GARMANY
SPRING / SUMMER 2014

return to glory

Sauvignon blanc becomes something special once more as a French-born winemaker draws on his memories.

By **Josh Sens**

He knew it for its suave sophistication—the Cary Grant of grape varietals, at once playful and complex, a cheery companion at cocktail hour but also mature company at formal occasions.

So imagine how winemaker Philippe Melka felt when he saw what had become of sauvignon blanc.

In the Napa Valley, where Melka settled in 1994, the grape wasn't given the star treatment it had enjoyed in his native France. Instead it was relegated to a lesser role in that unimpressive genre—the high-volume, inexpensive commercial release. Not that California sauvignon blancs were awful. They were light and bright, fine for patio sipping.

"But they were not nearly as exciting for the palate as the sauvignon blanc I had experienced back home," he says, "and they did not connect with food to the same degree."

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Last fall, winemaker Philippe Melka's dream came true with the release of Mekera, a California sauvignon blanc as rich and textured as those he enjoyed in his native France.

Clockwise from left, Philippe Melka, the Screaming Eagle Vineyard, Vineyard 29 casks, Lail Vineyards Georgia Sauvignon Black 2008.

Not surprisingly, one problem was where the varietal had been planted. In Bordeaux sauvignon blanc had been grown in prized locations, bearing delightfully balanced fruit, but the grape had no such luck in Napa. There were plenty of great sites for it in the valley, but other varietals got top billing. Shouldered aside by cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, sauvignon blanc mostly wound up making do in sub-par plots. And it responded accordingly.

"You hear people speak so often of *terroir*, and for good reason," Melka says. "So much depends on the quality of the soil and the microclimate required to give the fruit the complexity it needs." Yet Melka also realized that it wasn't just the land. Whereas in France, after harvest, sauvignon blanc was aged leisurely in oak—handled, that is, like a fine red wine—in California it was rushed to market, deprived of the time it needed to improve.

In many ways, the cost-cutting approach made sense; the resulting product—an uncomplicated, easy-on-the-palate wine that rarely retailed for more than $15—met mainstream expectations. In the United States, at least, this was what consumers looked for in a sauvignon bla

Years went by, and Philippe Melka went abou
ness, building a name as one of Napa's great grap
while consulting for such acclaimed wineries as G
and Vineyard 29. His focus in California was cabe
sauvignon. But all the while he wondered: Why n
more with that other fine varietal, the one he'd fal
in Bordeaux?

In the early 2000s, he got his chance. It came
Lail Vineyards, a celebrated property in St. Helen
forward-thinking owner, Robin Lail, had, at Melk
ing, uprooted several acres of underperforming m
replaced it with sauvignon blanc.

At last, the varietal had a worthy site, with co
based soil that kept the grapes from ripening too q
plenty of daytime sun to draw out the fruit's comp
2002, with Melka serving as winemaking consulta
released Georgia, its first sauvignon blanc.

Made from a painstakingly selective harvest, and aged

MELKA WINES

2013 Mekera Sauvignon Blanc, $145

Aromatic on the nose, with strong hints of minerality, this well-structured white blends notes of peach, mango and lychee that give way to a long, brightly acidic finish.

for 18 to 24 months in new French barrels, the wine reminded Melka of all the things he loved about sauvignon blanc. It was luscious on the palate but played out in a symphony of intricate notes: brassy citrus and dulcet stone fruits with a subtle baseline of well-integrated oak. You could drink it on its own, as you could its less interesting Napa predecessors, but unlike those simple backyard sippers it was nuanced, and it all but begged to be paired with food.

Another difference: Produced like a red wine, it was priced like one too. Georgia retailed for $75.

"It was a challenging price point," Melka recalls. "We knew that it would be about telling a story and educating consumers and broadening the understanding of what sauvignon blanc could be. In the end, I think, we were pretty successful."

So much so, in fact, that it was really just the start. Before long, Vineyard 29, one of Napa's landmark cabernet makers, enlisted Melka's help in its own exploration of high-end sauvignon blanc. Vineyard 29's first release was in
t $100 per bottle, it too proved successful. Consum-
d out, were willing to pay extra for a sauvignon
ave more in return.
end continued. In 2010, cult winery Screaming
d to the output, albeit in a small volume, offering
of its first-ever sauvignon blanc to longtime custom-
-sauvignon-blanc-like price of $250 per bottle.
was not involved with the Screaming Eagle project,
adventures with the varietal continued. Last fall,
wn label, Melka Wines, the Frenchman released
vignon blanc, Mekera. Priced at $145 a bottle, the
ne is reflective of the vineyard where its grapes
—a prized, high-elevation site with varying sun
n steep Napa Valley slopes, which Melka purchased

s always clear to me that it could be done," Melka
is still so satisfying to see the dream come true—a
auvignon blanc as rich and textured as anything you
in Bordeaux."