

Bordeaux-Style Wines From Sonoma

An Interview with Jesse Katz, Founder and Head Winemaker, Aperture Cellars and Devil Proof Vineyards



EDITORS' NOTE Early adventures to legendary vineyards and wineries around the world with his family and father, photographer Andy Katz, gave Colorado-native Jesse Katz a profound respect for the creativity and art of winemaking. It was through his father's work that he recognized and fell in love with the importance of terroir, balance, and the beauty of a winemaker's influence – setting him on a path he has pursued ever since. Today, he creates distinct and nuanced wines for his brands,



Jesse Katz

Aperture Cellars and Devil Proof Vineyards, while serving as a consulting winemaker for some of the world's elite wine programs. Since his debut as a first-generation talent out of college, Katz has emerged as one of the most exciting – and accomplished – winemakers globally. His diverse experience spanning 24 harvests at wineries, along with a passion for travel, fueled his aspiration to learn from the best in the industry. After graduating from Fresno State's Department of Viticulture and Enology, he spent time studying at Pétrus in Bordeaux, Screaming Eagle Winery and Robert Foley Winery in Napa Valley, and Viña Cobos and Bodega Noemia in Argentina. In 2010, he became the youngest head winemaker in the U.S. at Lancaster Estate. During his five-year tenure there, he orchestrated the building of the new Roth winery, production facility, and tasting room. Behind the scenes, he received 90+ scores on every wine scored by the Wine Advocate and secured Lancaster Estate's inclusion on the list of Wine Spectator's Top 100 Wines. In 2013, Wine Enthusiast named Katz one of its 40 Under 40 Tastemakers, and he also earned the distinction of becoming the first winemaker on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list. He has served as a consulting winemaker for some of the biggest names in entertainment – including Von Miller, Tony Hawk, and Justin Timberlake. In 2017, Katz's wine collaboration with Shep Gordon, under The Setting Wines label, earned the designation as the most expensive 750 ml bottle of wine in the world ever sold. He then broke his own record in 2021, when a 6L of his Cabernet Sauvignon sold for \$1 million, setting the world record of most expensive bottle of wine ever sold. Katz's wines have garnered superlative recognition over the years from the top wine critics in the industry. The Aperture Chenin Blanc has earned the highest Wine Enthusiast rating for the varietal in the history of California. In 2021, his work with Devil Proof's Farrow Ranch

vineyard led him to joining the elite group of winemakers receiving 100 points from both Robert Parker's The Wine Advocate and Jeb Dunnuck. Katz has gained multiple 100-point scores not only for his Devil Proof brand, but also for Aperture. He finds joy in utilizing his craft to raise funds for charitable causes, nonprofits, and charity events. Devil Proof, Aperture, and The Setting Wines actively donate and participate in a large variety of charitable auctions, donating numerous cases of wine and custom winery experiences to causes they firmly believe in each year. Katz

has raised over \$5.8 million for charities and foundations since starting his brand and has recently joined the Board of Directors for the SommFoundation, an educational-based nonprofit benefiting professionals in the wine and spirits business.

WINERY BRIEF Aperture Cellars (aperture-cellars.com) champions a range of stunning Bordeaux style wines from the Sonoma Valley. Founded in 2009 by winemaker Jesse Katz, Aperture wines are crafted from unique, cool-climate vineyards in Sonoma's top regions. Wanting to craft wines on par with the quality and refinement that are so integral to a Bordeaux, the winery set roots in Sonoma, believing it offers the best of both worlds: new world fruit and old world elegance.

The vineyard-designate wines produced for the Devil Proof (devilproofvineyards.com) labels offer interpretations as singular expressions of each site – of grapes grown within the ecosystems of those vineyards. Those vines are well-tended throughout the growing season, from winter pruning and springtime bud break to summertime bunch growth and fall harvest. Devil Proof remains the highest-rated California Malbec by the top wine critics, including Wine Advocate, Wine Enthusiast and Wine Spectator.

When did you develop your passion for the wine industry?

My passion for wine began through travels during my youth with family and following my artist father, Andy Katz, who frequently worked on photography projects that took us to some of the world's best wine estates. These travels instilled a deep appreciation for terroir, balance, and the artistry of winemaking. This passion led me through an impressive immersion into the wine world, including studies at Fresno State and hands-on experience at

prestigious estates like Pétrus, Screaming Eagle, and Bodega Noemia. I feel very fortunate that I have been able to observe how great wines have been made throughout the world in a lot of different styles, climates, regions, soils, etc. from my childhood to my professional career. Introduced to wine in my early teens through my father's artwork, I have always been attuned to the sense of place and an artistic approach has always been integrated in me. This background and my experience making wine all over the world has given me a unique vision of how to look and find great sites that preserve and showcase the distinctive qualities of each site and varietal that make it unique, often in areas others have overlooked.

What was the vision for creating Aperture Cellars?

Aperture Cellars started from a vision throughout two decades of harvests learning from the best producers in the world. I wanted to create wines inspired by some of the best producers in the world and in 2009, I started that dream. The vision for Aperture was to create a winery that highlighted my father's lifelong dedication to his art as a photographer and showcase his photos on all our labels along with my lifelong dedication and pursuit to crafting some of the greatest wines in the world. My vision is to create something lasting and sustainable that will positively benefit this community and land that is so special in Sonoma County for the next generations to come. As we have continued to see Northern California wine country get warmer and dryer, we set to showcase what some of the best sites in slightly cooler areas for Bordeaux varietals can do. We continue to look for and plant vineyards for what we think can be successful now, but also what will be some of the best sites for the next generation. We have made 17 perfect 100-point wines from five different critics as of the 21' vintage, a region that had never had one prior to us.

