

A youthful future for Napa?

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The story behind the distinctive new regime at Stony Hill, Heitz and a host of other important properties. New Stony Hill winemaker Jaimee Motley is pictured above.

At the end of last year, just before Christmas, it was announced that Napa Valley's emblematic Stony Hill winery and vineyards had been sold (see some background in [The story of California Chardonnay – part 1](#)). The sale came as a surprise to the wine community as it was the second time in just over two years that the property changed hands. In August 2018, its founders and then-owners, the McCrea family, sold a majority share to the Hall family of Long Meadow Ranch. But the Hall family have since sold Stony Hill in its entirety to the Lawrence family. Although Napa Valley is by no means immune to acquisitions or ownership changes, it is unusual for any property to change hands twice in such quick succession. Adding to the surprise, the Halls chose to keep the sale entirely confidential, even from their own employees, it would seem, until the day the sale was finalised and announced publicly.

The Lawrence family is relatively new to both the Napa Valley and the wine industry. With a fortune as an agriculture magnate invested in multiple states, Gaylon Lawrence Jr recently turned to Napa Valley vineyard land. Lawrence has quickly made a name for himself buying numerous historic properties throughout the region with unusual speed, beginning with Heitz Cellars in April 2018. (Heitz has since been renamed Heitz Cellar in the singular). The purchase included more than 400 acres (162 ha) of vineyards.

In 2019, Wildwood Vineyard of Rutherford (54 acres/22 ha) and Haynes Vineyard of Coombsville (32 acres/13 ha) were added. Both vineyards have served as the backbone of some of the region's most exciting wines for decades, often without being designated on the label. As a result, locally they are considered gems of Napa Valley while being little known elsewhere. In 2019 Lawrence also recruited Master Sommelier Carlton McCoy, previously beverage director of The Little Nell in Aspen, Colorado, to be CEO of, and partner in, Lawrence's expanding wine group. In 2020, they went on to purchase first the historic Burgess Cellars on Howell Mountain (26 acres/11 ha) and, only a few months later, Stony Hill (160 total acres/65 ha) directly across the valley in the Spring Mountain District.

While Stony Hill had already been sold by the McCreas, its transfer to the Lawrence–McCoy wine group feels like a starker change. With the sale to the Hall family, third-generation owner Sarah McCrea moved to the executive team of the Halls' Long Meadow Ranch (LMR) with the intention of guiding the future of her family's property, and her father Peter McCrea (who had helped plant the vineyards with his parents, Stony Hill founders Fred and Eleanor) became part of its advisory board. Stony Hill winemaker Mike Chelini, who had maintained the winemaking shown to him and established by Fred, partnered for a year with incoming winemaker Stéphane Vivier to share insights about the vineyards and winemaking.

But by November of last year, Sarah had left her role at LMR and Peter was no longer involved. Vivier continues as winemaker for LMR's Anderson Valley property and so has no involvement with the new ownership. They have instead hired winemaker Jaimee Motley (in our main image above) to make Stony Hill wines. Motley also has her own brand, Jaimee Motley Wines, and previously served as assistant winemaker at Pax Wines in Sonoma County.

The history of an iconic property

Although it's relatively small (making only a few thousand cases of wine a year), Stony Hill has been one of Napa Valley's most important historic properties. With its harvest in 1952, it became the first new winery in the region after Prohibition ended in 1933. More unusually, Stony Hill was devoted for much of its history entirely to white wines. The first vineyards were established in the late 1940s to Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Blanc. At that time, Stony Hill and Mayacamas were the first Napa Valley wineries to plant Chardonnay knowingly. (Later, it would be discovered that the Riesling cuttings Stony Hill had taken from Inglenook were interspersed with Chardonnay. Inglenook had had random Chardonnay vines among their Riesling vines all along which were unacknowledged and simply picked and fermented as part of the Riesling.) Then, in the 1950s, Gewürztraminer and Sémillon were added at Stony Hill.

Mike Chelini began renting a house on the property in 1970. He became vineyard manager and winemaking assistant to Fred McCrea in 1972. When Fred unexpectedly died four years later, Chelini became head of both vineyards and winemaking. Though winemaking trends through the region shifted repeatedly, Chelini continued to grow and make wine just as McCrea had done until he retired in 2018 when the property was sold to the Hall family. Over time, that consistency made Stony Hill wines iconic. The whites served as a window into California wine history, a glimpse of how wine used to be made.

Stony Hill was never averse to red wines, however. In the 1970s, they experimented with planting Pinot Noir. When that didn't work, they replaced it in the 1980s with Zinfandel. When that didn't work either, in 1998 they planted the same block to Syrah. It became what many consider one of California's best examples of the variety although, with less than an acre planted, it was made in very small quantities. In 2004, they also added Cabernet Sauvignon. That wine too became what many consider one of Napa Valley's best examples, but again in small quantities. When Stony Hill was sold in 2018, a total of five acres (2 ha) were planted to Cabernet, although it is unclear what portion of it was made for themselves, and how much was sold as fruit to other vintners.

