

{ sommelier spotlight }

A People Business

DESMOND ECHAVARRIE, MS, TRACES HIS JOURNEY FROM WINE SERVICE TO BOUTIQUE DISTRIBUTION AND PRODUCTION by Stacy Briscoe



After years on the hospitality side of the business, Desmond “Des” Echavarrie, MS, founded Scale Wine Group in 2016 to serve as an advocate for small, family-owned brands.

DESMOND “DES” ECHAVARRIE, MS, started his career in hospitality at the age of 14. “My mom said, ‘I have a birthday present for you, but I can’t wrap it.’ She tossed an apron at me and announced, ‘I got you a job,’” he recalls. This humble beginning in the kitchen of a small mom-and-pop Italian joint in his home state of Arizona was all it took to hook Echavarrie. “I loved the environment, the people, the communal experience,” he says. “By the time I was 17 I was closing up the place at night.”

Echavarrie climbed the hospitality ladder from saucier to server to sommelier in the span of just a few years, working at ever-more-prestigious restaurants alongside legendary chefs and eventually landing in Napa at Thomas Keller’s The French Laundry; while there, he achieved the coveted title of Master Sommelier. Ever the curious-minded entrepreneur seeking to propel his career to even loftier heights, Echavarrie asked himself, “Where do I go from here?”

The answer, he found, lay in learning “a new side of the business,” he says. “I didn’t yet have any business skills, but my background in wine, my wine studies, and the MS credentials . . . were all great stepping stones. And I was able to parlay that experience into my position at Realm.” Now a notable Napa name, the boutique winery, which was founded in 2002, had recently undergone a restructuring when Echavarrie stepped in as director of sales in 2014. There, he was able to immerse himself in the wine business from another angle. “I had some incredible mentorship,” says Echavarrie, “and it helped solidify in my mind that I wanted to start my own wine business

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SCALE WINE GROUP



Des Echavarrie works with winemaker Britt Richards (left) on his boutique label, Alta Nova.

and carve a career working with small, independent producers."

And so in 2016, Echavarrie founded Scale Wine Group to do just that, working with up-and-coming brands to help them get their foot in the door of the wholesale market. "It's getting harder and harder in this challenging market for small producers to have a presence. Larger-volume companies have such a priority with major distributors. We are one of the last advocates for small, family-owned brands," he says, adding that his philosophy is built on an often-forgotten mantra: "The wine business is 100% a people business." For him, successfully connecting his clientele with the right outlets is all about cultivating relationships. "It might sound cheesy, but when you have the right relationships with distributors and accounts that you can rely on, they'll let you know what [wines] they're looking for in their portfolios," he explains. "And I've developed what I believe is a good sense of where we can sell and what's going to be successful."

He's also investing in his own team, growing a robust roster of regional salespeople who can work more closely with distributors in specific markets. "What we need to do is give more support to the distributors, coordinate closer connections between them and the boutique wine brands, and get these brands more involved in the target market space," says Echavarrie. "And really that's just taking

a cue from the consumer: This DTC-like approach makes it feel like they have a personal connection with the owner, vintner, and winemaker and brings excitement—and then *they'll* become advocates for the wines."

From hospitality to wholesale, Echavarrie is now taking what he's learned from the business side to craft his own wines, founding his boutique label, Alta Nova, with the 2016 vintage. As the name implies, it sources mountaintop Napa fruit to produce both single-vineyard expressions and wines celebrating the broader Napa AVA, with an annual production of 2,000–3,000 cases. Echavarrie refers to himself as the vintner and works alongside winemaker Britt Richards, who oversees production. "We're in sync every step of the way," says Echavarrie. "I know what I want, she knows how to make it, and we're constantly talking and tasting together."

Another project Echavarrie has in the works is a relaunch of Band of Vintners, a label he took over in 2023 that was previously based on one wine, a collaborative effort from several esteemed Napa winemakers. Echavarrie's vision is to work with up-and-coming winemakers separately to craft something experimental that's interesting to them. "Instead of seven cooks in the kitchen making one dish, we'll bring on new voices with unique stories and give them carte blanche to make their wine," he says. *sj*



With an annual production of 2,000–3,000 cases, Alta Nova features both single-vineyard expressions and wines celebrating the broader Napa AVA.

TASTING NOTES

Alta Nova 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$33) Tobacco, garrigue, anise, and leather meld on the palate of this big-boned Cab; showing style, substance, and balance, it's powered by blackberry-lathered graphite. The dusty mouthfeel is energetic and shadowed with earthy charisma. **94** —*Meridith May*

Alta Nova Cellars 2022 Lot 1981 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$40) Violets bloom on the nose, leading to silky, spicy notes of dried heather; vanilla, and boysenberry. Luscious and delicious, with round, seductive tannins that dry the palate amid notes of cocoa and walnut. **94** —*M.M.*

Alta Nova 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$63) Boysenberry and tobacco are bound in leather and held in check by sultry, round, dusty tannins. Structured and intense, graphite stands firm, contributing midpalate tension. It's an overall luxurious wine dressed in a velvet robe. **95** —*M.M.*

Alta Nova 2019 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$95) Dusky notes of black tea, tilled soil, molasses-soaked cedar, and walnut show depth and glamour. Plum and espresso are deep and resonant on the dramatic finish. **97** —*M.M.*