

# MAKING IT LOOK EASY

Winemaker Dave Phinney, creator of The Prisoner, has plenty more in the pipeline

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC / PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATRINE NALEID

“I wish I could tell you that only a select few of us can make wine,” says Dave Phinney. “But the process of converting sugar to alcohol isn’t really that tough.”

He’s being modest, of course, but Phinney does make winemaking seem almost effortless. His first wine, The Prisoner, debuted with the 2000 vintage and rocketed to success. A blend of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah and small percentages of

Phinney’s office reflects the artistic sensibilities expressed on his ambitious wine labels.



Syrah and Charbono, wasn't meticulously planned—as a fledgling winemaker, Phinney used what grapes were available to him. He made 385 cases the first year, labeling it with a Goya etching his parents had given him and selling it for \$25 a bottle. The brand hit shelves just as Zinfandel was experiencing a resurgence in popularity. The Prisoner received consistently high scores, and within 10 years its case production grew to 85,000.

But the young winemaker, faced with the runaway success of his first release, was beginning to feel like a prisoner himself. "It's an animal," Phinney says of The Prisoner. "As great as it is—and it's brought so much into my life—something had to give. It was going to run me."

In 2010, Huneus Vintners, the owners of Quintessa, in Napa Valley, and Veramonte, in Chile, purchased the brand for a rumored \$40 million, along with Saldo, a \$28 California Zinfandel. Phinney stayed on during the transition, but 2012 was his last vintage; The Prisoner will go on without him. "Personally, selling [The Prisoner] has given me financial gain and freedom. It saved my marriage," admits Phinney.

Phinney may be free from The Prisoner, but the wine set a blueprint for his future creations: memorable labels, attractive price points and, most importantly, good wine. Most of Phinney's wines are made under his Orin Swift Cellars brand, a combination of his father's middle name and his mother's maiden name. The producer's lineup also includes The Prisoner-like Rhône-based blends from California; three different Napa Cabernet bottlings; an old-vine Grenache from a French vineyard Phinney owns; and a line called Locations, négociant wines from Spain, France and Italy. And there's more to come. (For a complete list of his wines, see page 74.)

As the breadth of his portfolio testifies, Phinney is buying and blending grapes from a huge array of vineyards around the world, with more than 100 in California alone. "That's the beauty of having all of these different programs," says Phinney. "It gives us flexibility and interplay between them." He mixes and matches grapes as he sees fit in an ongoing push for originality and quality.

**P**hinney, 41, grew up in the Los Angeles area. His parents were both professors, his father a microbiologist who taught botany and his mother a psychologist who taught childhood development. Phinney went to the University of Arizona and majored in political science, with plans to go to law school. But stints working for a public defender and a U.S. congressman taught him that he didn't want to be a lawyer or a politician.

His introduction to wine came in 1995, during a semester abroad in Italy. When Phinney returned to Arizona, he planted



Phinney recently opened an Orin Swift tasting room on Main Street in St. Helena, Calif., decorating the interior with reclaimed materials such as the recycled book pages that make up the floor.

experimental blocks of Zinfandel and Petite Sirah in Tucson with the help of a professor in the university's agriculture department, and took a job in a wineshop.

But what Phinney really wanted to do was work a harvest in Napa Valley. He sent out 50 résumés to different producers; Robert Mondavi Winery was the only one to reply. "I showed up for a harvest job interview, that took place in a trailer, wearing a suit," Phinney recalls with a laugh. He took a temporary position, "the only white guy on an all-Mexican crew," he says.

In 1997, he moved to Whitehall Lane, where Dean Sylvester—"the most patient man I know" says Phinney—introduced him to winemaking over the next five years. Whitehall Lane is also where Phinney met his future wife, Kim Leonardini, the daughter of winery owner Tom Leonardini. The couple has been married since 2001 and has two children, Angelina, 10, and Aidan, 8.

