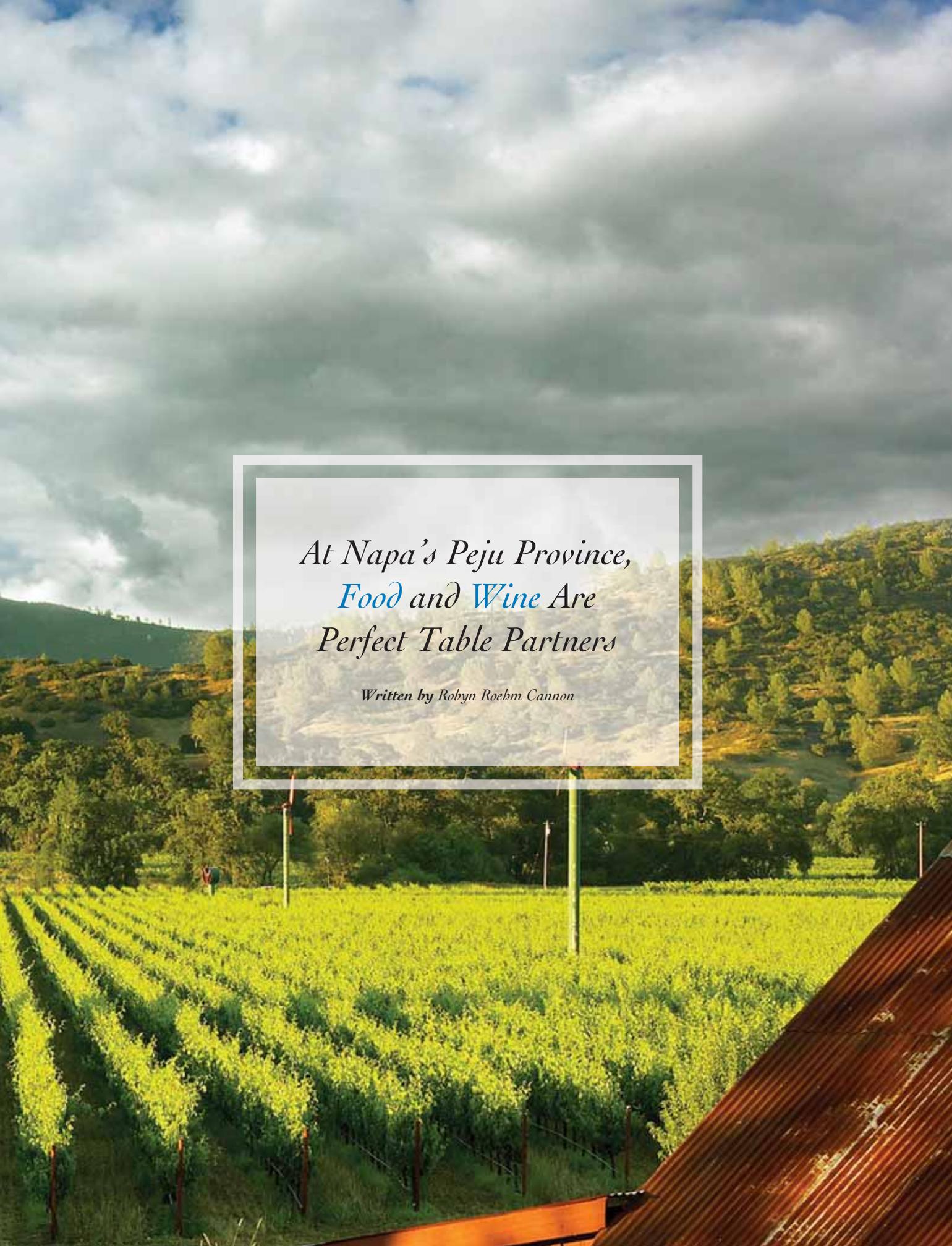
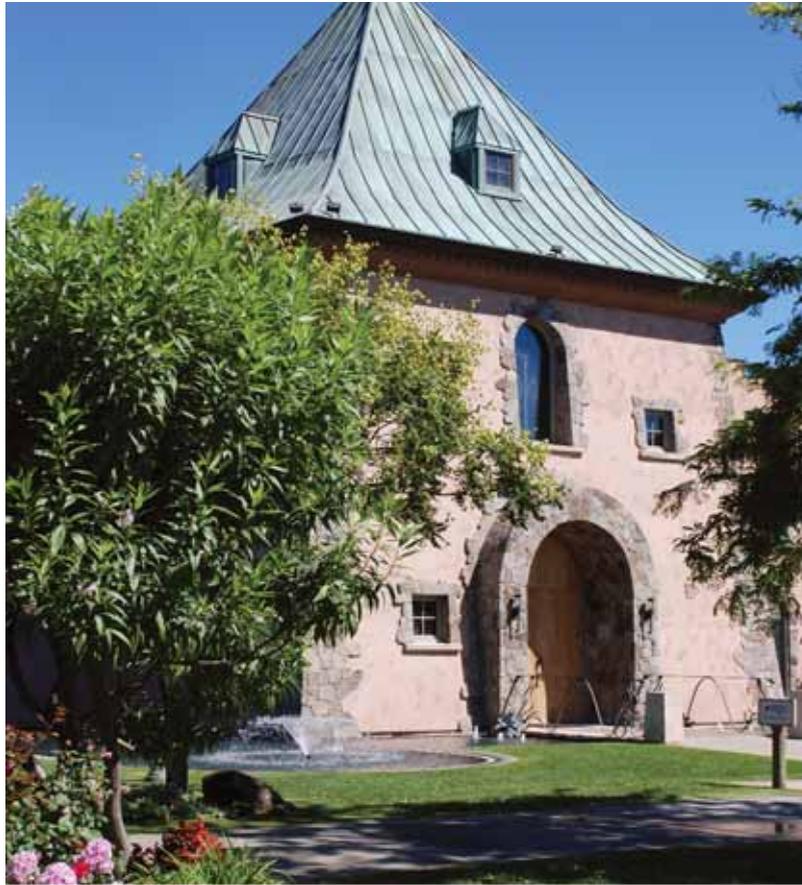


