

The



story by Eric Marsh / photos by Jeremy Ball

CONNECTION

ATC WINES LEVERAGES ITS RELATIONSHIPS IN NAPA VALLEY TO POSITION ITS PORTFOLIO FOR THE NATIONAL MARKET



ATC chief marketing officer
David Zurowski.

In 2003,

after decades of commuting from Napa Valley to the Bay Area, Charles Bartlett quit his job in the printing industry. He wanted to spend more time in Napa, where he'd grown up, and he'd always had a hidden desire to work in the wine industry—just like some of his lifelong friends who were now running the family winery as their parents did before them. Soon after his return, Bartlett established himself as a print broker specializing in wine labels and, in so doing, began to learn more about the bulk wine market, occasionally purchasing a few barrels himself to resell in small amounts.

He learned that even small producers can end up with more wine than they're capable of selling as their own. This surplus can come about for a few reasons, a common one being that, in certain vintages, boutique winemakers who've planned for incremental growth are cursed with bumper crops that require them to increase inventory. If they attempt to sell it for a cheaper price, they might negatively affect both its perceived value and their reputation in the future. Another reason is that, well, consumers aren't always buying. Such was the case in the late aughts, at the height of the recession, when many producers were saddled with finished wine.

At that time, Bartlett had already been buying and reselling wine for years, and he saw an opportunity both for himself and for the local winemakers he'd formed relationships with. In addition to growing his knowledge of bulk wine, he'd developed a firm understanding of industry trends and how winemakers and winery owners operate. As



Old friends: ATC founder and CEO Charles Bartlett and general manager John Galvin.

he consistently and covertly bought wine over the years, Bartlett continued to earn trust from producers. So in 2008, when several of them had a surplus, Bartlett made his move, turning his small-scale operation into a full-scale enterprise: ATC (Appellation Trading Company).

MAKING A NAME

ATC is a relationship-driven business inside and out. For starters, Bartlett has known ATC general manager John Galvin since they were teens. They cut their teeth together in the printing industry; in fact, Galvin recommended Bartlett for a job at the company he worked for. That's where they learned, in Galvin's words, "to understand customer needs and to find solutions to meet those needs," providing service as much as executing sales. In 2013, Bartlett brought Galvin on board at ATC—and though their vocation has changed, their principle and approach are still the same; they remain, as Galvin puts it, "solution providers in the sales world."

Nearly 13 years since its inception, "ATC has earned a reputation in Napa

for purchasing quality wine at a fair price," Galvin asserts. And the brand is efficient at it. Whether it be a few barrels or half a fermenting tank, he adds, "We take all the wine; we move it when it's needed to be moved; we pay the bill . . . and we keep things confidential, which is key to the sale." In return, ATC receives exceptionally good wines that would otherwise never hit the market.

While the company got its start by buying and selling finished wine, it eventually began blending in house and, finally, procuring raw juice and grapes, contracting reputable Napa winemakers such as Kevin Morrisey, Chad Alexander, and Julien Fayard (who now serves as ATC's master blender) to make its own wines. Today, it bottles 200,000 cases a year in its 10,000-square-foot winery and has also acquired a handful of brands, including Edict Wines and the flagship Beau Vigne.

SCALING UP

It's the ATC team's wont to continuously raise the bar through growth. That means tirelessly conceptualizing

new sales strategies while forging relationships with distributors in addition to wineries. CMO David Zurowski says that he and his audacious team don't shy away from contacting national companies that are also expanding, sometimes unsolicited. They have, in fact, built partnerships after emailing distributors directly to say: "We have opportunities that might be of interest to your organization. We're both scalable organizations, and we'd love to see if there's some synergy." If it seems as though there might be, the ATC team will then identify exactly what they think their potential partner needs and put together a proposal.

Indeed, though ATC wines had been readily available only in Napa Valley up until this year, consumers in every state but Michigan can now purchase ATC labels such as Verdon Estate, Edict, and Beau Vigne at retail, thanks to the relationships it has formed with national distributors. And if the relationships the brand has cemented with boutique wineries is any indication, those it's building with distributors will also be lasting, forming the cornerstones of the superstructure that ATC is becoming. **LT**

TASTING NOTES



Beau Vigne 2018 Romeo Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$100)

Intense dark chocolate-covered cherry and roasted coffee glide in on a sleek mouthfeel with seductive notes of blackberry and licorice. In its youth, this

broad-shouldered yet already balanced red is cloaked in dark violets that bloom as it opens up. **97** —*Meridith May*



Beau Vigne 2018 Juliet Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$100)

Spicier than her Romeo, Juliet is a savory beauty romanced by a sonnet of cigar leaf, black pepper, and sandalwood. Plummy flavors cling to dry, chalky tannins, delivering a

complex mouthfeel as notes of soy sauce and dark cherry paint the palate. **97** —*M.M.*



Verdon Estate 2018 Blue Line Vineyards Proprietary Red, Napa Valley (\$58)

Aged ten months in second-use French oak, this superb blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Malbec, and 20% Merlot announces itself through aromas of briar-laden

boysenberry, chocolate, and coffee bean. With notes of melting dark chocolate that lend graininess, the mouthfeel is sumptuous, meaty, and almost chewy before iron and white pepper awaken the back of the palate. A tremendous surge of blue fruit drenches the mouth on the finish. **94** —*M.M.*



Beau Vigne 2018 Legacy Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$75)

Blended with 10% Cabernet Franc and 5% Petit Verdot and aged 20 months in (50% new) French oak, this Cab exudes a plethora of floral notes, with dried violets

and earth at the forefront. Bold, generously built, and elegantly appointed, it has a grand presence, showing off graphite and espresso integrated with teeth-coating plum-skin tannins. **95** —*M.M.*