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Realm's 2021 Spring Releases

With the upcoming 2021 Realm releases of their single vineyard wines and The Absurd, this is an opportune moment to look back at the story of Realm's dramatic past as well as the impressive changes that are going on now.



Risk

2002-2015 – This blessed plot, this earth, this Realm.

Realm was co-founded by Juan Mercado in the early 2000s. Mercado had been a medic in the army during the Gulf War and then came to work as a nurse at a hospital in Oakland, California, before moving to Napa. He caught the winemaking bug, and in 2002, with the help of friends in the industry, he was able to buy a few tons of Beckstoffer To Kalon fruit plus a little fruit from Dominus to make his own wine. By 2010, production had gone from just a few hundred cases to 2,500 cases.

In 2011, French-born winemaker Benoît Touquette came on board. Touquette had studied Chemistry and Oenology at Bordeaux University and worked at several Bordeaux wineries before arriving in California to work with wine consultant Andy Erickson. In the early 2000s, he quickly made a name for himself, working at Screaming Eagle, Ovid, and Dalla Valle. Realm was less well-known, but Touquette was drawn to the spirit of this project. He brought along his friend and mentor Michel Rolland as a consultant, adding the cherry on top of this emerging recipe for success.



Come 2011, Realm was doing everything right, but it all went horribly wrong. Like so many wineries purchasing fruit and living hand to mouth, the team was one difficult vintage away from disaster. That vintage was the cold, rainy wash-out that was 2011. The business was about to hit a financial wall.

Then, one fateful day in 2011, a young Air Force veteran and Harvard Business School Graduate named Scott Becker walked into a bar and sat down next to Mercado. Becker has been working for Bill Harlan for a few years but dreamt of striking out on his own. Before long, Becker found himself joining forces with Juan Mercado and Benoit Touquette. He had the secret ingredient they were missing—business acumen.

By the end of 2011, debts at Realm were spiraling out of control.

Juan, Benoit, and Scott had to re-start Realm in early 2012. At the time, the business was bankrupt. But, with Scott's financial know-how, they decided it was worth trying to turn things around. Scott bought out Juan's old business partner, but that didn't leave much capital to invest in the company. 2012, '13 and '14 were skinny years. Benoit became active in the vineyards, working with growers to fine-tune farming standards. They were making the wines at Chateau Boswell, which was great, but it wasn't the same as having their own home. Juan and Scott traveled across the country selling wine to whoever they could. There was a lot of back-vintage wine to move, which in theory was good for cash flow, but these were older wines not made by Benoit, wines that didn't necessarily show the future.

"I could tell stories for days about what it was like to try to turn around a brand," said Scott. "Lots of heartache, holding onto hope, cleaning up an old mess, repairing relationships with vendors who weren't paid, earning back trust from consumers who were promised something that never materialized. But through those scrappy years, the thing that kept us going was tasting the wines in barrel from 2012. We thought if we could just hold on until we put those 2012 wines onto the market, there was a chance Realm could turn into something special."



When the moment of truth came, so much was riding on Robert Parker's assessment of Realm's 2012 vintage. His reviews of the 2011s had been disastrously lackluster, with just one wine receiving a 90-point score, and the rest were in the 80s—the kiss of death. At the end of October 2014, Parker published his annual Wine Advocate Napa report, focused on the 2012 new releases. Realm's Dr. Crane Vineyard and The Absurd both received 100 points, with no label scoring below 96.

"The meaning of tasting those 2012 wines with Bob..." Becker said, "...we will never forget that, and we continue to wake up every day trying to live up to the opportunity he gave us."

Realm was back in business.

In 2015, the team at Realm took the next step toward achieving their dream. They purchased a home—the Hartwell Winery and vineyards located just off the Silverado Trail in Stags Leap District, up on Wappo Hill. "To go from struggling for survival to being able to farm our own vineyards, it's hard to overstate the significance of that," Becker said. "We worked our tails off to get here, but we are still constantly humbled by the gravity and responsibility we now carry to be stewards of the land. When you are just buying fruit, you are living year to year. When you plant your own vineyard, you have to be thinking about the next 30 or 40 years."

