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Acumen - A New Shining Star From Napa Valley

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Acumen Edcora Vineyard, Atlas Peak, Napa Valley

Photo courtesy Acumen

Every year, it seems, a new winery opens in Napa Valley. Often this is a big occasion, as someone or some corporation with deep pockets purchases a few ideally situated vineyards, hires a talented winemaker and sets off on what they hope will be start of a long, thriving success story.

Some of these projects do succeed, while others enjoy less acclaim. Recently I have tasted the releases of a relatively new Napa Valley winery that I believe will become, if not a household name, at least a name worth remembering. The winery is Acumen.

Acumen was founded by entrepreneur Eric Yuan, whose passion for wine had been instilled in him during his studies in Paris. He acquired his first vineyard in 2012, in the Atlas Peak AVA of Napa

Valley, and today Acumen consists of 116 acres of vines on two vineyards on Atlas Peak: Edcora and Attelas.

The current winemaker is Henrik Poulsen, a native of Denmark, who has been an enologist in France as well as with other wineries in Napa Valley. I asked Poulsen about Acumen and why the owner selected Atlas Peak, which is situated northeast of the town of Napa Valley, east of Yountville and above the foothills of the Stags Leap District; vineyards in this territory are at elevations of 1200 to 2500 feet above sea level.

“While grapes have been grown on Atlas Peak for many decades, it is in our mind one of the most exciting ‘new’ AVAs in Napa,” Poulsen comments. The inherent characteristics of fruit concentration and minerality from our mountainside fruit perfectly matches the restrained, ‘old-school’ and structured winemaking style we were looking for.”



Henrik Poulsen, Acumen director of winemaking

Photo courtesy Acumen

There are several examples of Cabernet Sauvignon produced at Acumen. The Mountainside offering, a rich, elegantly styled wine, is made from younger vines; Poulsen treats these wines with a lesser

percentage of new French oak than the featured Peak bottlings; the Mountainside Cabernet Sauvignon is more approachable and can be enjoyed at an earlier age.

I've reviewed the wines below and thoroughly enjoy the 2015 Mountainside Cabernet Sauvignon, but the Peak Cabernet Sauvignons, one from the estate's Edcora Vineyard and the other from their Attelas Vineyard, are a step up in body and complexity, and are wines of outstanding complexity. These last two wines combine not only impressive weight on the palate along with notable structure, they are also very supple with graceful tannins, a style seen too rarely with Napa Cabernet Sauvignon from mountain vineyards.

How does Poulsen explain this - why are these wines so graceful? "Because we are well above the fog line, our grapes receive additional sunlight. At the same time, they are cooled by the constant breezes on the mountain tops. As a result, the berries tend to have thicker skins, which reduces the juice-to-skin ratio. This leads to more flavors and aromatics."

Poulsen also notes his cellar techniques to craft a more elegant style of wine. "To tame the natural tannins in the skins and seeds, we make very deliberate winemaking decisions, including using very gentle extraction methods during fermentation to achieve a perfect balance between natural acidity and the structure, concentration, and complexity found in our mountain fruit.

"Also, the coopers we have selected for our barrel program are very much dialed in to our specific varietals, blocks, age of vines, and date of picking, which adds to the seamless, elegant structure of our wines."

It's this restrained manner of Cabernet Sauvignon that renders the Acumen wines as being so special. This signature style will certainly help in terms of identity, but apart from that, the Acumen Cabernets are much more enjoyable upon release than many counterpart wines from Napa Valley. For dinner tonight, would you rather opt for a wine that is huge and brimming with ripe fruit and big tannins, or would you prefer a first-rate wine that can actually be enjoyed now? I'm sure for most of us, the choice is an easy one.

Along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Acumen also produces Sauvignon Blanc; there are two examples, the Mountainside bottling and the Peak offering. Why did the winery decide on Sauvignon Blanc as opposed to Chardonnay? Poulsen explains; "Sauvignon Blanc really thrives in the somewhat moderate temperatures at Attelas Vineyard. Paired with low soil pH and a very even ripening season, the fruit reaches perfect phenolic ripeness and is often brought in after the harvest of Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon have begun."

As a lover of Sauvignon Blanc, I extend a heartfelt thank you to Poulsen and estate director Mark Castaldi for working with this varietal. The wines offer beautiful varietal character and excellent complexity, with the 2017 Peak Sauvignon Blanc being a remarkable Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc.

I've tasted only a few wines from Acumen, but let me repeat, this is an estate worth remembering. Keep an eye out for these wines.

Notes on current Acumen releases:

Sauvignon Blanc “Mountainside” 2017 (Napa Valley) - Bright yellow; aromas of freshly cut hay, spearmint and coriander. Medium-full with a rich mid-palate, very good, quite high acidity and notable varietal character. I'd like to see a bit more richness on the mid-palate, as well as a bit more length in the finish, but otherwise, this is a well made Sauvignon Blanc crafted in a subdued style with only a hint of herbal character. A bit more ripeness with less acidity would also have helped. Enjoy over the next 2-3 years. **Excellent**

Sauvignon Blanc “Peak” 2017 (Atlas Peak AVA, Napa Valley) - Brilliant straw with golden tints; exquisite varietal aromas with subdued notes of chervil, snow pea and hay. Medium-full with excellent concentration and persistence. Lovely harmony, very good acidity and outstanding varietal purity. Very stylish, with brilliant complexity. Beautiful fruit and excellent cellar work combine to make this one of Napa Valley's finest examples of Sauvignon Blanc. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years, perhaps longer. **Superb**

Cabernet Sauvignon “Mountainside” 2015 (Napa Valley) - Bright, ruby red/crimson; aromas of rose petals, maraschino cherry and dill. Medium-full with very good concentration. Lovely ripeness, good acidity, nicely managed tannins, very good persistence. Well made, this has a nice subdued nature. Approachable now, but best in 3-5 years with peak in 7 or 8 years. At \$65, this is very fairly priced. **Excellent**

Cabernet Sauvignon “Peak” Attelas Vineyard 2015 (Atlas Peak AVA) - Bright, deep ruby red; aromas of huckleberry, clove and purple iris. Medium-full with very good to excellent concentration. Beautiful varietal character, round, elegant tannins, beautifully integrated oak, notable persistence and fruit definition. Exquisite harmony, this is a bit more approachable than the Edcora, and it is lovely to enjoy now, while it will peak in another 7-10 years, and drink well for a few years after that. **Outstanding**

Cabernet Sauvignon “Peak” Edcora Vineyard 2015 (Atlas Peak AVA- Napa Valley) - Deep ruby red; aromas of cassis, black currant and anise. Full-bodied with excellent concentration. This has ideal ripeness, yet is not forced or showy, as there is good acidity as well as finely balanced tannins. The wood notes are especially well integrated. A rich young Napa Cabernet Sauvignon with lovely harmony and excellent complexity. While it is somewhat approachable now, this is clearly a wine for 5-7 years down the road with peak drinking after 10 years. Proof that a big, young Napa Cabernet Sauvignon can offer a marvelous sense of finesse. **Superb**

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