How do you define Aperture Cellars' mission and purpose?

Aperture Cellars specializes in crafting exquisite Bordeaux style wines from Sonoma. These wines are made from unique, cool-climate vineyards for the varietal in Sonoma's top regions. Striving to achieve the quality and refinement that are so integral to a Bordeaux, I set roots in Sonoma, believing it offers the best of both worlds: new world fruit and old world elegance. I am passionate about honoring the art of winemaking by combining traditional techniques with modern practices, ensuring that each

bottle represents the distinct terroir of the region through balance and textures. I want to produce wines that not only delight the palate, but also connect with people on a deeper level, celebrating the craft and culture of winemaking.

What can guests expect to experience when visiting the Aperture Cellars estate?

A visit to Aperture isn't like any other in Wine Country, and whether you're a wine lover or an art aficionado, the benefits of spending a few hours here are unparalleled. Each of our three lush experiences allows guests to enjoy an intimate, seated tasting through our exceptional Bordeaux-style at the modern, state-of-the-art winery surrounded by century-old vines, first planted in 1912.

The Soil Series Experience offers a stunning introduction to the breadth of the Aperture portfolio with a journey through our Soil Series collection consisting of Bordeaux-inspired blends from exquisite vineyards in Alexander Valley and greater Sonoma County with unique soil profiles perfectly suited for these varieties. The Site Series Experience explores a rare opportunity to dive deep into the curated vineyards of Aperture Cellars while exploring the notion of terroir, focusing on unique cool-climate vineyards in Alexander Valley, and showcasing the site-driven wines from our single-vineyard cabernet sauvignon locations. The Private Lounge Experience is our most elevated and in-depth experience showcasing the most sought-after Aperture Cellars wines. This experience takes place in our pristine private gallery rooms, in a lounge setting with stunning floor-to-ceiling views of our estate vineyard, where guests will be guided through an educational journey served alongside curated food accompaniments.

Guests can look forward to enjoying a range of exceptional Bordeaux-style wines, crafted from unique, cool-climate vineyards in Sonoma's top regions, while taking in the expansive

landscape of the estate vineyards. With a glass in hand, they can relish in the scenery: the fully exposed natural beauty of the northern Russian River Valley courtesy of floor-to-ceiling windows, which look westward over our 40-acre estate and vineyards.

The scenery indoors is just as vivid. Guests can experience the fine art collection by my father, acclaimed photographer Andy Katz, that graces the walls of our gallery-inspired tasting space. Spending time with us at Aperture isn't just about the wine; it's about the entire property, and every surprise it offers.

Will you discuss Aperture Cellars' commitment to sustainability?

Aperture Cellars places a strong emphasis on sustainability in our winemaking practices. The commitment to environmental stewardship is reflected in several key areas:

- **Vineyard Practices:** Aperture Cellars implements sustainable farming techniques in our vineyards. This includes using organic practices to maintain soil health, reduce chemical usage, and promote biodiversity. We focus on soil management, pest control, and water conservation to ensure that the vineyards are environmentally friendly and producing the most expressive fruit they can.

- **Water Conservation:** Managing water resources efficiently is a priority for Aperture Cellars. We employ practices such as dry farming and in areas that need water, we use drip irrigation to minimize water waste and monitor water usage closely to ensure the use of this vital resource as efficiently as possible. We reclaim 98 percent+ of the water used in the winery and use that as irrigation back into the vineyard.

- **Energy Use:** The winery aims to reduce its carbon footprint by adopting energy-efficient technologies and practices. This includes using



renewable energy sources where possible and optimizing energy use in production processes.

- **Waste Reduction:** Aperture Cellars takes steps to minimize waste through recycling and composting. We strive to reduce the amount of waste generated during the winemaking process and repurpose byproducts whenever feasible back into the vineyard.

Overall, our commitment to sustainability reflects the broader goal of producing high-quality wines that are not manipulated. We don't fine, filter, or acidify any of our wines. We let the vineyard speak. The vineyard is the focus of not only a sense of place, but also for where we live. My family and I live on the vineyard, and we are respecting and preserving the natural environment as our home, because it is. These practices not only contribute to the health of our vineyards, but also support the broader effort towards environmental responsibility in the wine industry.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in the wine industry?

The wine industry is such an amazing field filled with joy and driven by passionate people. However, it requires substantial commitment and effort. If you lack genuine passion for this work, there are undoubtedly easier ways to earn a living. For those who are enthusiastic and just beginning their careers, I encourage you to immerse yourself fully and absorb as much knowledge as possible across all facets of the industry – winemaking, viticulture, sales, marketing, and the broader business landscape.

Find what you're good at and really go for it. Strive to be that person in your company that everyone admires for your drive and thirst for knowledge. I can't tell you how many weddings, birthdays, weekends, and nights I've missed because of harvest and work, but honestly, I wouldn't change a thing. For me, this is not just a job; it's my passion. Don't take shortcuts. Keep your head down and invest the necessary time and effort. Trust me, it's worth it in the end. ●



Aperture and Devil Proof wines (opposite page); interior and exterior view of Aperture Cellars (above)