

# Forbes

October 1, 2025  
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## Seeking The Sound And Soul Of Hamel Family Wine In Sonoma

How John Hamel, Director of Winegrowing, finally achieved the unique taste and character of the land in his Sonoma Valley wines, and elevated the reputation and legacy of his family winery.

John Hamel and Pedro Parra were busy digging 7-foot holes in vineyards high on the hillside of Moon Mountain in Sonoma County, California. They were searching for sites with the perfect combination of soil and fractured basalt from ancient volcanic eruptions and lava flows.



Pedro Parra, Vineyard Terroir Expert, in Soil Pit in Hamel Vineyard, Sonoma County, CA

“I want to make wines with soul,” explained John Hamel, Director of Winegrowing for [Hamel Family](#) Wines, to the group of us who had gathered on a cool foggy

morning to learn more about the dramatic shift in winemaking style achieved at Hamel over the past several years.

When the winery first opened in 2014 they were producing high-quality cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc wines filled with the warm, ripe fruit of California. Though delicious to taste and easy to enjoy, John Hamel was filled with a burning desire to craft wines that tasted like those he enjoyed from France and Italy.

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John Hamel, Director of Winegrowing, Hamel Family Wines

Then, one day, John was listening to a podcast called *‘I’ll Drink to That,’* and heard terroir expert, [Pedro Parra](#), describing how he assisted wineries to find the specific sites in their vineyards that could eventually be a source of great wine. John convinced Pedro to visit Sonoma Valley, and thus began the search for the soul of their Nuns Canyon Vineyard, situated over 1200 feet high on the mountain.

“It is critical to look at the geology in the vineyard and find locations that have the right combination of soil and either limestone or volcanic basalt,” explained Pedro. “Here in Sonoma Valley, it is volcanic basalt from ancient volcanoes.”

According to Pedro, the combination is important because if grape vines are planted in locations with a higher percentage of rock (basalt or limestone), such as 80 to 95%, the resulting wines will have more tension, energy, and linearity. Whereas, if the location has less rock, such as 60% rock and 40% soil, then the wines will be more plush and rounded. If there is too much soil, and not enough rock or the wrong type of rock, then the wines will not exhibit the unique attributes of a truly great wine.





### The Steep Hillsides of Nun's Canyon Vineyard in Sonoma Family

“That is why only 2% of Burgundy vineyards are Grand Crus and only 15% are Premier Crus. The French figured out hundreds of years ago where the best sites were in their vineyards, and created these specific designations,” Pedro stated. “You need to do the same in California, but not many wineries have achieved this yet.”

Farming methods are also important, and Pedro stressed that the vines should be farmed organically or biodynamically and given very little water, so that they are forced to send their roots deep into the ground. “This allows the vines to produce wines that taste of the place and have more complexity, rather than just being fruity. If you want all fruit, you might as well plant the vines in a pot and feed them fertilizer,” he said.

“Once the correct site is found within a vineyard and is farmed suitably, this is where your great wines will come from, and they will also have a distinctive sound of the place,” Pedro added.

### Hamel Family Wines Show Intentionality in the Vineyard and Cellar

Over the course of several years, John Hamel was able to implement all of these modifications. Together, he and Pedro identified 43 micro-terroirs in the vineyard, which they call ‘polygons.’ Each polygon is based on the composition of the underlying soil and rock, providing the grapes with distinctive tastes, wrapped around a mineral driven backbone. John also adopted [dry-farming](#) and achieved Demeter certification as a biodynamic vineyard.

“Once we made all of these changes, I realized that I also needed to change the way we made wine in the cellar,” John said. “So, working with Maura Kinsella, our associate winemaker, Saskia Tingey, viticulturist, and the rest of our team, we redesigned our winemaking process.”

John led our group deep into the hillside cave that makes up the Hamel winery cellars. Instead of relying only on traditional stainless steel tanks to ferment wine, John has introduced large oak casks and concrete tanks for fermentation and aging. He has adopted non-interventionist winemaking techniques, such as gentle extraction, mineral racking, and a more moderate use of oak so the distinctive taste of the soil can shine through.

“Our goal in winemaking is to showcase the unique expression of our volcanic terroir in every bottle, so people can experience the ‘sound’ and soul of the land,” he explained. “Every aspect of what we do in the vineyard and winemaking is done with this clear intention.”



John Hamel, Director of Winemaking at Hamel Family Wines

## Hamel Family Wine Tasting Experience

So what do the [wines](#) of Hamel Family Winery taste like now? Frankly, I was unprepared for the astonishing difference in taste, compared to how they had tasted in the past.

On a blind tasting, experts would be forgiven for thinking the wines could be from the volcanic vineyards of Sicily, Spain, Portugal, or Santorini, Greece. Each glass smelled of the soil, with hints of flowers, herbs, and subtle pure fruit. The alcohol was lower, the oak well-integrated, and the wines had a great sense of balance, elegance and length.

**Hamel 2023 Estate Sauvignon Blanc** – a delicate nose of lemon, honey and faint white blossoms flowed into a palate of complex wet stone, lemon verbena, peach and salinity. Very linear across the palate with a long refreshing finish. Blended with 14% semillon and aged partially in concrete eggs. 13%, \$60

**Hamel 2023 Estate Grenache** – probably the most stunning red grenache I have ever tasted, with a medium ruby color and an exuberant nose of fresh rose petals, strawberry, spice, and a hint of iron. It glided seductively across the palate with notes of bright cherry, dusty cherries, potting soil, and candied rose petal. Wonderfully long, complex, and very memorable. Blended with small amounts of mourvèdre and zinfandel, it was aged in 100% concrete eggs. 13%, \$80





Estate Sauvignon Blanc

Estate Grenache

Stratum

Wines Crafted by Hamel Family Winery

**Hamel 2020 Stratum Red Blend** – composed of 66% cabernet sauvignon and 34% merlot, this wine was reminiscent of an old red Bordeaux. Opening with a subdued nose of dark fruit, forest floor, dried fig, and herbs, its structured tannins and bright acidity are interwoven with clear notes of iron, chalk, cedar, and black currants. Aged one year, primarily in older French oak barrels, and 5 months in concrete tanks. 14.3%, \$60

**Hamel 2019 Nuns Canyon Vineyard Red Blend** – composed of 78% cabernet sauvignon and 22% cabernet franc, this was a very elegant wine with fine grained tannins and a nose of dark fruit, earth, pepper and herbs. Again, reminiscent of a fine red Bordeaux, it was filled with notes of black cherry, forest floor, spice, and the distinct taste of iron from the soil. Very complex, long, concentrated and well balanced. Aged one year in 32% new French oak barrels and 6 months in concrete tanks. 14.3%, \$160

At the conclusion of the tasting, John stated, “Here, at Hamel Family Wines, we are trying to bring the personality of the land, instead of the grape variety, to the glass, so that you can taste the place.”

And it appears they have achieved this. In the last several years, Hamel Family Wines have garnered very positive praise and high ratings from the critics, along with becoming a cult favorite with top sommeliers across the nation.

## Hamel Family Winery Visitor Center

Hamel Family Wines welcomes visitors to enjoy a tasting experience at their hospitality center, located in the heart of Sonoma Valley. Guests can relax with a glass of wine on the terrace, overlooking the vineyards, or choose to participate in one of [three tasting experiences](#), including a food and wine pairing.



Wine Tasting Terrace at Hamel Family Winery