Young guns

Prior to being hired to lead Stony Hill, Motley had already established her own relatively small eponymous winemaking project. There she focused primarily on Mondeuse and Chenin Blanc from throughout California, although more recently had begun to work with bordeaux varieties from a mountain vineyard in

Monterey and another in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Prior to launching her own brand, Motley's experience included alternating harvests in northern and southern hemispheres. She worked at both Villa Maria and Bell Hill in New Zealand. In 2015 she became assistant winemaker to Pax Mahle at his eponymous winery (where he then also made Wind Gap wines) in Sonoma County. In 2016 she started a US import company with Raj Parr for the cult Stockinger cooperage in Austria.

With the sale of Stony Hill, Motley steps to the fore of the property deciding both the future of the vineyard and the winemaking for the estate. This will be her first time leading a vineyard team or acting as lead winemaker in her own facility. She will work alongside another relative newcomer, Laurie Taboulet, as estate director. Previously, Taboulet (pictured below) worked as national sales manager for Larkmead, another historic property of Napa Valley.



Laurie Taboulet, Stony Hill's new estate director

In many ways, the duo is an unusual choice for such an iconic property in one of the world's most prestigious wine regions. With land prices and reputation as they are for Napa Valley, the stakes for winemaking success are relatively high

and neither Motley nor Taboulet has led their own programme before. McCoy told me that hiring for a fresh perspective is by design and common to multiple wineries in the group's properties.

At Burgess, Meghan Zobeck leads both vineyard and winemaking. Her prior experience includes serving as assistant to Philippe Melka, and as partner for a boutique brand, Inconnu, but like Stony Hill for Motley, Burgess is her first lead position. Heitz retains winemaker Brittany Sherwood. Just prior to the purchase of Heitz, Sherwood had been advanced to director of winemaking by the previous owners, taking a lead winemaking role for the first time after having previously served Heitz as assistant. When Lawrence purchased the property, Sherwood stayed.

The new group's estate purchases that came without established wineries work a bit differently. For Haynes Vineyard, known for its combination of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah, winemaker Nico Cueva has been hired to create a new brand from the estate. Previously, Cueva was winemaker for Kosta Browne in Sonoma County.

As part of the Heitz purchase, Lawrence acquired the Ink Grade estate. The steep-sloped Howell Mountain site was planted to a mix of Zinfandel, a Portuguese field blend used to make fortified wine, and bordeaux varieties. Winemaker Matt Taylor has been hired to launch a new estate winery, Ink Grade, focused on Cabernet Sauvignon. The Ink Grade wines will be launched in autumn 2021. Matt Taylor has his own eponymous wine brand focused on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Sonoma Coast, but previously he was winemaker for Araujo. While both Cueva and Taylor served as winemaker in their roles at Kosta Browne and Araujo respectively, they did so with the assistance of outside consultants or executive winemakers. This is the first time fully leading their own facility for both of them.

What is common to all these winemakers is that they are relatively young professionals who have each made fresher-focused California wines popular with younger wine lovers. This stylistic commonality McCoy describes as 'classic' and 'structured'. As he explains, the goal for each estate in terms of style is to show a respect for California's more restrained and classical roots with wines that focus on freshness and energy.

The winemaker choices are not without risk. It is unusual to have a substantial wine portfolio of this sort without a more experienced winemaker employed as consultant or executive director to help counteract winemaking problems before they start, or to advise on how to fix them when they do. Each of the new group's winemakers has some experience and is certainly well connected to an experienced wine community, even if that is not the same as a mentor on site or on contract.

But there are also clear advantages to the team. The enthusiasm of the Lawrence winemakers is without doubt. When speaking with both Motley and Taboulet, I was inspired by their excitement for the future of Stony Hill.

Each of the winemakers in the group was selected on the basis of the character of wines made under their own or previous labels. For Stony Hill, Motley's Cabernet Sauvignon from the Peter Martin Ray vineyard of the Santa Cruz Mountains in particular drew the attention of both McCoy and Lawrence, as its aromatics and mountain energy reminded them of Stony Hill. And McCoy has built other avenues of mentorship into the structure of the overall company.

As CEO, McCoy's own role includes regular tastings with the individual winemakers. Without winemaking experience, he does not advise on cellar practices. But at The Little Nell, McCoy was exposed to a deep collection of the best wines of the world. His role is to advise on matters of quality, style and how wines are developing.

