

# 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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# Volume 3:

# Sonoma

The sun goes up, the sun goes down. Ripening occurs, just like you said.



# Figuring Out Stonestreet



I'll admit to knowing little about Stonestreet going into our visit other than it was a winery started by Jess Stonestreet Jackson of the Jackson Family (along with his wife, Barbara Banke). That was it. I had to look up its location, and was unaware it was in Alexander Valley. I'd never had any of its wines.

When a visit became a possibility, I went to the webpage, saw the picture of a beautiful mountain covered with vineyards, and confirmed my interest. Now, this is a Jackson Family Wines estate, and that right there goes a long way with me because I tend to like the wineries they own and appreciate how they empower each winery's team to do their best work in a unique way. But the website picture's caption, "high elevation wines," is a trigger phrase for me. It triggered a "yes."

Stonestreet's winemaker, Kristina Shideler, was our host. She met us out front of the winery, walking up to us as we approached the entrance, directing us straight to the car for the drive up to the vineyards. Straight to the mountain we went.

On the drive up, which took a considerable amount of time despite the close proximity, we got to know each other a bit. As we climbed higher and higher, turning onto smaller and smaller roads,

transitioning from pavement to dirt, the Alexander Valley floor below became something we could not see much anymore. The slopes we were climbing were draped mostly in a lush green blanket of grass, spotted with vineyards starting at 400 feet above sea level and topping out at 2,400 feet. The entire estate, located in the Mayacamas Mountains, is 5,500 acres and a stunner of a plot of land.

The scope of Stonestreet's vineyards offers not just a dramatic setting on a mountain exposed to powerful winds, but also a diverse range of what Kristina describes as "mesoclimates" in which to site vines. A mesoclimate is viticultural term meaning the climate specific to a particular vineyard, and in the case of the Stonestreet estate vineyards this means some vineyards are in valleys, others on peaks, and some perched near ledges. With each mesoclimate vine offering a unique set of winemaking components, Stonestreet aims to spotlight each through vineyard-designate wines.

Kristina's past experiences make her a natural to lead the winery's efforts. She got her winemaking start in Missouri and has international experience in New Zealand, Portugal, and Argentina. She joined the Stonestreet team in 2012, but left for a stint at Vérité and then nearby Arrowood Winery where she

took over winemaking duties after Richard Arrowood retired. She returned to Stonestreet in 2020 to lead winemaking, and is the first to admit that mastering Stonestreet's estate vineyards will be a forever challenge given the dynamism of the property and its vineyard diversity.

We made a few stops on our way to the highest vineyard, checking out different vineyards and other spots, like Jess Jackson's burial site, along the route. With the views and conversation, the experience was not only good for the soul, but very informative when it came to tasting the wine upon our return to the winery.

Stonestreet's vineyards are certified sustainable, and located in the proposed Pocket Peak American Viticultural Area, or AVA (the application was filed in 2022). If approved it would be an AVA within an AVA (Alexander Valley), which falls within Sonoma County. The AVA would cover about 30,000 acres of which nearly 3,000 are currently planted to wine grapes.

Pocket Peak would be quite a hilly AVA, which according to its website features slopes that "consistently exceed 10 percent grade and are more commonly above 20 percent." The petition is supported by Stonestreet as well as Aperture



Previous page: A Stonestreet estate vineyard.

Cellars, Foley Family Wines, Reynoso Family Vineyards, Rodney Strong Vineyards, Skipstone, and Wilson Artisan Wineries.

AVAs are pursued because of geographic and geological distinctions and, increasingly, for marketing purposes. However, based on the tour of Stonestreet I can understand why Pocket Peak deserves its own recognition. Most of the slopes in Alexander Valley are not nearly as steep as those in what would be Pocket Peak, nor are the elevations nearly as high. These two characteristics alone, slope and elevation, can have dramatic effects on the wine outcomes; for example radiant energy, water drainage, and weather. Add to that any differences in soil types that likely exist, and discerning Pocket Peak wines from those in the broader Alexander Valley should be relatively easy.

Back at the winery, we sat down to try six wines divided equally between chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. The selection was thoughtful in two ways: Vineyard and vintage comparisons, beginning with the chardonnay, with which Kristina is trying different winemaking techniques (think amphora, tank finishes, etc.) to “push the vineyards in the

winery,” meaning accentuate their characteristics in the finished wine. We tasted the current 2021 releases of the Broken Road and Upper Barn single vineyard bottlings as well as the 2014 Upper Barn.

The 2021 Broken Road chardonnay offers a boisterous nose and a full body showing sweet stone fruit, Opal apple, pear, and caramel. Showing a higher barrel toast level than the Upper Barn, it is creamy and mostly smooth on the palate, though it gets a little gritty on the finish to provide added texture to a great mouthfeel.

The 2021 Upper Barn is similarly full bodied, offering more butter notes on the nose than the Broken Road as well as more dynamic acid on the palate, where it’s lighter in weight and driven more by citrus and mineral flavors (although stone fruits show through as well).

The decade of age on the 2014 Upper Barn has had a mellowing effect that’s deepened the wine’s complexity. The citrus has settled into a limey profile and the stone fruit has turned more yellow than orange. There’s a wonderful white pepper note along with orchid and some orange blossom.

While both 2021s are quite enjoyable in their youth,

the additional bottle age on the 2014 has made it a more dynamic wine and helped it develop a more Burgundian texture and level of complexity. This library vintage was not a special pull for us, but rather part of a standard library program that releases a decade-old vintage along with the new release of select chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons.

