



AMICI

BY LISA PERROTTI-BROWN MW

In a Napa Valley increasingly driven by marketing hype, trophy labels, and rising bottle prices, Amici Cellars opts for a calmer yet more meaningful approach. The winery's simple plan is to source grapes from premier vineyards—including To Kalon, Morisoli, Cimarossa, Hyde, and Charles Heintz sites—and produce cellar-worthy wines full of character. This strategy focuses on quality over brand flash through carefully chosen sources, meticulous winemaking, and competitive prices.

AMONG FRIENDS

Amici ("friends" in Italian) began as a modest side project in the early 1990s, when founder Jeff Hansen and a group of friends crushed a few tons of fruit for personal use. The wine was good enough to convince them to bottle it commercially. Ownership evolved over time, ultimately leading to the partnership of Bob Shepard and John Harris, who now oversee the winery alongside winemaker Tony Biagi.





THE WINE PALATE

Amici's home base—a practical facility at 3130 Old Lawley Toll Road in Calistoga's Jericho Canyon—doesn't depend on decorative architecture to convey its identity. Instead, the team's values are connected to the vineyards they source from and the wines they put in bottles.

Both proprietors came to wine from non-wine careers, but each developed a serious, analytical interest in it long before buying into the business. Harris traces his deeper appreciation to years spent working abroad. "In France, the relationship between wine and food is part of their culture, and that is what made me fall in love with it," he says. Weekend trips from the Peninsula to Napa eventually cemented his interest. "Wine is agriculture," he adds. "The sites are different, and you can taste that in the wine."

For Shepard, the turning point came when tasting a Montrachet during a Peter Marks master class in the mid-1980s. The impression was lasting. "My interest in wine began in college during a finance internship," he recalls, "but the moment it clicked was tasting that Montrachet." His enthusiasm eventually expanded into hosting tastings, buying futures, and traveling to wine regions.

The two met through community organizations on the Peninsula, bonded over classes at K&L, and became traveling companions to wine regions. Their shared palate and shared pragmatism later shaped the way Amici approaches sourcing: top vineyards first, everything else second.

"Every year we strive to make a better bottle of wine than the year before," Shepard says. "But for us, the focus is always about overdelivering on quality. We want to make wines that are approachable and never disappoint." That reliability, he adds, is the foundation of customer trust.

Harris reinforces the stylistic intent: "The word we always use is balance. The tannins, the acid, everything is in alignment. Nothing is ever in your face or over the top." Both proprietors point to France—rather than domestic cult Cabernet—as the stylistic north star.

Winemaker Tony Biagi, who joined Amici after decades working with several of Napa's most respected estates, approaches the wines with the same vineyard-first framework. His philosophy centers on adjusting technique to the site, not vice versa.

"For us, everything is about working with the best vineyards," Biagi says. "We do not have one way of making wine; we change what we do based on what the vineyard dictates."

The focus is on fine-grain tannins, balanced phenolics, and wines that don't require a decade to become enjoyable. "We want intensity, but it has to be balanced with elegance so nothing is out of line," he says. "I love smooth tannins and wines that drink well young and age well too."



This approach has helped keep the wines grounded in structure and freshness rather than the exaggerated ripeness sometimes associated with modern Napa Cabernet.

Amici's vineyard-designate program—bottlings from sites like Morisoli in Rutherford, To Kalon in Oakville, Hyde in Carneros for Chardonnay, and Cimarossa on Howell Mountain—adds a layer of transparency that appeals to collectors. These wines demonstrate that Amici's sourcing network is on par with many of Napa's more expensive estates.

Harris points to two personal favorites that underscore the model. "For white, it is the Amici Charles Heintz Chardonnay. For red, it is the Amici Cabernet Sauvignon Morisoli Vineyard," he says. "Both of these are amazing sites farmed by the grower/owner. The care they take in their vineyards shines through in these wines."

Shepard's top pick—the Amici Reserve Cabernet—offers a blended snapshot of heritage sites across Napa Valley. "It truly embodies Napa Valley in a glass," he says. "My favorite white is the Amici Chardonnay Sonoma Coast. It's a great expression of balanced Chardonnay where the fruit is the center."

For Biagi, the favorite is the one that reaches the most people. "The Napa Cabernet is my favorite because it is accessible to the greatest number of people—as is the Olema Cabernet," he says. The Olema label, launched in 2005, remains one of the region's clearest examples of a second-label strategy that actually delivers on affordability without abandoning quality.



THE WINE PALATE

While Shepard and Harris are the public faces of the winery, they insist that the story isn't about ownership. "We don't want the focus to be on us," they say. "The true story of our success is about our team." In addition to Biagi, the winemaking team includes Dante West and Matt Courtney—winemakers with the kind of experience typically associated with higher-priced bottles. The collective experience of the trio helps maintain stylistic consistency and reinforces the small-lot, vineyard-driven approach at the brand's core.

Amici is not trying to redefine Napa Valley, nor is it chasing status. Its significance lies in the alternative it offers: wines from top vineyards made by an experienced team, priced below the region's luxury escalation. In a valley where marketing often outpaces substance, Amici's strategy is almost contrarian in its simplicity: invest in the sites, invest in the winemaking, avoid the fluff.

If Napa's current price ceiling continues to rise, wineries like Amici may become increasingly relevant to collectors who still want benchmark vineyards without paying trophy-wine premiums. In the meantime, the wines continue to prove that great vineyard sources, handled with restraint, don't need inflated prices to succeed.

