

Cain Vineyard Rises from the Ashes

The Napa winery was devastated by fire last year but, like a phoenix, it has risen.

[W. Blake Gray](#)·Thursday, 18-Nov-2021



© Getty Images | The fires of 2020 destroyed vast tracts of Napa vineyard and winery buildings.

Chris Howell devoted nearly half of his life to his life's work, and it all disappeared in a night. Now, after a painful year, he is ready to talk about rebuilding it.

Since 1991, Howell, 69, has been general manager of [Cain Vineyard](#), an estate winery in [Spring Mountain District](#) that stands apart, literally and figuratively, from the rest of Napa Valley.

Howell has always pursued balance in wine even when it was unpopular. He believes in Bordeaux-style blends even as the rest of [Napa Valley](#) moves more towards 100 percent [Cabernet](#). He became a low-intervention winemaker before that was trendy, and even now he thinks – as many French winemakers do – that a touch of brettanomyces from the vineyard can add character without being a flaw. He's also not afraid of a little fresh herb character in his Cabernet. Howell says of many Napa vintners: "They see [green character] as unidimensional. They think it's capsicum. But there's a spectrum of green notes. They don't understand green can also be lime or Douglas fir."

That's how Cain stands apart figuratively. Unfortunately, it is its literal isolation, so long an asset, that turned out to be a problem.

Fire on the mountain

The 500-acre Cain property is like a bowl, a natural valley with rolling hills inside nestled at the top of the Spring Mountain District. The onetime sheep farm is isolated enough that you can't really see any neighbors. It's surrounded by forest on all sides.

"Forest on all sides" was once a descriptor of beauty, but today in [California](#) it strikes an ominous note. However, this is a story of rebirth.

Since the year 2000, Howell and his wife Katie Lazar lived on the beautiful site. After a career outside the wine industry, Lazar took over as Cain's director of sales and marketing in 2010. They had an idyllic life: living and working at home in one of the most beautiful spots in northern California. A romantic reader will appreciate that even now, having been married for two decades, when they meet in the morning after having been apart for a couple hours, they greet with a kiss on the lips.

They were home on the night in September 2020 when the Glass Fire struck.

They watched the fire that first seemed distant. Then suddenly the hilltop across from them burst out in orange flames. The sheriff's office was sending alerts to evacuate, leave, get out now. Howell didn't want to leave: he thought he could do something to protect the property. But Lazar didn't want to stay, and with flames bursting out, smoke filling the air, and the visibility dropping to nonexistent, Howell didn't want her to try to leave alone.

By the time they left, Howell had to manage the drive on the narrow winding road that leads to and from the winery basically by memory; trees sparked and popped and crashed all around them. Fortunately they made it to safety.

But Cain Vineyard did not. The winery building was destroyed. Howell's and Lazar's home was destroyed. Various outbuildings were destroyed. All of that is bad enough.

The worst, though was that while grapevines are more resistant to wildfire than trees, when surrounded by enough flames they will succumb. Howell says 90 percent of the vines died. That is the worst part.

It was especially difficult because Howell had spent 30 years working on Cain as an estate winery, learning the nuances of the site and trying to interpret the terroir rather than his own winemaking vision.

"What we do is pay attention," he said, while giving me a tour around the property. "When you make wine with minimal impact, you have to pay attention."

Howell quotes the author Simone Weil: "At its highest level, attention is the same as prayer."

I visited Howell in October, more than a year after the fire. He and Lazar are living in a house she bought in [St Helena](#) in 1993. They had been renting it out.

"The people renting realized we lost our home," Lazar said. "They asked us if we needed a place to live. They agreed to move."

Into recovery

Work crews have been back to Cain since right after the fire finally was under control, but he had not brought other visitors. You sense that it's more than a piece of property for Howell, a thoughtful man whose dinner conversation tends to the philosophical. Howell doesn't own it – it has been owned for decades by Jim Meadlock, an Alabama software company founder. But Howell shepherded it to its greatest heights, and now he is trying to nurse it back to health.

"That was some of our favorite Cabernet," he says, pointing at a nearly nude hillside that once held vines; his voice is wistful.

In fact, it's as if the fire went after the best the property had to offer. Cain Vineyard is large enough to have a variety of slopes and a few flat areas that look like valley floor. Howell said the best wine came from the steepest slopes – but those are the ones that burned.

The story gets worse. The year before the fire, Cain's insurer dropped the winery. Insurers paid out millions of dollars to California wineries after wildfires in 2017 and 2018 and Howell said his insurer said they simply would not insure hillside vines anymore. Cain was able to get insurance from the state-run insurer of last resort, the FAIR plan, but only for the winery buildings – not for the vineyard, and not for the wines that were stored on site.

Cain lost not only its buildings and most of its vineyards: It also lost the entire 2019 vintage, which was in barrels stored on the site. There will be no 2020 vintage because of the fire. It's a good time to buy past vintages of [Cain Five](#), the winery's top cuvée (named after the five Bordeaux varieties that go into it), because they are all you will see for a long while.



© Cain Vineyard & Winery | Chris Howell and his vineyard team noticed something unusual about some of the burnt vines.

