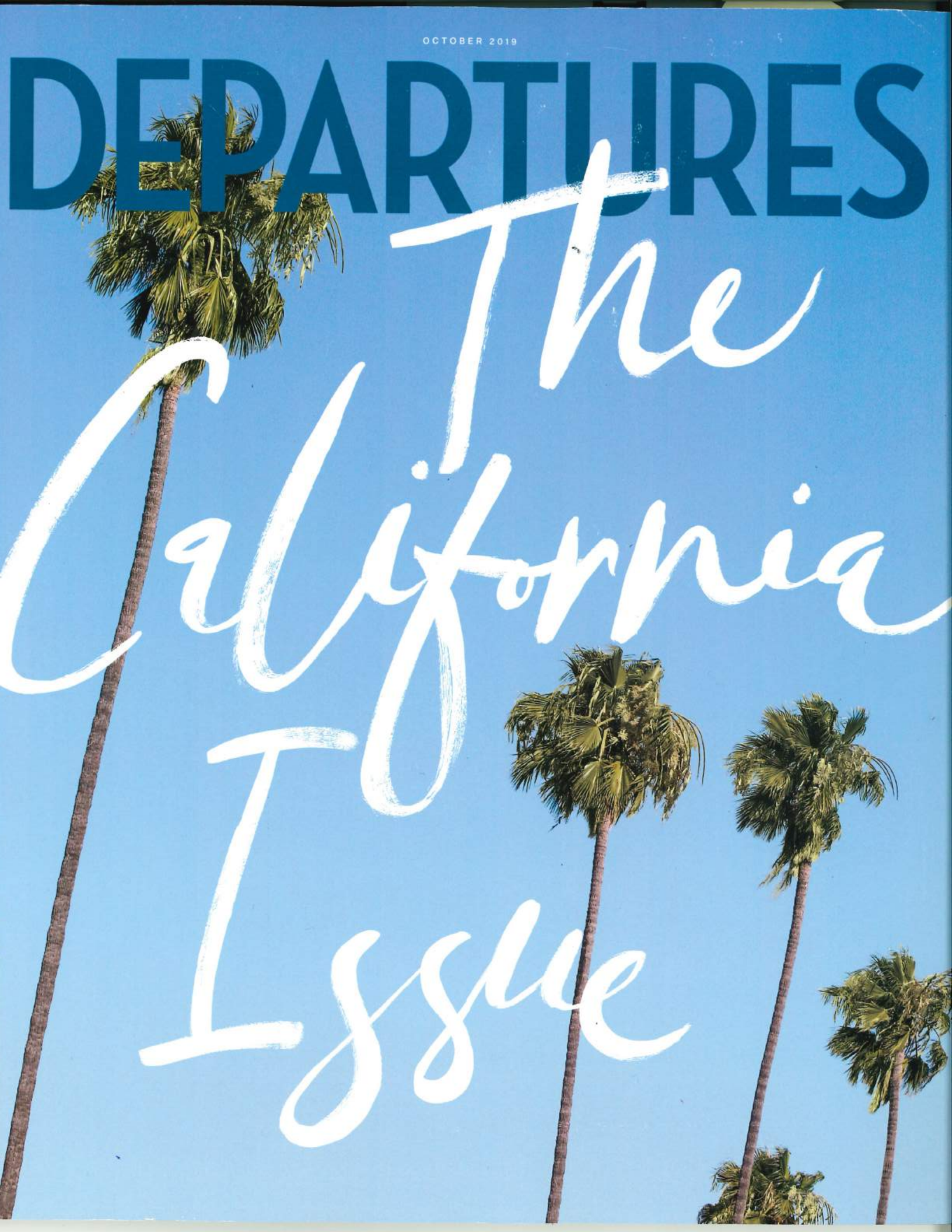