The Prisoner was still gaining visibility in 2008 when Phinney made his first trip to France's Roussillon region. Before he went, his wife warned him to "not do anything stupid." But during his stay, Phinney fell in love with the old-vine Grenache he found,

**“I HATED THE WORD *TERROIR*. I FELT IT WAS OVERUSED. BUT NOW I GET IT.” —DAVE PHINNEY**

## “THERE COULD BE A TRAIN WRECK OVER THERE, AND [DAVE] WILL BE INTENTLY GOING ON ABOUT GRENACHE.” —JOEL GOTT

and ended up buying 30 acres. The decision marked a new direction for the winemaker.

He now owns a total of 300 acres of Grenache, Carignane and Syrah in France, the source for his D66 label. “What frustrates me is when people talk about Roussillon and the Languedoc, all they talk about is value,” says Phinney. And while he recognizes that quality-for-price is one of the region’s hallmarks, he maintains that “some of the best wines I’ve ever made—some of the best wines I’ve ever tasted—have been made there.”

What makes the region stand out, Phinney says, is *terroir*. “I hated the word *terroir*. I felt it was overused, or used as a placeholder

when there was nothing else to say. But now I get it.”

He’s tasted wines from Roussillon costing everywhere from \$5 to \$100 a bottle, and even the bad ones, he claims, show a distinctive band of minerality, attributable to the lack of irrigation and the region’s famous black, fractured schist soils.

“I’ve never tasted a Cab and said, ‘This is Napa-esque,’” says Phinney. “I’m not bad-mouthing Napa or California. But [discovering the Roussillon *terroir* has] taken my respect for winemaking to a different level.”

Phinney, who barely speaks French, built a winery in the town of Maury, where he is known as “the American.” And it’s not just

his nationality that’s raising eyebrows in the area. Even though his old vines are naturally low-yielding, Phinney says he’s dropping fruit to reduce yields even further. During his first vintage at the site, his grapes were still on the vine long after other vintners had harvested. He recalls the locals asking, “Does the American know he has to pick?”

Two years later, in 2010, Phinney took fellow Napa vintner Joel Gott with him to look at the area. They decided to collaborate on a wine they called Shatter, a Grenache made in partnership with Trinchero Family Estates and named for the term given to grape clusters that don’t fully develop (which contribute to the Shatter bottling).

Now Phinney is intent on finding other vineyards around the world to use in blends for his Locations line. “The idea behind Locations is to go to whatever location to make the best possible wine we can without considering vintage, without considering varietal, and without considering appellation,” explains Phinney.

So far there are three versions: reds from Spain, France and Italy. They will be made every year, with new bottlings added to the lineup when the grapes and opportunities present themselves. Reds from Argentina and Portugal, and a white from Corsica, are on deck. Each carries a price tag of around \$20. Phinney doesn’t own any of the source vineyards; each bottling is made in the country of origin and then imported into the United States.

**B**ack in California, Phinney’s land holdings are growing. He owns 250 acres in the Foss Valley region of the Atlas Peak AVA, a quiet, undeveloped area with red soil and large boulders, offering views of vineyards owned by Stagecoach, Artesa and Antica. He plans on planting 70 to 90 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon at elevations ranging



Phinney purchased the 8-acre Old Crane vineyard in St. Helena in 2012. Planted to old-vine Zinfandel that Phinney plans to incorporate into future bottlings, the site will one day house its own winery.

from 1,200 to 2,000 feet.

In 2012 he acquired the 8-acre Old Crane vineyard in St. Helena, planted with old-vine Zinfandel—some of it dating to the 1880s—and intends to build a winery at the site with the backing of business partners. Phinney also owns 250 acres in Alexander Valley, not yet developed, with 40 suitable for grapegrowing.

Like many vintners, Phinney's main focus is on the quality of his raw materials. "We try to do 90-something percent of winemaking in the vineyard. The rest is just managing risk," he says.

Still, there is arguably a definitive Dave Phinney wine style. Most distinctively, he tends to pick late, resulting in ripe, bold wines. "I'm not afraid at all about alcohol, and I'm unapologetic about it. I think if it's balanced, then it can be balanced at any alcohol level."

