## FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS California wine's most unlikely celebrity: an Italian with a chainsaw



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Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

By **Jess Lander** 

a faded yellow glove over each hand before turning to a grapevine. Then he pulls out a chainsaw. With the vine in two pieces, the lesson begins. Simonit points to dried-up

Marco Simonit slips on a pair of kneepads, laces up his work boots and pulls

pieces of deadwood, a sign of severe damage inside the plant. He shows how the damage has disrupted the natural flow of sap and nutrients through the vine, ultimately hindering its growth and potential to produce high-quality grapes.

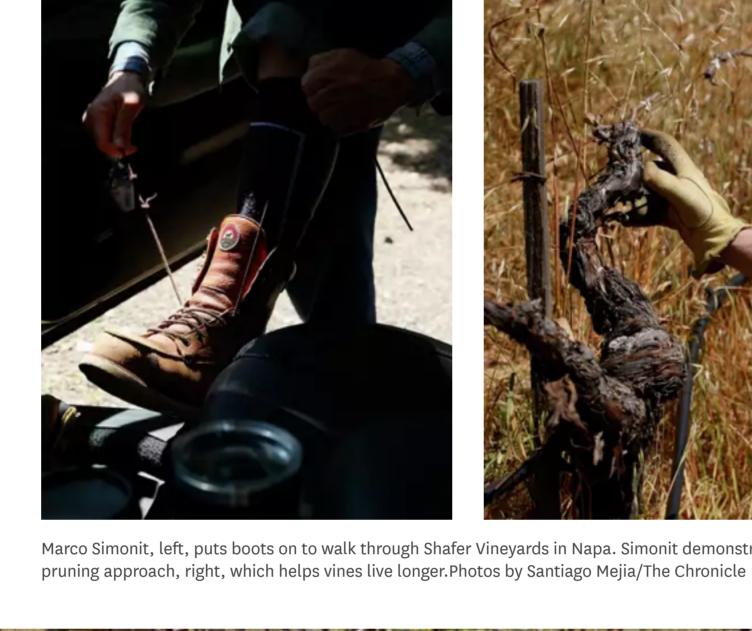
It was a dramatic demonstration but, as winemaker Chantal Forthun put it,

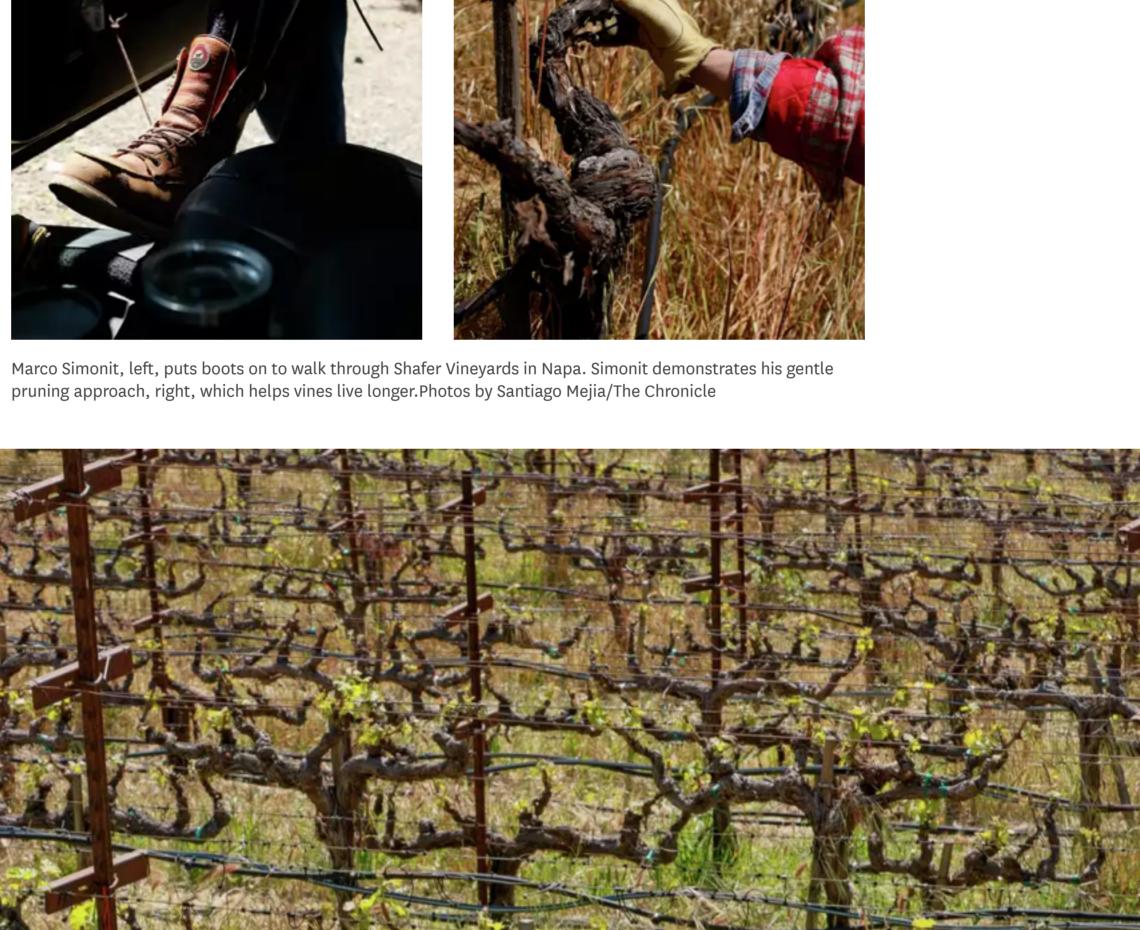
"an incredibly eye-opening" moment for the team at Flowers Vineyards & Winery in Healdsburg. "You can see the desiccation inside the plant," Forthun said.

