

# The New York Times

LIKE A BOSS

## The Pandemic Work Diary of a Napa C.E.O.

The first African-American to run a major winery, Carlton McCoy spends his days making his industry more approachable and more inclusive.



As told to Ben Ryder Howe

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Carlton McCoy, the chief executive of the storied Heitz Cellar in Napa Valley, Calif., is used to being the only black man in the room. Out of nearly 300 master sommeliers in the United States, Mr. McCoy, 36, is one of just three African-Americans.

“Wine is marketed as luxurious, even entry-level pinot grigio,” he said. “But that’s not what people of color are associated with.”

Eighteen months ago, Mr. McCoy became the first African-American to run a major winery when he was hired to oversee Heitz, whose 1974 Martha’s Vineyard cabernet sauvignon is considered one of the finest California wines ever bottled. He was lured to Heitz by the Arkansas agriculture billionaire Gaylon Lawrence Jr., who bought the vineyard in 2018. The two had met at the Little Nell Hotel in Aspen, Colo., where Mr. McCoy directed the hotel’s highly regarded wine program.

“Gaylon had booked a reservation in the cellar, where I had created a lounge that was a bit of a speakeasy, and we listened exclusively to A Tribe Called Quest,” Mr. McCoy said. “I stopped in to say hello and we ended up talking for four hours over a ’90 Petrus and an ’02 DRC Grands Échezeaux.”

Mr. McCoy grew up in an extended multigenerational family where wine was not consumed. “My grandfather, who was from the South, used to get two gallons of homemade corn liquor from a buddy of his each year,” he said. “And my grandmother was a preacher. She didn’t drink at all.”

After winning a citywide cooking competition in high school with a slow-poached breast of chicken accompanied by tournéed spring vegetables and an herb velouté, Mr. McCoy attended the Culinary Institute of America, then worked at top-tier restaurants such as Per Se and Aquavit while studying for his certification as a sommelier. After graduating in the top four of his class, he moved on to one of the wine world’s premier postings as director of the viticultural program at the Little Nell.

The pandemic struck at a particularly inopportune time for Heitz, which was three months from reopening its tasting salon. Mr. McCoy did not lay off any of the winery's 52 employees, but he did have several conditions for the new state of work: no Zoom meetings ("I cannot express how much I hate Zoom culture," he said. "I need to make eye contact and see body language"), no internal emails longer than five sentences, and mandatory suggestions for improving Heitz — two per day.

The worst idea he received, he said, was to re-bottle existing wine with a new label and higher price, "something that happens in the wine industry all the time." The best was so good, he said, he couldn't share it publicly.

## Tuesday

**6 a.m.** I'm a rarity in the food and beverage industry: a morning person. I like to start the day with a run. Running gives me a clarity of mind that I can't get any other way. And I live close to one of our properties in the Napa Valley, the Hayne Vineyard, which I like to run by and see where it is in the growth cycle. If I need a little push, I listen to Rick Ross.

**9 a.m.** My first meeting of the day is usually with our chief financial officer, who, like most of our staff, is in his 30s. This is about strategy and looking at the big picture. Heitz is a historic wine company, but one of the things we're trying to do is come up with something more approachable, a place where young people can interact with pedigreed classic wines — the tried and true.

**3 p.m.** I exchange texts with one of my mentors, [Maverick Carter](#), the chief executive of SpringHill Entertainment, who is also LeBron James's business manager. Maverick started out as a wine client at the Little Nell, then became a friend. For African-

Americans who make it out of poverty, you're a bit of an island, and as I've progressed in my career, I have found fewer people of color in the room. Maverick and I connect about music, food, business and things happening in the country. We text more than we speak since we're both overcommitted.

**4 p.m.** I put up [an Instagram story](#) my grandmother, who raised me and has been on my mind because of the protests. After I graduated culinary school, my grandmother told me I needed to cut my hair, change the way I spoke and wear new clothes. It crushed her to say it. However, she always instilled a sense of pride in our culture, food, music, and way of being. She understood that this country was far from perfect, but it's our country.

