

Custom crush wineries: the California scene and wines to try

How do you break into the wine business with a new winery project without breaking the bank? If Dave Phinney's The Prisoner is anything to go by, then custom crush facilities might be the answer. Stacy Slinkard explores this expanding wine model in California.

By Stacy Slinkard May 29, 2022

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Some of the wines made in the Grand Cru Custom Crush facility.

It's no secret that buying or building a winery requires a significant capital investment. With initial expenditures being cost prohibitive for most start-up projects, many would-be winemakers might never get made.

Enter the imaginative (and relatively economical) custom crush concept. Custom crush facilities are bonded wineries that allow their clients to produce wine on site. They typically provide start-to-finish winemaking equipment and consulting services for both commercial and private clients.

JW Reynoso of Reynoso Family Vineyards in **Sonoma**'s Alexander Valley, explains: 'As barriers to entry increase with land values, construction costs and, most importantly, regulatory requirements, custom crush becomes a much more attractive and economical option.'

The innovative winemakers and growers using these facilities bring great dynamism to both their wines as well as their direct-to-consumer marketing strategies. Wine volumes vary wildly, from boutique one-off labels of a few hundred bottles to larger portfolios, where production numbers exceed 10,000 cases a year.

What are custom crush wineries?

Custom crush facilities allow members to share the collective costs of making and marketing wine – including dealing with all the regulatory paperwork required to be a fully licensed and bonded winery.

Facilities not only provide high-end winemaking equipment, a range of tanks and barrels and comprehensive packaging, bottling lines and storage options. They also offer access to skilled winemaking staff, marketing services and, more recently, on-site tasting rooms for clients to showcase their wines directly to consumers.



Winemaking facilities at The Wine Foundry in Napa.

Sites offer both commercial and private clients everything they need in a functional grape to glass service. Many commercial brands bring in their own fruit and winemakers, making all of the vinification decisions from crush to bottle themselves. Private clients may need more technical input, and tend to rely on custom crush facilities to assist in everything from sourcing fruit to winemaking and packaging with the in-house winemaking team.

Essentially, the custom crush model comes down to economies of scale, allowing producers to focus on building a brand, without the worry about capital investments, infrastructure, equipment maintenance or extensive staffing requirements.

‘Custom crush sites are often incubators for small brands,’ explains Robert Morris, co-founder of Grand Cru Custom Crush. ‘And there are some pretty amazing wines made by some very talented winemakers coming out of today’s facilities.’

Who uses them?

Start-up wineries are the ideal custom crush client, says Ryan Pritchard, winemaker for Flambeaux Wine and **Three Sticks**. ‘It’s a way for innovative winemakers to get access to the equipment and expertise they might not have had elsewhere.’ The facilities often function as an incubator for start-up brands until they can fund their own wineries. Established winemakers are also tapping into the model to make their own labels, or partner with upcoming brands on projects. Many also look to custom crush facilities to help shoulder expansion by increasing off-site tank space for portfolio development. Even winemaking legends like Philippe Melka (Lail, Brand, Raymond, Moone-Tsai, Fairchild etc) use them for client projects.

Reynoso has been making estate-grown **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Syrah** and **Sauvignon Blanc** with Sugarloaf Crush for the past seven years. ‘It can actually be better than owning your own winery, as you have access to winemaking tools and equipment that might otherwise be out of reach,’ he explains.



The hospitality space at Sugarloaf Crush in Sonoma.

Many consumers may not realise just how many well-known, affordable and approachable brands are being made right alongside premium wines selling for hundreds of dollars. Whether clients bring in their own fruit and winemaker, or opt to buy a finished wine to bottle and label privately for wholesale or retail intent, custom crush allows for easy pivots as a one-stop winemaking shop.

However, it's not just winemakers and start ups that are leaning into the model. Growers are also utilising custom crush in big ways. According to Raleigh O'Brien, director of winery operations at Red Custom Crush, growers who don't sell their fruit at harvest can sell the finished wine through brokers, giving them a more profitable alternative when grape prices aren't optimal, or when the buyers are not available at harvest time.

Custom crush facility vs European cooperative

The European winery co-operative concept and the custom crush model work on a distinctly different premise. Unlike a co-op, which is usually owned by a collective of growers or winemakers who pool resources to share equipment, knowledge and often grapes, custom crush facilities have clients who each pay for that access.

'Custom crush sites are cooperatives in a sense that you are sharing equipment and resources,' says Pritchard, 'but brands are operating independently within the structure of the facility.'



Ryan Pritchard uses the Grand Cru Custom Crush facility for his Flambeaux wines.

Raleigh O'Brien with Red Custom Crush adds: 'While our ownership structure is different, the service we provide remains the same, and that is to offer a facility and processing for both winemakers and growers, typically at a much lower cost than they'd face in building their own winery.'

It's no secret that opening a new winery in prime regions like **Napa Valley** or **Sonoma County** is cost prohibitive for most – from the initial capital investment needed to build or buy it, to the continuing maintenance.

That's the niche that custom crush facilities meet – in all their unique, scalable and versatile ways. And it's a model we will undoubtedly see increase in **California** and beyond, as more enterprising start-ups become recognised, inspiring others to give their wine ideas wings.

The Prisoner

Perhaps the most famous custom crush client is Dave Phinney. You might not have heard of him, but you will certainly know his red blend The Prisoner, which had an initial production of just 385 cases when he first made it in 2000. He sold the brand in 2010 for a reported \$40 million, and it is now part of the giant Constellation, which now churns out close to 200,000 cases a year.

