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Sonoma's Obsidian Winery is seeding the next generation of winemaker

By Jess Lander
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Obsidian Wine Co. invited its Rabbit Hole Entrepreneur Program recipients to pour their wines at a wine club event in December. The program provides emerging winemakers discounted custom crush services, resources and mentorship. Provided by Obsidian Wine Co.

In 2021, Justin Michelle Ward Trabue searched all over Napa Valley for a place to make wine for her new brand, Ward Four Wines. She was awarded a \$25,000 grant to fund the venture, but pricing at Napa's custom crush facilities was so high — roughly \$3,500 per ton of grapes — that her entire grant would have gone to winemaking, leaving her with no money to cover other expenses, such as grapes, transportation of said grapes to the winery and bottling materials.

She moved her search to Sonoma, where she connected with the owners of Obsidian Wine Co. The meeting was kismet: Obsidian had been developing an incubator to help young winemakers get their brands off the ground, the Rabbit Hole Entrepreneur Program. Trabue would be the first to go through it. "The next generation has a ton of ideas, but they're missing cellar space, capital and community," Obsidian co-founder Arpad Molnar said. "In the wine industry, that access is the bottleneck."

Trabue got a significant discount on her first year of custom crush services — about half of what other wineries quoted her — in addition to resources and mentorship from the Obsidian team. Unlike most custom crush facilities, where clients hand over winemaking duties to an in-house team, Obsidian allows and encourages its entrepreneurs to do everything themselves, including crushing, punchdowns, racking and bottling. This gives them full control over how their wines turn out instead of relying on someone else to carry out their vision. "I was worried about handing my babies over to other people," Trabue said of the grapes she sources. "I really get to make (the wine) my own."

The Rabbit Hole program is the brainchild of Obsidian production director Casey Graybehl, who launched his own side project, The Grenachista Wine Co., at Obsidian in 2014. Named after Obsidian's experimental line of Rabbit Hole wines, which includes Pezsgo, a sparkling Petite Sirah, and several low-ABV piquettes, the program has naturally attracted winemakers who "want to push the limits a bit and try some new things," Graybehl, who's worked at Obsidian since 2011, said. "We've thrown a lot of spaghetti at the wall.

Trabue is working with "varieties people know (of), but don't always know what they're like," she said, such as Muscat, Mourvedre, Barbera and Viognier. Melani Vargas, the Rabbit Hole program's 2025 recipient, made a skin-contact Viognier as the first wine for her brand Squish Cellars, which she started with her partner, Deniro Keck. Vargas discovered Obsidian after she "low-key stalked" Trabue on Instagram because she "was as involved (in making her wine) as we wanted to be with our winemaking."

Because of its extremely limited-production Rabbit Hole wines, Obsidian is uniquely outfitted to run an incubator program, which picks one recipient a year. Few custom crush facilities have the equipment to manage winemaking in such small quantities, yet another barrier to entry for winemakers just starting out. "Nobody wants someone coming in as a custom crush client and making one ton. It takes the same amount of bandwidth to run a one-ton client as a 100-ton client," Graybehl said. "It just doesn't pencil out.

Graybehl makes himself "totally available" to the winemakers as a mentor, a practice he said has become increasingly hard to find in California's most "commercialized" wine regions, like Napa Valley and Sonoma. "Everyone is kind of on their own little island. I know some places that will take smaller clients, but you're a thorn in their side. It doesn't generate a feeling of goodwill," he said. "But there are no secrets here."

There have been four Rabbit Hole entrepreneurs thus far and some of the program's early recipients, like Trabue — who offers tastings of her wines on Napa River gondola rides — have also taken to mentoring incoming participants "At any custom crush facility, you'll meet winemakers who will give you advice, but this felt different in that they really go out of their way to support you," Blair Feng, the 2024 Rabbit Hole entrepreneur, said. She produces minimal-intervention Pinot Noir for her brand Leap of Grapes Wines, which she started with two friends. "We don't have roots here. We don't have parents or uncles who know somebody to guide our way."

There are only a few requirements. Applicants should have the required licenses, permits and insurance for launching a wine brand — or at least be working towards that — and plan to produce no more than five tons, equal to roughly 300 cases. If winemakers remain in the program beyond the first year, Obsidian continues to offer a subsidized custom crush rate.

It wasn't intended, but the program has also become a sort of fellowship for underrepresented winemakers: Thus far, all Rabbit Hole recipients have been BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color). As of 2020, less than 1% of U.S. wineries had a Black owner or winemaker, according to Wine & Spirits magazine; Trabue said she was the only Black student in her "entire four-year winemaking degree."

The Rabbit Hole program is currently accepting applications for its fifth vintage, but for the first time, Obsidian hasn't received many submissions. Graybehl, who said people are usually "lining up" for the opportunity, thinks the wine industry crisis could be to blame: "We normally have a bunch of people," he said. "But I feel like no one in their right mind is like, 'I'm going to start a label right now.'"

Yet the industry's challenges make a program like this even more critical, and Molnar hopes other wineries will replicate the idea. "It's a scalable answer to a structural problem in the industry," he said. "You're never going to get the next generation of drinkers unless they're matched with the next generation of producers."