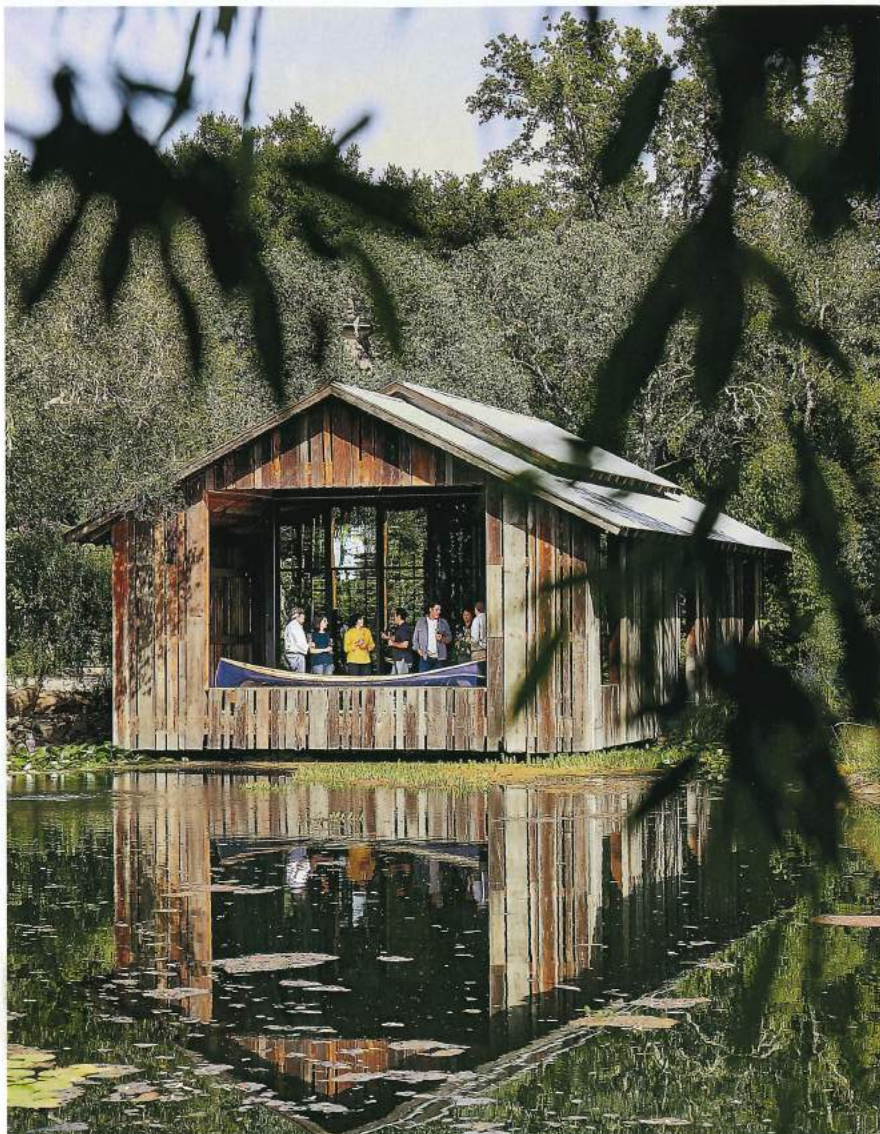