Moving to the cabernet, we started with the current release Monolith and Rockfall single vineyards, both from the 2019 vintage. The Monolith vineyard, which the winery calls its “wildest and most powerful” cabernet offering, is fermented in oak upright tanks of which 30-40% are new depending on the year. On the nose it has a strong savory quality consisting of iron and crushed rock, which pairs nicely with black fruit and fig. Dense, finely grained tannin is balanced nicely by the acid, delivering a somewhat sweet palate of black fruit, olive, and pink peppercorns.

The Rockfall Vineyard sits above the fog line, and the 2019 cabernet sauvignon coming exclusively from this vineyard, which is aged half in new oak, shows a reticent nose of blue and black fruit, violet, menthol, and a bit of greenness. The seamless mouthfeel is very elegant with superfine tannin and



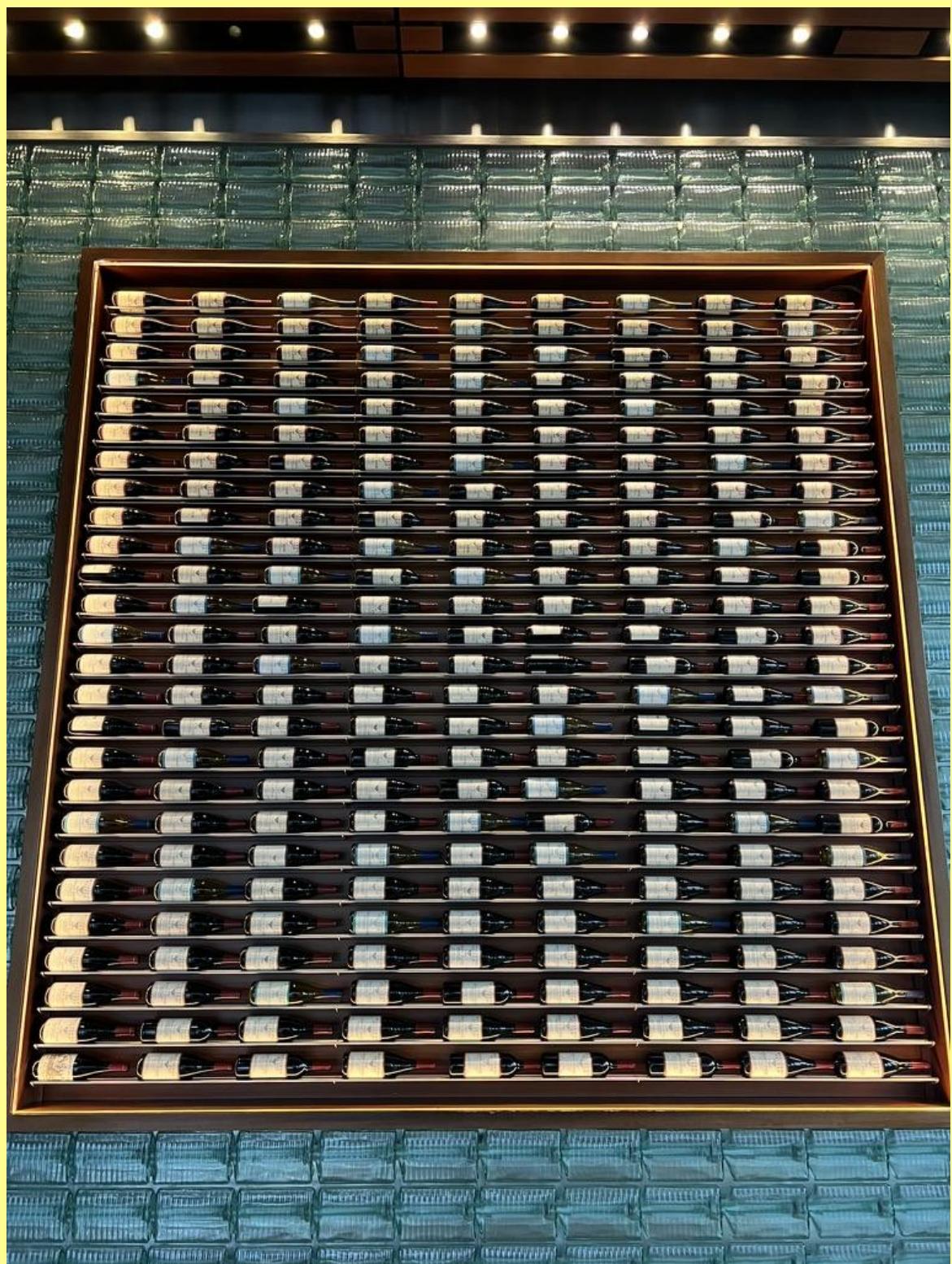
Previous page: Another Stonestreet estate vineyard.

a very pretty lift. It's less tannic at this stage than the monolith, and more savory.

The 2014 vintage of Rockfall, the last wine we tasted, was one of my favorite wines of this entire trip. It offers dried blueberry and violet, baking spicy, deeply saturated cherry, and some black tea that emerges from the smooth, fine tannin. A nice juicy acid sweetness the fruit and spice notes. It's ten years young structurally, and is one I think will continue to evolve positively for at least another half decade.