The team named their new home vineyard "Moonracer," paying homage to the Wappo indigenous people of northern California who once used the hill as a central lookout. Jack London, who wrote about the competitions among Native American tribes that took place during full moons, noted that the Wappos often won. Thus, Moonracer is a reference to this heritage.

"The vineyard is made up of about twelve acres in production at the moment, with another eight acres in the stage of replanting, so ultimately, we will have twenty acres surrounding the winery," Becker informed me at the time of purchase. "The original Hartwell blocks at the top of the hill are planted to two acres today, but we hope to expand that to five acres or more in time."

The acquisition of their new base kick—started a massive project to build a new winery, expand the cellars, and restructure the vineyards. Make no mistake, this was a huge financial bet—all or nothing.



2016 to Now – Beyond the Realm of Possibilities.

In 2018, Juan Mercado parted ways with Realm to start his own new passion project in Paso Robles called RIIE. Since then, Realm has continued to flourish under Becker's and Touquette's management. Its juggernaut rate of development and expansion has been nothing short of jaw-dropping.

Today, Realm has an impressive winery and underground cellar facility in Stags Leap. Surrounding this is the Moonracer vineyard, which underwent a costly redevelopment project that involved shifting a literal mountain of topsoil to install a state-of-the-art drainage system. Not forgetting the old Hartwell Estate vineyard on top of the hill, which is in the process of replanting. And, from 2018, Becker and Touquette entered into an agreement with Farella Vineyard in Coombsville, taking over the farming and management of the site, rendering it, for all intents and purposes, an estate vineyard.

In 2022, Realm purchased Houyi Vineyard and the accompanying Nine Suns Winery with the illustrious neighborhood of Pritchard Hill, placing them in the big leagues. I recently tasted the newly bottled Realm 2021s with Benoit and Scott at their new Nine Suns Winery on Pritchard Hill.

"We were purchasing fruit from Houyi Vineyard for years (since 2013), but the previous owners would keep the blocks they wanted for their label, and we got what they gave us," said Scott. "We only ever got Cabernet Sauvignon. When we purchased the vineyard, there were 21 acres planted here, with one-acre fallow. We've since grafted over three acres to Cabernet Franc. We have 18 acres producing this year."

Realm continues to outsource some fruit for a few top labels, most notably from Beckstoffer's Dr. Crane and To Kalon vineyards, but they are increasingly becoming estate-driven. As for quality, after a non-existent 2020 vintage (they took the difficult decision not to bottle and sell any reds because of potential smoke taint), with 2021, the team is firing on all cylinders again.

"In 2021, gentle extraction was key," said Benoit. "It was easy for the wine to go too far, to be too much. Ripe but not over-ripe, that's 2021."

A couple of wines not made in 2021 are the Cabernet Franc-based wines. Falstaff is only made occasionally and was not made in 2020, 2021, or 2022. Meanwhile, the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Franc label will not be made anymore.

"We only used to make about 100 cases of To Kalon Cabernet Franc, but now we have decided to blend this in with the To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon," said Scott.

Also, the last vintage of the Beckstoffer's Bourn Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon label is 2021.



A new wine in the 2021 line-up is the Nine Suns label, named after the former winery. This is a one-time wine, made only in 2021 to commemorate the Realm purchase. Nine Suns' former winemaking consultant, Philippe Melka, crafted the wine, and the Realm team blended and bottled it. "Our first instinct was to blend it in with our Houyi Vineyard wine," said Scott. "But this wine is constructed so differently. We wanted to honor what Philippe did. So, this is a one-off label." Only 500 cases were made, and the fruit is all off the Houyi vineyard.

Realm has finished preexisting contracts to sell fruit from Farella and Houyi Vineyards, keeping the production for Realm's wines.

"It's an important part of our business plan," said Scott. "Now, we're making wines with more freshness, precision, and structure because we're now in control of all the variables. We're more in control of our winemaking and fruit sources."

This impressive set of 2021 new releases showcases what this expanded, newly fortified Realm is now capable of producing in a great vintage. Call it a game of Risk well played. Bravo!