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Why a revered California winemaker is risking everything for his final project



"I'm just doing it for these little glimpses of flavor," said Marty Mathis, owner of Kathryn Kennedy Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

By **Esther Mobley**, Senior Wine Critic

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 Gift Article





Listen Now: Why a revered California winemaker is risking ever

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On a hilltop in Aptos, where the aroma of redwoods is potent and the air so foggy that windshield wipers are necessary in the summer, winemaker Marty Mathis has embarked on what he calls “the last planting project of my life.”

Last year, Mathis began planting what will eventually be an acre of the Austro-Germanic white grape Sylvaner, a paragon of the type of “quiet white wine” that has lately become his obsession.

To Mathis, the prospect of making a crisp, herbal wine from his Sylvaner vineyard is thrilling. It’s also, from a financial perspective, madness. An obscure variety like Sylvaner is unlikely to be a smash hit in California, where drinkers are accustomed to name-brand grapes like Cabernet and Chardonnay. More to the point, Mathis is 67 with no children and no succession plan for his business. Planting vineyards, which take several years to bear fruit and several more to reach their full quality potential, is a young man’s game. If Mathis works another 10 years, he won’t have recouped everything he’s put into it.

In another era, corporations might have clamored to acquire his winery, but with the industry experiencing its most severe downturn in decades, no one is buying. Mathis is part of a generation of California winemakers who drove the industry’s wave of success from the ’80s through the aughts, only to find themselves now, on the eve of retirement, stuck without the prospects they once imagined they’d have.

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Above: Marty Mathis' wines include the Kathryn Kennedy Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (left and second from left), the Kathryn Kennedy Small Lot Cabernet Sauvignon (center), the M. Mathis Winegrower Godello (second from right) and the Kathryn Kennedy Sauvignon Blanc (right.) Below: Mathis checks his latest barrel of white wine at Kathryn Kennedy Winery in Saratoga.

The owner of Kathryn Kennedy Winery, one of the most revered estates in the [Santa Cruz Mountains](#), Mathis sees the situation differently: that he has nothing to lose. In the twilight of a career spent making California's most famous wine, Cabernet Sauvignon, he's going all in on wines that have little commercial appeal — what he calls “quiet” or “frivolous” whites.



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With unruly brown hair, a thick white beard and a tendency to draw out his vowels in a way that exposes him as the Santa Cruz surfer he is, Mathis was teeming with excitement as he sat on the deck of his home, which resembles a log cabin. The Monterey Bay was just visible in the distance. He'd trained the Sylvaner vines, planted just below his porch, on individual wooden stakes, an inefficient trellis system that he described as “1700s-style.”

Mathis poured a small vial containing Sylvaner wine that he'd harvested from here two weeks earlier. The grapes registered just 17 brix, a sugar level that most California winemakers would consider wildly underripe. But that's what Mathis, who wants to create “white wines that are whispering,” was going for: searing acidity, minimal flavor. The nascent wine did, indeed, taste mostly of acid, but the flavors of grapefruit and a late-spring, still-crunchy peach peeked through.

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Mathis has in mind a specific model for the wine he wants to make. In 2015, he spent seven weeks in Austria, patronizing the Viennese wine taverns known as heurigers, where patrons sit at outdoor picnic tables and drink the current year's wine — fresh, cold — from carafes. "It's the opposite of Napa Cabernet culture," Mathis said. "I want subtlety."



Vineyard workers harvest grapes at a vineyard in Watsonville that was planted with eight different grape varieties in the model of an Austrian-style Gemischter Satz, a white field blend.

Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Mathis' main focus, Kathryn Kennedy Winery — founded by, and named for, his mother — remains devoted solely to Cabernet. His side label, M. Mathis Winegrower, is the outlet for his quiet-whites obsession. In addition to the Sylvaner at his Aptos home, Mathis has planted an Austrian white field blend at a friend's home in Watsonville; obscure Central European and northern Italian grapes at a new site in Los Gatos; and Galician and Venetian whites at a neighbor's vineyard in Saratoga.

