

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.”



Brandlin's estate vineyard, above, exemplifies what makes mountain winegrowing so challenging...and rewarding.

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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.”



Mayacamas Vineyards takes full advantage of their mountain location to produce wines of elegance and ... [+]

COURTESY OF MAYACAMAS

“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.



Higher-altitude vineyard sites, like Mt. Brave's, above, can allow for grape-growing above the fog ... [+]

COURTESY OF MT. BRAVE

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.

Acumen “Mountainside” Cabernet Sauvignon 2017

From two different vineyards on Atlas Peak, this is an appealingly herbaceous expression, with tomato vine, leather, cigar tobacco notes to the thyme and oregano that spice up currants and cedar alongside loads of red cherries. Give it until 2023 and then enjoy over the next decade.

ADAMVS Téres Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain

Ripe yet still lifted, with warm plums, flowers, and cooked honey aromas before a palate of sweet, ripe berry and plum fruit joined by warm black figs, allspice, cloves, and the well-caramelized cap of a crème brûlée. A subtle bonfire character lingers through the purple-fruit and balsamic flavors of the finish, all kissed with the suggestion of flowers and dark chocolate-enrobed wild strawberries. This will age for a decade with ease, but there's no need to wait.

Arkenstone Estate Red Wine 2017 Howell Mountain

This Cabernet Sauvignon-based red is both taut and generous at the same time, with mouthwatering and impeccably ripe blackberry and plum fruit lifted by hints of cedar and a fine dusting of cinnamon. Texturally, this really sings with elegant yet persistent tannins that promise 20+ years of evolution, but that are irresistible right now. A seam of pencil-led savoriness follows through from the nose to the finish, which is grippy and lingers with balsamic-tinged and cocoa-dusted currant flavors.

Brandlin Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Mount Veeder

Roasted cacao nibs and Fernet Branca aromas are joined by blood oranges, tamarind paste, and allspice, preceding a palate of density and length, with cafe mocha, cloves, purple plums, mountain berries, tamarind paste, and cinnamon. Like so many of 2018's best, this is delicious already, but can age for another 10 - 12 years with ease.

Cade Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain, Napa Valley

There's serious density to the plummy, jammy nose, with aromas of cassis, sachertorte, melted black licorice, and sun-warmed mineral before a rich, plush palate marked by generous, nicely concentrated yet still balanced flavors of blueberries, cobbler shell, warm vanilla-chocolate pôt de crème, and blackberry liqueur. It all finishes with pencil shavings and lots of black cherries. 15 years in the cellar won't be too much, but it's delicious already.

Cakebread Cellars Dancing Bear Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain

What a beguiling nose, with copious autumn spices mingling with toasted coconut, espresso oils, soy sauce, plums, the meaty savoriness of roasted duck, and blackberry syrup. The palate is pure silk, energetic and concentrated, with a beam of black cherries and black plum compote, an undertow of dark chocolate, and grace notes of baker's chocolate, peppercorns, licorice, fennel seeds, and mocha. Now or in 20 years or more, this is stunning.

Duckhorn Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain

There is a riveting dance of purple plum and blackberry aromas with flashes of more herbal notes—rosemary, fresh-picked oregano, and thyme. Then the palate, weighty and glycerine, is sweetly spiced with vanilla and dulce de leche, which lends a ripe edge to the brandied cherries, star anise, floral peppercorns, and candied black oranges through the sage-singed finish. Drink this now through at least 2034.

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.

Ladera Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain

Minty and perfumed with cedar, but with a solid core of huckleberries and kirsch, before a palate that glides across the tongue with plum pudding, cracked pink peppercorns, Chinese five-spice powder, dark cocoa powder, and cinnamon stick. A beef bouillon note lingers on the finish. Plush in texture, yet boasting enough acidity to keep it fresh. This will evolve in fascinating ways well into the late-2030s.