Flowers is one of 20 California wineries currently working with Simonit, a vine savant from Italy. He flies all over the world to teach winemakers and

withstand the industry's most imminent threat: the climate crisis. Simonit has amassed a cult-like following, and his client roster — over 150 wineries in 15 countries — includes some of the most revered producers in the U.S., such as Napa Valley's Shafer, Spottswoode, Corison and Hyde. **ADVERTISEMENT** Article continues below this ad

winegrowers his own farming philosophy, one that could help them





Thirty-year-old vines at Shafer Vineyards in Napa Valley. Master pruner Marco Simonit has consulted with Shafer for the past six growing seasons.

battleground in Napa Valley

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

last month. **More For You** Why this unexpected beverage is a favorite at Michelin-starred restaurants in the Bay Area

He's an artist, never without his sketch pad, which he uses in the vineyard

to illustrate the more complex points of his work. And he's a romantic,

Usually, winemakers, not those working in the vineyard, take the spotlight

in the wine world, but it's easy to see how Simonit has become an unlikely

industry celebrity. A bushy white beard matches his white hair, which he

primed for a magazine photo shoot than a farm. "Where's the movie star?"

asked Shafer winemaker Elias Fernandez ahead of a meeting with Simonit

styles into a rocker-inspired faux-hawk, and his plaid outfits look more

pausing suddenly while walking through vineyards to sigh at the views. **ADVERTISEMENT** Article continues below this ad

"I'm impressed with his passion," said Corison Winery founder and

How a small rural California road became the latest wine

and training company, Simonit & Sirch, for six years. "He's very charismatic, yes, but this is all coming from science, the physiology of the vines. I understand the way the grapevine grows in a way I never did before, and I had all the classes" at the University of California Davis. Simonit's work focuses on pruning, a niche part of the winegrowing process

performed every winter when the vines are dormant. Like other trees and

plants, vines are pruned to encourage new growth. To achieve a balanced

aggressive cuts. But these wounds can have long-term, devastating effects

crop with strong yields, vineyard crews traditionally make severe and

winemaker Cathy Corison, who has been working with Simonit's consulting

on the vine, according to Simonit, including premature death. "Pruning is one of the most dangerous actions we can (take against) the vines," he said. "A big mutilation has big consequences."



enabling it to thrive with little to no water, and helps promote consistent and even ripening, no matter the weather. **ADVERTISEMENT** Article continues below this ad Forthun has worked with Simonit for four years at Flowers' rugged Sonoma Coast vineyards. While the climate there can be particularly harsh and

varied, she's already seen a positive shift. "The plant gets bigger and

for more reserves, more energy to flow through the plant," she said.

more consistent expression of wine."

stronger, and that in turn promotes more homogenous growth and allows

"Previously, each plant in the vineyard was on its own timeline, doing its

own thing, but bringing a sameness to the way the plants grow has made a

The rapidly evolving climate has undoubtedly intensified the interest in

Simonit's holistic philosophy. In 2021, he launched an online pruning

academy that has acquired over 10,000 users. But the wine industry,

notoriously resistant to change, was slow to embrace him. "In the

beginning, people said, 'This man is very crazy,' "Simonit recalled.

Eventually, he won over some of the world's most renowned producers,

including famed Bordeaux chateaus Angelus and d'Yquem, Champagne's

promising. He claims it enhances a vine's hydraulic system over time,

Louis Roederer and Biondi-Santi in Montalcino, Italy. He made his first foray into California in the 1990s with Napa's Luna Vineyards and returned in 2011 when Roederer brought him to Anderson Valley. Business in the U.S. has since blossomed, especially in California, mostly via word of mouth. The U.S. is now one of the company's largest markets, Simonit said.

years before the vines are mature enough to produce quality fruit. "If we can go 50, 60 years without having to redevelop, we save a lot of money," said Fernandez of Shafer, who has worked with Simonit for six years. He explained Simonit's process as bringing "high-speed Internet to

vines" that weren't operating efficiently — like dial-up Internet — due to

Corison claims that Simonit & Sirch's technique has "rejuvenated" her

estate vineyard, Kronos, which is over 50 years old. "Poor Kronos Vineyard,

standard pruning practices.

Scientist Marco Simonit has amassed a cultlike following. His client roster includes some of the most revered producers in the U.S., including Napa Valley's Shafer, Spottswoode, Corison and Hyde.

The urgency around climate change fits conveniently with Simonit's

original objective from four decades ago: help vines live longer. Older vines

more than 50 years, often surpassing 100. But in the U.S., vines rarely reach

the age of 25 before they're ripped out due to disease, a drop in quality and

low yields. Replanting is expensive, and each time, wineries have to wait

are widely believed to produce the highest quality wines. In Europe and

other regions abroad, it's common for vines to remain in the ground for

you wouldn't believe the huge cuts made over time," she said. "But I've seen Kronos really perk up and get stronger and more balanced." Now she expects the vines to live another 50 years. From Simonit's perspective, that's not just doable, it's simple. "Vines don't need humans. Humans need vines," he said. "If you want to keep the vines resilient, you need to respect them."

April 22, 2024 Jess Lander

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WINE REPORTER Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at The San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Based in Napa Valley, Jess has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications since 2014. In 2021, Jess published "The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook," a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic and fires. Jess hails from Boston, where she studied journalism at Emerson College

and started out as a sports reporter before making the switch to wine.

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