Mathis wants to fashion them all into wines dialed down to the lowest possible volume — low in alcohol, light in flavor. It's fashionable these days for winemakers to say they favor subtler wines, but Mathis seems to take that preference to its extreme, beyond any logical endpoint. One Italian grape, Garganega, attracted him because it produces “wines so quiet they border on insipid.”

What's his endgame? “I'm just doing it for these little glimpses of flavor,” he said.



Above: Mathis supervises harvest at the Watsonville vineyard owned by John Ahner and Jody McKeller. Below: Abraham Montez harvests grapes for the Gemischter Satz blend.

Photos by Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Mathis is a winemaker's winemaker. Kathryn Kennedy Winery is canonized as one of the great Santa Cruz Mountains estates, along with [Ridge](#) and Mount Eden. Whether because of its small size — now 1,500 cases, down from 8,000 at its peak — or Mathis' aversion to courting publicity, it never achieved the global fame of those peers. "He's regarded as one of the best Cabernet producers in North America," said Ken Swegles, founder of Santa Cruz Mountains vineyard management firm Rhizos and a partner in [Madson Wines](#). "It's just a very small production."

Mathis makes his wines in a dilapidated Saratoga building, so close to Silicon Valley mansions that it looks as if it's a shed in one of their front yards. The ramshackle structure was never meant to produce wine; it has no drains. The acre of 50-year-old Cabernet Sauvignon vines outside of it is a shadow of the vineyard that once stood there, Mathis having sold off most of it to a housing developer after

his mother's death in order to pay off his siblings, who had no interest in the winery and simply wanted their inheritance.

Mathis' parents, Raymond Mathis and Kathryn Kennedy, bought the lot in 1947, when a 2.5-acre strip of land in Saratoga went for around \$2,000, he said. (Today, the median home listing in Saratoga is \$3.9 million, according to Realtor.com.) The couple were in the homebuilding business, but after they divorced, Kennedy decided to plant a vineyard, largely because she wanted to conserve the land as suburban sprawl took over the San Jose suburbs.

Kennedy enrolled in winemaking classes at UC Davis, commuting back and forth every day. There, she learned that Saratoga's weather was similar to that of Napa Valley's Oakville, and therefore a suitable climate for Cabernet Sauvignon. She planted seven acres of it, using cuttings she received from Santa Cruz Mountains winemaking pioneer David Bruce.

After graduating from UC Davis in 1979 — where Mathis majored in political science and never took an enology course — “my mom handed me a hoe,” he said, and he joined her working at the winery. Their arrangement was not always collegial. The stubborn Kennedy had learned a recipe from Mount Eden's winemaker, and she wanted to stick to it; Mathis, dreamy and naïve, longed to

experiment with different barrels and yeast strains. “She was Irish, I was young, and we banged heads,” he said.



One acre of Cabernet Sauvignon vines remains at Kathryn Kennedy Winery in Saratoga.
Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Within a few years, “my understanding of wine started to exceed hers,” Mathis said. In 1985, Kennedy ceded control but remained a presence until her death in 2009, attending wine tastings, where Mathis recalled she would always respond to the question, “How’s the latest vintage?” with the same line: “It’s typically outstanding.”

Business was brisk throughout the '90s and early aughts. California wine boomed following an influential “60 Minutes” segment extolling red wine as a boon for cardiovascular health, and Kathryn Kennedy had developed a reputation among

the cognoscenti as one of California's premiere Cabernets. Mathis piled all the excess revenue into a corporate savings account and expanded his offerings. Kathryn Kennedy's core Cabernets would always remain miniscule in volume, but Mathis hired winemaker Chris Condos to help him make a North Coast Sauvignon Blanc and a Bordeaux-style blend called Lateral.

From their first season together in 1998, Condos said he was struck by Mathis' "calming way of making wine." Condos was accustomed to Napa, where wineries expected to make a perfect wine every year, but Mathis "really embraced the vintage and didn't worry about it needing to be a certain style." When 1998 was a cold, rainy year, Condos "freaked out" that his employer would reject the light, barely extracted red wine he produced. "But Marty and Kathryn just said, 'This is beautiful, it shows the vintage.'"