These six wines were a fantastic introduction to Stonestreet and its estate program, and are just that, an introduction. Given the acreage of vines and diversity among them, it is the kind of portfolio that requires a good deal of exploration and study to wrap one's head around. I'm not there yet, but my interest is piqued and I hope I'll have opportunity and cause to dig deeper in the future. It is a must-visit for anyone venturing to Alexander Valley.

## Panoply Pinot: Williams-Selyem



If I've very come across a perfect wine, I haven't known it, and I'm not sure I ever will. *Wine Enthusiast*, on the either hand, is more comfortable declaring perfection, and did so with the 2007 Williams-Selyem Litton Estate pinot noir, making it the first North American pinot to receive a perfect 100 point score by any major wine publication.

By that point, Williams-Selyem had established itself as a premier source for pinot noir. It began in the late 1970s as the garage project of Burt Williams and Ed Selyem. Their first commercial release came in 1981 under the name Hacienda Del Rio Winery, but a cease-and-desist letter in 1983 forced the friends to change the name, landing on the combination of their last names resulting in a new label beginning with the 1984 vintage. The following vintage, 1985, announced Williams-Selyem first vineyard designate pinot noir release, setting in motion the legend of one of America's premier producers of *terroir*-focused wines.

Like perfect wine, I don't have much experience with Williams-Selyem, and am thrilled that my first proper experience was a visit to the winery guided by winemaker Jeff Mangahas, who has been with the winery since 2013. Jeff joined two years after predecessor Bob Cabral was named *Wine*



Previous page: The first Hacienda Del Rio Winery release.

*Enthusiast's Winemaker Of The Year.* We had a wide-ranging discussion, but the initial focus was the winery's use of the old school open top stainless steel dairy troughs for fermentation that began day one. The trough's uniqueness helps define what is a very purposeful and consistent winemaking approach centered around gentle extraction and reduction. As we talked and tasted, it became clear that these troughs are the core of what defines a house style that is elegant, reserved, and slow developing.

As far as he knows, Jeff believes Williams-Selyem is the only winery in the world to use these troughs for winemaking. Williams and Selyem did not originally seek them out, but rather found them when establishing their garage winemaking setup. “[The troughs] were available and affordable and seemed like they might work,” Jeff said. As the years went on, the two friends and their fans liked the wines that were made in these tanks, and so they kept using them.

One challenge with the troughs is that they are no longer made, and haven't been for a little while. Jeff and his team key an eye on classifieds and auctions

around the country, buying them whenever they become available because they are uniquely responsible for a core part of the winery's history and wine's DNA that the winery and its ownership want to maintain.

"They're double walled," Jeff explained as he showed us one. "This makes them great for controlling the temperature of the fermentation. Plus, because the dairy industry is so closely regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), [the troughs] have very high sanitation standards." These standards, which were last in place in the 1980s before the troughs were replaced by the dairy industry with equipment, "were higher than today's FDA wine sanitation standards."

You can see the high standards, for example, in the quality and smoothness of the tank's welds, which were regulated so that the beading does not provide a safe environment for bacteria to hide out. This kind of beading takes great skill and time, and when compared to standard stainless steel wine fermentation vessels puts the latter to shame. While it is not essential that beading be this smooth in a stainless steel wine tank, it does mean that cleaning the standard tank is more challenging, takes more time, and is more likely to put bacteria in contact





Previous two pages: Winemaker Jeff Mangahas shows us a trough, and a look inside one.

with the wine. Fermentation vessels are a key part of any wine's final presentation. Open versus closed is one decision-point. Another is material type - wood, steel, amphora, concrete, etc. At Williams-Selyem, dairy troughs are non-negotiable.

"[The type of tank] changes the ratio of skins to juice," Jeff explained, adding that compared to traditional open top fermenters the dairy trough's unique shape - square sides with a semicircular bottom - allows for more natural movement between the skins and juice during fermentation than tradition vessels. The circular bottom creates a natural movement in the trough, aggetating a unique extraction process while also reducing the amount of human jostling required to achieve the desired interaction between the liquid and solids.

This more gentle extraction during the fermentation is one of several techniques aimed at creating "the house texture that Williams-Selyem is famous for." The other techniques include foot treading and a slatless basket press that preserves protein content in the grapes and prevents oxygen from escaping during pressing. This approach "builds additional

texture because it avoids “allowing the protein to escape, [which means] you allow the potential of that texture to escape,” Jeff explained.

Additionally, the winery is all gravity fed, which eliminates the need to force pump the wine around the winery. This means that “there is no oxidation potential” associated with pumping “because [the wine] goes straight to barrel by gravity from tank.”

While the winery has a signature house style, another key component of the brand is its numerous vineyard sources, most of which are in the north central part of Russian River Valley (RRV) where the minimal fog influence “means a longer growing season” than other parts of the RRV. Jeff pointed out that while [a longer growing season is] helpful for refining tannin, it also results in lower acid, which is less desirable. “We [therefore] pick on the earlier side” when acid levels are higher “to get redder fruit,” he said.

Jeff’s two decades of experience in the Russian River Valley, which also includes stints at Hartford Family Winery and Dutton Estate Winery, has helped him navigate vintage and climate variation among the vineyards they use in the AVA. Leveraging this experience, Jeff “[hedges his] bets” by picking from

different parts of the vineyards. For example, he “makes sure to include some hillside [vine rows to get] natural vigor regulation [of the vines during the growing season], which develops better lignification of stems, which enables whole cluster use during fermentation.”

