

Striking GOLD

***In Northern
California's
Sierra Foothills,
Andis Wines
Hits Pay Dirt***

The striking Andis Winery, designed by Sage Architects in 2010, emphasizes functionality. The north façade is covered by a screen made from whitewashed used barrel staves.

story by David Gadd / photos by Beth Baugher

The tiny town of Plymouth, California—population 1,005 at last count—is hot and sleepy on a Monday afternoon in August, but the friendly and surprisingly hip local gathering spot, Amador Vintage Market, is doing a brisk business in sandwiches, soda pop, and cold-brew coffee. Less than an hour east of Sacramento, Plymouth lies on Gold Country’s main thoroughfare, Route 49, which leads to Sutter Creek to the south and, 40 minutes north, to Coloma; gold was discovered there at Sutter’s Mill in 1849, setting off one of the largest mass migrations in U.S. history.

But it’s not gold we’re after. Since John Sutter’s day, this land has become much better known for an entirely different commodity: wine. Plymouth forms the southwestern point of a roughly triangular-shaped appellation called the California Shenandoah Valley, which became an official sub-AVA within the vast, 2.6-million-acre Sierra Foothills AVA in January 1983. (The word “California” had to be appended to distinguish the appellation from the Shenandoah Valley AVA in Virginia and West Virginia.)

Following the valley, Shenandoah Road leads north-by-northeast out of Plymouth to become a wine trail lined with slow-moving tractors and dotted with wineries—some familiar, some as yet undiscovered. Three and a half miles from town, a strikingly contemporary building appears on the crest of a knoll, bright red pennants fluttering in the warm breeze. This is the home of Andis Wines, which since its inception just a decade ago has become one of the Sierra Foothills’ most innovative producers.

Grown from the Land

Andis is the creation (and the portmanteau namesake) of Andrew “Andy” Friedlander and his wife, Janis Akuna. Friedlander, a Marine Corps veteran, spent 50 years in Hawaii, where he built the state’s largest commercial real-estate firm. Akuna, who holds an MBA, is a financial advisor with a prominent Wall Street firm. While Andy is still actively involved in real estate in the Aloha State, Janis became so involved with the winery project that she enrolled in the Executive Wine Program at the University of California, Davis.

Completed in 2010, the 22,000-square-foot winery was intended to appear as if it had “grow[n] from the land” by Sacramento design firm Sage Architecture, which eschewed European models to emphasize functionality. One striking feature of the state-of-the-art facility is the exterior accent screen, made of whitewashed used barrel staves, that covers the north side of the building. A new private-events pavilion is currently under construction on the south side, to be used for weddings and other functions.

Bordeaux-born legend Philippe Melka’s consulting company, Atelier Melka, was brought on in 2016 to supercharge the winemaking program here. Melka is



The Andis management team on the crush pad: Winemaker Mark Fowler (with his Boston terrier, Hugo), Chief Operating Officer Jenae Plasse, and National Sales Manager Besmir “Lorenzo” Muslia.



A concrete egg is used to ferment the Andis Cabernet Franc, preserving the flavors that come from a high-elevation volcanic site in El Dorado County.



Painted Fields is the Andis Wines blend tier: a classic Sierra Foothills Old Vine Zinfandel from multiple sites, the white Bordeaux-inspired Cuvée Blanc, and the multi-varietal Red Blend, which includes Barbera and Primitivo. See Meridith May's review of the Old Vine Zinfandel on page TK.

A Closer Look at Andis Wines

Whites

"Painted Fields is our blend tier," explains National Sales Manager Besmir "Lorenzo" Muslia as he pours the **Painted Fields 2018 Cuvée Blanc Sierra Foothills (\$22)**—a medium-bodied, white Bordeaux-inspired blend of 50% Sémillon, 30% Sauvignon Blanc, 10% Chardonnay, and 10% Arinto, a citrusy Portuguese variety that adds a deft touch of acidity. "It's a blend with a sense of region," says winemaker Mark Fowler of this wine, which paints a panoramic picture of the potential for Sierra Foothills whites.

The **Andis 2018 Amador Sauvignon Blanc Sierra Foothills (\$22)** is a complete surprise. Fermented in stainless steel and aged six to eight weeks on the lees, this is the winery's most-sold SKU—with good reason. A 100% Sauvignon Blanc from various clones (including the aromatic Musqué clone) grown in several different dry-farmed, low-yield vineyards—some with 40-plus-year-old vines—it delivers opulent tropical fruit on a lingering finish. "It's got some grassiness, some minerality," says Fowler, "and it walks a beautiful balance between the two." If you don't often think of whites from the Sierra Foothills, this wine is reason to reconsider.

The **Andis 2018 Old Vine Sémillon Bill Dillian Vineyard Amador County (\$25)** is from a sandy, 10-acre head-trained vineyard that grower Bill Dillian planted in the 1970s. Unable to sell the fruit, Dillian was going to rip out the vines, Plasse recalls: "We took the fruit as a blending grape for Sauvignon Blanc but thought it was an amazing wine on its own." Andis has taken the entire crop ever since. With luscious white fruit interwoven with rich floral notes, this wine earned a spot on a top-ten list by Master Sommelier Peter Neptune as a "hidden gem of California." It would make an authoritative but not overpowering complement to rich, subtle seafood dishes.

noted for working only with small-lot, handcrafted wines, and his input helped Andis achieve maximum quality from the Sierra Foothills terroir. Earlier this year, Andy and Janis hired winemaker Mark Fowler, a local with more than 15 years of experience in the region. He works with the Melka team to shape the couple's 14-SKU portfolio of red, white, and rosé wines.

