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JUNE/JULY 2022



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THE
MAGIC
OF THE

MAYA CAMAS

This range's
volcanic hillsides
are home to some
of Napa's most
prized vineyards.

BY
VIRGINIE BOONE

On

the western side of the Napa Valley, from roughly Yountville to Calistoga, lies some of the best ground ever given to Cabernet Sauvignon, strewn along the benchlands and hillsides of the Mayacamas Mountains. Here sit the western portions of the Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford and St. Helena appellations and the entirety of Mount Veeder, Spring Mountain and Diamond Mountain. Hidden within its folds are a handful of ghost wineries, long abandoned, yet nonetheless, links to a distant past of homesteaders and pioneers—signs of the Mayacamas' long well-understood viability and endurance in agriculture.

GETTY IMAGES

The appropriately named Mayacamas Olds grew up at Sky Vineyards on Mount Veeder, established by her parents in 1973 at 2,100-foot elevation. As a child, Olds learned every aspect of the wine business from the literal ground up. She then earned a degree in fermentation science and an MBA in corporate sustainability, and has become a sought-after viticulturalist.

"I'm 100% biased because I grew up in the Mayacamas," she says. "But up in the mountains it feels magical—there's a feeling of wildness from Mount Veeder to Diamond Mountain. The hillsides become less extreme with gentler slopes and more uniformity the more south you go, and you get cooler closer to the Bay."

In its entirety, the mountain range encompasses 52 miles from north to south and reaches heights up to 4,700 feet, straddling to the Sonoma side, where the Moon Mountain AVA is another recognition of the range's special charms. On the Napa side, the vineyards—many nestled within redwood forest—face mostly east, allowing them to breathe the cooler air from the Pacific Ocean and avoid the direct sun and afternoon heat felt more acutely on the valley floor and Napa's eastern side.



Geologist David G. Howell, coauthor of *The Winemaker's Dance: Exploring Terroir in the Napa Valley*, describes the main geologic takeaway as this: "The Mayacamas Mountains are less than 2 million years old and are actively growing, as are the alluvial fans that are commonly called the westside benchlands." According to Howell, those vastly varied deposits account for a dizzying array of unique soil types.

The Once and Future King Benchlands

Some of the most historic vineyards planted in the Napa Valley exist along these benchlands in Oakville and Rutherford, where gently sloping alluvial fans and rich volcanic soils provide good drainage and balanced vigor. Here, earlier ripening grapes with an intensity of flavor are possible, freshness is retained and tannins structured.

The Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard, Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard, Martha's





Opposite page, clockwise from left: the chateau at Inglenook; Sleeping Lady is an under-the-radar source for Cabernet; grapes on the vine there; Sleeping Lady lies in the Yountville foothills; this page: forests surround Vine Hill Ranch

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: INGLENOOK; BRION (3); THIS PAGE: OLAF BECKMANN

Vineyard and To Kalon Vineyard, are all here, as are the wineries and estate vineyards for Bella Oaks, Detert Vineyards, Far Niente, Futo Estate, Harlan Estate, Inglenook, MacDonald Vineyards, Promontory and Staglin Family Vineyard. Some of the land can be traced back to original Rancho Caymus plantings by George Yount in 1838, the beginning of viticulture in the Napa Valley.

“Many historic vineyards on the Napa side are roughly aligned with those geologic features called alluvial fans—the gravelly nature of which promote drainage and were therefore particularly suited to farming grapes,” explains Graeme MacDonald of MacDonald Vineyards, whose estate plantings were once part of the original To Kalon Vineyard. “In the pre-Prohibition era, To Kalon was not recognized for its Cabernet Sauvignon, but instead famous for Crabb’s Black Burgundy [Refosco]. If a site can transcend grape varieties and wine styles, it must truly be due to a sense of place.”

Some of these vineyards were once holdings and grape sources for Beaulieu Vineyards’ Georges de Latour Private Reserve wines, under the post-Prohibition guidance of André Tchelistcheff. Later still, many of these same vineyards were sourced by Robert Mondavi for Robert Mondavi Reserve.

Tchelistcheff was explicit about this stretch of land in conversation with Robert Benson in his book, *Great Winemakers of California*, saying, “This is the greatest region for production of Cabernet Sauvignon in California,” defining it as starting from Oakville and going to Zinfandel Lane, on the southern outskirts of St. Helena, on the left side of Highway 29. His opinion was based specifically on the wines of Beaulieu, Mondavi and Heitz’s Martha’s Vineyard. Decades after Tchelistcheff’s observations, it remains home to a who’s who of fine vineyards and wineries making, indeed, some of the best Cabernets in California.