Kathryn Kennedy's reputation for quality Cabernet never wavered. But in the Santa Cruz Mountains and throughout California, scores of wineries sprung up, intensifying competition. And Mathis "is not a self-promoter at all," Condos said. While many California wineries were making ever-riper, jammier red wines — not to mention building national sales teams and branding departments — Mathis stayed the course, turning out his unfailingly acid-driven, lower-alcohol Cabernets. Always a small, quiet brand, Kathryn Kennedy got even smaller and quieter.



Above: Mathis prepares to process a new harvest of grapes at Kathryn Kennedy Winery in Saratoga. Below: Abraham Montez dumps grapes into a bucket at the Watsonville vineyard.

Photos by Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

“I always said that Kathryn was like her wines: You’re rewarded for being patient and investing some time and thought,” said Eric Fountain, Kathryn Kennedy’s sales director from 2001 to 2015. “If somebody came into a restaurant expecting a really subtle, toasty Cabernet and they got something that’s linear” — laser-like, without a rich, mouthfilling texture — “and takes a second to open up, that was the difficulty.”

After Kennedy’s death in 2009, Mathis knew that the family would want to sell most of the seven-acre estate vineyard. A lifelong Santa Cruz surfer, he likened the situation to when a big wave is coming at you: There’s no use lamenting it, because it’s happening whether you like it or not. “I didn’t shed a tear over it,” he said. A housing developer subdivided the vineyard to create seven luxurious homes. Mathis was left with one acre of Cabernet vines.

That acre yields only about 100 cases per year of estate Cabernet. (The production of Kathryn Kennedy's Small-Lot Cabernet, sourced from other Santa Cruz Mountains vineyards, isn't as limited.) Recently, Mathis discontinued his wine club, which had dwindled to 20 people. In August, he said he sent an email blast to a 1,500-person mailing list recently, with an offer to buy wine, and received zero responses.

If there was ever any hope of selling the brand, or the vineyard to someone other than a housing developer, Mathis has abandoned it. "No one would have ever thought the wine industry would go the way it has in the last five years," he said. "You'd be a fool to get into it right now."

Besides, he doesn't want to sell his mom's name. He points to [Charles Shaw](#), a once-respected Napa Valley Gamay grower whose namesake brand, after being purchased in bankruptcy proceedings, became better known as [Two-Buck Chuck](#). "I'd rather her name be well regarded in some history book," Mathis said.



Adam Cacioppo harvests grapes in Watsonville for Marty Mathis' Gemischter Satz project.
Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

The fascination with quiet whites began about a decade ago, after a trip to Galicia. The Spanish region is famous for the aromatic white Albariño, but during his travels, Mathis was more drawn to a quieter, citrusy variety, Godello. He returned jonesing to make some, but didn't know where he'd find any Godello grapes in California. Then he remembered a vineyard just up the hill from his winery in Saratoga, owned by a woman named Peggy Guichard. After he'd helped her farm it in the '90s, it had laid neglected for years. In a handwritten letter, Mathis asked Guichard if she'd let him farm it again. She agreed, and in 2015 he planted Godello grapes.

On a summer morning at the top of the steep, rocky Guichard site, Mathis opened three examples of his Godello. He releases it, like all of his experimental wines,

under the M. Mathis Winegrower label, since he wants to keep Kathryn Kennedy Winery's identity focused on Cabernet. The 2021 Godello was soft and nutty, the 2023 herbal and apple-y, and the 2024 the best — and quietest — of all, summoning the sage brush and lavender that grows around the vines.

Delicious as it is, \$55 Godello does not fly off the shelf. "I've been making it for 10-12 years and I've probably sold 10-12 cases," Mathis said, admittedly understating its success. It's on the list at some high-end local restaurants such as the Plumed Horse and Aubergine, a nice "ego boost," he said, but most of it languishes in dry storage.