On the business side, each estate is established to become an independent entity – but initially each winemaker and estate director duo work closely with the central office of the group to develop best practices for long-term success. Currently, Taboulet and Motley are getting to know the estate's past and present in detail, including its regular customers, in order to develop their plan for its future.

The future of Stony Hill

Motley has spent the last month getting to know the vineyards at Stony Hill and assessing their current condition. Some changes were already instigated under the ownership of LMR. Multiple blocks of white-wine varieties had been pulled up for replanting. A block of Cabernet Sauvignon was grafted over to Chardonnay.

Motley has confirmed that they will maintain the oldest block of Riesling as well as the oldest Chardonnay. The 3.1 acres (1.3 ha) of Riesling planted in 1948 is possibly the oldest (or at least among the oldest) in California. About four acres of Chardonnay planted in the 1980s remain on property. Those that were older had long ago been replanted by the McCreas due to phylloxera.

The other whites will be pulled out or grafted over. Most of the younger Riesling and Chardonnay vines had already been pulled out by LMR. There was no longer any Sémillon or Pinot Blanc on site, both of which had been changed to other varieties by the McCreas family decades ago. The acre of Gewürztraminer will be grafted over to Chenin Blanc. The feeling is that, as climate change transforms the valley, the low-acid variety Gewürztraminer is less likely to adjust to higher potential temperatures, while Chenin Blanc might retain its acidity more readily.

The issue of climate change informs the other planting choices. When replanting is finished, the site will have a total of 42 acres (17 ha) of vineyard. The 8+ acres of Riesling, Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc will be the only remaining white-wine vines on the property. The rest of the site will include the established Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Cabernet block LMR grafted to Chardonnay will be grafted back to Cabernet. Elsewhere, some blocks already pulled out by LMR will be planted with more Cabernet Sauvignon.

Other reds are also being tried. In a now-empty field once planted to Riesling, a mixed planting of reds will be established to Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Gamay. The Cabernet Franc is not too surprising. It has grown on the property previously to accompany Cabernet Sauvignon. (As did Merlot, but with climate change many producers are moving away from that variety.) The Malbec will be entirely new to the site but has proved itself in a few plantings elsewhere in the region. Gamay, however, is essentially new as the variety is not established in Napa. (What was previously called Napa Gamay was actually the obscure French variety Valdiguié.) Inspired by the wines of Touraine, Motley will grow and likely co-ferment the four varieties together to make a fresh, energetic, quaffable red.

While the shift from predominately whites to far more reds will probably shock many avid Stony Hill fans, it is perhaps inevitable. In truth, climate change has arrived in Napa Valley and many vineyards so far north in the region where the climate is warmest have moved away from many white-wine varieties, apart

from Sauvignon Blanc. (That said, just up the road from Stony Hill, at a slightly higher elevation, Smith Madrone continues to make beautiful Riesling and Chardonnay as well as Cabernet Sauvignon.) The Stony Hill site has proved it is an excellent choice for both Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Cabernet Franc therefore makes sense. Malbec and Gamay are more surprising choices but the decision to plant them also aligns with the overall ethos of this expanding wine group.

A future based on experimentation

As excited as each of the group's winemakers are with the chance to lead their own prestigious wine programmes, they are also under significant pressure to succeed. Napa is one of the world's most famous wine regions, as well as one of its most expensive. In recent decades, the combination has meant that wineries have less flexibility on what they can sell, and winemakers have less leeway over the style and kind of wines they can produce. The wines have to prove commercially feasible to justify their existence.

But for many wine lovers, those same restrictions have lessened the excitement of the region. One outside criticism is that as the region has moved so completely to Cabernet Sauvignon the wines have become more homogeneous. McCoy, pictured below, hopes to help change that.



Carlton McCoy MS by Matt Morris

Recognising the pressure Lawrence's winemakers are under, he has built into the mentorship model a sort of pressure-relief valve designed to offer a creative outlet to winemakers with the possibility of new discoveries.

The Brendel brand will launch in summer 2021 and will offer a more affordable and playful side of Napa Valley rarely seen today. Its wines will come from side-lot experiments made by various winemakers of the Lawrence group and will be available through a new tasting room they plan to open in downtown Napa. McCoy admits he expects it to draw a younger wine lover, while also offering anyone the opportunity to try new styles of wines along with a more affordable weeknight option. The Brendel wines will include sparkling Grignolino, a Zinfandel/Chardonnay co-ferment, a Friuli-inspired white blend, table wine made from Portuguese field blends, and others.

In truth, until the group begins releasing wines later this year, they will remain a bit of a wild card in the region. Still, many of their ideas and plans are exciting. Listening to McCoy describe the venture, I found his enthusiasm infectious. It is clear he imagines a new road for Napa Valley. As he describes it, it is one that

includes wines made in a classic, restrained style from the historically great vineyards of the region, alongside playful, unexpected options meant to foster exploration.