from the
Vine
to the
Kitchen



*At Napa's Peju Province,
Food and Wine Are
Perfect Table Partners*

Written by Robyn Roehm Cannon



MATTHEW ONA HAS A JOB OF WHICH MANY YOUNG culinary professionals only dream. As one of a mere handful of executive chefs who work for wineries in Napa Valley, he's a talented—and lucky—guy. Because although producing excellent wine can be claimed by many estates in this wonderland of the grape, very few take the step of inventively showcasing their vintages with more than a nibble of cheese and bread.

Peju Province Winery is the rare and delicious exception. A stop at this beautiful estate in St. Helena along Highway 29 is a treat for the eyes, the nose, and the palate. Prepare to spend a leisurely afternoon sampling an array of estate wines perfectly and unpretentiously paired with the bright, clean flavors coming from Ona's kitchen. If you're lucky, you'll sit at the counter and watch his magic—or be part of a team effort to produce a culinary masterpiece.

Ona acquired his love of fine food early, going straight from high school into the culinary world. He's a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, New York, and of Greystone, in Napa Valley. As a Certified Chef de Cuisine, he's cooked in the nation's best kitchens, from Philadelphia's esteemed Le Bec-Fin to the hallowed grounds of Thomas Keller's French Laundry prior to arriving at Peju Province in 2005.

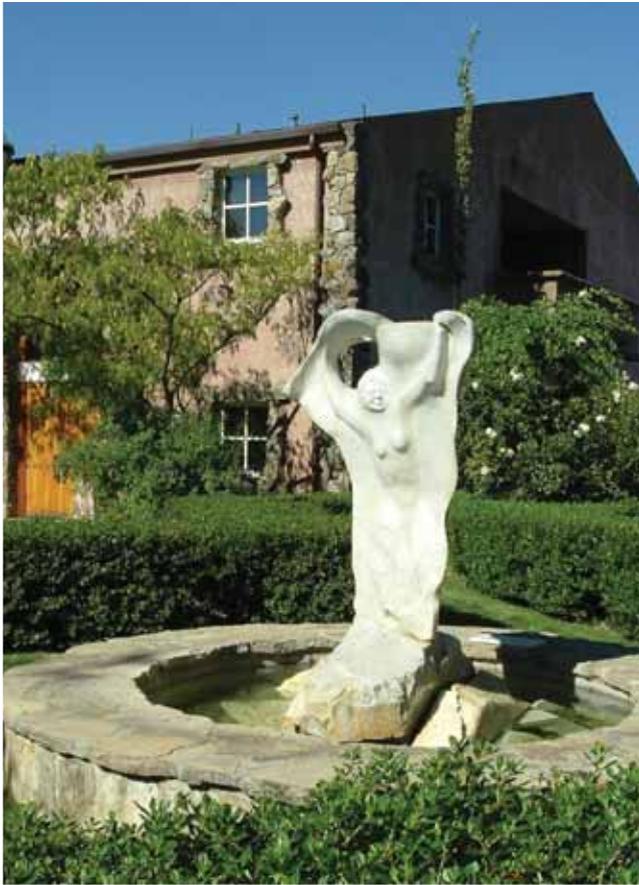
His philosophy is simple: "Everyone associates great times with great wine and great food," he offers. "We focus on the wines and keep the flavors approachable. Our goal is

to let the wines take center stage and let people explore a variety of tastes in a relaxed atmosphere."

