

GOOD VITIS™

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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Napa

According to the map, we've only gone four inches



Napa Valley became the second American Viticultural Area (AVA) in 1981. At 30 miles long, it's 12 miles more than the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH) AVA, and unlike the SLH, includes both valley floor and mountainsides. Although it can be tempting to think of Napa wines as either valley floor or mountainside styles, it's a bit more diverse than that; there are 17 smaller AVAs nested within it that have been added over the years. Every AVA gets its determination based on the presentation of a unique set of characteristics. This means that in theory each of these 17 AVAs are sufficiently distinct to warrant their own designation.

I've spent a fair amount of time in the Napa Valley and while I understand that there are, indeed, many differentiating characteristics scattered around the Valley, I think it's going too far to say there are 17 distinctively different areas to grow wine grapes from the perspective of the wine they produce. The previous article on the aforementioned SLH discusses a single AVA that is two-thirds as long and runs through a valley along a single hillside with dramatically different temperatures and elevations throughout it. To say the SLH has microclimates is a statement of obvious proportions, but one AVA is enough to cover them all. I am not sure Napa needs 17 because I am not sure it offers 17 areas of

meaningfully different *terroir*.

This is no disrespect to the industry or the wineries I'm about to cover. Ultimately I suspect the fact that there are 17 different AVAs is a reflection of business considerations: Those in the most prime locations want to protect their reputation while those in other locations want a unique brand around which to build their reputation. When the best producers are selling a sense of place, everyone else feels like they need to do the same.

The distinction that matters most to me in Napa is valley floor versus benchland versus mountainside. It's not even that Napa's valley floors, benchlands, or mountainsides are unique among the world's wine growing valley floors, benchlands, and mountainsides, although they have their own set of dynamics. It's that when we refer to "Napa wine," there is a meaningful difference, broadly speaking, in the wines produced from the three different growing environments.

This has much to do with how slope plays into viticulture, although there are differences in soils and climatic aspects as well. Cathy Corison, who makes some of my favorite California cabernet sauvignon off benchland vineyards, has told me

about how critical aspects of grape chemistry like pH are influenced by whether the vine is on a mountainside, bench, or valley floor. Mountain vineyards, she said, in general can produce high, “good” levels of tartaric acid (TA) along with high levels of pH. Conversely, valley floors produce high TA but low pH. These numbers matter because they’re part of a relationship with other chemical factors like malic acid and potassium.

Another reason that pH matters is its inverse relationship with the long-chain anthocyanin tannin that develops in the skins and contributes to the smoothness of a wine’s profile. This isn’t an article about wine chemistry, but it’s an interesting illustration of how topography impacts wine.

To illustrate some of these differences in the Napa Valley, let’s go a few doors up St. Helena Highway from Corison to HALL Wines where they laid out a nice lineup for us of their appellation designate cabernet sauvignons.

Meaningful Differences: HALL Wines



Previous page: HALL Wine's lawn.

HALL is one of the more interesting characters in the intrigue of Napa Valley. It is run by a family with deep roots in the wine industry as well as in American political life. I am going to go into this intrigue a bit because it is part of its *terroir* and therefore part of what customers get when they buy a HALL wine, and therefore something worth exploring a bit.

HALL was founded in 2003 by Kathryn Hall and her husband Craig. A long-time Democrat, Kathryn has been very active in local and national politics, and served as America's ambassador to Austria during part of the Clinton Administration. Both she and her husband have achieved great success in business, and they are very active philanthropically. They are art lovers as well, which is evidenced even from outside the property by the massive metal *Bunny Foo Foo* rabbit sculpture at the entrance. The big selection of art, much of which is large in individual size, is like everything else you experience at the winery: Statement making.

The Halls swing a big stick in the California wine industry that I've heard some argue is outsized when considering production levels. That argument

usually goes along the lines of they have the reputation and means to run in big wine circles, but they have the production level (approximately 100,000 cases annually) and quality more associated with wineries that do not usually achieve their influence (the latter a thinly veiled compliment that's more of a swipe at the bigger winery groups).

The Hall's personal network adds prestige to their brand and garners envy from some in the industry. As an example, when the winery was closed to the public during the COVID pandemic, they hosted regular virtual events for club members featuring friends and friends of friends like the main cast of *Schitt's Creek*.

Some think that HALL should do more with this influence, others less. Invoking the Hall name in the industry often elicits a response, good or bad, but rarely indifferent. Opinions aside, what cannot be disputed is that the HALL winery produces super premium quality wine with personality and character that more than justifies the winery's existence and efforts.