Conversely, flatland vineyards in the Russian River Valley have “heavy clay soils [that] provide a ton more nutrients, too much sometimes.” But in lean years, these grapes can sometimes deliver components missing in hillside fruit. The goal each vintage is to find the right balance.

While vineyard row selections in the final wines vary from year-to-year, one point of consistency is the barrel regime as every pinot is aged in the same Francois Freres French barrel with the same toast level. “All our wines taste different because they’re expressions of site, not barrel type, [and because] of [our preservation] of our unique winemaking process.” The barrels are also pressurized with argon prior to filling to remove oxygen, a step that protects the wine as it barrel ages and contributes to the reductive style Williams-Selyem seeks.

Another Williams-Selyem first, at least according to the winery, is that the founders invented the

concept of the waitlist. When the winery won the 1987 California State Fair Sweepstakes Prize for top red wine, demand shot up “to where [Williams and Selyem] needed to waitlist [customers] and allocate,” Jeff told us. To this day, Williams-Selyem wines are challenging to find outside of the waitlist. This has driven prices up on the secondary market to well above the prices offered to allocation list members.

Despite producing 25 different pinot noirs in most years as well as some chardonnay, chenin blanc, zinfandel, and late harvest gewurztraminer, production is small. To mitigate the risk of not being able to meet their list members’ demands, the winery is only open to active list members.

We tasted five different pinot noirs and one chardonnay with Jeff, beginning with the 2021 Russian River Valley AVA blend; this is the most widely available Williams-Selyem wine and meant to be its entry point to the broader portfolio. It struck me as a very classic RRV pinot noir, smooth and a little plush with crispy acid, finely grained tannin, and a cola finish. The 2021 is quite primary now, but has a brilliant freshness that’s enjoyable at the

Next page: The 1987 California Sweepstakes Prize for top red wine ribbon bestowed to Williams-Selyem.



moment. Nevertheless, evidence suggests a smart 10-year evolution ahead.

From there we tasted the 2021 Block 10 Mass Selection Estate pinot noir. The concept behind this wine is to take 18 different estate clones planted all to the same rootstock, and harvest and vinify them together. This was quite closed down when we tasted it, offering a very serious nose with deeply concentrated cherry. It is full bodied with dense finely grained tannin, bright acid, and a plush mouthfeel that delivers a juicy sensation and residual chewy tannin. The flavor profile is black in nature, with dark fruit, black pepper, tobacco, and forest floor fungus. Jeff describes it as a wine “built on differences, not similarities.” Despite its density and darkness, it has a very fresh finish and amazing acid performance that provides a palate lift. I would love to try this in 7 or 8 years.

Our final 2021 pinot noir was the high elevation and rocky Hirsch Vineyard. Jeff explained that at this site “the vines really struggle. This leads to small berries, thick skins, and lots of seeds; it’s a less fruit-driven wine.” This description passed the taste test. It starts with a very elegant mouthfeel that’s fairly rounded...and then the grip comes on big, bringing with it saline and savory qualities. There is

loads of dried herbs and black currant at this early stage. Like the Block 10 it has great acid lift on the mid palate, and like the RRV blend, has cola on the finish as well as a lot of pepper and some olive tapenade. This was aged in 60% new oak, although it doesn't come across as that oaky, at least in flavor, because Jeff uses barrels with an extra year of stave aging on them (4 years for this versus his standard 3 years for the other wines). This will be long-lived wine as well and worth setting aside for at least five years.

We then jumped back in time to taste the 2011 Terra de Promissio Vineyard pinot noir that proves not all wines made in that often disparaged vintage are worth ignoring. It has beautiful tertiary qualities and has smoothed out and balanced beautifully, showing what appropriate aging of Williams-Selyem wines can achieve. It has a bit of a Northern Rhone savory character that pairs well with sour cherry, rhubarb, and white and pink peppercorns. These flavors sit nicely atop a very polished mouthfeel. It's the first vintage of this Petaluma Gap vineyard for Williams-Selyem, and was aged in 60% new oak.

Our last pinot came by way of Olivet Lane and the 2012 vintage. This is a vineyard I'm well acquainted with through Merry Edwards' Olivet Lane pinot noir

(and chardonnay), having tasted every vintage since 2017. I mentioned this to Jeff, and he noted that he has his rows in this vineyard picked earlier than Merry Edwards does. This shows, perhaps a bit, in the surprising degree of freshness of the 2012 Williams-Selyem. It has lots of earthy notes like dried herbs and pepper, as well as baking spice. The fruit has a warmth about it that is inviting and comforting. It has nice harmonization among its structure components, which are aging symmetrically. It's likely to keep evolving in a positive direction for at least a few more years.

We finished with the 2021 Allen Vineyard chardonnay, which turned out to be my favorite wine of the lineup. Allen Vineyard develops a thick chardonnay skin, which means that under Jeff's winemaking it produces a very real tannin structure despite being aged in only 20% new oak. The nose is quite tropical with little oak awareness. The structure is gorgeous and gratifying, establishing a real presence without being heavy or overbearing. The mouthfeel - smooth, seamless, and lifted - is the selling point, although its gravely minerality, beautiful citrus zest variety, and lovely daffodil only add to its appeal. I am sure this could age, but I am not sure I would have the patience.

These wines demonstrated a few consistent characteristics, namely lift, structural completeness, and density of flavor. While they're not all wines I would crave to have, I'm sold on the house style that has made the winery so well respected and attracted so many long-term loyalists.

