

art of the moment

One man's snapshot of
American wine culture

by Keith Lin



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—A Notch Above—

It's Friday night and a crowd has gathered outside an understated building in the Hoboken. A wave of music and dramatic light filters through the sleek and glamorous masses, throngs of people carrying oversize bags, wearing straight-leg jeans, running fingers through meticulously disheveled hair. You recognize them immediately from their nouveau-bohemian jewelry and ironic T-shirts: Hipsters. While it may not surprise you to find the beautiful people schmoozing and mingling as they kick off the weekend, what might raise your eyebrows is *where* you find them. Not nightclubs, not martini joints. These days, you're more likely to find them here, at an art gallery, sipping and swirling a glass of wine, combining two interests that have become a bit of an obsession with Generation X, Generation Next and beyond.

As the world gets smaller, young people are facilitating a renaissance in art and wine culture. Today's sommeliers show hip sensitivity to young palates, because they are often young themselves. Bottles are more accessible, with lower costs and greater selection. Wine bars continue to spread across the country. Meanwhile, interest in the visual arts is on the rise as it encompasses a broader spectrum, from "outsider" and Southern folk art to ultra contemporary, futuristic installations. Not surprisingly, the wine and art worlds have found common ground.

At the crux of this trend is an artist named Thomas Arvid. With an innate talent for capturing light-reflections of bottles, glasses and corkscrews—his paintings document shape and form with photorealistic precision. In Arvid's work, there's no depth of field, like you'd expect in a photograph; every element of the composition is drawn into sharp focus. His subject matter is more than a physical object. It's about the quest for authenticity in our often superficial lives, the heights and depths of being human, the special moments we share with friends and a bottle of wine. The effect is often startling and, as a result, many galleries like the National Collectors Gallery in Ridgewood have noted how Arvid has changed the landscape in just a few years. "People get excited about his work," owner Dan Mulroy says. "When they see it, they're just drawn to it. They want to touch it."

Arvid is a self-taught artist and he speaks with animated passion about his place at the intersection of the two art forms. "Wine is a beautiful catalyst," he says. "If you're open to living, the painting will present itself to you."

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—With Pride—



—Stems from Napa—

That connection between art, wine and life itself is at the forefront in Arvid's work. He focuses on the feeling we all get when sitting with friends after popping the cork. And, in many cases, his paintings challenge the pretension surrounding traditional wine images. *Unplugged*, for example, depicts a collection of corks from an evening the artist spent with friends. "We were standing in the kitchen and, as I opened bottles, I tossed corks into the corner," he recalls. "I took a snapshot of the moment. I wanted to recreate that disorganized feel."

As art historian Maria Phillips notes in her introduction to his book, *Arvid: Redefining the Modern Still Life*, there's a "seeming informality" to his work. Hence the cropped bottles of re-corked wine, the torn foil, corks lying next to half empty glasses, the interruptions, angles and framing of his work. It's these types of recognizable, accessible images that draw a new generation of wine and art lovers into the fold. "I'm trying to connect with people," Arvid says.

It's working. All of these aspects—approachability, familiarity and character—have made Arvid's work a hit, not only with private collectors, but with restaurants, most notably Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar. Skip Fox, president of Fleming's, says this kind of artwork is a perfect fit. "We discovered Thomas Arvid in 2004, and it has been a successful partnership ever since," he says, noting that the organization is also grateful for Arvid's role in hosting its charitable wine dinners. "Thomas's pieces are front and center in the core dining experience at Fleming's."

While there is a decidedly European edge to much of the current art and wine trend, Arvid infuses his paintings with particular American flair. Titles like *Product of USA*, *So Napa*, *Oakville Crossing* and *America's Bordeaux* make a clear point. In particular, the sheer magnitude of his paintings convey a distinct sense of Americanism. Their large scale creates a demanding presence, derived in part from his own views of how America represents itself: "Supermarkets, cars, freeways—they are all larger than life," he says. And so it goes with his paintings as well, which are often described as monumental.

The informality of Arvid's compositions and the massive dimensions of his canvasses represent much of the country's progress toward something distinctly American. In other words: Culture is here—in wine and in art—and, like Arvid's paintings, it's always larger than life. **NT**



Thomas Arvid