

# Napa Valley *Register*

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Acumen opens downtown gallery

By: Paul Franson

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Acumen Wines' owner, Chinese-born businessman Eric Yuan, probably was a happy man in the weeks before his company opened an elegant tasting room and art gallery in downtown Napa on April 29.

Not only was the tasting salon almost across the street from the new Archer hotel that will cap a long renaissance of downtown, but he saw astute Gallo pay \$300,000 per acre for Jan Krupp's famed Stagecoach Vineyards in the Atlas Peak area.

Yuan had earlier bought 220 acres of vineyards from Krupp earlier, paying significantly less than the purchase that elevated the visibility and status of the remote region.

Yuan, who attended college in Paris and lived in France and has a residence in New York, created Acumen with the first vintage in 2010.

He had been seeking a vineyard that could produce world-class cabernet sauvignon, hiring winery management executive Steven Rea and his team of wine industry veterans including Bordeaux-born winemaker Denis Malbec and viticulturists Steve Matthiasson and Garrett Buckland to find a site.

He bought Krupp's original 40-acre property (32-acres planted) in 2012. He calls it Attelas.

Yuan bought a second, 180-acre property called Edcora (84 acres planted), just a half mile away, in 2013.

The vineyards feature desired volcanic soils and a long growing season. They lie in Foss Valley, a "hanging bowl" or elevated valley at 1,300-1,600 feet altitude.

His team sought to produce Napa wines that exhibited more traditional, Bordelaise if you will, cabernets that were ripe but not overripe with depth, complexity and phenolic concentration.

"Denis has a strong vision that was based on his own tradition," said Matthiasson. "He had been here more than a decade, and he sought a more balanced version of California wines."

Matthiasson added, "We saw eye to eye."

Tradition extends to a bit of the “green” flavors older wine lovers remember from earlier days. “Mountain cabernet is supposed to have pyrazines,” he said, using the technical term for the flavors.

Hiring 22 full-time workers, some living on the property, and careful farming allow them to ripen the grapes earlier for mature flavors at moderate alcohol level.

Doing this involves not tilling the soil, leaving the cover crop long and delaying shoot thinning.

Matthiasson has replanted part of the vines, particularly those in a low spot. “They call Foss Valley Frost Valley,” he quipped.

## Strong French influence

Denis Malbec was born and who was raised in the vineyards and cellar of Chateau Latour, a Bordeaux first growth estate in the Pauillac commune of the Medoc. He was the first winemaker and made the Acumen wines through the 2015 vintage.

Tragically, Malbec died in a car accident in early 2016.

Fortunately, the winery didn’t have to look far for a replacement. Steve Matthiasson, who has farmed the vineyards, is also a talented winemaker well recognized for making distinctive wines. He was chosen as Winemaker of the Year by Food and Wine Magazine in 2012 and the San Francisco Chronicle in 2014.

He noted, “Eighty percent of the balance is in the vineyard, the rest in the cellar.”

Matthiasson laughs that some hail him as innovative, but points out that what he’s doing is making traditional wines; it’s the people making super-ripe, highly alcoholic wines that have been conducting an experiment.

Matthiasson has worked with wineries like Araujo, Dalla Valle, Spottswoode, Chappellet, David Arthur, Duckhorn, Hall and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, and he and his wife, Jill Klein

Matthiasson, have also made their eponymous wine since 2003. They live with their children on their small farm and vineyard in Napa.

Matthiasson was raised on his family's farm in North Dakota, later studying horticulture at UC Davis, where he received a master's degree, before immersing himself in sustainable farming in the San Joaquin Valley as a consultant.

He co-authored the widely-regarded Lodi sustainable farming manual, which birthed the California manual on sustainable vineyard practices in 1999, and in 2002 he moved to the Napa Valley to work as a consultant on vineyard practices. He is a partner in Premiere Viticultural Services with Garrett Buckland.

Buckland grew up in a Napa Valley grape growing family — his father owns Buckland Vineyard Management — and has worked at every level of growing ultra-premium wine grapes. Buckland oversees the vineyards, which are farmed organically.

Buckland has planted or managed vineyards for Araujo, Warren Winiarski, Realm, Knight's Bridge, Baldacci Family and Kathryn Hall. He has a degree in viticulture and enology from UC Davis and currently serves as president of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers.

Steven Rea admits that he didn't intend to become president and estate director of Acumen. A native of Los Angeles, Rea enjoyed a successful career in real estate and management consulting but his love of wine led him to study with the Court of Master Sommeliers. He started a company to help others create wineries, but ended up working for his first client.

Rea lives in Napa and rides his horse daily through Acumen's vineyard.

An elegant tasting room

Acumen doesn't have a winery yet, but has applied to build controversial Mountain Peak Winery on its property in Foss Valley. That's one reason Acumen sought a place to greet customers and club members.

It has received approval from the planning commission for a 100,000-gallon winery on its property in the Atlas Peak appellation, but an appeal is in the works

Unlike most downtown tasting room, Acumen's incorporates a high-end art gallery that will feature a rotating collection of art. The present collection features work by Vincent Xeus, many of local vineyard workers. Most pieces are large, and many cost \$25,000.

The striking space also includes a small wine bar where taps dispense some samples as well as a private tasting room and a glass-front closet for wines.

Wine gallery manager Jennifer Ryan welcome walk-in guests if they can, but reservations are suggested.

Famed sommelier and wine expert Marian Jansen op de Haar, former wine director at Fleming's Steak Houses, is estate ambassador.

They offer three seated tasting options, current release for \$25, Peak tasting for \$40 and portfolio tasting in the private dining room at 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. for \$60.

Acumen just received a permit to offer food pairings, so will be reconfiguring its kitchen for that.

The Acumen wines

Acumen's first wine was in 2010. All are Napa Valley wines:

— 2013 Acumen Mountainside Cabernet Sauvignon, \$60

— 2013 Acumen Mountainside Red Wine, \$45

— 2015 Acumen Mountainside Sauvignon Blanc, \$30

— 2013 Acumen Peak Cabernet Sauvignon is a blend of the very best blocks, marrying the grace of Attelas and the power of Edcora. Matthiasson said Attelas is more “feminine” than Edcora, showing more pepper, red fruit and softer tannins, while Edcora is more masculine with black fruit and graphite at \$150.

— 2013 Acumen Peak, Attelas Vineyard, \$150

— 2014 Acumen Peak Sauvignon Blanc, \$75

Not yet for sale are merlot and malbec. Matthiasson also plans to make a rosé from tempranillo.

Acumen Wine Gallery is at 1315 First St. in Napa. The wine gallery is open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Call 492-8336 for appointments.