I have heard rumblings from some of these loyalists in the past few years that new releases are showing differently, a little more extracted and less personality-driven. Given my lack of prior experience, I cannot comment on this. What the tasting did instill, more than anything, is a desire to see how the wide variety of vineyards sourced are expressed through the Williams-Selyem process. I have no doubt that, among the full lineup, there are wines I would want to add to my personal collection. It's not hard to suggest that readers make a point of pursuing their own Williams-Selyem adventure.

## Not Your Grandfather's California Bordeaux: Hamel



“We have zero tradition, and the most exciting thing is what’s ahead of us,” John Hamel, Director of Winemaking at Hamel Family Wines, told me in the winery’s library room towards the end of his narrative of the winery’s journey thus far.

When considering a visit to Hamel ahead of the trip, I had been pitched on the unusualness of this Sonoma winery’s focus on high end cabernet sauvignon. While there is almost as much cabernet planted in Sonoma County as there is pinot (12.7k versus 13k acres), the latter is more associated as a premium Sonoma wine than the former. (For the record, chardonnay is the most planted with 15.5k acres). In fact, I had to do some quick research to remind myself of Sonoma’s premium cabernets, which include the previously covered Stonestreet as well as places like Silver Oak, Jordan, and Arrowwood. There are also a handful of extra-Sonoma wineries that produce high end cab from Sonoma vineyards like Anakota and Lancaster Estate. Despite these respected wineries making cabernet, when one thinks of Californian cabernet, their minds don’t really go to Sonoma, do they?

So when John told me that he has no tradition to uphold, I understand at least part of what he meant - as you will soon - but I also thought to myself, ‘that

means he's got to create one.' And that makes what Hamel is doing even more exciting, especially because of the approach they are taking.

When John talked about the absence of tradition, it came at the culmination of a recitation of the winery's history, which was started by John's parents, George and Pam Hamel, in 2006 on a parcel behind their home that produced an inaugural 290 cases of cabernet. The first commercial vintage came in 2014, four years after John got involved.

John brought with him a love of organic farming and a soft spot for the Slow Food movement that promotes local food and cooking traditions, as well as some insecurities about how to help make Hamel a premier winery. "I'm afraid of missing classic California reference points and European benchmarks" in terms of quality, John explained. "We had been making technically good wine, but were missing that salinity, that minerality, on the level of great wines," he admitted. His family had set higher targets than that when they decided to fully invest in the project.

And what an investment it's been. The area for visitors at what they call the Hamel Family Ranch could be a modern museum in New York or London.



Previous page: Hamel's cave.

Hospitality is the responsibility of a full time director who is a Court of Masters Sommeliers' Advanced Exam graduate and who oversees a sizeable staff. There is an executive chef as well who is responsible for the meal portion of a \$200 per person wine and food experience. The winemaking facilities are fully stocked, and the cave that's been built into the adjacent hillside is not only first class, but sizable as well.

Then there are the vineyards, which are spread across three sites: The lower elevation Hamel Family Ranch and a property called Tres Palmas, both at the foot of the Mayacamas mountain range, and the higher elevation site in Nuns Canyon, where vines are planted between 1,200 to 1,600 feet above sea level. Any amount of time spent with John reveals just how central the vineyards are to the vision for Hamel, which is, to paraphrase, to make expressions of these vineyards that rival the greatest expressions of Bordeaux by identifying, nurturing, and demonstrating the best of Sonoma's *terroir*. Getting there has been a diligent and purposeful evolution.

"We started in a place where we were very much, 'we

make Bordeaux varieties, how are things done in Bordeaux?' [because] that's the reference point," John explained. But following the techniques of the reference point was not producing wine that the Hamels felt were their best expressions.

"At a certain point," John said, "you have to think about how you adapt to the expression to your place, and don't just borrow what others are doing in other places." As he explained:

"You spend time in California, it's evident we're not in Bordeaux climatically. They're more humid, they're maritime, they have more cloud cover. Us, we have lots of light, a dry heat, and we have end of season heat spikes with low relative humidity. Then look at soils, ours are young, volcanic, lower quality clay, very stony, whereas they have much older soils, limestone with granite deposits; climatically and soil-wise we're very different, but we're dealing with the same set of varieties."

John and his team set out to understand both parts of the expression: The *terroir* and the appropriate winemaking techniques to express it.

In 2016, Hamel hired Chilean consultant Pedro Parra who, no joke, has a doctorate in *terroir* from the Paris Center of Agriculture. “His speciality is understanding the connections between soil and wine in a meaningful way,” John said, explaining that he felt identifying and understanding those connections in Hamel vineyards was the best way to achieve the vision.

“It seems abstract [to have] a specialty in *terroir*,” John said, referencing Parra’s doctorate, “but when I took over the vineyards and winemaking, it’s just something I felt that we in California, it being a younger growing region [than Bordeaux], need to expedite our understanding of what we have.”

Parra helped Hamel classify the character of their various soils and where they change from block to block for the purpose of understanding how the changes affect the wine. They knew the vines are planted in volcanic soils “at the beginning,” John said, “but the work with Pedro showed soil diversity [was] much more scattered [within the vineyards] than we had understood.”

Identifying the different soils is just one part of expressing their respective uniqueness. To learn more, they began vinifying vineyard blocks

separately based on the information they were learning from the work with Parra. “With 80 acres [of vines], we did 93 [individual] ferments,” each representing a unique block of vines based on soil diversity.

John described their work with Parra as a classification project. “Now we know what we’re looking for, where to look for it among our three properties. What we’re really doing is looking for specific things that show the best example of volcanic soil.”