Anthony Peju, who founded Peju Province Winery 25 years ago, is a transplant from Los Angeles with a background in horticulture and a love of farming. He is a "visionary," claims his youngest daughter, Ariana. Alongside her mother, Herta, and older sister, Lisa, she shares the operational and marketing roles at the winery with her father and is dedicated to preserving and advancing his legacy. The senior Peju was the original winemaker and still maintains a hands-on approach to operating the estate. He works closely with winemaker Sara Fowler to design the vintages, with an emphasis on how well they complement food.

"We've been doing the culinary program for more than six years, which makes us one of the first," comments Ariana. "To us, food and wine go hand in hand, and my father always wanted our guests to have that same experience."

Sitting down for one of Chef Ona's "Kitchen Lunches" is a memorable treat. The early autumn afternoon my husband and I walked into the winery's 50-foot-high tasting "Tower," we hit the jackpot. Our host announced that two seats were left at the kitchen counter, and lunch would be served in just ten minutes. Did we care to partake? We were, as they say, "in the right place at the right time" and quickly joined ten other guests behind the tasting room



(From left to right) The Peju Tower; interior of the Tasting Room; statue of *The Harvest Dance* by Welton Rotz; Koi Pond on the west side of the garden.

door at a simple counter set with Riedel stems and white linen, in full view of the exhibition-style cooking area. As enticing aromas filled the air, it was clear that Ona and his team had been preparing for our arrival. Glasses of Estate Chardonnay were poured and the show began.

As much as Ona's cuisine shines, so does his personality. He spoke of centering his kitchen on sustainable agriculture; organic produce from small local growers; and free-range meats, poultry, and wild fish. Then, with a blink of an eye and a sleight of hand, delicious morsels were artfully plated on pristine white plates. He offered a casual narrative that invited questions and discussed his technique, although he politely declined requests for recipes. While his food demonstrates his pedigree, he doesn't take himself too seriously—but he's not giving away the keys to the kingdom, either.

Our multicourse lunch began with an amuse-bouche of curried tuna tartare, followed by an heirloom tomato puff tart topping a baby arugula salad, lightly dressed in Napa Valley olive oil vinaigrette. Both selections paired beautifully with pale straw yellow, brightly acidic Estate Sauvignon Blanc, blended from grapes picked in three stages of flavor development. Next, a luscious seared beef tenderloin, morel mushroom gratin, and cipollini onion jus was served alongside glasses of the dark garnet Estate-bottled Napa Valley Cabernet Franc, with its soft tannins, red currant, and cranberry nose. For dessert? A seasonal

fruit tart with a heavenly brown sugar and Madagascar vanilla bean pastry cream—oh, my! Ona paired this treat with the winery's unique Provence California Table Wine, a proprietary red and white blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Zinfandel with Chardonnay and French Colombard. This floral wine has the structure of a fine Pinot Noir filled with plummy fruit, perfect and refreshing with the tart. As a fitting end to our delightful meal, we each savored a roasted vanilla bean caramel made with Valrhona chocolate, alongside a glass of the elegant Estate-bottled Zinfandel Port, with its concentrated dried Bing cherry notes and a bit of anise and cinnamon in the finish.

Ona is a busy chef. He's authoring a cookbook to be called *The Terroir Plate* (*terroir* from the French, referring to the character a grape acquires from the dirt it grows in), a selection of his recipes that are most in demand. In addition to his Kitchen Lunches—for which advance reservations are generally required—during the warmer months he orchestrates more impromptu daily food and wine pairings on the estate terrace, overlooking marvelously manicured grounds that are still maintained personally by the Peju family.

Peju Province is a serious winery. But, like Ona, it doesn't take itself too seriously. "We're giving people phenomenal wines," he continues. "But when you come to Napa Valley, it's about more than that. It's about the total experience—so we try to make it as fun and memorable as we can. We want you back, again and again." ISE