

{ on-premise }



by Kate Nowell-Smith

Sonoma

SIPPING

**PULLING UP A CHAIR AT MAISON HEALDSBURG,
A CALIFORNIA WINE BAR WHOSE TIME HAS COME**



*Maison Healdsburg owners
Jade Hufford, Evan Hufford,
and Ryan Knowles.*

COMMUNITY, HOSPITALITY, AND

sharing are the dominant themes that arise when speaking with the trio of sommeliers behind Maison Healdsburg, a wine bar and shop that's set to open in the northern Sonoma County town of Healdsburg in February. With decades of collective hospitality experience at such celebrated restaurants as San Francisco's Michael Mina and Atelier Crenn, Evan and Jade Hufford and Ryan Knowles could have chosen to remain at the starry apex of fine dining for the rest of their careers—or they could have settled comfortably into less demanding roles in quieter locales. They chose to do neither. Instead, the three have banded together to create their ideal spot, described by Evan as “a Parisian-inspired wine bar in a comfortable space with a Michelin-caliber wine list.”

Evan and Jade began their careers in Phoenix, Arizona, at much-awarded Native American restaurant Kai. Evan credits it with giving them a thorough grounding in what he calls “peak hospitality.” It was there, while hosting the local chapter of the *Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin*, that he had that “aha” moment known to so many wine lovers—when we encounter a knockout that defies generic descriptors and presents us with a beguiling mystery. In his case, it was a Joseph Drouhin 2005 Charnes-Chambertain Grand Cru. “I couldn't keep my nose out of the glass,” he enthuses. “I had to know more!”

Knowing more entailed entering a more established wine scene, a requirement that prompted Evan and Jade, by then a couple, to move to Las Vegas, where Evan accepted a sommelier position at Joël Robuchon's L'Atelier. In their new home, they were exposed to the sort of broad and deep wine lists that most sommeliers can only dream about. Evan speaks fondly of one regular who insisted on selecting wines that the young sommelier had not yet tried, thus helping him to fuel his passion and education. A subsequent move to San Francisco took Jade to Michael Mina and Evan to Saison, which maintained a focus on Burgundy that deepened the couple's love for the region. Eventually, the two were brought up to Healdsburg to be part of the opening team at SingleThread Farm-Restaurant-Inn.

While Evan and Jade were coming up in the industry, so too was Ryan, a Healdsburg native who began his career

at age 14. By 16 he was working at The Madrona, a local showcase for Sonoma County food and wine. After a stint in Oaxaca learning everything there is to know about mezcal, he returned home and joined the opening team at SingleThread, where he met his future business partners. Jade gently teases Ryan about this time; it was then that he passed the first two levels of the Court of Master Sommeliers exam—less than a month after turning 21.



SingleThread earned three Michelin stars within its first two years, a testament not only to its exquisite food and wine but also to its superb hospitality. Nevertheless, the trio began to dream about a place of their own. They craved opportunities to interact with locals, see familiar faces, and develop lasting friendships over wine. “Wine is so inclusive,” Ryan says. “Everyone has a spot at the table. We are about knocking down the barriers to entry.” Their vision began to crystallize into something rarely seen in this part of the world: They would offer a top-tier by-the-glass wine list in a warm, casual setting for industry locals and tourists alike.

While that list incorporates what Evan calls “cool, amazing finds” from all over the world, the primary focus is on their shared loves: West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Burgundy, and grower Champagne. Jade speaks excitedly of a space where she can pour the wines and tell the stories of small producers they have come to know as friends, thereby replacing an outmoded, recher-


ché approach to wine education with one of enthusiasm and inclusion.

The decision to open Maison Healdsburg from 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. is a radical one in what is still a sleepy grape-farming town at heart, but it reflects the owners' desire to serve the local hospitality community as much as the many travelers they receive. Whether you've just finished a meal or a shift at one of Healdsburg's fine restaurants, there will be a place for you here.

In addition to serving an ever-evolving

selection of wines and bites, Maison will hold educational tastings in its cellar room. These will range in price and scope from single-variety flights designed to put local wines into a global context to knock-your-socks-off explorations of the world's most vaunted and hard-to-find wines. And if you taste something you love, you can buy a bottle to take home.

For those just starting down the sommelier path, the Maison team has plenty of wisdom to share. “Find the passion for hospitality alongside wine,” enthuses Evan as Jade nods in agreement, “and learn to understand the back end of running a wine program.” Ryan's advice: “Take the job seriously, but don't lose sight of the fun of it—how playful wine is.”

As if on cue, Arzelle, Jade and Evan's magnificent Husky Shepherd mix, pads over, and I can tell my time is up. But I'll be back, and I know that Maison Healdsburg will be here to welcome you too. 

For more information, visit maisonwinebar.com.