

THE INNOVATOR

The Sauvignon Blanc Savant

Winemaker Chris Christensen can't stop asking, "What's next?"

By Oset Babür

BY THE TIME he was 28 years old, Chris Christensen had been through two careers: For one, he sat in a cubicle working in banking during the 2008 financial crisis; the other involved clocking in at six in the morning to test samples from 150 tanks of wine for sulfur and sugar content. The former was absolutely untenable.

"I thought I should use my degree in data sciences like a good Stanford grad," he says, laughing. Fast forward to today, and Christensen has put the past 11 years into making Muscat, Syrah, and, notably, under the label Bodkin, the first American sparkling Sauvignon Blanc in Sonoma County.

Formative stints spent learning the ins and outs of winemaking as an intern at Sonoma's Gallo winery and, later, at Meeker and Armida wineries in Healdsburg eventually led to a full-time job at Medlock Ames, where Christensen says the Sauvignon Blanc bug bit—hard. "They grow some of the best Sauvignon Blanc, consistently. It's super unique, stylish, wonderful stuff," he says. There, in 2010, he experimented with skin fermentation, which turned into the first wine-making project that was truly his own. Unfortunately, it wasn't an easy start. "There just wasn't a spot in the market for it. [Customers] didn't know how to react," he says.

Instead of being discouraged, he doubled down on his passion; when the 2011 vintage came in at very low Brix (a measure of sugar content in wine grapes or juice), it was time to make the sparkling Sauvignon Blanc he'd been dreaming of.

"I wanted the ultimate brunch wine, like a mimosa that needed no orange



juice," he says. "I look back now and see that what I was really advocating for was user-friendly sparkling wine, which has really become a genre of its own over the past 10 years." Indeed, the rise of pét-nat has been both a massive help and also somewhat injurious to Christensen's market share, but he stays honest about where he stands on the spectrum. "Not everything from Bodkin is super natty," he says. He was craving an outlet for more natural winemaking that "pushed the envelope," so it was kismet last year when Jenny Lefcourt of New York-based natural wine importer Jenny & François asked him to collaborate on a new natural label called Where's Linus?

So far, Where's Linus? includes a dry, strawberry-forward rosé; a Petite Sirah

and Zinfandel blend; and—wait for it—a crisp Sauvignon Blanc. Christensen's natural urge to ask, "What's next?" has also pushed him into other corners of the industry, like creating what he calls a "bulldozer of a rosé, the opposite of the austere Bodkin rosé," with the canned-wine fanatics at Maker. On top of all of his creative

projects, he's embracing his power to make a career in the industry seem feasible for aspiring Black winemakers.

"I've been half Black since the day I was born ... but I would always avoid talking about it because I was afraid that I was going to be pigeonholed in my career," Christensen says. "I know that it's nothing that can't be learned ... Wine's a trade. I'll never be done learning, and I love that."

> FIND IT Order Where's Linus? Sauvignon Blanc (\$18), Red (\$20), and Rosé (\$19) through jennyandfrancois.com.