Left: Mayacamas Vineyards on Mount Veeder sits on the edge of the crater of an extinct volcano; below: the vineyards there are planted between 1,800–2,400 feet in elevation

Morning Mists Yountville to Rutherford

In the foothills of Yountville, just north of Domaine Chandon, Dominus and Blankiet estates, is Sleeping Lady Vineyard, a 46-acre, under-the-radar source for Cabernet owned by the legendary grape-growing Bettinelli family. Grapes go to Accendo Cellars, Alpha Omega, Fait-Main, Covert Estate, Brion Wines, Ad Vivum and AXR, among others.

It offers classic elements of these Mayacamas' benchlands below the fog line, with alluvial and fluvial soils and cobbly rock. First planted to vines in the 1860s, there is still an original Victorian home on site and a refurbished barn, which serves as the cellar and tasting space for Brion Wines.

Julien Fayard makes the Brion and Julien Fayard Sleeping Lady Cabernets. "The vineyard gets a lot of morning light and morning cooling," he says. "Sleeping Lady is closer to the mountain and closer to the Bay, slightly sloped to the east and not prone to sunburn or heat damage. The grapes get a little longer hangtime, the tannins are more complete. There's a lot of minerality and complex density."

A few miles north of Sleeping Lady, three generations of the Kelham-Phillips family have farmed Vine Hill Ranch, an exquisite piece of Oakville, since 1959. Tucked into the Mayacamas, it is behind the Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard (land the family once owned) and due east of Harlan Estate.

Forests surround the 350-acre property (71 acres planted to vines) on several sides. Records show a history of grapegrowing as far back as 1884. There is a chunk of rhyolite on site, while the woodlands contribute a note of chaparral.

"Because the western slopes are in the shade 45 minutes before the east side [of the Napa Valley], you get luxuriant fresh-fruit characters



in the wines," says third-generation proprietor Bruce Phillips. "There's vibrancy and freshness because of the soils and aspects."

Vine Hill Ranch's modern era begins in the 1970s, with a redevelopment of the vineyard overseen by Tony Soter, who once bought Vine Hill Chenin Blanc as the winemaker for Chappellet. A phylloxera outbreak in 1985 led to yet another replant, this time almost entirely to Cabernet Sauvignon, which is split into seven distinct blocks and a variety of clones and rootstocks.

Vine Hill Ranch grapes have been an important part of many deliriously delicious Cabernets beyond the family's, including Lail Vineyards' J. Daniel Cuvée, Bond's Vecina and Tor Wines' Pure Magic, the latter of which coferments Cabernet Sauvignon with Petit Verdot from the modest 2-acre smidgen of which is planted at Vine Hill.

In Rutherford, the legendary Inglenook, with wines dating back

A Different Kind of Vertical

Taste the Mayacamas

98 Lail 2019 J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley). Enjoy from 2029–2039. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 15.7% Price: \$295

98 Mayacamas 2019 Merlot (Mount Veeder). Enjoy 2029–2039. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14% Price: \$65

98 VHR 2019 Vine Hill Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville). Enjoy from 2029–2039. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14.8% Price: \$250

97 Inglenook 2019 Rubicon (Rutherford). Enjoy from 2029–2034. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14.1% Price: \$215

97 Stewart 2019 Beckstoffer Las Piedras Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley). Enjoy 2029–2034. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 15% Price: \$240

96 Ad Vivum 2018 Sleeping Lady Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Yountville). Enjoy 2028–2038. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14.5% Price: \$175

96 AXR 2018 Sleeping Lady Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley). This is a memorable wine. *Editors' Choice*. abv: 13.4% Price: \$215

96 Diamond Creek 2018 Volcanic Hill Cabernet Sauvignon (Diamond Mountain District). Best from 2028–2038. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14.5% Price: \$285

96 Far Niente 2018 Estate Bottled Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville). Enjoy from 2028–2038. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 14.5% Price: \$250

95 Nickel & Nickel 2019 Branding Iron Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville). A structured, earthy and herbal red. abv: 14.8% Price: \$125

95 Smith-Madrone 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon (Spring Mountain District). Balanced and fresh in approach. abv: 14.3% Price: \$62

94 Anthem Winery 2018 Beckstoffer Las Piedras Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (St. Helena). Enjoy 2028–2033. *Cellar Selection*. abv: 15.3% Price: \$150