

# 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 0:

## *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 13

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

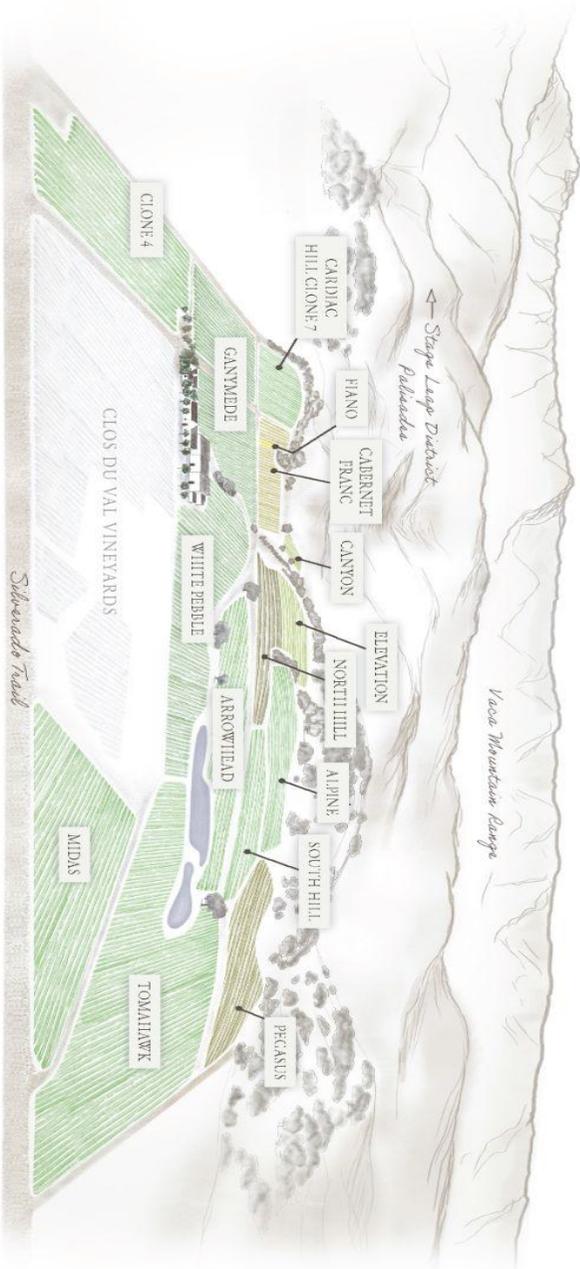
special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

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, Midsas, 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.



# 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, that 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 be 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 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



OOD  
ITIS