La Jota Vineyard Co. Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Howell Mountain

Taut and generous at the same time, with aromas of Chinese five-spice powder, goji berries, and pomegranates before a palate of sweet, generous fruit that's framed by sweet tannins, all of it dusted with cinnamon, cloves,

and allspice. The suggestion of sage smolders in the background, as well as a hint of rosemary and mint. It's cut through with mouthwatering acidity, making this particularly food-friendly. Enjoy over the next decade...or right now.

Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Mt. Veeder

So minty on the nose, with cedar, sandalwood, spearmint, and a savory grace note to the mountain berries. All of this precedes a palate of energy and concentration, with flavors of sage, thyme, olives, pan-toasted fennel seeds, caraway, cherry pits, mountain berries, red cherries, and cedar. Savory and so mineral, yet not lacking in generous fruit. This is almost Bordeaux-like, without ever losing its Napa roots, and will reward patience over the next 20+ years.

Mi Sueño Winery Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Lynn's Vineyard , Mt. Veeder

This zips along with spicy aromas—Szechuan peppercorns, caraway—and is anchored by smoldering cedar before sweet, ripe mountain berries and currants sweep in, as well as a hint of figs and black raisins that glide through the graphite and singed-sage of the long finish. Enjoy through 2031 and beyond.

Mt. Brave Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Mt. Veeder

A savory, mineral-driven nose tees up a palate of excellent concentration, where crunchy yet still somehow pliant tannins frame flavors of cassis, blackberry and black cherry liqueur, pencil lead, and melted chocolate, all spiced with star anise that shimmers through the finish. Great now, and with lots of time left—easily another 15 years or more.

Newton Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Spring Mountain District

Lifted with licorice-tinged herbs—tarragon, shiso—as well as a core of red currants and cherry pits, before a palate of sage, salty minerality, star anise, sun-warmed rocks, and a mix of currants and mountain berries. This is an excellent example of a brilliantly made mountain wine. Give it a few years to shine even more brightly than it already does, and then enjoy it for another 20 years.

Seven Apart “Shale” 2018 Stags Ridge Vineyard Atlas Peak

This is rich, generous, powerful, and opulent without sacrificing purity, elegance, and detail. Aromas of black raspberries, cassis, and blueberry compote dance with pencil shavings and incense, and set the stage for a palate of sweet ripe fruit—blackberries, huckleberries, crème de cassis—and cobbler shell, the caramelized top of a vanilla crème brûlée, and then candied violets, cedar, and crunchy minerality. Kirsch-filled dark chocolate ganache rises to the surface, and the ripe tannins are remarkably elegant. Drink this now or hold onto it for the next 25 years.

The Hess Collection Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Mt. Veeder

Primary fruit and oak spice emerge right away, but with air, they resolve and reveal a velvety wine flashed through with lots of sweet spice to the blueberries, cherry cobbler, chocolate, and thyme, all with a background bass-note suggesting scorched earth. It will evolve nicely until 2030, but I wouldn't want to wait that long and sacrifice the lovely fruit here.

Theorem Vineyards “Voir Dire” Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Diamond Mountain District

Distinctly chocolatey on the nose, with touches of espresso beans, vanilla, and cassis, all of which prepare the palate for flavors of blueberry cobbler, round and rich brambly berries, plum pudding, and melted chocolate. Toasted fennel seeds and smoldering cigar tobacco lend it a savory undertow. Needs time...or a charred ribeye. Best from 2024 - 2039+.

Trinchero Napa Valley Single Vineyard Collection Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Cloud's Nest Vineyard, Mt. Veeder

This shows the silkier side of Mt. Veeder, with an open-knit nose of red berries, fresh springtime flowers, and carob that all tee up a palate of sweet, generous blue and red fruit, a distinct dusting of cinnamon and cloves, cocoa powder, and mineral-flecked tannins through the balanced finish. Enjoy through 2030, but there's no need to wait that long.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianfreedman/2021/05/17/exploring-the-cabernet-sauvignon-of-napa-valley-part-five-mountain-wines/?sh=4e880f94c3bf>