

How the wine world's most sought-after 'rock' star transformed one California vineyard

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By Esther Mobley, Senior Wine Critic



Pedro Parra, from left, sits at the edge of a pit dug at Hamel Family Wines' Nuns Canyon Vineyard while speaking with viticulturist Saskia Tingey, associate winemaker Maura Kinsella and winemaker John Hamel.

A decade ago, John Hamel didn't like the wines that his family winery was selling. They seemed "generic and commercial." Hamel, the winemaker at [Hamel Family Wines](#) in Sonoma, which his parents founded in 2006, knew what he wanted: to emulate the great European wines, which had a distinctive sense of place that made them unlike wines grown everywhere else.

That ineffable quality is most often described as "terroir," or sometimes, as "minerality."

“I kept thinking, ‘Why weren’t we getting it?’” Hamel said.

Ten years later, Hamel believes that his winery is getting it. He credits it almost entirely to the help of Pedro Parra, who has revolutionized how Hamel understands his vineyards.



Pedro Parra, second from right, tastes wine at the Hamel Family winery with viticulturist Saskia Tingey, left; winemaker John Hamel, second from left; and associate winemaker Maura Kinsella, right.

Parra, a sought-after Chilean “terroir consultant” who’s known in wine circles as “Dr. Terroir,” has become the wine world’s most famous soil and geology expert. He helps winegrowers in several continents hone their approach to planting, farming and winemaking — all with the nebulous goal of “expressing terroir in the most pure way,” Parra said.

The ascent of Parra, 55, suggests a shift in the power dynamics of global winemaking. Over the past two decades, the superstar consultants of the wine world were invariably winemakers — celebrated enologists like Michel Rolland, whose job would mostly kick in after the grapes had already been picked, advising wineries on how to vinify, age and blend their wines. (For more on their domination, see the 2004 documentary “Mondovino.”)

Gradually, the industry — or at least, its artisanal end — is coming to privilege what happens in the vineyard over what happens in the cellar, valuing farming-centric questions like how to enhance soil health rather than winemaking ones such as which French oak barrels to use.

More wineries are clamoring for Parra's help than can receive it: He has whittled his client list to 15, down from 30 a decade ago. (Ten years from now, he hopes it will be 10.) The roster spans Italy, France, Argentina, Spain and Australia, including illustrious names like Jean-Marc Roulot, Comte Liger-Belair, Biondi Santi, Comando G and Zuccardi. He has two U.S. clients, Rose and Arrow Estate in Oregon, and Hamel Family Wines in California.

On a foggy, windy morning in late October, Parra descended into a pit dug into the hillside at Hamel's Nuns Canyon Vineyard, a 100-acre site on the northern boundary of Sonoma's Moon Mountain District abutting Sugarloaf State Park. Parra pointed to the place, about 2 feet below the ground, where the earth visibly changes. The top segment is the soil, in this case a clay-heavy formation "that creates very simple wines," Parra said. It's farther down, where the clay yields to dense crags of rock, that things begin to get interesting. Wispy threads of vine roots have borne down in between the fractures of this basalt, or "the mother rock," as Parra calls it.

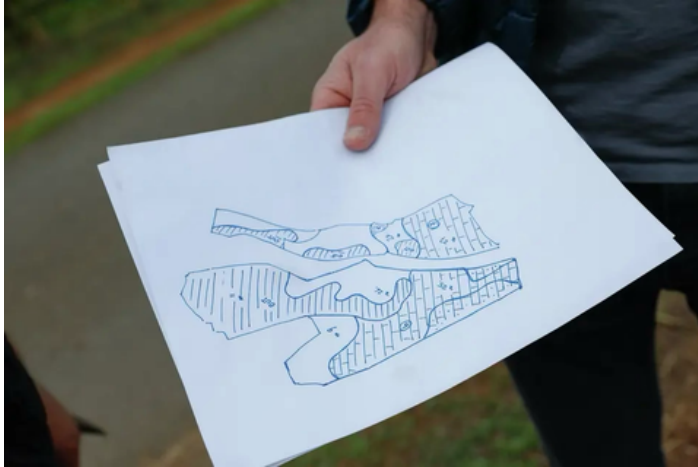


Pedro Parra, right, has been working with Hamel Family Wines since 2016 to map their vineyard and isolate micro-terroirs within it.

Whether the vine roots peter out in the soil or reach down into the mother rock wholly determines the character of the resulting wine, Parra explained. If the soil is "a hamburger," the basalt is "a Michelin restaurant."

I could taste the difference. Hamel brought two samples of young Cabernets harvested in September, one from a basalt-heavy section of Nuns Canyon and one from another area that's entirely clay. The clay wine is softer, fruitier, with less structure and a shorter finish; the basalt wine, though still nascent, is textured, energetic and decidedly stony in flavor. "It's a very interesting time" at Nuns Canyon, Parra said as he spit a taste of Cabernet onto the ground, "because finally we have wines that are really good now."

Parra pulled out his hand-drawn maps of Nuns Canyon, each section shaded with a different pattern according to its geology. He categorizes each micro-plot as either alteration (solid rock), alterite (decomposed rock) or soil. On certain blocks, he has scribbled “OUT,” by which he means don’t even bother trying to make compelling wine from there.



John Hamel holds maps that Parra has hand-drawn, outlining the different geologic formations at the Nuns Canyon Vineyard.

Before working with Parra, Hamel would harvest the vineyard in 5-acre chunks. Because of the geologic variability that Parra diagrammed, it inevitably resulted in fermentations that included both overripe and underripe grapes — “green raisin wine,” Hamel said.

