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Boulder native becomes the wine maker of choice for stars and oenophiles

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Unlike most kids, [Jesse Katz](#) had an appreciation for wine by the time he graduated from Fairview High School, but the Boulder native still didn’t think there was a career path into the industry.

Fast-forward 15 years and Katz is the co-owner of one of the hottest wineries in the Napa Valley, Aperture Cellars, and he’s growing a reputation as a winemaker for the stars.

After first making a special blend for the wedding of an old friend, actress [Jessica Biel](#) (who went to high school in Boulder), to pop star-actor [Justin Timberlake](#), he’s branched out to make specialty wines for Denver Broncos linebacker [Von Miller](#), as well as for both celebrity chefs and old high-school pals wanting to offer special touches to clients of their businesses.

Few notable figures in the national wine sector come from Colorado, whose local industry is growing significantly but rarely gets mentioned in the same breath as vintages from California or Washington.

To Katz, who now lives full-time in the Napa area but returns frequently to visit his mother and get his products into select Front Range restaurants and wine shops, that background fueled not only his passion to seek out further-flung opportunities but also to travel between continents at a young age to try to master his craft.

“I always had a feeling that I wouldn’t be doing a normal 9-to-5 day job. But my father and mother instilled in me a work ethic and told me to make sure I enjoyed work,” Katz said on a recent return visit to host a wine dinner at the restaurant Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder. “And since I realized there was a future in wine-making, this was my one and only determined goal.”

It was Katz’s father, photographer [Andy Katz](#), who had the biggest influence in developing the future oenophile. Andy began shooting books on wineries and vineyards when Jesse was young, and they traveled together to regions like Tuscany and Burgundy, where Jesse grew fascinated by the differences between wines from different villages.



ANDY KATZ

Wine maker Jesse Katz stands in a vineyard that grows the grapes for his Aperture and Devil Proof wine labels.

After graduating high school in 2002, he moved to Santa Barbara to study business but realized quickly that viticulture and enology offered him a direct path into the wine industry and concluded his studies of those subjects at the renowned Fresno State University program.

Because he graduated in December, after the end of the American wine season, he moved to Patagonia, Argentina to work for a pair of remote wineries, learning to pinpoint varietals and vintages on blind taste tests he undertook as he dined almost nightly with the Italian owners of the businesses.

For several year afterward, Katz shuttled back and forth between California and Argentina to be a part of wine harvests in both hemispheres, working both with modern instruments and with Patagonian women who plucked grapes from the vine by hand and pressed them in barrels with their feet. By 25, he'd landed a job with Alexander Valley Vineyards of Napa, becoming the youngest head wine maker in the country.

On the side, the father-son Katz team invested in a 3.5-acre vineyard and planted the grapes for their Aperture label, a passion project through which most of the wines either were gifted to friends or sold by Jesse to local shops. But that passion project became a full-blown phenomenon after Robert Parker sampled an Aperture Malbec and called it one of the finest Malbecs in California.

Before Aperture even had a website, it fielded orders and sold out its first batch of Devil Proof Malbec in three days. The Tasting Panel named it cult winery of the year and Forbes named Katz in its 30 Under 30 food and drink professionals. By 2014, Aperture was hot enough that it became his full-time job.

But while Aperture and Devil Proof pay the bills — bottles sell anywhere from \$35 to \$120 apiece, and they are distributed largely through direct-to-consumer sales to devotees — Katz's reputation has grown to the point where he is being asked to make additional wines, by some fairly well-known people.

Biel, an old friend from high school, asked Katz to make a cabernet blend for her nuptials to Timberlake in 2012, and the publicity from that "Blue Ocean Floor" label helped to launch further requests for personalized, small batches.

He created a special label, The Setting, for those wines, which have included everything from a cabernet sauvignon that Miller sent to every opposing player in the AFC's western division after last season to a 2015 Russian River Valley pinot noir called "Good Deed" that longtime friend Nathan Klutznick gifts to clients of his luxury-focused K Company Realty LLC.

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Katz has been able to self-fund the expansion of distribution and the new ventures so far, and he continues to look to expand into more key markets.

While Aperture and Devil Proof wines are distributed now only in California, New York and Colorado — and in Colorado, the distribution is limited to a handful of wine-savvy restaurants and retail outlets — he believes that he can grow his reach more, and that he one day can put up his own winery for people to visit in his hometown of Healdsburg.

Despite his growth and fame, Katz said he still considers Colorado his home — especially because no one sings his praises more than his mother, Kathy Mackin of Boulder.

“Colorado is, outside of California, our largest market,” he said. “And my mom is my biggest P.R. person out here.”



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From the Denver Business Journal:

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