

WINE



Auteur's new Russian River winery overlooking the famed Westside Road will open April 11.



Auteur's Kenneth and Laura Juhasz at Auteur Russian River, which features a stunning Wine Country view through a 50-foot-long wall of windows.

After 20 years, Auteur Wines ready to debut ambitious Russian River estate

Gorgeous new tasting room is new era for Healdsburg winery that flew under the radar

By Jess Lander

Perched on a hilltop in Healdsburg's forested Russian River, a gorgeous new winery with a 50-foot-long wall of windows overlooks the region's famed Westside Road, home to California Pinot Noir pioneers like Williams Selyem, Gary Farrell and Rochioli.

The winery looks like it'd belong to a major conglomerate or a tech executive seeking a retirement career. But this ambitious structure has surprisingly humble owners: the founders of Auteur Wines, a small Pinot Noir and Chardonnay producer that's hovered under the radar for more than 20 years.

The opening of Auteur's new winery (10520 Wohler Road, Healdsburg) on April 11 will be the pinnacle of the outfit's slow-burn journey. It started in 2003 as a side project for Kenneth Juhasz, winemaker at Sonoma's Donum Estate for a decade, along with his wife, Laura Juhasz. Focused on coastal Pinot Noir and Chardonnay sourced from Santa Barbara to Mendocino, Auteur grew "slowly, but surely," he said, mostly via wholesale placements and word of mouth.

In 2007, the brand suddenly amassed an underground following of wine geeks and collectors who lurk on message boards like WineBerserkers and CellarTracker. Influential wine buyer and reviewer Doug Wilder rated an Auteur Pinot Noir 100 points on the blog of wine retailer Vinfolio; it was reshared on a Robert Parker

message board and went viral. "The fax machine was ripping," recalled Kenneth Juhasz.

The couple, who met at an Irish pub in Portland, Ore., finally opened a tasting room inside a quaint bungalow on the Sonoma Plaza in 2012. For several years, it didn't even have a sign, but Kenneth Juhasz said the brand "took on another life" and became known for throwing wildly popular wine club parties where hundreds of people would max out the small space.

"Every time, I'm shocked by the RSVP number," added Laura Juhasz.

Auteur also has a knack for changing the minds of "Anything but Chardonnay" drinkers — famously known as ABCers — with its crisp, elegant and balanced Chardonnays that buck the rich, buttery and oaky trend of the 1980s. But the winery has remained largely undiscovered; until a few years ago, Kenneth Juhasz was still taking on consulting wine-making clients. The winery only makes roughly 5,000 cases of wine and has put minimal effort into marketing.

"We don't want to be a flash in the pan, and our instincts weren't to be showy about it," he said. "The wines have been the focus for years — that's where all our investment went. When you grow at that pace, you have these points where you can make the next level."

That next level was reached in 2021 when the Juhaszes purchased the Russian River estate, a former hops ranch locat-



Photos by Strazzante/The Chronicle

An outdoor patio beckons visitors outside for tastings, which range from \$40-\$100.

ed at what Kenneth Juhaszes called the "wishbone of Westside Road." The couple jumped at the opportunity because the property came with the necessary permits. Plus, investments from two additional couples made the impressive build, which took four years, possible.

Enveloped by vineyards, the new tasting room isn't exactly unassuming, especially compared to Auteur's low-key Sonoma home, which will remain open. But it stops short of feeling over the top. The abundance of glass gives the building a definitive modern feel, yet the design is simple, said Kenneth Juhaszes. "We wanted to keep the building as modest looking as we could."

The modular structure blends into the surrounding nature. It isn't immediately noticeable from the road below. The focal point of the space — cloaked in a floor-to-ceiling patchwork of natural woods — is the view. The open concept interior is unfussy, sleek and warm with a charred redwood

fireplace and several tasting nooks. A patio lures guests outside to fancy picnic tables. "It feels very different from what we're doing in Sonoma, but we're keeping a lot of the DNA," Kenneth Juhasz continued. "Our spot in Sonoma feels like Provence in the backyard; it's very relaxing. I walk onto this property and there's this take-your-breath-away sort of feeling. It's like, slow down, put your phone down, take a breath and just really experience the wine."

Tastings (\$40-\$100) range from conventional flights to nerdy deep dives into clones and library vintages. The Be Here Now experience (\$40) is the most unconventional offering, featuring a blind tasting of four wines with "no story, no spiel," said

Laura Juhasz. "Just have some sensory moments with (the wines), talk with friends and then someone can guide (you) through after."

A former cheesemaker from Wisconsin, she's also curated a cheese board (\$50) that visitors can add onto their tasting. Other options include fresh bread with cultured butter (\$10) and crudités with pistachio-stuffed olives and other accoutrements (\$30).

Auteur Russian River. Opens April 11. 10520 Wohler Road, Healdsburg. auteurwines.com

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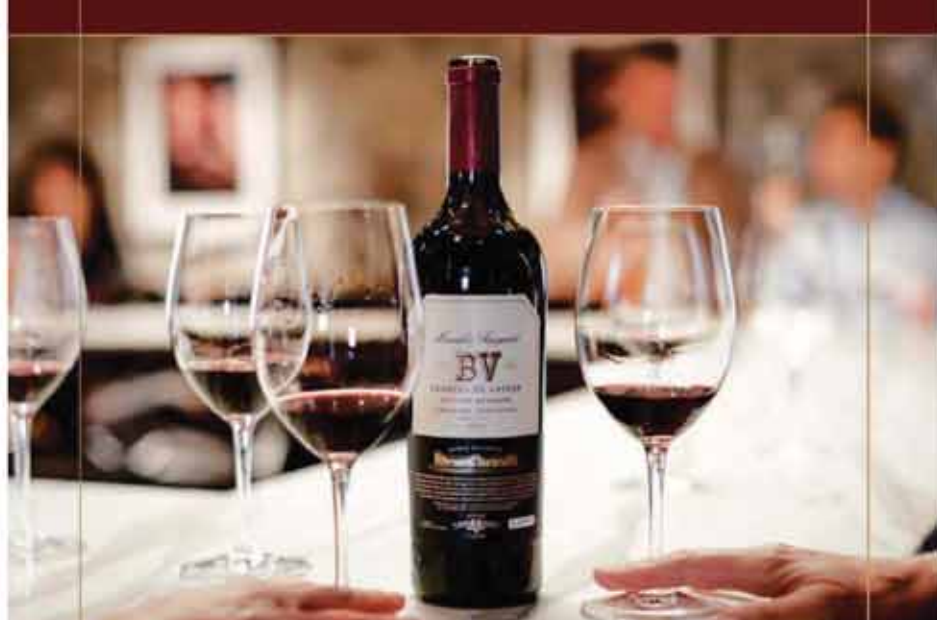
Andrea Ghigliazza, left, and Jenna Zollinger dine at Bon Délice in San Francisco. The restaurant, a modern take on the classic French bistro, is located at Pier 3 along the waterfront. Photo: Laura Morton/Special to the Chronicle

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