland – to the blending table. Later, it would become apparent that they'd crafted excellent wines from the vintage, possibly some of the best to date.

But after that blending session, Realm flirted with bankruptcy for the next two years. Mercado and Laidley needed a divine intervention. In 2011, the prodigal Scott Becker came to lunch.

Realm at a glance

Owners: Scott Becker, co-owner and CEO and Benoitt Touquette, co-owner and winemaker

Key varieties: Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot

Vineyards: Estate vineyards include the 10-hectare Realm Moonracer Estate

(Stags Leap District), 8.9-hectare Houyi Vineyard (on Pritchard Hill), 0.8-hectare Hartwell XX, 10-hectare Farella in Coombsville. Estate contracts include Levensohn Vineyard, Beckstoffer Bourn, Beckstoffer Dr. Crane, and Beckstoffer To Kalon.

Key wines: *Proprietary Blends:* Fidelio, The Tempest, The Bard, Falstaff, The Absurd; *Estate wines:* Houyi, Moonracer, Hartwell XX, Farella; *Single Vineyard:* Beckstoffer Dr. Crane, Beckstoffer To Kalon, Beckstoffer Bourn, The Bard Blair Edition



Touquette and Becker in the cellars at Realm. Credit: Realm.

Words of wisdom

At the time, Becker was working at [**Harlan Estate**](#). A former US Air Force officer and Harvard MBA, Becker looked up to Harlan and respected him for his achievements – held in the same high regard as other pioneer vintners like Colgin, Araujo and Bryant.

Becker's admiration was also aspirational. He deeply desired to 'do something that I could feel that I had a sense of ownership over,' he says, 'and more than a sense, but that I could put my thumb-print on.' Like a younger Bill Harlan, he was eager to carve out his place in Napa's history.

Becker recalls consulting Harlan about buying Realm. Harlan, recognising the unstable financial ground Realm was teetering on, said flatly: 'Don't.'

But Becker marvelled at what Realm had achieved, and he saw his opening. It might be the last chance to raise a brand up to icon status in Napa, but, 'Realm was that opportunity, even if we had to work our way through the difficulties to start to see a little bit of momentum finally'.

A decade after its founding, in 2012, Becker acquired the brand and restructured Realm. Becker became the managing partner. Wendell was out, and Mercado stayed on as the face of the brand for many years. Benoit Touquette had turned down a job with Screaming Eagle to helm the wines of Realm.

In the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet: 'This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man'.

Flirting with disaster

With a steadfast quality focus but no fortune to draw upon, Realm's cash situation became increasingly dire, made worse by one of Becker's earliest moves to correct the path and right Realm's reputation. 'We dumped the 2009 The Bard down the drain because it wasn't a wine we could get behind. \$250,000 in cash gone', he recalls with a flinch.

Financial issues began to pile up. They were writing personal checks for the corks and the yeasts.

‘We were bankrupt by 2014,’ Becker admits. ‘Some of the partners began asking for their money back. The bank was calling all the time. It was beat-up sessions. No one wants to remember how bad it was. But we knew the wines were great, and we just needed them in the market’.

Weathering the storm between 2012 and 2014 became a nerve-racking experience for the partners. ‘[The] 2012 [vintage] was the fusion,’ recalls Becker, ‘everything came together’.

With the 2012 vintage releases, Realm saw its first 100-point score from an American critic, which was game-changing and altered the property’s financial fortunes. The watershed moment ignited an impressive run over the ensuing decade, leading to stability and allowing the new owners to, as Becker put it, ‘do things our way’.



Touquette samples fruit in the vineyards at Realm. Credit: Realm.

Quality and control

Fastidiously adhering to a Burgundian focus on site over style in a region famous for its over-the-top exuberance became Realm's calling card.

Back in 2020, during a tasting with Becker and Touquette in a trailer outside the future home of Realm's brand new state-of-the-art winery and caves, Becker told me what he's been preaching for almost a decade.

'I want Benoit to make the best wines he can and not be contained by a financial situation, and you can only take a Burgundian approach if the wine is perfectly made every step of the way'.

That stylistic aim for 'purity and transparency', as Touquette puts it, led them to double down on their quality control. Steps toward that goal began in 2015 when they acquired the Hartwell Estate in the Stags Leap District of Napa Valley, which included a winery, cellar, and vines that now comprise the Realm Moonracer Estate vineyard on Wappo Hill.

'We focused on making every improvement possible', says Becker, and that also meant increasing their property assets.

In 2018, Becker partnered with friend and mentor Frank Farella to continue stewardship of the Farella Estate vineyard in Coombsville, providing Realm with a long-term lease of the vineyard while Frank's son, Tom, continues to produce wine under the Farella label.

Through to late 2022, Realm also added Hartwell XX, a 0.8-hectare parcel atop their Wappo Hill property, the 8.9ha Houyi vineyard on Pritchard Hill, and has cemented long-term contracts with Beckstoffer Vineyards.

In early 2019, founding partner Juan Mercado left to pursue a new project in Paso Robles. Over the ensuing years, Becker and Touquette have never stepped out of sync. Both are more at ease, grounded, and intensely proud of the work they've achieved.

‘The team is in place’, says Becker, ‘everything is new now. The control, the structure, the vision, the viticulture, winemaking, everything’.

In hindsight, the big risks that Realm took to get where they are seem like fate. Touquette, for his part, recalls being chided for not taking the job at Screaming Eagle. ‘But If I go there,’ reasons Touquette in a thick French accent, ‘I *join* something. I don’t get *to build* something.’



Sunset at Realm’s Hartwell Estate on Wappo Hill. Credit: Realm.

