

## Exploring The Cabernet Sauvignon Of Napa Valley, Part Five: Mountain Wines



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Discussing Napa Valley's mountain appellations as if they're some sort of monolith is a recipe for over-generalization if you're not careful. After all, the region's main mountain AVAs are found over a broad swath of Napa, and boast remarkably different geological origins, soil compositions, expositions, and micro-climates. In addition, the regulations that define those AVAs differ greatly in terms of how they approach the issue of altitude.

Still, for all the often dramatic divergence between, say, Atlas Peak and Diamond Mountain—they're nearly 30 miles apart, and the former is east of Napa city whereas the latter is west of Calistoga, with all the geological and geographical differences one would expect—so-called "mountain wines" are an increasingly important segment of the world of Napa Valley Cabs. Much of that, it seems, is because of the characteristics that they have in common.

"The main difference is that most mountain sites have free-draining soils, meaning rainwater or irrigation water wicks away from the vines and consequently the berries are often much smaller (as there is less liquid in them) than berries on the valley floor, farmed on deeper soils with better water-holding capacity," explained Steve Rogstad, winemaker for Brandlin Estate.

"On Mount Veeder," he also pointed out, "the vineyards are typically along the ridge lines as the slopes are often too steep and erosive for planting. This added exposure to the elements (wind, sun, diurnal temperature shifts) forces the skins to thicken in response to the environment. Since the color and tannin in red grapes are found in the skins, and mountain skins are thicker, they tend to have more tannin and color than valley floor fruit and less liquid to dissolve them in when the berries are crushed and fermented. So for me, the main difference between mountain Cabernets and other AVAs is concentration."

Renée Ary, winemaker at Duckhorn Vineyards, agrees. “Yes, there's a big difference in the tannin profile of our Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon versus what we see on our valley floor Cabernets. The tannins are bigger and bolder and can be a bit edgier,” she noted. “For this reason, we age our Howell Mountain Cabernet in barrel for six months longer than our other Cabernets. It also gets extra bottle aging time. The extra oak and bottle aging allows the tannins time to integrate and the wine time to soften.”

Jade Barrett, winemaker at Ladera, explained that, “In my experience, the soil and elevation play an integral role in both the tannin structure and natural acidity in the grapes and their resulting wines. During the summer, our mountain vineyards are often 10 [degrees] F cooler than on the valley floor and sit above the typical fog line receiving more hours of sun exposure, which lengthens the growing season. Also, the vines work harder to survive in the spare, rocky soils producing smaller, concentrated grapes. This results in a longer growing season giving the tannins time to fully mature, all while developing gorgeous flavors while retaining the vibrant natural acidity that can make a great Cabernet Sauvignon so dynamic.”

Growing grapes in the mountains has its own unique set of benefits and challenges. Braiden Albrecht, winemaker of Mayacamas, pointed out that, “For me, one advantage is how much variation we find both between vineyard blocks and within them. Changes in soil composition, soil chemistry, elevation, aspect etc. allow us to make wines with great complexity from a small geographic area.” However, he continued, “One more recent disadvantage is wildfire risk. Hillside vineyards in many cases are remote and surrounded by forest. If a wildfire does threaten the property, it'll be difficult for fire departments to safely defend.”

“Mountains are not the easiest places to farm,” said Chris Carpenter, winemaker at Cardinale, Mt. Brave, Lokoya, and other highly esteemed bottlings. He added, “You're dealing with a soil profile that's shallow.” Also, he elaborated, “There's a lack of nutrients...and water holding potential.”

“Then,” he went on, “you've got ridge lines, tree lines, that shade part of the vineyard” at different times. “Because of the lack of nutrients and because of the lack of water, you don't get a lot of fruit...so there's a financial implication to that.”

Still, the effort is worth it. “We do it because of the intensity of these wines...the fruit that you get from the mountains, there's a deeper concentration of flavor” and natural acidity that stays stable for longer, Carpenter said.

Barrett concurred. “There are plenty of disadvantages, however none of them affect wine quality. Mountain winegrowing is extremely labor-intensive and costly, both to plant vineyards and to farm them. Additionally, because the soils are generally very rocky, the vines naturally yield a smaller crop, which can be further impacted by spring frosts. At the same time, the ‘disadvantage’ of smaller crops can be a good thing, yielding complex and profound wines, with age-worthy structure. While growing and making mountain wines can be difficult, the rewards far outweigh the challenges.”

Below are 18 Cabernet Sauvignons, listed alphabetically, that exemplify the diversity and deliciousness that can be found among Napa Valley’s mountain AVAs.

**Heitz Cellar Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 Linda Falls Vineyard, Howell Mountain**

Classic mint aromas join menthol, eucalyptus, and red currants, as well as blood oranges and licorice, before a palate of ample acidity and seriously structured tannins that carry cranberries, red currants, orange oils, fresh-picked scrubby herbs, and a finishing note of cedar, all cut through with more of that red-berry acidity. This vivid, energetic Cab will sing through the next 15 - 20 years with ease.