While roughly a third of their fruit comes from notable vineyards in the region, grown according to their specifications, the other two-thirds is sourced from the 25-acre Andis estate. It was planted to Zinfandel by the original owners in the 1970s, and the grapes were sold to well-known wineries such as Bogle. Today, many of the 22 planted acres are still devoted to own-rooted, head-trained old-vine Zin—a variety that has been the calling card of the Sierra Foothills since the Gold Rush days. The secret to dealing with these old vines, Fowler says, is to listen to them: "The vines read the season; they know how much fruit to set. The clones have mutated and created their own identity over time. There's a great concentration and character with those vineyards." Andis also grows Sauvignon Blanc, Barbera, Syrah, Grenache, Petite Sirah, and some just-planted Cinsault.

Although the estate lies in the California Shenandoah Valley sub-AVA, National Sales Manager Besmir "Lorenzo" Muslia made the decision, beginning with the 2017 vintage, to label all the Andis wines with the Sierra Foothills AVA—the

Newly planted Cinsault grows on a plot just outside the winery. The 25-acre Andis estate also boasts Sauvignon Blanc, Barbera, Syrah, Grenache, and Petite Sirah in addition several blocks of Amador County's famed old-vine Zinfandel.



“mother appellation,” as he calls it—while providing more precise information about the source of the grapes on the back labels. The decision builds brand consistency while also allowing the winemakers greater flexibility in sourcing fruit. “Changing to the Sierra Foothills appellation is opening us up to finding the best fruit in the entire area,” explains Fowler. “There are so many different soil types, elevations, aspects—so much more to be explored.”

Muslia, who grew up in Albania and Italy before immigrating to California, describes the Andis house style as “a hybrid—a bridge between the New World and the Old, achieved through technology in the winery and attention in the vineyard.” Harvesting at lower Brix is key; the goal, Fowler says, is to “express the character of the vineyard while exercising restraint to keep freshness and vitality in the wine.”

Keeping prices reasonable is also part of the game plan. “Our goal is to deliver wine that people can afford,” says Muslia. Andis is currently available in 23 states; Muslia, who is on the road 180 days a year, reports that sales are particularly strong in Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina (with an astounding 300 accounts) as well as in the Great Lakes states. Under Chief Operating Officer Jenae Plasse—whose family has been in Amador County since 1850—the winery team is friendly and accommodating, making Andis a rewarding destination on the Shenandoah Valley wine route. ■■



Andis red varietals include a varietally correct Petite Sirah, a Loire-worthy Cabernet Franc, and the playfully named Barbera d’Amador, the winery’s answer to the Ba rberas of Piedmont.

another venerable Amador vineyard, it’s full of feisty red fruit and the acid-laced vibrancy that makes Barbera a nonpareil food wine.

It was an Andis Cabernet Franc that shaped Muslia’s career path: “I had it in a restaurant, looked at the label, and asked, ‘Where the hell is Amador?’ I basically camped out here until they gave me a job in the tasting room.” The **Andis 2017 Cabernet Franc Hawk Creek Vineyard (\$40)** comes from a high-elevation volcanic site in El Dorado County, where the long growing season allows for full flavor development. Fermented in a concrete egg, it’s a red that any Loire winemaker would be proud of, showing suave notes of plum, sage, and black pepper on the beautifully structured, medium-weight palate.

The **Andis 2017 Petite Sirah (\$30)** is an assemblage that Muslia calls “an exercise in varietal correctness.” This sometimes unjustly maligned grape is a natural in the rugged terroir of the Sierra Foothills, and the Andis version is exemplary. Sourced from Calaveras County and Fiddletown, it’s loaded with gob-smacking notes of blackberry and blueberry, a plus-sized yet supple body, and enough length to last through sundown.

Those to whom Amador means Zinfandel will relish every sip of the **Andis Old Vine Zinfandel Original Grandpère Vineyard (\$40)**, the patriarch among the three Zins made at the winery. Planted in 1869, the Original Grandpère Vineyard, just up the road from the winery, is one of the oldest documented Zinfandel vineyards in America. Owner Terri Harvey—only the fourth family proprietor in Grandpère’s 150-year history—works the vineyard by herself and sells her coveted grapes to just four lucky wineries, Andis among them. Production is limited to 200 cases (“unless we start squeezing the roots,” jokes Muslia), and winemaking is restrained, letting the vineyard speak. “We’re not a big oak house,” says Fowler. “We focus on the vineyard, not the cooperage.” This is a stunning wine, deep and powerful, with a presence and authority that command complete attention if not a humble silence—and it’s among the best red-wine values on the market.



Reds

Like its white sibling, the **Painted Fields 2017 Red Blend Sierra Foothills (\$25)** draws on several grape varieties for complexity, including Barbera and Primitivo. This is an utterly delicious wine with a touch of tobacco on the nose and a joyous mouthful of red-fruit flavors—a by-the-glass winner for any restaurant.

“The Sierra Foothills is not a monovarietal region,” comments Fowler upon introducing the outlier **Andis 2017 Barbera d’Amador (\$30)**. Barbera has actually thrived in Amador County since the Gold Rush days, and the name is intended to recall its Piedmontese equivalents. Drawn 50% from the Andis estate and 50% from