Gott describes the creative side of Phinney's winemaking. "He's much more of an artist—a painter—than a winemaker," says Gott. "If you look at the way he makes wine versus how I make wine, I know the structured way of doing it. He comes at it from a touchy-hands-feely way, not a chemistry way."

Phinney's wine labels, featuring bold images and memorable names, also seem like products of an artist's eye—or at least someone with a golden touch for branding. "The strategy is based on the fact that more than half of the people will buy a bottle if they pick it up. So how do you get them to pick up the bottle?" explains Phinney.

His labels have been inspired by everything from a word scratched into the side of a car, to hip-hop lyrics, to a piece of graffiti pointed out to him by his daughter. Phinney pulls out his iPhone and scrolls through the notes section, filled with hundreds of ideas for labels.

Gott recalls watching Phinney pick an image for the Shatter label: "We probably shot 2,500 photos to get that one image of broken glass. Watching Dave with the photographs was fascinating. He'd freeze for two to three minutes on each one before saying no."

Phinney has a way of coming across as simultaneously laid-back and intense. Gott first refers to him as "all over the place," but in the next sentence commends his intent focus. "Dave is one of those guys that might not know that anything else is going on around him. That thing could be on fire, there could be a train wreck over there, and he'll be intently going on about Grenache or the pump-over device he just got."

Phinney's success is also linked to his pricing strategy; most of his wines retail for less than \$60 per bottle. "I don't always know why my wines work, but I know one thing that makes it work is the price," he says. "It creates a wider audience. It makes people happy. It's not like we're not making any money. We're just making 40 percent, not 60 percent. At some point, it's enough money."



Phinney with his family on the front porch of their home (from left): daughter Angelina, wife Kim and son Aidan

"We spend more time on that \$16 Spanish wine [for Locations] than on Mercury Head [a \$75 Napa Cabernet]. I do not believe in cutting corners," says Phinney. He puts it another way. "With all the bells and whistles, production can cost ... let's say \$300 a case. And then [other vintners] charge \$250 a bottle? There is no rationale except capitalism and greed. I can't be that guy."

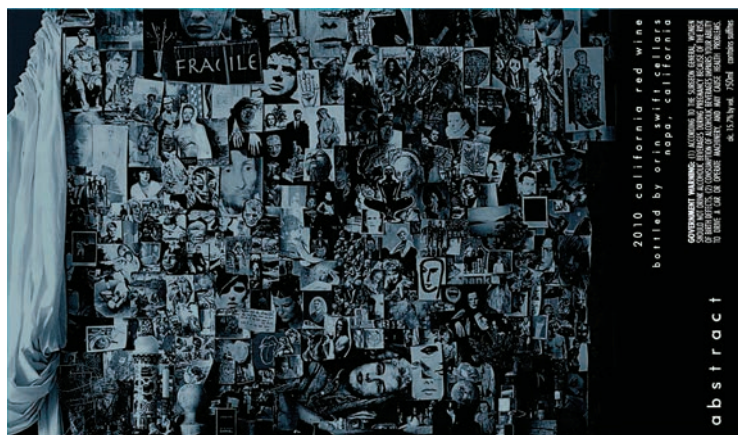
Phinney adds earnestly, "There is still a group of people in this world that would do this for free. There is still a soul in this business. It's not entirely corporate."

Phinney has no plans to slow down. He just opened an Orin Swift tasting room on Main Street in St. Helena, and personally picked out and pieced together the reclaimed materials used for the space's walls and floors. He's about to release a whiskey made from the spring water on his Alexander Valley property. And there are more wines in the works, of course.

"I can't imagine not going through harvest," he says. "It's like breathing for me."

# THE PHINNEY LINEUP

Dave Phinney produces wines under the California-based Orin Swift label (Abstract, Mannequin, Mercury Head, Papillon, Palermo and Veladora) and is a partner in a host of other winemaking projects abroad.