Godello was just the start. After visiting Galicia, he went to Austria, where the heurigers opened his eyes to the beauty of simple, fresh, cold white wines — the younger the better. The wine culture there struck him as a refutation of the gravitas and longevity that everyone in California seemed to be striving for. Mathis planted Garganega, the so-quiet-it-borders-on-insipid grape that goes into the Italian white Soave, on pergolas by the road outside his winery, and Friulano, from the sommdarling Italian region Friuli, at the Imperial Vineyard in Los Gatos. At Imperial he also planted a variety called Welschriesling — no relation to Riesling — that's popular in Central Europe and typically fashioned into sweet wines, though Mathis' is bone-dry.

"I'm tired of the pressure of \$100 Cabernet," Mathis said. "I just want to make frivolous whites."



John Ahner, who planted the Gemischter Satz vineyard at his home at Mathis' request, inspects a bin of just-picked grapes. Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Nothing feels to Mathis as frivolous, or as rewarding, as Austrian-style whites. He started by buying Gruner Veltliner grapes from Corralitos' Alfaro Family Vineyards, producing a few vintages' worth of wine that he described as smelling like "grandma's kitchen, chicken stock, muffins." But he wanted to pick the grapes so early in the season that the Alfaro crew was never quite ready, so he stopped buying the fruit after 2022. It wasn't until planting the white field blend at his friends' place in Watsonville in 2022, and the Sylvaner at his home in Aptos in 2024, that he truly began to feel the creative spark.

The Watsonville vineyard is particularly unusual for California. Modeled on the Austrian wine style known as Gemischter Satz — a blend of various interplanted white grapes harvested together — Mathis convinced his friends John Ahner and

Jody McKeller to cultivate Welschriesling, Weisburgunder, Roter Veltliner, Gewurztraminer, Gruner Veltliner, Weiser Traminer, Pinot Gris and Oraniensteiner. (Some of these are so esoteric that even California winemakers are unlikely to have heard of them.) After waiting three years for the vines to mature, he harvested his first fruit in October. He plans to call the bottling “Mixed Sentence,” a translation of “Gemischter Satz,” and is creating the label himself using cut-out letters from Kennedy’s old home-improvement magazines, glued together like a ransom note.

Notably absent from the field is Riesling, Austria’s most famous and prestigious white. Its intense aroma, often described as having a gasoline-like note, is too loud, “too obvious for me,” Mathis said.

Financially speaking, Mathis knows it’s folly. “I’ve got to stop,” he said. “Who’s going to want Sylvaner?” To keep the business going, he’s drawing from the corporate savings account that he opened in the flush Clinton years. “I don’t even do the math anymore,” he said of his accounting. “I’m so underwater on these projects that I don’t even want to know.”



Most of the grapes destined for the Gemischter Satz blend are white, but a few, like Roter Veltliner and Gewurztraminer, have pinkish skins.

Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Yet as Mathis tasted his young Sylvaner on his back porch, sporting a “Galicia 1981” t-shirt, he seemed relaxed, as if his enthusiasm for the quiet whites outweighed any of those anxieties. Was the knowledge that his winery will end with him a liberation of sorts — an absolution of having to fret about a legacy?

Ask any other vintner and she’ll tell you she’s striving for greatness, for ageworthy wines that will outlive their maker. And, to be sure, many of the Kathryn Kennedy Cabernets will almost certainly survive Mathis, even if the vines themselves don’t last forever in the Silicon Valley real-estate market. Some of his ’90s Cabs are only just now reaching their prime, their tannins having melted into silk, their characteristic floral aromas still pronounced.

What Mathis is pouring his real energy into now is designed to be ephemeral. Whispering, quiet, frivolous whites: They're not meant to last.

"It's not that important," Mathis said of those wines. "It's gone. It was the wine. It was the year."

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Esther Mobley

SENIOR WINE CRITIC



Esther Mobley joined the San Francisco Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. She reports on the business of the state's \$55 billion wine industry; reviews Bay Area wineries, wines and bars; and writes about the effects of climate change on vineyards.

Previously Esther was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York. She has worked harvest seasons at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina. She was the 2019 Feature Writer of the Year in the Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards, and her work has been recognized by organizations including the California News Publishers Association, the Society for Features Journalism and the Association of Food Journalists.

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