

cover story

FORCES *of* NATURE

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



Alicia Ysais (center) leads winemaking at Delicato Family Wines' Manteca winery, working with (from left to right) Gabriela Gonzales, Denise Worden, Ashley Maniti, and Lisa Vossekuil.

66 THE TASTING PANEL ~ MAY/JUNE 2025

MEET THE TALENTED TEAM OF WOMEN BEHIND DELICATO FAMILY WINES

BY STACY BRISCOE



Director of winemaking Andrea Card (center) leads the Francis Ford Coppola Winery team, which includes Sarah Adams (left) and Ali Davignon.

Speaking to members of the winemaking team at Delicato Family Wines, you'll hear a common sentiment being echoed: Working for the company *feels* very much like a family affair—it's about teamwork, collaboration, community. And it's a family whose female leadership has played a significant part in its growth and success: Women not only comprise 37% of Delicato's senior leadership team (by comparison, women make up only 29% of leaders in corporate America, according to a McKinsey survey) but, as of 2025, 61% of its winemakers are female. Each one brings her own unique background, talents, experience, and perspective to the table; here are a few of their stories.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF DELICATO FAMILY WINES

Alicia Ysais

Vice President of Winemaking

One of the key markers of a nurturing workplace is employee retention. After graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in 1994 in pursuit of “any job in analytics,” as she puts it, Alicia Ysais landed her first position at Delicato’s Manteca, California, facility. Now marking her 30th anniversary at Delicato, the biochem grad has risen to the top—from lab rat to vice president of winemaking.

“Growing up, wine was not a part of life for me or my family,” says Ysais. “Around the house, it was mostly beer and tequila when we celebrated events.” But wine chemistry, Ysais says, opened her eyes to the relationship between art and science in winemaking. “Once I could tie the science behind [the process] with the sensory impact, that spoke volumes to me,” she says. “It’s amazing to see how something simple like grapes can evolve in fermenters to become something so different, so aromatic.”

There’ve been ups and downs, just as with any career. “All that passion

and emotion during harvest—there are days when you want to pull your hair out, but when it’s over, you forget about that and want to do it all over again,” says Ysais, who attributes her long tenure in no small part to the encouragement she’s received from the top down since day one: “Before there were catchphrases about DEI, Dorothy Indelicato and the whole family have always been open and supportive.”

Ysais considers herself lucky—she’s not encountered much adversity as a woman in the wine industry; her career is based on her merits and passion. “When I first came to work for Delicato, there was one female winemaker, Charlotte Madison,” recalls Ysais. “I distinctly remember her coming to me in the lab and saying, ‘Hey, there’s a position open for an enologist. You should apply.’ I had already thought about it, but sometimes it takes that outside nudge.”

Though she can no longer thank the late Madison in person for the nudge that determined her career trajectory, what Ysais can do is pay it forward. As VP of winemaking for multiple brands—including Bota Box, Bota Box Breeze, and Delicato’s California- and



Lodi-appellated red varietal wines and blends—Ysais is responsible for managing a team of 12 winemakers, half of whom are women. “One of the most gratifying things about my job is encouraging my team to take the next steps in their careers—and making sure it’s a safe space for that to happen,” she says.

Denise Worden, Gabriela Gonzales, Ashley Maniti, Lisa Vossekuil—these are just a few of the powerhouse women behind Delicato’s staple brands. Ysais realizes there’s a misconception about large-volume labels, which are



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Andrea Card

Director of Winemaking

Andrea Card spent nearly two decades at Sonoma winery Benziger before joining Delicato. "I started as an intern and left as a winemaker," she says of her time at the Glen Ellen estate. "[But] I needed to see more of what the industry was about if I wanted to be a good winemaker and become part of something bigger. . . . I maneuvered my way into Coppola because I wanted to go back to [a] family-owned [business]." When she started in 2017, the company was under the proprietorship of Francis Ford Coppola; Delicato acquired it in 2021. "It's just a bigger family," says Card.

That big family produces a big portfolio. Card oversees the production of all of Coppola's brands. Noting that "boutique and small facilities are amazing," she explains that her team takes the same approach on a larger scale: "Every grape matters. The base of the wine has to be amazing, which means starting with amazing grapes, good relationships, and good intentions." With that in mind, Card

says Coppola's grower-relations department is her best friend. "I don't need to tell farmers how to farm, but making sure our forward-thinking winemaking is communicated, that our partner-growers understand the style of wine we're making and how we foresee grapes grown for certain flavor characteristics, is important," she says. "Fortunately, we have so many growers that have partnered with Coppola since its inception, and that's really special because it's not just a good business relationship, it's a friendship."

Like Ysais, Card comments that one of the most challenging aspects of the job is conformity of style. "Consistency is actually a really hard thing to do," she says. "Our goal is always to have the best-quality wines in the style consumers expect at the price they're willing to pay. If the consumer doesn't want it, we're not doing ourselves justice." Meeting those expectations may require adjustments in the vineyard or cellar, which means being flexible from vintage to vintage in terms of how final blends come together. "We always look at our options in order to bring the wines into balance and are open

often perceived as "recipe wines." "I would like people to know that they are not," she says. "There are people behind them making, tasting, adjusting to make sure we get it right. Consistency is key in our products. Our consumers are expecting quality but also consistency in every box or bottle—and that can be challenging but also fun."



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—Andrea Card

to the fact that what we do one year may need to be tweaked the following,” says Card. “That’s what makes winemaking fun.”