Add the wine and celebrity to the art collection, philanthropy, and grounds, which are regularly used to host a wide range of events, and you get a sense

of why they're the industry player they are.

It is therefore unsurprising that the HALL experience, whether at the winery or explored by the bottle, is a very thoughtful one befitting the effort engaged. From a purely consumer perspective, the bottles I'll cover shortly start at \$225 and go up from there, but it's not hard to find the classic HALL Napa Valley cabernet anywhere in the country for \$60 or \$70, which these days is where high quality Napa cab mostly starts. There are a handful of niche HALL cabs available for under \$100 as well, which at many other wineries aren't offered below that price point. The affiliated Walt and BACA brands, which focus on pinot and zinfandel, respectively, sell from the \$40s up to the \$90s. All HALL produce wines are appropriately and competitively priced against their peers, so from a quality-to-price perspective, the family is delivering with no pretense.

Speaking of delivering, Jeff Zappelli, HALL's VP of Sales and GM of Walt Wines, was our guide for most of our visit, and he led our tour off with a big focus on the winery's role in supporting various charity and philanthropic activities along with the visitor experience. In fact, this angle was a determinant factor in how the winery is designed. Our first stop

was a stone building dating to 1885 that for a period of its life was the Bergeld Winery. The Hall's renovated the building in 2013 to make it into a space for club members and others to share special Hall experiences, and they've nailed the design and atmosphere for this purpose.

We made our way over to the main building, which houses the various tasting areas as well as the winery itself. The HALL winery is larger than its production, and purposely so because the investment in the winemaking facilities suggest a thoughtful and best-in-class kind of mindset backed by the commitment to realize the vision. This is a winery - the facility, I mean - that would go toe-to-toe with any other in the world nominated for best-in-class.

We had a long discussion about the Hall's approach to building the winery whilst standing next to a large room full of modestly sized tanks that were chosen for quality control rather than economies of scale. To boil things down, it is basically this: They want to produce the best wine possible and don't want to give any space to the notion that the tools and materials needed to execute are not available.

From there, we met up with the VP of Winemaking,

Megan Gunderson. Megan's resume reads like that of the well-respected winemaker that she is: Robert Mondavi, St. Supery, Dominus, and then HALL, where she started in 2005. She leads winemaking for HALL, Walt, and BACA.

Megan and Jeff had chosen to pour us three mountain appellation designates and two estate vineyard cabernet sauvignons, which within the wide range of wines that Megan makes is the core focus of the Hall operation. All were from the 2019 vintage.

The first was their Mount Veeder designate. The Mount Veeder AVA was my introduction to high end Napa cab two decades ago, and it came by way of Robert Craig's offering. I was told by the shop clerk that sold it to me that Veeder cab has a mint signature, which is something I thought was so cool because, wow, mint in red wine? I'll admit that it's not something I've heard since, and I've definitely not found it frequently enough to agree with the moniker this guy wanted to pin to Veeder's lapel.

I didn't find mint in HALL's Veeder cab, but I did find a lot to like. It incorporates grapes grown between 1,400 and 1,600 feet above sea level. The vineyards yield about 1.5-2 tons of fruit per acre depending on

the year, which is a relatively small amount - certainly small enough to take the point that quality over quantity is the priority. Megan explained that the nature of the vineyards meant picking has to be done by hand.

The 2019 has the kind of grip you'd expect from mountainside fruit - dense, a little texturally rough in its youth, mouth coating, close-knit, and magically not heavy. The acid is what you'd want when paired with this kind of tannin profile.

The aromas are quite beautiful with olive, raspberry, graphite, wet soil, and a little saline. This is a quaffer for those who like earthy cabernet. Flavor-wise we're talking black fruit, a little licorice, a bit brambly and savory (at this young stage; with more bottle age I would expect more fruit and the sweetness that can naturally come from a wine as concentrated as this one). The Veeder cab shows promise for those with patience.

Next we tried the Stags Leap bottle, which I found to be the most open and accessible out of the glass. Megan has been making this bottle since 2012 from a vineyard off Silverado Trail adjacent to Shafer Vineyards. She emphasized an "extreme" diurnal shift in the area as context for the AVA producing



Previous Page: HALL's Bergfeld vineyard

some of Napa's higher acid cabernets. This one is big and bold, and in its youth is dominated by cherry and pepper with plum and tobacco leading to a bit of a minty finish. I like Stags Leap cabs in general and the HALL offering is no exception, though this was perhaps the least standout-ish of the wines we tried.