## Wednesday

**5 a.m.** I could not exist without coffee. I prefer a bitter, deep-roasted flavor, and if I could I would spend all day researching small roasters who can provide that. Instead, I subscribe to the Trade Coffee Club and have my beans delivered. It's all about efficiency. Greater Goods Roasters Rise and Shine is a brand I enjoyed. My machine is a JURA Impressa Superautomatic A9.

**10 a.m.** Every morning I meet with our farming team to discuss things like canopy management. You can't make great wine without great farming, and Brenna Quigley, a young geologist from Santa Barbara, is doing studies of our vineyards so that we can create more soil-specific farming plans. Wineries tend to hire European consultants, but I prefer Americans. We have so much incredible talent here; if anything, the Europeans are learning from us now that, thanks to climate change, Burgundy is also cooking wine.



**12 p.m.** Two hours of branding meetings. This summer we're bringing out a new line called Brendel, named for Leon Brendel, a legendary old winemaker known for planting quirky varietals like Grignolino. We're also bringing out Ink Grade, named for one of the oldest, most picturesque, and highest altitude vineyards in Napa Valley. Ink Grade is more of an age-worthy wine, unlike Brendel, which is a wine to drink every day.

## Thursday

**6 a.m.** An online spinning workout with Aaron Hines, a trainer I met at his Cycle House studio in L.A. The music's incredible, and even though he has super-famous clientele, he doesn't let you off easy.

**10 a.m.** A check-in call with Gaylon, our owner. Most winery owners would have a hard time identifying their own wine, and they certainly have no interest in farming. Gaylon is a farmer. He'd rather be out walking the rows or driving a tractor. Back in March, when the impact of the pandemic started becoming obvious, I flew to Arkansas to see him and we spent three days looking over every detail of the business.

**4 p.m.** A tense but ultimately fruitful Zoom with [the Hue Society](#), an organization devoted to diversifying wine culture. We all want to give back to the community, but how we do it is a matter of disagreement. Personally, I would like to focus on job placement and education. The result of this call is that we are going to create a new arm of the society called the Roots Fund, which will fund wine scholarships for the black community, followed by guaranteed job placement. We already have verbal commitments from 20 wineries.

# Friday

**5 a.m.** I'm high energy; my mind works fast, I talk fast. So to the relief of those who know me, I have recently taken up meditation as part of my morning routine. I use the Calm app; I figured if it's good enough for LeBron, why not me? It's made me more effective, which I need since my current job is all about managing time.

**6 a.m.** If you're doing farming right, you should wake up afraid every day. The soil of Napa Valley may be more diverse than any in the world and trying to understand all the variables, whether it's rootstock, humidity or the effects of climate change, is humbling. Today, with our chief operating officer, I walked Ink Grade, which as someone who likes to wrap his head around things is scary, because it has rows that face north, south and east and gets sunlight from all those directions. It's gnarly, but that's the reality of dealing with nature.

**12 p.m.** We just announced that Juneteenth will be a paid holiday for everyone in our companies.

**2 p.m.** I join a conference call with the Court of Master Sommeliers, an organization that certifies wine professionals, which is [in the news](#) this week because of charges that it isn't inclusive. [The Court agreed to drop the use of the word "master;" which is offensive to African-Americans.] These are real talks, not board meetings where people are appeased with donations. We need to change everything in hospitality, from the server at a fancy restaurant who gives black people less than quality service because of the assumption that they won't tip, to the way someone reacts when they go into a wine shop and a person of color is there to help them.

**5:30 p.m.** I'm running late to cook dinner for my girlfriend, the winemaker Maya Dalla Valle, and a few other people in the industry. Maya and I both grew up in convivial, food-loving families — hers is Italian and Japanese, mine is basically the one in the movie "Soul Food," so this is our element. A funny thing about wine industry people is that when you go to their homes, they rarely serve their own wine, but I love serving Heitz, and we break out a 2018 Heitz Quartz Creek Chardonnay from Oak Knoll and a 2019 Brendel Cuvée Blanche. We don't talk about it, though. Wine is at the table, but it should never be the guest of honor.