## Abstract

The quintessential Phinney project, blending different grapes (Grenache, Syrah and Petite Sirah) from regions all over California (Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino). The label shows a collage designed by Phinney, piecing together images the winemaker collected for years—from pictures of Hemingway to photos of old punk rock bands—embossed in black.

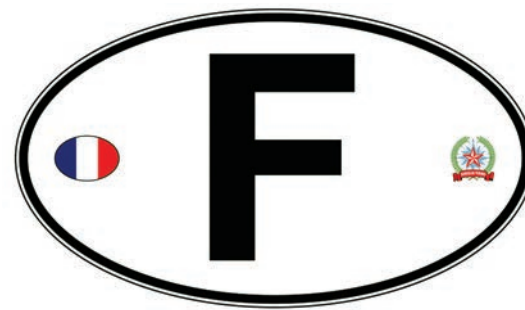
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|----|-------------------------------------|------|--------------|
| 88 | Orin Swift Abstract California 2011 | \$28 | 14,075 cases |
| 92 | Orin Swift Abstract California 2010 | \$29 | 16,000 cases |
| 92 | Orin Swift Abstract California 2009 | \$35 | 8,000 cases  |



## Department 66

From Phinney's old-vine Grenache vineyards in Maury, France. The wine's name refers to the French department number for the region. Though one of the simplest of his labels, Phinney says it was the most difficult to design. "I had so much respect for Maury, I wanted that to show," he says. The "D" on the label is copied from an honorary degree his father received in France.

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|----|---------------------------------------|------|-------------|
| 93 | Department 66 Grenache Maury D66 2010 | \$38 | 6,500 cases |
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## Locations

A value-oriented lineup of blends from Spain, France and Italy—so far, with more to come. The labels are made up of the international license plate country code to indicate where the wine hails from.

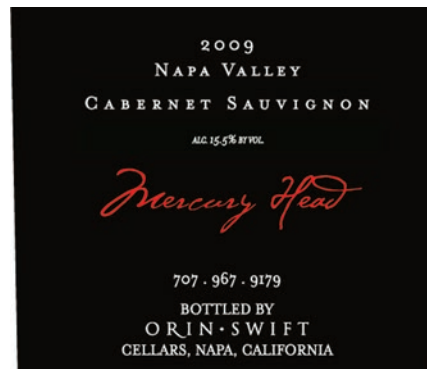
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|----|-------------|------|--------------|
| 89 | France F NV | \$17 | 21,000 cases |
| 87 | Italy I NV  | \$17 | 36,000 cases |
| 85 | Spain E NV  | \$17 | 26,000 cases |



## Mannequin

Phinney heard the word "mannequin" in the lyrics of a Nicki Minaj song, and instantly had a vision for a label. Well-known portrait photographer Greg Gorman spent a day with Phinney shooting dozens of pictures of mannequin limbs before snapping an image of the discarded torsos in the corner of his studio. A blend of Chardonnay, Viognier, Sémillon, Muscat and Marsanne.

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|----|--------------------------------------|------|-------------|
| 86 | Orin Swift Mannequin California 2011 | \$30 | 1,870 cases |
| 89 | Orin Swift Mannequin California 2010 | \$30 | 2,000 cases |



## Mercury Head

Phinney found a Liberty Dime in a handful of change, which reminded him of how much he enjoyed collecting coins as a child. The Liberty Dime—nicknamed Mercury Head—was always his favorite. Of the three Cabernets he makes, this is the most expensive, and represents his best Cabernet Sauvignon lots in Napa Valley. 2010 and 2011 were tricky vintages, and Phinney didn't bottle the wine in those years.

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|----|---|------|-------------|
| 93 | Orin Swift Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Mercury Head 2009 | \$75 | 2,000 cases |
| 92 | Orin Swift Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Mercury Head 2008 | \$75 | 1,500 cases |



## Papillon

French for “butterfly,” Phinney first heard the term when his daughter saw a butterfly and said the word out loud. A Cabernet-based blend, the grapes come from Howell Mountain, Rutherford, Oakville and St. Helena. The image—photographed by Greg Gorman—shows the hands of Vince Tofaneli, a third-generation grapegrower.