From there we went to the first of two estate cabs, the Bergfeld, which is very special and easily my favorite HALL wine as well as one of my favorite wines of the trip. The Bergfeld Vineyard is located behind the winery (adjacent to the old Bergfeld Winery). It is a 13-acre plot of organically farmed 10-year-old and 20-year-old vines. Well before Napa was a wine region, the Napa River used to flow through the same piece of land. This means the vineyard is full of rocks and the soil is well-draining, which helps give the fruit a lot of concentration.

The wine itself has a unique personality. It has some florals, really pretty ones, especially on the front of the palate. The back palate is dark, a bit dirty, and a little funky. It gives off a tempered ripe expression as the grapes don't usually reach full maturity by the time they're ready to be harvested. This dynamic

occurs because sugar development outpaces phenolic ripening. It has a bit of grip and in its youth is quite purple aromatically and flavor-wise with lovely soil and menthol notes. I could see this being a divisive wine, but I could also sign up for a few of these each year, especially as it promises to age well.

We then finished the mountain AVA tour with Diamond Mountain. This appellation doesn't get as much commercial shine as Veeder and Stags Leap, but many top Napa cabs come from its slopes. This is in part because there are only 550 acres of vines currently adorning its slopes. These vineyards are commonly 10 to 15 degrees cooler than the valley floor spread out beneath them, which makes it one of Napa's better examples of the influence of *terroir*.

The HALL Diamond Creek was the richest of the three mountain AVA designates we tried. The grapes are predominantly from the Rainin vineyard, which is situated about halfway up the mountain. The soils are volcanic, making them well drained. This, like the Bergfeld vineyard, produces small berries, which increases skin-to-juice ratio, boosting concentration and leading to the development of significant tannin. It's a darker cab, the darkest of the bunch, with blackberry, blackcurrant, chocolate, 21

a bit of fungal-ness, and a slightly bitter roasted coffee bean finish. Generally speaking I'm a fan of Diamond Creek, and this one fits the bill quite nicely.

We finished with HALL's *meilleur de la cave*, the Exzellenz. It comes from an estate vineyard called Sacrashe, which is perched at 700 feet above sea level atop the eastern ridge of the Vaca Mountains in Rutherford. The vineyard's topsoil layer is a light white-colored decomposed volcanic ash that Megan says sit atop an otherwise rocky site. She's been working it for 20 years, and feels like she's finally figured out how to develop good fruit character from its grapes. It produces a naturally and characteristically powerful wine.

This was the most stubborn of the five wines in terms of opening up, and to be frank there wasn't much personality showing through what is obviously a powerful and dense beast of a wine. There are clearly loads of cherry, pepper, chocolate, and Christmas spice layered in it somewhere to be fully enjoyed in ten or twenty years when the rich tannin releases them. Until then, it's best to lay this on its side and enjoy some other HALL wines.

This was an exceptional lineup of 2019 cabs. The

three mountain AVA wines, along with the mountain top Excellenz, showed some of the range of characteristics one can find across a selection of Napa's most famous mountain sites. However, as someone who's Napa preference tends to go mountain, bench, and then floor, it was a great reminder that the degree of slope is only one of several critical factors that determine a final wine because it was the Bergfeld Vineyard that appealed most to my palate. There must be something to this little section of St. Helena bench for me, because just a few doors down is Corison's Kronos Vineyard, which produces one of my very favorite American red wines.

I can now add Bergfeld to that short list for two reasons. First, like the reputation of HALL and the Hall family, it is memorable for its personality, and the best wines have the most interesting personalities. And second, because it is really, really good wine.



Terroir

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir's* particular characteristics in each wine.

Terroir is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on 31

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

THE COUNCIL
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Pinot Noir

VINTAGE 2019

Rosella's Vineyard 34%
Garys' Vineyard 34%
Pisoni Vineyard 32%

THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



124 cases produced

ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



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MORET

PN 114

Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stags Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY



CABERNET SAUVIGNON
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Midas, Ganymede, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



MERLOT
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



PETT VERDOT
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



FIANO
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



CABERNET FRANC
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.



It was an awakening. That 83' Smith-Madrone reminded me that I was alive, that I was a man full of energy, love, and passion. It was like being young again.