The wines of Realm



Realm Cellars, Beckstoffer Vineyards Dr. Crane, St Helena, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

100

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

A seamless, perfect expression of Cabernet Sauvignon from the Beckstoffer Dr Crane vineyard on the west side of St. Helena. Expressive, intense minerality gives lift to the pure and vibrant aromas of creamy red cherry, blackberry, plum and currant fruits, further elevated by rose petal florals and garrigue scents. Silken fruit provides a graceful entry, and ultra-fine featherweight tannins build with balletic grace and energy. Decadent creamy dark fruit is enveloping and is complemented by a tapestry of blueberry, tobacco flavours, and a long, linear, persistent mineral-rich finish—such a noble expression of this tremendous California site.



Realm Cellars, Beckstoffer Vineyards To Kalon, Oakville, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

99

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi

(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

A knockout Cabernet from the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville. Deeply brooding and explosive aromas of inky blackberry fruit intermix with graphite, exotic spices, creme de cassis, and purple flowers. Luxuriating on the palate, broad and supple, with ultra-fine-grained tannins that are beamlike, supported by a firm spine of acidity. For all this wine's richness, it is precise and energetic, with an airy lightness on the long, earth-driven and spicy finish.



Realm Cellars, Houyi, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2021

98

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

Alluring bay laurel and bay scrub aromas complement the supple dark black fruit and toasty oak spices with hints of crème de cassis and violets. Full-bodied with building tannins that are precise and chiselled, balanced by a chalky mineral mid-palate. The lengthy finish reveals notes of Mexican mocha, resolving with a welcome spicy nuance. From Houyi Vineyard, a 22-acre estate parcel planted atop Napa Valley's Pritchard Hill, this property was acquired by Realm from the Chang family in 2022.



Realm Cellars, Tempest, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2021

98

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

Fresh, alluring, and highly approachable, this wine captivates with its pure red-fruited and eucalyptus-spiced aromatics. The enticing mid-palate richness, perfectly softened and creamy from the Merlot, carries through to a long, nuanced finish. Fashionably sweet and supple fruits of fleshy black cherry, black plum, and boysenberry are underscored by fine-grained tannins. Pops of brown sugar, intermixed with dark chocolate and mint, round out this dazzling and delicious red.



Realm Cellars, Falstaff, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2019

97

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

Expressive, layered, and powerfully aromatic, leading with high-toned capsicum, black fruits, black olives, and liquorice. Perfumed crushed violets flood the palate, framed by giant beam-like tannins that are perfectly compact, forming a solid base of structure around which is woven a tapestry of blackberry and black cherry fruits nuanced by utterly intriguing exotic brown baking spices, cedarwood and a hint of clove, anise powder and the zest of blood orange and composed of Cabernet Sauvignon and fourth-leaf Cabernet Franc grapes from the Bettanelli family's Upper Range vineyard in the lower Vaca Mountain hills northeast of Rutherford along with Merlot from Blair, Realm Stags Leap District estate and Farrella vineyard.



Realm Cellars, The Bard Red Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA 2021

97

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi

(at Novato, California, 07 Dec 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

After sampling 86 wines over a two-day marathon tasting with Realm Cellars co-owners Scott Becker and winemaker Benoit Touquette, I had no doubt that one would make my top 10 list of the year. It would be The Bard, which will be available beginning in 2024. It is a very giving wine that promises great rewards for long-term cellaring and is enjoyable three full nights in a row, never losing its zeal if having one great glass each night is your prerogative. Power and muscle frame the core of this towering red, with its red-toned fruits and rich, toasty oak spices nuanced by bay Laurel and pastis. Full-bodied with tremendous decadence of chocolaty tannins that are pliant and billowy, lifted by supple blackberry and black raspberry fruit, a drizzle of cherry coulis, and resolving with refined tobacco, cedar wood spices, and laced with coriander and cumin aromatics. It has a satisfyingly rich finish. Number five of my top 10 wines of 2023.



Realm Cellars, Beckstoffer Vineyards Bourn, St Helena, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

96

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

Dominating violet florals are scented with creamy blackberry, black cherry and black currants with a hint of flamed grapefruit peel. Densely packed, showering serious plushness and weight and tremendous energy. Savoury tannins are sculpted, angular, and built as enticing blue fruits emerge, along with sea salt and graphite complemented by rich soil tones. The Cabernet Sauvignon and old head-trained Petite Sirah come from a 12-acre parcel in the Beckstoffer Bourn Vineyard on the west side of St. Helena. This wine is harmonious, balanced and precise. Considerable patience is required.



Realm Cellars, Houyi, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2019

96

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

Brooding aromas of liquorice, dried violets and garrigue, and pure primary notes of blackberry and blueberry deliver an equally captivating performance on the muscular palate—a refined wine of immense power with a towering structure of beam-like tannins and integrated acidity. Compelling shrub oak and manzanitas bring the terroir into focus, layered with a saline complexity that broadens through the plush, dense, and substantial finish. From Houyi Vineyard, a 22-acre estate parcel planted atop Napa Valley's Pritchard Hill. Realm acquired the property from the Chang family in 2022.



Realm Cellars, Tempest, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2019

96

Tasted by: Jonathan Cristaldi
(at Novato, California, 05 Feb 2023)

Part of Realm Cellars and Napa Valley's last fairytale founding

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2040

It is a beautifully long and linear Merlot-driven wine packed with energy and tension. Aromas and flavours of fleshy plums and crunchy black cherries are laced with purple florals, wild herbs nuanced by black olive. Featherweight tannins are expertly sculpted and balanced by a racy freshness on the long, drawn-out finish.