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|----|--------------------------------------|------|-------------|
| 92 | Orin Swift Papillon Napa Valley 2010 | \$65 | 6,400 cases |
| 89 | Orin Swift Papillon Napa Valley 2009 | \$55 | 8,000 cases |
| 91 | Orin Swift Papillon Napa Valley 2008 | \$55 | 4,100 cases |



## Palermo

Extra lots of Cabernet Sauvignon used to go into The Prisoner, so after the sale of that brand, Phinney created Palermo, the most value-centric of his Cabernets. The label image of a mummified priest is from a photograph by Vincent Musi that Phinney saw in *National Geographic* in a story about catacombs in Palermo, Sicily.

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|----|--|------|-------------|
| 89 | Orin Swift Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Palermo 2011 | \$35 | 8,000 cases |
| 91 | Orin Swift Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Palermo 2010 | \$32 | 5,400 cases |
| 86 | Orin Swift Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Palermo 2009 | \$28 | 5,800 cases |

## The Prisoner

Phinney’s first label, sold to Huneus Vintners in 2010. A blend of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Charbono and Grenache from vineyards around Napa, the wine gets its name from the Goya print—originally a gift from Phinney’s parents—on the label.

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|----|--|------|--------------|
| 92 | The Prisoner Napa Valley 2011            | \$38 | 68,000 cases |
| 90 | Orin Swift The Prisoner Napa Valley 2010 | \$38 | 68,100 cases |
| 88 | Orin Swift The Prisoner Napa Valley 2009 | \$35 | 70,000 cases |



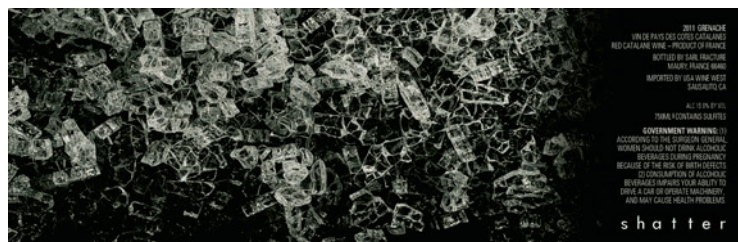
*The Prisoner*

## SALDO

## Saldo

Phinney sold this Zinfandel bottling in 2010 along with The Prisoner. It carries the broad California appellation, blending grapes from Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Amador and Contra Costa counties. In Spanish, “Saldo” translates to “balance on hand” or “from here to there.” The front label is just the single word on an embossed label.

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|----|---------------------------|------|--------------|
| 87 | Zinfandel California 2011 | \$28 | 12,500 cases |
| 88 | Zinfandel California 2010 | \$28 | 10,400 cases |
| 88 | Zinfandel California 2009 | \$28 | 20,000 cases |
| 91 | Zinfandel California 2008 | \$28 | 14,000 cases |



## Fracture

This French Grenache is a joint venture between Phinney, vintner Joel Gott and Trincherro Family Estate. It is named for the propensity of the Grenache in the Roussillon to shatter. The label, fittingly, is a photograph of shattered glass.

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|----|--|------|--------------|
| 88 | Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes Shatter 2011 | \$25 | 15,000 cases |
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## Veladora

Charity has always been important to Phinney; in lieu of wedding gifts, he and wife Kim asked guests to donate to a farmworker housing organization. All of the profits from this wine are donated to a local charity, Puertas Abiertas (“Open Doors”), which helps the Latino farmworking community in Napa. From the first time Phinney worked alongside Latino farmers during harvest, he felt a connection. “They took me in and really showed me about this work and pride,” he says. Veladora refers to the prayer candles on the label’s image.

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|----|--|------|-------------|
| 90 | Orin Swift Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Veladora 2012 | \$25 | 1,150 cases |
| 88 | Orin Swift Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Veladora 2011 | \$25 | 600 cases   |