Showing that soil requires a process, and a visit to Champagne grower-producer Jacques Selosse in 2017 sold John on the concept of dry farming (meaning a preference for no irrigation of the vines) as an important part of that process. “Selosse is big on ‘irrigation drowns out and erases *terroir*,’” John told me of the revelation. “They said irrigated vines are like growing potted plants in a field. I agreed, and you can’t agree and [then] not resolve it.”

Luckily, Hamel’s soils are fractured enough for the vines to penetrate the volcanic material in search of water. This allowed Hamel to test dry farming on 20% of their vines in 2017. In 2018 they increased it to 70%. “Now, we’re at about 80%,” John said.

He explained that “dry farmed vines start the reproductive cycle earlier, stress more, and develop more mature phenolics with higher acidity and lower sugar [than irrigated vines],” all desirable things to many high end winemakers. He added that “we pick earlier [so] we don’t have to adjust for acidity or sugar [in the winemaking] because [the clusters] come into ripeness [on the vine] along with [good] phenolic [development].”

As Hamel’s *terroir* and viticulture approach came into focus, they began taking a look at winemaking technique. “Once you understand your *terroir* and have confidence in its character, you want to start dialing back the [winemaking] that gets in the way of that expression,” John noted. While Bordeaux’s techniques had been the original blueprint for Hamel, John came to fully appreciate that Bordeaux and Sonoma are very different places from grape growing and winemaking perspectives.

As one example, John explained that “it’s harder to ripen grapes in Bordeaux [than in Sonoma]. They deal with more astringency and greenness [in the grapes, stems, and seeds], and so it makes sense to use small oak barrels and a higher percentage of

new oak because that helps to sweeten the wine." But standard oak barrels and lots of new oak were not expressing Hamel's *terroir* to the family's satisfaction.

Instead, John looked to places with more similar growing conditions to get insights. "In central Italy and France where [like Sonoma] you have riper phenolics, less acid, more potential for higher alcohols, traditionally it's a lot of concrete and larger oak [aging vessels]." Hamel embarked on the trialing of a variety of concrete and oak vessels, and does most of its red wine in larger vessels for both fermentation and aging. While John believes they are heading in the right direction, the cove is full of a wide variety of vessels being tested in the hope of finding the best expression of Hamel *terroir*.

Hamel is up to an annual production of around 10,000 cases comprising one white wine and six red wines. I asked John about production growth, and he said some will naturally come from new vines planted in the Nuns Canyon vineyard last year, "but it's not aggressive [growth]; it's more organic to the vineyards coming into maturity."

After spending time at the winery and tasting several of its wines, I asked John about evidence I

saw of a reductive winemaking approach. “We end up with wines built for aging. If that feels like a reductive tendency, then that’s right. But we don’t do reductive things for the sake of doing reductive things.” It’s much more about what’s going to express their unique *terroir*, and techniques that happen to be reductive are, John says, part of how Hamel is achieving the big goal.

As an example, the Nuns Canyon vineyard planted in soils naturally high in iron, which “has a tendency to give a very mineral character to the wine,” John explained, and showcasing that in the wine is helped by putting the wine through some reductive techniques.

Further, “when you have a Mediterranean climate [like Sonoma], that is you have riper phenolics, less acid, more potential for higher alcohol, in that context it makes sense to take a more reductive philosophy because that’ll make the wine more open when it reaches a place where [then] you want to preserve it [for bottle evolution] rather than evolve it [at that time by introducing more oxygen],” John explained.

As he opened Hamel’s only white wine, John made sure to point out that “white and red wine are two

different things and concepts.” For white, and in Hamel’s case it is sauvignon blanc, “we expose it to oxygen during and after fermentation because that’s actually a natural way of mitigating oxidation later in its life [when exposure usually causes more damage].” This approach creates a more reductive bottled wine that goes through a larger, albeit slower, evolution in bottle and in glass. It also displays more of what Hamel feels is the best expression of its particular *terroir*.

For red wines, recognizing that they have more natural tannins and ripeness than Bordeaux, they “take a reductive aging philosophy using larger casks [along with barrique] and some concrete for the first year.” In the second year all the cabernet gets moved to less aerobic concrete for last 6-8 months. The goal is for “the wine [to] age as it would in bottle where the tannins are maturing in the absence of micro oxygenation” so that, like the sauvignon blanc, it is more protected in the bottle and less susceptible to oxidation. This, in turn, allows the wines to age gracefully and safely.

There is great reverence for the classic Bordeaux style of wine at Hamel, one that ages gracefully over many years. The use of these various reductive techniques is to produce wine that “evolves in the

glass [and bottle]," which is a precursor and sign that they are on track to produce a Bordeaux structure with Bordeaux-level minerality that is uniquely Sonoma in expression.

The 2024 vintage will bring Hamel's 10th commercial vintage, and already during that very short time John has led the winery through a significant evolution. Many winemakers will tell you that it takes several decades to learn a vineyard, and John and his team are a mere ten years into working with vineyards that are in puberty. This will be quite the process, but the diligence, thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and patience that the Hamels display give me decent confidence that they'll figure things out. Only time will tell.

