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Spotlight on Aperture and Devil Proof

If you haven't heard of Jesse Katz yet, you soon will. He's one of northern California's most talented young winemakers with a natural eye for unique sites in Sonoma and Napa. I first tasted his Devil Proof Farrow Ranch Vineyard Malbec five years ago during an extensive Sonoma County tasting and was stopped in my tracks. Although it is recognizably Malbec, no other Malbec on the planet is quite as pure, well-defined, multi-layered, and evocative as this. Simply put, it's an artist's Malbec.



Live Well, Drink Well

Unless you are born into it, say the offspring of a Château owner, a merchant, or an avid collector, the world of wine is usually not in your sights until you are well past drinking age. It wasn't for me. And although I've had a wine career for as long as my children have lived, they are not remotely entitled to inherit my interest. On the contrary, their under-aged view of wine is through a distorted lens of boring winery visits, overflowing spittoons, and purple teeth. Jesse Katz, on the other hand, viewed wine as a kid through a keen, expertly focused lens. His father is Andy Katz, a celebrated photographer whose captivating images have featured on the album covers of the Doobie Brothers and Dan Fogelberg. Andy has also produced a dozen books devoted to wine.



-Jesse Katz and his father Andy

"I traveled to over 80 countries with my father growing up," Jesse told me during my August visit to his winery in Healdsburg, Sonoma. "Getting to see how my father captured amazing beauty from many overlooked places early on in our adventures, even before he started his books on wine, gave me even more respect for his art. When I was in my early teens, and he started doing books on wine regions, I developed a unique perspective of wine as someone who wasn't born into it."

"I was introduced to the beauty of the vineyards and cellars alongside the culture that surrounds most wine regions. At dinners, when I was served a little glass of wine, usually from one of the vineyards my dad took photos from that day, I always wanted to know if it was from one of the vineyards we visited. My dad would describe the photo that he captured that day, and that would give me a sense of where the wine came from. I think this early fascination with how the place affected the taste of the wine followed me throughout my career."

After a stint at business school in Santa Barbara and obtaining a BS in viticulture and enology with a minor in chemistry at Fresno State, Jesse hit the road again—this time on his own adventure. He worked for Vina Cobos (Paul Hobbs) and Bodega Noemia in Argentina, and Petrus in Pomerol, before coming back to California to work for Fess Parker on the Central Coast and Bob Foley in Napa Valley. He landed a job at Screaming Eagle as Andy Erikson's assistant. And he was the youngest-hired head winemaker in the US at Lancaster Estate in Alexander Valley, Sonoma.

"I've traveled all over the world to study how certain Bordeaux varietals thrive in vastly different sites and climates, from Argentina to Bordeaux to Napa and Sonoma," said Jesse. "This has given me a unique perspective to look at sites differently."

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It wasn't long before Jesse got the idea to work with his father to create their wine label. Aperture was founded in 2009, featuring wine made by Jesse with the label's photo courtesy of Andy. Then, when Jesse stumbled across a single block of mature vine Malbec at Farrow Ranch in Sonoma, he knew he'd found the source of something that deserved a new label.

"We were the first people to isolate this block," Jesse said. "I think my time in Argentina had a lot to do with finding this. It is just a small, single, dry-farmed block planted in 1982."

The first vintage of Devil Proof Malbec from Farrow Ranch was made in 2012.

"The name comes from a trip my dad and me made to Cuba. The locals told us, 'If you live well and drink well, the devil can't get ya.' Like, you're devil-proof. The first label didn't say Farrow Ranch on it because we only had one vineyard back then."

One of Andy Katz's most iconic Cuban photos still identifies the two single-block Devil Proof labels made today.



The early vintages of the Aperture and Devil Proof wines were made at Carter Cellars in Calistoga. Following the success of the first few father/son releases, in 2015, Jesse was able to stop working for other wineries and devote 100% of his time to his wines. In 2016, he and his father purchased a 40-acre vineyard and winery site on the outskirts of Healdsburg. This included a block of ancient vines dating back to 1912, the basis for one of the wines made today.

"Technically, this vineyard is located in Russian River," said Jesse as we walked these vines last month. "First thing we did was dig 56 soil pits. We've isolated nine different soil types here."



Before embarking on tasting Jesse's extensive line-up of new and upcoming releases, arranged across six different labels, I took a little tour around the winery and relatively new Aperture tasting room. An impressive architectural design work by Juan Carlos Fernandez of Signum Architecture, the tasting room/cellar door (open to the public, tastings by reservation) has a ceiling crafted to look like the aperture of a camera lens. Andy's photography lines the walls, transporting visitors to far-flung places in every direction.

"This space was completed in April 2020," commented Jesse. "Bad timing, right? So, we didn't officially open until July 2020."

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Since 2021, following his clever purchase of the Farrow Ranch vineyard that he had long admired, most of Jesse's vineyard holdings are in Alexander Valley. Farrow Ranch now has 73 acres under vine, and Jesse leases another 80 acres of vineyard land, equating to a sizable operation these days. But managing a large business has not meant selling Katz's soul.

"I am completely obsessed with the art of wine growing and making," said Jesse. "It's a huge part of my identity and life. I literally live at the winery. My house is just behind the production facility. My father obsesses over his art in the same way. He relies so much on the perfect light to be able to capture the moment and doesn't own photoshop to correct it if he can't. I think there is a purity to the art I learned from my father, whether he realizes he taught it to me or not. Because I have never acidified, fined, or filtered any of my red wines, capturing the fruit at its perfect balance is critical. I'm not trying to make the same wine every year. I'm trying to showcase the unique sites I farm and tell the story of the place and the vintage in its most perfect form."

Guess there really is something to that saying about living and drinking well.