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DEPARTURES

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Raising a Glass At her carefully curated tasting events, Kerrin Laz introduces wine lovers to some of the most coveted bottles in Napa.

by David Kamp. Photographs by Aubrie Pick

JUST DOWN THE STREET from the French Laundry, in a modest, prettily vine-covered building in Yountville, California, stands the K. Laz Wine Collection, a homespun, intimate Napa Valley retailer and tasting room that highlights high-quality, hard-to-find wines. In a mere four years in business, the company's proprietor, the Long Island-born Kerrin Laz, has established herself as a force in the California wine scene, befriending vintners and viticulturists—many of them independent and experimental—and

For a special wine tasting held at the Rudd Estate (left), Kerrin Laz (below) selected six Napa reds.



championing their hard-to-find wines with her roster of private clients.

Laz holds most of her tastings at either her Yountville shop or the CIA at Copia, the cooking school and culinary center in the town of Napa. She'll pour you a series of Cabernet Sauvignons grown within a few miles of one another and explain, in granular detail but uncomplicated vocabulary, how a Cab made with grapes from the eastern valley might differ from one made with grapes from the western valley, depending on sun exposure, topography, soil composition, and the proclivities and peculiarities of the winemaker.

It's a compelling approach to introducing unfamiliar wines, and none of Laz's spiels comes from secondhand knowledge. Having spent 12 years at Dean & DeLuca, where she rose through the ranks to become the gourmet grocer's wine director, she has gotten to know these vineyards and their caretakers intimately. "The success of the wine business really depends on relationships," she says. "That sounds trite, but it is especially true in Napa Valley. The people here are like, 'We want to work with who we want to work with.'"

And Laz is the retailer of choice for such exalted winemakers as Brad Grimes, Andy Erickson, and Françoise Peschon. It's a testament to her pull that all three of these stars showed up at the tasting I attended, which took place at the Rudd Estate in Oakville, a few minutes' drive from Yountville. (Samantha Rudd is another of Laz's



Several acclaimed winemakers attended the Rudd Estate event, including Brad Grimes (below left), who provided the snacks.



powerhouse friends; her late father, Leslie Rudd, was Laz's mentor when he owned Dean & DeLuca.) We convened on one of those gloriously languorous early summer evenings, when the sun stays up past the children's bedtime, in a glass-sided barn abutting a pond where bullfrogs croaked at boom-box volume. Grimes, an adept cook as well as a vintner, had laid out some snacks on cutting boards: beef tartare canapés topped with quail eggs; strips of seared tuna in lettuce cups; hollowed-out new potatoes filled with caviar.

Though it's not unusual for Laz to travel off-site for clients, having hosted tastings as far away as New York and North Carolina, this gathering was atypical in its turbocharged eats (Laz usually offers a selection of cheeses) and its big-shot guest list. But even the pros were hanging on her every word, enchanted by her unpretentious approach. For example, Laz gives you just one glass for the whole tasting, preferring that you enjoy a wine on its own merits rather than pitting it against another wine in a side-by-side comparison—a philosophy that Grimes heartily endorsed. "We have a cultural tendency to declare one wine 'the best' or 'the favorite,'" he



said, "but isn't it possible to recognize two things of beauty separately?"

Indeed, the six Cabs and Cab blends that we sampled were as distinctive as they were exceptional. The 2015 Vine Hill Ranch VHR Cabernet Sauvignon, made by Peschon, was black-cherryish and juicy, while the 2016 Dalla Valle "Maya," a 65-35 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Franc made by Erickson, had an elegance and balance that belied its youth. (Laz, on account of her relationships with Erickson and the Dalla Valle family, was able to pour the '16 Maya on a sneak-peek basis; it is only just being released this autumn.)

Laz's focus is on quality and terroir, and the result is wines that sell in the hundreds of dollars. The VHR goes for \$205, and the Maya for \$525. Laz's own Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, made by Celia Welch, is \$165 a bottle. For Laz, the goal is to provide her clientele with a site-specific special experience. "When you make the effort to come to the Valley, you can taste some killer \$20 to \$50 wines, but chances are, you can get them where you live," she says. "I'm not gonna sell you something you can get down the street."

K. Laz, unlike the big tasting rooms along Napa Valley's Silverado Trail, is open only by appointment, accommodating groups as small as two and as large as 50. Laz curates the tastings carefully,

arranging them around a specific varietal or the customer's taste preferences and wine-buying history; she has never offered the same lineup of wines twice.

Laz admits that she had some trepidation about undertaking such a specialized enterprise. "It was like, 'Omigod, what if people don't show up?'" she says. But with demand high for the experience she is offering, her gamble has paid off. "We're not going to be for everybody. We know we're going to be high-end. It's what I'm most known for," she says. "I can't help that, so I might as well embrace it." klazwinecollection.com