At the end of the tour, we tasted four wines. I have put my tasting notes below. With the exception of one, they are quite impressive given the relative youth of the vines and the learning process the team has gone through to get here this quickly. I agree with John, however, that what's most exciting is what's to come. This strikes me as a wine club to join now because, once they get there, availability is going to become quite limited.

of fruit from the Tres Palmas and Nuns Canyon vineyards that went through only primary fermentation. It starts out reductive, especially on the nose where it is perfumed, and has a nice balance of weight and brightness. It shows a flinty mineral texture and flavors of yellow grapefruit, apricot, and banana peel. There's no rush to drink this wine, which has more personality than most Californian sauvignon blanc.

2020 Hamel Family Wines Stratum Red - A blend of two-thirds cabernet sauvignon and one-third merlot, it was aged in mostly neutral oak and mostly in larger casks before being blended and put into concrete for the final five months. It pours reductive in aroma and structure, the latter defined by finely grained tannin and a plump juicy acidity. The mouthfeel is velvety. ~~While it's not as obviously influenced by the 2020 fires as many wines I've had from that vintage, it does show potential smoke influence.~~ I appreciate that making this wine was probably a very helpful educational exercise, but because other vintages of Hamel wines are better than this one, I would recommend customers skip it for other Hamel vintages. NOTE (8/27/2024): The 2020 vintage presented significant challenges including drought and heat spikes as well as fires. After reviewing Hamel's 2020 vintage processes

related specifically to potential smoke taint, it appears unlikely that smoke taint is chemically present in the wine and that my perceptual bias has likely gotten the best of me.

2019 Hamel Family Wines Isthmus Red - This blend features four Bordeaux varietals: Cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, and petit verdot in order of largest to smallest percentage. Less reductive than the prior two wines, it is plush and velvety with a grippy mineral core. It is early in its flavor development, but nicely delineated already featuring savory qualities of dried herb and pipe tobacco or leather. The merlot delivers dark red fruit flavors. This stands to be a very good wine around its 7th or 8th birthday.

2018 Hamel Family Wines Nuns Canyon Red - The star of the line up for me. It is 74% cabernet sauvignon - and thus a red wine versus a varietally labeled cab sauv - and 26% cabernet franc. It is dense, complex, and weightless on the palate where it shows a youthful reductive vigor. It hits the tongue with a bit of sweetness, after which follows a variety of purple-themed aromas and flavors plus notes of dried herb, leather, cedar, and saline. It's still a baby in 2024, and I think best to hold until its 10th birthday (at least).



# *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 55



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

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' lifes' 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%  
Gary's 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 Franscioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Gary's 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 Franscionis.

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

024

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 Franscioni 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

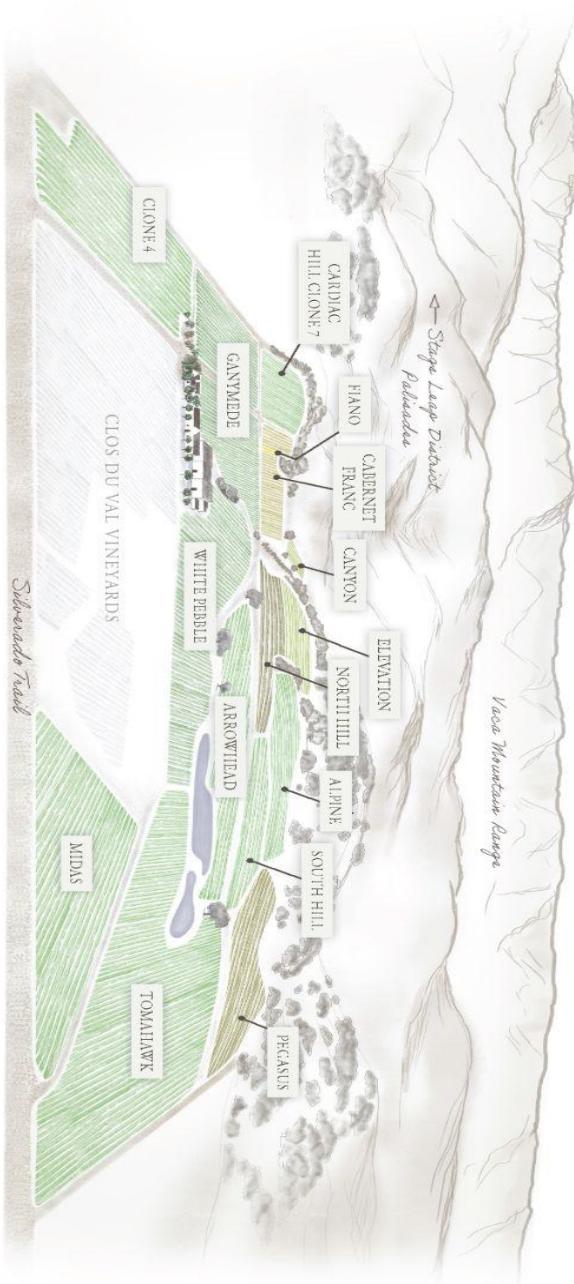
special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

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

**PETIT VERDOT**  
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon

**CABERNET FRANC**  
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc  
(A Single Row)

**MERLOT**  
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus

**FIANO**  
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.



# Hiking in Napa

You gotta approach every day as if it's Open That Bottle Night.





Previous page: One of my prouder moments as a horrible camera phone photographer. Taken from one of the over 50 peaks of Bald Mountain outside Calistoga.

I've been to the Napa Valley more than a few times, and until this visit I had no idea a view like the previous page existed in the area. That's 100% ignorance; it's not like the mountains in the area are hidden. I only discovered it this time because Jesse and I decided to mitigate the health impacts of all the eating and drinking we did on the trip with several hikes.