As a leader in the company, “I want my staff to grow into my position. That’s the intention, which can scare some people, but not me. I have the pleasure of working with two bright, intelligent women, and that’s thrilling for me,” she says, referring to her immediate reports, Sarah Adams and Ali Davignon. She comments that she was fortunate to have women winemakers around her early in her career acting as mentors and role models: “Now, 24 years later, there are so many more women and people from different backgrounds—I find that fascinating. It just adds to the differences in wines and the fingerprints on the wine industry. . . . Wine is a reflection of people,” she says.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DELICATO FAMILY WINES

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Juliane Schmitt

Chief Executive Officer, Schmitt Söhne

Representing the fifth generation in the wine business, Juliane Schmitt is the first woman to step into a leadership position at her family’s Schmitt Söhne winery in Germany. The German word *söhne* in fact translates as “son”; until Schmitt took the helm as CEO, there had always been a patriarchal head figure. “My father, who was the previous CEO, made it clear that neither my brother nor I had to be a part of the business,” she says. So, when she and not his son showed an interest in coming on board, there was no qualm or query: “My dad just always wanted us to be happy.”

But Schmitt hadn’t initially planned on building a career at Schmitt Söhne, let alone stepping into the

chief executive position. After completing a degree in business management, she worked for other wineries as well as a distributor (“I never veered far from the material,” she says with a laugh) before taking her first job at Schmitt Söhne. For a while, she continued to look for other opportunities—but eventually, she notes, “I loved it, and I decided, no, I don’t want to do something different.”

Today, as CEO, Schmitt has her fingers in all aspects of the company, which focuses heavily on export sales, with the U.S. being its strongest market. “Our success started with the [Schmitt Söhne Family Wines] range, with the idea that [the names of] German wines tend to be very difficult to pronounce and European wines can be difficult to understand. We wanted to turn that around,” she explains. Schmitt Söhne’s wines indicate their varieties on the front label, provide sweetness scales on the back, and use clear descriptors to communicate style. “We want to make German wines approachable and easy to understand—both for consumers as well as [for] shop owners and restaurateurs to be able to talk about and sell the wines easily,” she adds.

Key to the success of the export business is working with distributors around the world—including, of course, Delicato Family Wines in the U.S.—who have expertise in what regionally specific demographics enjoy and are seeking out. For example, Delicato was early to flag the rise in low- and no-alcohol beverages; in response, Schmitt Söhne added two NA wines to its portfolio last year. “We have a leg up in this space,” says Schmitt, pointing to Germany’s long history in the low-ABV category. “Because our wines tend to be lower in alcohol naturally [due to the cooler climate] and our use of more aromatic varieties like Riesling, there’s less manipulation involved, and that comes across in the final product.”

Asked about her role as a woman leader within the German wine industry, Schmitt comments that it’s still a rarity in her country and culture. “Most companies I know in Germany don’t have many women in management,” she acknowledges. “That could be for a variety of reasons, but it still feels like a boys’ club sometimes. I hope that changes.” *LM*



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Tasting Notes

Schmitt Söhne 2023 Dry Riesling, QbA Rheinhessen, Germany (\$11)

Omnipresent acidity lights up honeysuckle and tangerine along with fresh and lively notes of Bosc pear and banana custard. Clean minerality washes the finish. **90** —*Meridith May*

Francis Coppola 2023 Diamond Collection Chardonnay, California (\$14)

Aromas of orange peel, mango, and yellow flowers arouse the senses. Toasty at the onset, the palate reveals hazelnut and lime zest before a finish of luscious pear tart; balanced acidity keeps it lively. **90** —*M.M.*

1924 2023 Limited Edition Double Black Cabernet Sauvignon, Lodi (\$14)

Mouth-filling notes of blackberry, graphite, smoky leather, and dark chocolate coat the tongue and make a lasting impression. As rich as it is, this delicious wine possesses balance between fruit, oak, and acidity. The flavors go on and on. **91** —*M.M.*

Three Finger Jack 2022 Wild Country Red Blend, Lodi (\$18) At 15.5% ABV, this wine is bold and ripe, with notes of black cherry dipped in milk chocolate. Its acid structure reins in its concentrated richness, leaving behind savory notes of cigar leaf and toasty cedar. **92** —*M.M.*

Sofia Blanc de Blancs, Monterey County (\$19) White flowers bloom from the glass with a waft of fresh linen. Honeyed peach, lemon biscuit, and jasmine are sensuous, their aromas lingering with each sip of this blend of 91.9% Chardonnay, 6.9% rosé of Pinot Noir, and a fraction of other grapes. Delicate bubbles dissipate to reveal underlying minerality. **93** —*M.M.*

Bota Box Breeze Pinot Grigio, California (\$23/3-L) At only 8% ABV and 80 calories per serving, this wine shines brightly with light and airy notes of peach, wispy white flowers, and vanilla cookie. Freshly squeezed tangerine glides to the crisp finish. **90** —*M.M.*

Bota Box Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$23/3-L) Housed in eco-friendly packaging, this is a wine of substance, with flavors of blackberry ganache and blue flowers. Held up by supple tannins and a fine acid structure, the silky mouthfeel is as impressive as the liquid itself. **92** —*M.M.*

Gia Coppola 2022 Red Blend, Paso Robles (\$45) A rapturous blend of 35.9% Primitivo, 25.6% Petite Sirah, 19.5% Syrah, 14.7% Tannat, and small amounts of Zinfandel and other red grapes sourced from a 100% California Certified Organic Farmers–certified vineyard and aged four months in American oak. Sturdy tannins meet a sleek, generous flow of boysenberry, toasted cherrywood, dusty cocoa, and new leather. Sophisticated, with depth of flavor and a defined finish of white-peppered plum skin and violets. **94** —*M.M.*