Four top names in the California scene

Grand Cru Custom Crush

This facility in [Sonoma](#) is home to more than 20 family-owned wineries, producing between 60,000 and 80,000 cases of wine a year. Black Kite, Flambeaux Wines, String Cellars, Ernest Vineyards and Maritana are top brands to keep an eye on. With a focus on hospitality, Grand Cru was one of the first sites to include upscale private tasting rooms for its clients to book for customers. Visitors can drop in for tastings of member wines and it also boasts a retail shop.

Sugarloaf Crush

Once a custom crush client itself, [Sonoma](#)'s Sugarloaf Crush makes wine from 44 [California AVAs](#) and 35 grape varieties. Its state-of-the-art equipment includes access to a cloud-based winery management system that allows clients to track inventory and work orders in real time. Hospitality is a big deal here and general manager Ronald Du Preez has created a 650sqm wing complete with commercial kitchen, indoor and outdoor space for both intimate tastings and large-scale events and even bocce ball courts. Brands to try include: Sosie, J Cage Cellars, McIntyre and Reynoso Family Vineyards.

Healdsburg Custom Crush

Rob Kblecka of Robert James Wines heralds HCC as a 'winemaker's crush facility': winemakers of small-lot, premium brands are hands-on themselves instead of the HCC in-house team making wine to client specifications. Wineries of note include Robert James Wines, Sassoferrato and Brick & Mortar.

The Wine Foundry

From the usual high-tech facilities for commercial brands, to micro-scale opportunities for friends to create a custom barrel of wine together, to learning how to design, package and launch a private label – the menu options at this [Napa](#) business are staggering. Innovative wines coming out of The Wine Foundry range from the Anarchist Wine Co's orange wine made from skin-contact Pinot Blanc, [Gewürztraminer](#) and [Viognier](#), the approachable appeal of Ludor's Sonoma County [Cabernet Sauvignon](#), to The Wine Foundry's own luxury single-vineyard Cabernet.

Custom crush wineries: 10 top picks from California



Maritana Vineyards, La Riviere Chardonnay,
Russian River Valley, Sonoma County, California,
USA 2019

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

This barrel-fermented blend of four vineyards is pure and precise, with ripe apple and baked pear aromas. Subtle, creamy lees notes give delicate texture to the full-bodied palate which is layered with tropica...

Points 92



Sassoferrato, Keyhole Ranch Vermentino, Russian
River Valley, Sonoma County, California, USA 2021

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Cool coastal breezes and a mix of gravel and clay loam soils give rise to this incredibly lively 'just say summer' Vermentino. Intense aromas of lemongrass, fresh lime zest and a heady blend of tropical notes run...

Points 92



Cobden Wini Wines, Dalton Vineyard Marsanne-
Roussanne, Sierra Foothills, California, USA 2019

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

A delightful blend of 75% Marsanne and 25% Roussanne from a well-established, higher-elevation vineyard (460m) in the Sierra Foothills. Opens with buttery brioche aromas followed by ripe apple, pear and...

Points 91



Modus Operandi Cellars, Antithesis Proprietary Merlot, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

+ Add to My Wines

Plush, opulent and powerful, this Merlot-dominated blend opens with an outstandingly complex aroma of blackberry, wild herbs, tobacco leaf and violet over layers of graphite and cedar from the 22 months in ne...

Points 95



Black Kite Cellars, Gap's Crown Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California, USA 2019

+ Add to My Wines

At 120m altitude, Gap's Crown Vineyard rests on a mix of rock and clay soil, with consistent coastal winds streaming through the Petaluma Gap. Bright red and black berry perfume leads to a medium-bodied, supple...

Points 94



Flambeaux Wine, Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County, California, USA 2019

+ Add to My Wines

Compelling aromas of blackberry and raspberry are laced with zesty black pepper. Full-bodied and showing remarkable depth alongside a persistent freshness, well-woven dusty-textured tannins support plus...

Points 94



J Cage Cellars, El Coro Vineyard Pinot Noir,
Petaluma Gap, Sonoma County, California, USA
2018

+ Add to My Wines

From a wind-driven, fog-infused high-elevation vineyard in the Petaluma Gap, this is expressive and defined. The fresh, vibrant nose displays dark cherry and red liquorice with cinnamon undertones....

Points 92



Kale Wines, Hyde Vineyard Syrah, Los Carneros,
Napa Valley, California, USA 2017

+ Add to My Wines

Fermented in large puncheons with extended maceration and whole berries adding complexity and dazzling perfume. Flavours of black fruit, ripe strawberry and pepper spice run alongside violet and miner...

Points 92



Robert James Wines, Pinnacle Pinot Noir, Russian
River Valley, Sonoma County, California, USA 2015

+ Add to My Wines

Inviting and finely scented with ripe red fruit and earthy herbal notes. Juicy raspberry, strawberry and cherry dance on the softly layered palate, which is medium-bodied with lingering acidity, soft tannins an...

Points 91



Sosie Wines, Rossi Ranch Red Blend, Sonoma Valley, California, USA 2019

+ Add to My Wines

This organic, co-fermented Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre blend captivates with red brambles, nutmeg and tobacco leaf on a wildly expressive nose. Dense and structured, tangy red cherry meets plum...

Points

92