The pleasures of hiking are relatively new to me as well. Not as new as Bald Mountain, but only within the last year or so have I become a quasi-regular hiker. My exercise history is mostly tied up in the many years of competitive cycling I did and the post-cycling-retirement routine of running (for which I am now too old), gym workouts, and Peloton riding. However, once we left Chicago last summer to move around the western United States, I and especially my wife have taken to the hiking trails of Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. I've really enjoyed it, and my wife about 100 times more so.

So rather than try to find a gym in Santa Rosa, where we stayed, or bring exercise bands with me



Previous page: Jesse reaching the summit of Bald Mountain hike in a much more representative example of my photography skills.

for in-Airbnb workouts, I suggested and Jesse agreed to hiking. As a secondary factor, I thought that maybe getting above the vineyard line might give me a new perspective on the Valley. And boy, did it ever.

I don't know how many wine tourists like myself spend time in the upper heights of Napa Valley, but I'd wager it's a small percentage. The few people we saw on the trails gave off local vibes. Now, I can't foresee a visit without a few hikes. Not only are the mountains beautiful and offer beautiful views, but as a student of Napa's wine, I have a much more dynamic appreciation of how and why the weather does what it does because I can see how the mountains impact it. I also have a better perspective on distances and where vineyards are located relative to other vineyards. And because, if you hike high enough, you can see multiple AVAs, you get a sense of how they differ in terms of topography and aspect.

I would not know how to begin reviewing hikes, which is fine because I really enjoyed the three we did and



Previous page: A Redwood dwarfing my 6'3 height and 6'5 wingspan.

would recommend them for able bodied people. The hikes we did in Napa are listed below by the name you'll find them on All Trails. We did two additional hikes, one to see some Redwood trees, for which we drove up to Ukiah, north of the Anderson Valley. We also enjoyed a hike in Cloverdale, which is about 30 miles north of Santa Rosa. I've provided some information on these as well.

I cannot recommend adding a few hikes to your next Napa Valley trip for the all the reasons outlined above. They were also nice breaks for all the driving and winery visits Jesse and I did that are chronicled in this *Good Vitis* issue. It gave us time to talk about things other than wine and travel logistics, as well as time to not talk and just listen to nature. They were revitalizing for the mind, and good for the body.

**Bald Mountain via Widow Maker and Oat Mine Trail**  
This ~6 mile hike near Calistoga is straight up to the midway point, and then straight down. The views are incredible, and although the summit sits a bit lower than the top of the mountain range of which it is a part, you do enjoy 360 degrees of views from it.



Previous page: Jesse crossing a stream in Bothe-Napa Valley State Park.

There are options to extend the hike from the summit in several directions, all of which require additional elevation gain. Footing is generally and mostly very solid, but I do recommend proper hiking shoes. Parking spots are limited, so try to go during off peak times.

### Ritchey Canyon Trail and Coyote Peak

This 5.1 mile lollipop-shape hike is located in Bothe-Napa Valley State Park, opposite the valley from Bald Mountain. There is a small entrance fee. The hike involves an elevation gain of just over 1,000 feet, and as such has a number of constant climbs and steep pitches. Footing requires attention in parts and there are multiple stream crossings, so sturdy hiking boots are recommended, and I wouldn't blame anyone for bringing hiking poles. It is a great option for hiking right off Highway 128. Since it is in a state park, there are a number of alternative routes as well as add-ons.

### Preserve, Andiamo, Egglestein, NW Link, and Lower Traverse Loop

Located on the edges of Cloverdale, this 3.2 mile loop gains over 900 feet elevation, making it an

Previous two pages: The entrance sign to Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve the Redwoods that inhabit it.

appropriate choice for those looking to pack a hard workout into a short distance. The lollipop-shaped hike is a series of trails amongst a much larger trail system, and requires paying close attention to the map and trail signs to stay on course. As this might suggest, there are a number of alternative options and add-ons available to make your hike longer or shorter with less or more elevation gain. Footing was tricky in several spots, and the trail is narrow. There are several stream crossings as well, so hiking boots are recommended; poles would helpful as well.

## **Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve**

This is a tricky spot to find because GPS cuts out several miles before you arrive at the parking lot, and the coordinates given for it on All Trails place the trailhead a few miles short of where it actually is if you're driving in from the east like we did. Your only way in and out of the Reserve, from either direction, is Orr Springs Road, which approximates a back road in England's Lake District: Narrow and twisty with numerous blind corners; usually tilted upwards or downwards; often with a steep drop off on one side; and oncoming cars coming quickly at



MONTGOMERY WOODS  
STATE NATURAL RESERVE



TO GROVE TRAIL VIA  
MONTGOMERY CREEK TRAIL .50 MI



you. Some of us love driving these kinds of roads, others don't. If you're the latter, I would recommend either not going or having someone else drive.

The reserve has a small network of trails. The purpose is really to see the Redwoods, so do not go if your primary interest is a workout. Nevertheless, we meandered for about two miles total and saw our fair share of beautiful, awe-inspiring Redwoods. It was wet while we were there, and found ourselves at times having to walk across fallen trees, covered in moss, to continue onwards. While this is not an extreme location nor are the trails particularly challenging, between the drive and the mandatory first half mile or so that is entirely uphill at a fairly steep grade, and the chance of wetness, this is best for those looking for some adventure.



Jesse and I on Bald Mountain

GOOD  
WITIS



