

HOUSEPLANTS MADE EASY! p.50

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IDEA
HOUSE
REVEAL
p.43

BIG
SUR'S
HIDDEN
TREASURE
p.64

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How Low Can You Go?

A stunning low-alcohol sparkling wine from an artist and a natural-wine maven heralds a new kind of party drink.

By ELLEN FORT

W

hen author and artist Julia Sherman opened a bottle of verjus while cooking at Scribe Winery's Hacienda during her 2017 book tour, she didn't expect it to launch a new project, let alone create a whole new category of wine. Verjus, the tart juice pressed from unripe grapes, is usually used for cooking or mixing into cocktails, not for drinking straight from the bottle. This bottle, however, had accidentally undergone fermentation and bubbled over when opened. A curious sip revealed the result: effervescent and mouth-puckeringly tart, and just slightly alcoholic, like drinking a green apple Jolly Rancher. It had the properties of wine and the taste of wine, but it wasn't really wine, at least not as it's usually experienced.

"It was kind of like a light bulb went off in my head," says Sherman. "And I thought this could be a really cool thing to try and make, since all of the ingredients are already there for fermentation: sugar in the grapes and naturally occurring yeast." And with that the idea for Jus Jus, a low-ABV sparkling

wine, was born.

With one foot in the art world and one foot in the food world with her platform Salad for President—a project showcasing artists in the kitchen that ultimately became a cookbook—Sherman says that drinking was becoming more of a habit than something she was truly enjoying, moving through openings, dinners, and parties with an obligatory drink in hand. "It seems like for a lot of people, especially in our industry, drinking is becoming an everyday thing," says Sherman. "And I didn't love that." And in her own life, drinking less had become part of her journey toward motherhood, curtailing drinking while trying to become pregnant and ultimately enjoying the way not drinking made her feel.

Spurred by her discovery at Scribe, Sherman made plans to create something that would mimic that fizzy, fun, low-ABV moment, something that was a big step away from the high-alcohol, in-your-face wines that have dominated the conversation in recent years. Winemakers are experimenting outside the typical 12 to 14 percent ABV range, championing lower intervention along the way. Natural wine's use of native yeast over commercial lends itself well to that cause due to their lower



Above: Martha Stoumen (left) and Julia Sherman taste freshly pressed grape juice before fermentation. Right: Sherman harvests grapes at Stoumen's vineyard in Mendocino County.



WINE DOWN

American winemakers are catching on to easy-drinking wines with lower alcohol levels. While it's rare to find an ABV as low as Jus Jus's, there's a growing selection of bottles hovering around 12 percent and below.



MATTHIASSEN 2018 NAPA ROSÉ
\$24; 11.5% ABV.
A quaffable Napa rosé.



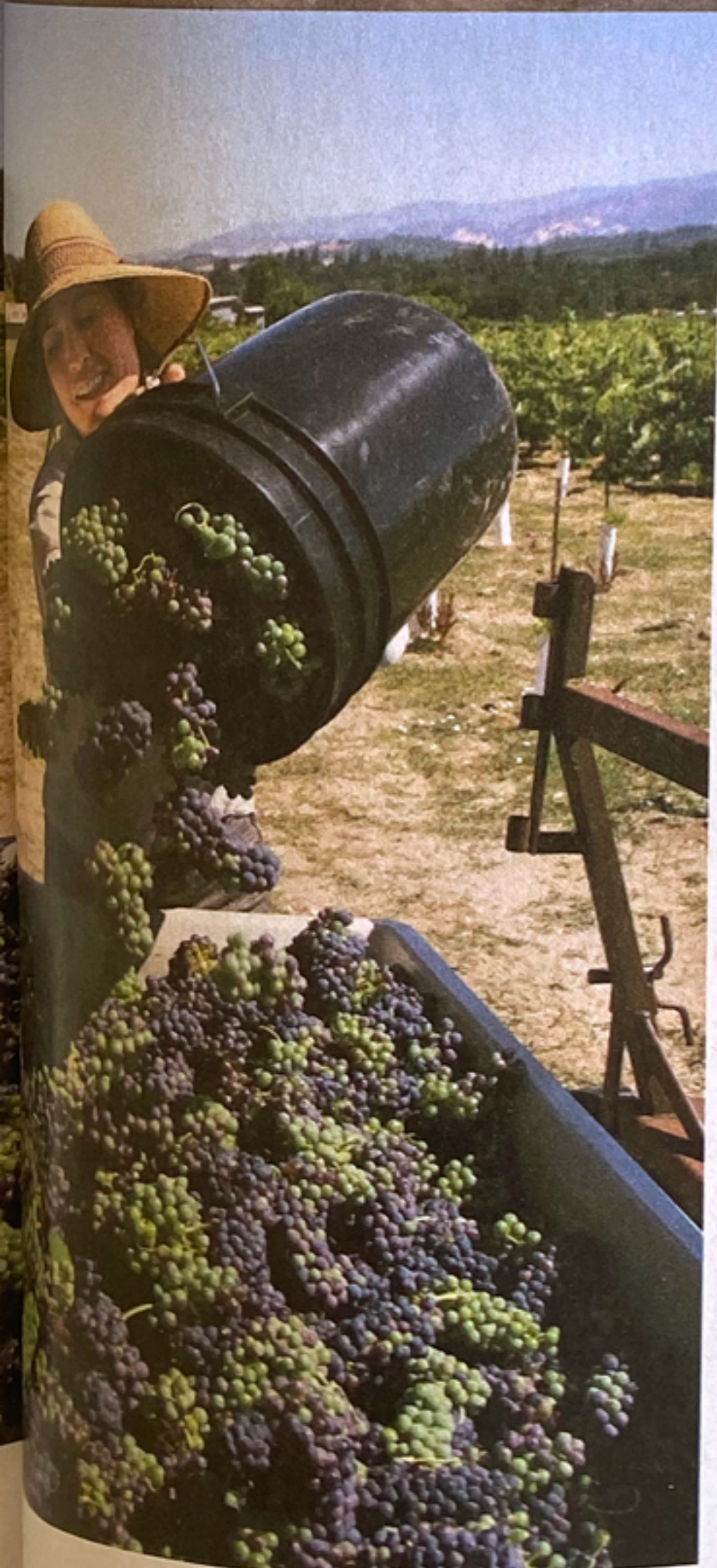
FAUSSE PISTE 2018 "FISH SAUCE" MUSCAT
\$28; 12% ABV. A lively Willamette pét-nat.



