

{ roads less travelled }

Chris Blanchard,
MS and DJ, photo-
graphed at Redd in
Yountville, CA.

SOMMS

Off the Floor

master sommeliers CHRIS BLANCHARD
and emmanuel KEMJI SPIN NEW
DIRECTIONS FOR THEIR CAREERS

CHRIS BLANCHARD: RAP ATTITUDE

At Redd, in Yountville, on a recent Wednesday afternoon, Chris Blanchard settled in to a corner table with the relaxed air of a late-career music mogul. The former wine director here was wearing a black t-shirt under a jacket, his silvery dark ringlets of hair coiling out around his ears. A bartender, with a nephew's glee, made Blanchard a "concoction": bourbon, Campari, sweet vermouth. A few sips in, the bartender placed a glass of red wine on the table. Blanchard sniffed it and fired a quizzical smile. "That's not Down by Law."

To say Blanchard made his name at Redd is only part of the story. As a young rapper in Portland, in the 1980s, he found fame under the moniker DJ Vitamix, and released the popular single "That's the Way Girls Are." That led to sharing a label with Run DMC,

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



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frequent on-stage battles with Sir Mix-a-Lot, and, eventually, the loss of his savings in a recording deal gone south. Blanchard reinvented himself as a wine rep for Gallo in the early 1990s and went on to become a Master Sommelier, influential wine director and, now, a winemaker with his own label, Down by Law.

"The whole thing here is paying dues," he explains, gesturing at a bottle of 2014 Down by Law Chardonnay (\$18). "A lot of sommeliers get into it through a connection, or through their mom and dad's restaurant or whatever. But in my days at Gallo, I saw people getting beat up, I saw one guy get shot running from a store he'd robbed, people getting punched while I'm filling up the cold box. When you see the name Down by Law, f--k yeah I'm down by law. I paid these dues, in restaurants and in sales."

For his move out of the cellar and into the winery, Blanchard began with California Chardonnay and Cabernet. "When you start out you make a wine for your friends, but I wanted to buck the trend and make varietals that aren't cool and hip and happening." He selected Chardonnay grapes from Monterey (60 percent) and Sonoma Coast (40 percent), with a small amount of malo to bring the linear Monterey profile into harmony with the richer Sonoma Coast fruit. For the 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20), fruit was sourced from Napa and Sonoma, with a small parcel of Syrah and some Merlot from Mendocino.

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Blanchard is also branching out into Spanish wine, starting with a Grenache Blanc from Catalunya called Sacacorcho, an affectionate name given to him in his restaurant days (it means wine opener, both the device and person).

He says winemaking evolves into an important outlet for sommeliers and becomes a way of stepping out from behind the curtain. "Being a somm is not a stardom profession. We're there to provide service, and you get frustrated because you're not *making* anything. Getting into wine, it's our chance to create something." —Aaron Ridgway

EMMANUEL KEMJI: EUROPEAN ROOTS

It wasn't much of a leap for Emmanuel Kemiji to transition from front-of-the-house to student to winemaker. After all, if you have a Master Sommelier accreditation (Kemiji is one of only five to have passed the rigorous exam on his first try) and both textbook and front-of-the-house wine experience, it's only a matter of time before you're making the juice yourself.

Though he's made of European rootstock—his parents are Greek Cypriot and Spanish, and Kemiji, born in the United States, was reared in Spain and England—he didn't have the typical wine-family background. "Growing up, nobody in my family was in the wine business and unfortunately I did not inherit vineyards or a trust fund, and I'm still very angry about that," he said, with a laugh, during a recent visit to New York City.



In Spain, Kemiji owns Clos Pissarra—the Catalan word for slate that represents the terroirs of Montsant and Priorat. There artisan wines from ancient vines are targeted mostly for private sale.

It wasn't until a tasting tour through old Riojas from his Madrid uncle's cellar during a college break that Kemiji understood the culture of wine and decided to make it his own.

After years of award-winning service at Ritz-Carlton restaurants at Laguna Niguel and San Francisco, Kemiji created Miura Vineyards in 1995, becoming the first sommelier to establish a commercial winery. Within five years the *San Francisco Chronicle* named him one of ten "Winemakers to Watch."

The Miura project draws on Kemiji's various interests—cultural, historic, philosophical and culinary. Anchoring the Pinot Noir-driven portfolio—and, Kemiji admits, the jewel in the crown—is the wine from the Pisoni Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands. "The Santa Lucia style is sexy," says Kemiji; "there's lots of fruit, it's exuberant. It's become popular in a short time even though it's a tiny region."

Kemiji said the Pisoni fruit, marked by intensity and richness, gives the wines their California Pinot expression. But his personal penchant for the Old World comes through as he strives for a wine that balances "the finesse and elegance of Burgundy with the "great intensity and concentration" of California.

"Obviously that's a challenge because our fruit gets riper and riper means less acid," he said. But we're never going to be the biggest Pinot from that vineyard . . . I want it to be from Pisoni but I want it to have restraint."

Burgundy was also his model for honing in on single-vineyard approach. "I don't blend sites, because even with its inherent defects, I find the wine from a single site much more interesting," Kemiji says, adding, "A blend become representative of a person, not a place. It becomes a style. Fine, if that's your objective, but it's just not what interests me."

Kemiji sources fruit from other vineyards in Anderson Valley, Sonoma and Central Coast (Monterey) for five other Pinots under the Miura label, so named



Emmanuel Kemiji (right) with André Compeyre, Beverage Director at Loews Regency Hotel in New York City.

PHOTO: DOUG YOUNG

for the famed Spanish fighting bulls. He has collaborated with winemakers (and French star Chef Laurent Manrique) on two other projects: the Antiqu's and Almvs labels, which respectively focus on Syrah, and Cabernet and Chardonnay.

Kemiji maybe be a winemaker now, but as a sommelier he is conscious of making wines for the community from which he came. "With Muria, I want sommeliers to know these are the kinds of wines they are choosing—small vineyards, small producers from sought-after vineyards that I think are emblematic of the region. These are our versions of Grand Crus in California," he says.

André Compeyre, the French-born

Beverage Director at Midtown's Loews Regency Hotel (and formerly of Alain Ducasse's Benoit) put Miura on the list from the beginning of his tenure. "What was important was to have wines that are true to type, I like [this] as a great representation of what Pinot Noir can be in California," he says. "There are people behind each wine and the story of Emmanuel running the floor at the Ritz-Carlton and running after the little parcels to put on his wine list: I like that continuity."

Of the wine, he says, "It's really quite balanced between price and quality. It's been so successful, I don't even try to compete with a Burgundy." —Lana Bortolot SJ