Now, with Parra’s understanding of the vineyard, they pick grapes in half-acre increments. It’s more work for associate winemaker Maura Kinsella and viticulturist Saskia Tingey, but to them it’s worth it.

Understanding the geology is only part of the task. The Hamel team has also radically changed how it farms under Parra’s watch. They dry farm most of the vineyard — eschewing irrigation, relying solely on precipitation — which Hamel’s previous vineyard management company had warned would result in depleted yields and dehydrated berries. But irrigating encourages the vine roots to stay close to the surface, in the “hamburger” zone. It’s only when they’re deprived of water that the vines have to search deeper down, into the basalt. And the yields haven’t suffered yet.

When Parra first arrived at Nuns Canyon, which is certified both organic and biodynamic, he dug 100 soil pits. Most of the root systems, he demonstrated to Hamel, ended within about 2 feet, and they were oriented sideways. Even in areas where there was basalt, the vines weren’t reaching it. “It’s like going to a movie, watching 20 minutes and leaving,” Hamel said.



Pedro Parra handles chunks of basalt taken out of a pit at the Nuns Canyon Vineyard in Glen Ellen.

But producing profound wines isn't as straightforward as isolating the grapes that come from the rockiest areas. Red wines grown in very iron-rich soils, which proliferate in some parts of the Nuns Canyon Vineyard, can often on their own be too extreme: heavy, dark-fruited, brooding. Parra seeks a balance of “flesh and bone,” he said. At Nuns Canyon, the most promising spots contain a mix of softer and fractured rocks, which tend to result in wines that have power but also some delicacy and freshness.

The perception held by much of the world of California wines as jammy, overblown fruit bombs “comes from people not understanding this,” Parra said.

Parra claims he stumbled into his consulting work. After early turns in forest management and as a jazz musician, he attended the Paris Center of Agriculture, where he received his doctorate in what he initially described as “terroir,” but was technically called agronomics. His dissertation was on micro-terroirs in Don Melchor, arguably Chile's most prestigious vineyard. After graduation, a handful of well-known Chilean wineries — De Martino, Matetic and Viña Montes — enlisted his help as a consultant.

In 2007, Parra got his first consulting gig outside of Chile, in Argentina. Four years later, he made it to Italy. Around this time, he had formed a winery with two other partners in Chile, but in 2011 decided he wanted to do something on his own, establishing Pedro Parra y Familia winery in a granite-rich section of Chile's Itata Valley. Wine writer Alder Yarrow called his bottles “quite simply the most exciting wines I've ever tasted from Chile, and (they) have completely reset my understanding of what Chile may be capable in terms of expression of terroir.”

Parra's star was truly beginning to rise when Hamel cold-emailed him in 2016, after hearing a 2-year-old episode Parra had recorded on the wine podcast "I'll Drink to That!" In the throes of believing his wines to be "generic and commercial," Hamel heard in Parra someone who might have the answers he sought about how to reveal his vineyard's terroir and minerality.

Parra said no: His European business, which he had strived for years to establish, was finally taking off, and he didn't want any distractions. Plus, he had no reason to believe that Hamel's vineyard would prove interesting to him.

What changed his mind was the sudden recollection that he had been to Moon Mountain. Parra had consulted in California once before, for Benziger Family Winery in 2009. Benziger had taken Parra around to 10 sites, and only one, in Parra's opinion, had noteworthy terroir. It was close to Nuns Canyon.

Parra agreed to visit in 2016. Hamel said that he had little sense at that time of what lay underneath his vines, and that it was pure coincidence that he happened to lead Parra to a section of the vineyard that was studded with basalt. "I've realized that we have good terroir and we have bad terroir," Hamel said, and, by chance, "I showed him the most expressive terroir."



Winemaker John Hamel looks into the head-trained Grenache vines that Pedro Parra advised him to plant. The trellising system is unusual in modern-day California.

As soon as Parra dug down to the mother rock, he “knew we had something amazing,” he said. Now in his 10th year with Hamel, he visits two to three times a year for two days at a time, excavating the vineyard, refining his maps, tasting through the wines and offering his suggestions for adjustments. He convinced Hamel to plant more Grenache, and to head train rather than trellis it, reverting to an old-fashioned system that he prefers for the way it shields the fruit from the ever-harsher California sun.

Although Parra focuses on the vineyard, he has deeply influenced Hamel’s winemaking practices too. The protocols here have evolved in tandem with Parra’s own at his Itata estate: Fermentations have gotten colder and longer; sulfur use has diminished (this year, 20% of Hamel’s wines received no sulfur); concrete vessels and big wooden casks have replaced small oak barrels.

Hamel hasn’t bought new barrels since 2019, a serious rarity for a high-end California winery, and he thinks they likely won’t ever buy any oak — even large-format casks — again. He and Kinsella prefer concrete for its minimal flavor impact on the wines, seeing it as a better vehicle for preserving the expression of minerality. “We really just love the purity that you get from concrete,” said Kinsella.



Hamel Family Wines has been aging more of its wines in concrete vessels, and fewer in oak barrels, since working with Pedro Parra.

It's never a guarantee that a collaboration with a winery will be this rewarding, Parra said. Some vintners hire him with "a dream," only to discover that "the terroir is not very good." There's nothing he can do in that situation, he said. "My role is finished."

Most of this planet, in Parra's view, is not good terroir, and some winegrowers that have good terroir aren't capitalizing on it. "One percent of wine producers are very good," Parra said. "Nine percent are curious, moving in the right direction. Ninety percent of wine producers don't know what they're doing."

This is where Parra's ultimate passion lies: the taste of the wine. The labels typically ascribed to him — "soil scientist," "geologist" — he rejects outright. His preferred title, he said, is "wine producer."

"I don't care about the soil," he continued. "I care about the wine."