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Taste

FERN STROUD'S
BLACK VINES
BRINGS WINE
TO THE PEOPLE **p8**

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HIDING FROM HISTORY **p3** **UC BERKELEY NEWS** **p6** **NUEVO SOL'S FRESH START** **p12**

Tech and Terroir

Fern Stroud's diverse talents grow Black Vines

BY JANIS HASHE

THE BLACK VINES Festival celebrated a jubilant, yet carefully safe, return to a live event late last month. The 11th annual festival hosted 400 sippers, nosherers, art-lovers and networkers—half of capacity at Berkeley's CIEL Creative Space.

"The energy was just so infectious," said Black Vines founder Fern Stroud. "The space was filled with love." This makes perfect sense, as the Black Vines Festival began as a labor of love for Stroud, who embodies the concept of "mold-breaker."

Stroud earned a B.S. in Computer Information Systems and completed a software development internship at NASA in Palo Alto. As part of this work, she learned to take a big vision and execute it in smaller, bite-sized pieces. "I leveraged that knowledge in creating the festival," Stroud said. She is still working in tech, currently managing "Big Data"-related efforts in Silicon Valley.

But the seeds for Black Vines had actually germinated much earlier. Stroud's father was a tour bus driver for Gray Line Tours, and she sometimes accompanied him as he drove groups through Napa Valley. She loved what she saw, and "couldn't wait" to be old enough to get her chance to taste the wines. When that time came, she began to develop her palate and expand her knowledge of wines.

"Winemakers are artists," she said, "and grapes are their canvas."

Stroud's original concept for the festival combined art, music, food and wines, a tradition that continues. The 2022 Black Vines Festival featured more than 20 winemakers, alongside work and presentations

from painter Charles Rogers, vinyl artist Lorenzo Crocket, Carla Lawson (Isis the Poet), fire artist Mary Lawrence, painter Andrea Harvey, Nubian Chic designer Halimah Akiode and handmade beauty products from Nicole Thrower of Bismillah Boutique.

Over the years, though, as Stroud encountered more and more Black winemakers from across the country, the focus began to center on the wide diversity of wines being produced. "Black Vines attendees span the wine palate spectrum, so we continue to seek out wineries that resonate with all palates," she said. New winery partners this year included Ayaba Wines (Oakland), Mermosa Wines (Oregon), LoveLee Wines (New Jersey), Coronado Vineyards (Arizona) and LaFête du Rosé (Saint-Tropez).

Stroud has traveled the U.S. and other countries, such as France and South Africa; encountered and recruited Black winemakers for the festival; and along the way, discovered how *terroir* make a huge difference in how each varietal tastes. Certain wines, not previous favorites of hers, have proven a revelation when tasted from a new vineyard.

She sees Black Vines attendees having the same experience. Many times people don't know the varietals they really love—until they have a chance to taste many versions of them, she said. At the festival, people can have conversations with winemakers about their wines, and discuss flavor profiles and preferences with others tasting as well. "We believe the wine that resonates most is the one our attendees get to hear the back story from winemakers as they sample them," Stroud said.



GLASSES WITH CLASS *Black Vines Festival attendees*

That was one of the real joys of the 2022 event, she noted. Although many safety measures were in place—reduced headcount, outdoor access, air purifiers throughout the venue and a COVID questionnaire filled out in advance—"people were having conversations. There were handshakes and hugs," said Stroud.

She has since heard from a number of attendees who praised the opportunity to make "genuine connections" during the event.

That the community supporting Black Vines is loyal and enthusiastic was borne out by the 2021 "USA Today's Readers Choice 10 Best Wine Festivals" awards. Black Vines was named the #1 wine festival in the country.

"Being recognized was most humbling for two very distinct reasons," Stroud said. First was being nominated among 20 wine festivals across the country by a panel of wine experts.

The second, is that each day, during the nominating and selection period, people had to vote for Black Vines. "Our people, our community took time out of their day to ensure that we remained in the number-one spot," said Stroud. "This level of encouragement is a reflection of what we desire our event to be, full of love and support."

Black Vines also celebrated new partnerships and foundation support this year, including a \$10,000 grant from the NAACP x



Photos courtesy of Black Vines Festival

BeyGood project; funding from the McBride Sisters SHE CAN Fund, which supports Black-women-owned businesses; and a new partnership with Wine Direct, an industry-to-consumer platform.

“These strategic alliances help further establish our desire to provide a consumer touchpoint for wineries to be introduced to a new consumer base,” said Stroud. “The future success of wineries will be heavily dependent upon the experiences created for new potential customers.”

Black Vines itself has expanded beyond the East Bay, and is sponsoring or part of events across the country. Stroud is excited about the growth because Black

Vines can now be part of cities in other states, and also because the festival has incorporated a “virtual tasting” aspect. “People knew of us by reputation beyond our geographic region. Now, they have the opportunity to experience what we do,” she said.

And for the loyal local supporters, she encourages them, as well as those just discovering Black Vines, to visit the wineries, tasting rooms and restaurants featuring wines from Black-owned wineries right here in the East Bay.

Wachira Wines, the first Kenyan-American winery in the U.S., has a tasting room, Karibu, in Alameda. Longevity Wines in Livermore, where founder/winemaker Phil

Long is the president of the Association of African American Vintners, also features a tasting room. Stroud suggests sipping and dining at Oakland restaurants Magnolia St. Wine Lounge & Kitchen and Miss Ollie’s, or enjoying a glass of wine with the music at Geoffrey’s Inner Circle.

Stroud looks forward to continued growth and outreach for the festival, and its offshoots, including bringing back “Black Vine Wednesdays.” She realizes many people are still encountering Black Vines for the first time. “The journey is continuing, and the discovery is amazing,” she said.

She paid tribute to Oakland Wine Festival Founder Melody Fuller, calling her a mentor, and saluting

the community Oakland has fostered around wine. Black Vines will keep extending its tendrils, drawing in everyone from wine novices to sommeliers.

And Stroud will continue to use her crossover abilities.

“In many ways, California is a ‘tale of two valleys’—Silicon and Napa/Sonoma,” said Stroud. The two multi-billion-dollar industries, tech and wine, share a respect for entrepreneurial, outside-the-box thinking, and tolerance for risk.

Fern Stroud is an ideal person to help co-ferment those varietals.

For more information about the Black Vines Festival and events, visit www.blackvines.net