The cleanup so far has cost \$750,000, and it's still just getting started. Howell's first job was to prevent erosion from winter storms from taking away the thin, valuable soils on the hillsides; irrigation pipes had to be dug up and removed.

"We were concerned about preserving the soil and keeping the land intact," Howell said. "It wasn't easy because we lost almost all of our equipment." Even now, crews work out of temporary storage containers.

Howell hasn't had time to deal with the threat of the many blackened, dead trees that still surround the property. It will be safer to cut them down because they're now firewood, but there are so many and rebuilding a 500-acre vineyard has so many other requirements.

The Lazarus vines

Before spring, Howell tried to identify which vines had survived, so the crew led by vineyard manager Ashley Bennett – who has been at Cain since 1999 – could nurture them.

"When it came to assessing the vines, we wanted to say that far more were viable than were," Howell said. "We pruned at least half of all the vineyard as if we hoped it would grow in a normal way this coming year. Not all of it, because clearly some of it was nothing but charcoal. There were a lot of vines we pruned waiting to see what would happen. A small proportion grew normally."

There isn't much research on vineyard recovery after a fire, but this might be something UC Davis should look into. Howell said that by mid-April, early in the season, on most of

the vines, "we didn't see buds when we expected to see them. We said to ourselves, maybe we shouldn't be so hopeful."

The Cain crew focused its attention on the small number of vines growing normally. They rebuilt the irrigation system just in those areas, even though older vines don't necessarily need it. It was more difficult than usual because piping is usually laid in the winter, when vines are dormant; in spring, they had to work around branches and leaves. Cain also usually sprays vines to prevent powdery mildew, but in this case they did not spray around the vines that looked dead.

Then something surprising happened: some of the vines that looked dead began putting out green new shoots.

"The top of the vine wasn't growing, but what we didn't know is that the base of the vine somewhere was preparing to grow," Howell said. "We didn't see buds when we expected to see them. But then we'd see new growth in summer. We'd say, this vine isn't dead after all. It could be only rootstock. But it could be the vines above the graft."

Here's a little background on wine grapevines. Most of the world's grapevines are one species – *Vitis vinifera*, which includes [Pinot](#) and Cabernet and almost every wine grape you've heard of – grafted on top of the roots of another species. This is done because native American grapevines don't produce great wine, but they are resistant to phylloxera, a root-sucking louse. Napa Valley had a phylloxera outbreak in the early 1990s and Cain Vineyard was replanted as a result. So their vines (and almost every other vineyard's vines) are Frankenvines, if you will, with a valuable head on a working-class body.

Wine is fundamentally mysterious and Howell has inadvertently discovered a question that currently has no answer. What happens when a Cabernet Sauvignon (or [Merlot](#) or [Petit Verdot](#)) vine that has been grafted onto a non-*vinifera* rootstock appears to die, but comes back? If it produces a bunch of grapes, will they be Cabernet, or will they be whatever type of grapes the rootstock would have produced if ungrafted? Howell doesn't know, but now he'll be watching to find out.

He'll have time to find out, too, because although he plans to replant, he can't do it all right away. Cain is limited not only by the number of workers it has, because replanting is very labor-intensive, but the amount of water it has in its retention ponds. Old grapevines with deep roots don't need much water, but young vines do, and California is still in a drought.

"We have two ponds that fill with rainwater," Howell said. "We have to receive about 50 inches of rain for them to fill. Most of the water on the Cain ranch just goes down the canyon. It's important to maintain the watershed. It just reinforces the fact that we're not completely in control here. It's up to us to be observant and appreciative of what's around us. Wine can remind us of agriculture. When you go to a grocery store and buy a loaf of bread you don't really think about what it took to grow the wheat. That's what's good about wine. Wine makes you think about agriculture. It's a metaphor for all food."

So while Cain will replant, they also will see what they get from vines that were left for dead, but sprang back to life.

"We picked a few hundred pounds of Petit Verdot from a block that we thought was gone," Howell said. "Here was a block that we did nothing to. We did in late July get the irrigation back. But we never sprayed it, we never did the things we usually do. Those vines have done very well and next year we will absolutely prune them and expect hopefully a normal harvest."

Cain has no 2020 vintage. But it will have a small 2021 vintage. Nearby [Raymond Vineyards](#) has allowed Howell to make the wines there, a neighborly gesture by owner Jean Charles Boisset. Howell prefers to make estate wine but for 2021 he bought some fruit from another neighbor, Fritz Maytag of [York Creek Vineyards](#). He plans to make two versions of 2021 Cain Five: one an estate version and one labeled as Spring Mountain District.

"I should tell the distributors we'll have 2021 Cain Five, and it will be \$1000 a bottle," Lazar said.

I said that given the winery's situation, and the fact that scarcity is what drives Napa wine prices, it's not actually a bad idea. Howell shakes his head: definitely not. Cain will be reborn, and it will change, but at its philosophical core, Howell wants to get back to what it was.

"We won't have much 2021 Cain Five," Howell said. "Maybe only a few bottles. But it will be symbolic. It's a symbolic vintage."