

CAIN

VINEYARD & WINERY



The Cain Cellar; photograph by Mitch Rice

Wine Making

The transformation from grape to wine is magical. 1,000 years ago, alchemists called this process “fermentation.” Although much is understood, much is also misunderstood, and much more still remains a mystery. This is exactly as we would have it.

Nothing that we do at Cain could be called unique—in fact, it could be called classical winemaking. Nevertheless, we believe that the sum of all our choices could still yield a wine that is uniquely Cain. Making red wine can be reduced to the most elemental, timeless recipe—and this is how we approach it. Our winemaking program is simple, and it follows the same path for all our wines: hand picking, gentle destemming, native-yeast fermentation, thoughtful maceration, and intentional *élevage*.

Rather than using “fermentation” to refer to the entire process of wine making, today, enologists use the word “fermentation” to distinguish the biological conversions of grape sugars and acids from the physical processes of extraction, which they denote by the term “maceration.” Like cooking, and all of the food arts, winemaking is the culmination of a myriad of choices, some intended, some accidental, and some unseen. Our goal is to grow our grapes and make our wines with intention. Still, we understand and honor the fundamental truth that natural wine must be, in part, the outcome of circumstances beyond our control. Of course, we will always do everything we know and everything within our power, and everything we believe in, to ensure the best possible outcome. But we also know that, if wine were merely the predictable product of technology, we would not be driven to make wine, nor would you be reading this. After our process of hand picking, destemming, native-yeast fermentation, maceration, and *élevage*, the wines usually complete malolactic fermentation in the barrel, are blended in the spring

following harvest, and are repeatedly racked from barrels. They are usually egg-white fined, and they are often bottled without filtration. As can be seen, wherever possible, we eschew intervention. Our clear mantra is “less is more.”

Once this is understood, we should also state clearly that our constant goal is to create wines with virtues that we believe are timeless: complexity, balance, harmony, and grace. There must also be a sense of energy and of vivacity. Specifically, in wine, we value these attributes: a complex bouquet; a silky entry; a nice balance between the sweetness of fruit, refreshing acidity, mouth-filling viscosity, and finely textured tannins; a graceful exit; and a lengthy finish. There must be a rhythm to a fine wine. Sometimes insubstantiality is politely described as “elegance.” And sometimes, true elegance is mistaken for insubstantiality, especially by those inclined to judge a wine by its weight and power. But, knowing just how difficult they are to attain, we remain comfortable in our commitment to our goals. Most of the critical decisions that will affect the finished wine have been made by the time the grapes are picked. These decisions were all made in the vineyard, and they culminate in choosing which area to pick and the harvest date. Each facet of each vineyard must be identified and vinified separately. We understand that, with all fruits, there are the familiar stages of unripe, ripe, and overripe—the key is in their identification. While unripe fruit will not fully express its potential and can be harsh and green, overripe fruit loses much of its complexity, and the wine from it may become more soft and plush—it begins to flatten out and to lose the tension and energy that we call vibrancy, which gives life and excitement to a truly fine wine. Once the grapes are picked, the next key decisions surround the handling of the fruit as it is transformed into the raw, young wine. We believe that red wine is a partial extraction of the grape. Our goal is to get what we want and to leave the rest behind. Therefore, we need to handle the grapes gently; we choose to remove the stems and to deliver a high proportion of whole berries to the tank. By not adding yeast, we can let the grapes continue their metabolism before the fermentation begins with native yeast on the skins. The length of maceration and the intensity of pumping-over, or of punching-down, is determined entirely by taste. Air plays a constant role in our vinification. All of our pressing is controlled manually, so as to obtain the finest quality of press wine. Again, our decision whether or not to incorporate any portion of the press wine to each individual lot that we vinify is made entirely by taste.

As soon as possible, each wine goes to barrel where it will complete its fermentations. The French have a word to describe the development of wine from its raw, unfinished state at the end of fermentation until it reaches the finished stage, at which it is ready to be bottled. They call it “*élevage*” in winemaking vocabulary. There is no equivalent English word for this process. Many transformations will occur—many of them not completely understood. Again, oxygen plays a crucial role as the wine loses its gas and sediment, clarifies, and becomes increasingly more stable. Early in the year after the harvest, we begin a series of tastings to understand each lot and, ultimately to compose the blends of each of our three wines. Usually, some twenty individual lots will contribute to each of the Cain Five, Cain Concept, and Cain Cuvée. Once the blend has been determined and realized in our cellar, the wine goes back to barrels to continue its *élevage* for another year or more. During this time, the wine will be “racked” (drawn off) from its lees (sediment) in the barrel, reblended, and then returned to barrel. The decisions about when to rack the wine, how much air to give it, whether or not to fine the wine, and whether to filter it, are, once again, determined entirely by taste. When the wine is ready for the bottle, our goal is always to get the wine into the bottle with the minimum trauma possible. This means gentle pumping, gravity filling, and as close to zero oxygen uptake as we can get. At that point, our job is done.