STAGIAIRE 2018 "CHEEKY BISOUS"
\$29; 11.8% ABV. A tart red blend from Santa Cruz.



TWO SHEPHERDS 2018 PICPOUL BLANC
\$26; 11.3% ABV. A crisp white from Oregon.



stamina for fermentation. Jus Jus goes even further than most, clocking in at 3.4 percent alcohol by volume—even less than a Bud Light.

Through friends, Sherman was introduced to Martha Stoumen, a Sonoma County-based winemaker who has become one of the natural-wine scene's rising stars behind the Post Flirtation Red Blend, a 50-50 Carignan and Zinfandel blend. "I loved the idea," says Stoumen. "It was something I thought was both really interesting and, from the winemaking perspective, challenging to figure out how to actually make the product because it's kind of in a

no-man's-land." She began to delve into research papers and old French winemaking texts for insights.

It became a creative experiment, using grapes picked from a vineyard in Ukiah that Stoumen leases and farms herself. Crush and fermentation took place at the winemaking facilities she shares with other producers, like Pax Mahle Wines, in Sebastopol, in which all tenants are required to ferment with native yeast that is naturally occurring on the skin of grapes and in the air. As Stoumen notes, native yeast are more "laid-back" than those produced in a commercial setting,

and they tend to ferment less aggressively, a plus for low-ABV purposes. After two years of tries, she nailed it with a wine based on Chardonnay from Contra Costa County, with a dose of Muscat, to create a rounder, gentler acidity. Stoumen ultimately chose to filter the fermented juice to stop fermentation, an unorthodox winemaking move that already fits into Jus Jus's unorthodox origins.

When Stoumen became pregnant, it was a relief to have a fun bottle to bring to gatherings and share with friends. "It's more about where it fits in your day. People who are discerning about what they want to put in their body, something grown organically without chemical additives, was appealing to people too." During her time training as a winemaker in Italy, she saw a culture of moderation. There was always wine on the table, but diners might just have one glass; when she returned to the States, the contrast was stark. There's just drinking a lot, an all or nothing mentality, she says. "I think culturally we have a ways to go to reach more balance."

In many ways Jus Jus is the perfect balance for Stoumen and Sherman. Both have babies—Sherman's daughter was born in spring of 2019 and Stoumen's son was born later that fall—and both have reached a time in their lives and careers that make this kind of partnership possible. "It's nice to be at a point in your life when you feel that you can throw an idea out into the world and the right person will come your way," says Sherman. "That feels like the luxury of being where I'm at right now." ▽

Stoumen and Sherman foot tread grapes with Sherman's daughter, Red Katz, at Stoumen's production facility in Sebastopol.



Jus Jus Spritz

$\frac{3}{4}$ oz. Cocchi
Americano
Squeeze of lemon,
plus slice for
garnish
About 5 oz. Jus Jus
Soda water

Fill a red-wine glass with ice and add the Cocchi Americano. Add a squeeze of lemon, then fill three-quarters of the way with Jus Jus. Add a splash of soda and stir. Garnish with a lemon slice.