

## At Napa's Cain Vineyard and Winery, Planting a New Future Means Learning from the Past

written by  
Courtney Schiessl Magrini

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Winegrower Christopher Howell discusses how the Spring Mountain producer is rebuilding after the devastating Glass Fire in 2020 and using library releases to manage availability



Christopher Howell, winegrower and co-general manager of Cain Vineyard and Winery. Photo by Kelly Puleio.

Anyone who has visited Cain Vineyard and Winery can attest to the fact that it's one of Napa Valley's most unforgettable vineyard sites. Perched high atop Spring Mountain, its vines wind through the hills in a bowl that overlooks the valley from the west. Surrounded by forest, the organically farmed vineyard rows are interspersed with plants and wildflowers that act as a permanent cover crop, and Cain Vineyard has proven to produce some of the region's most distinctive wines.

But in September 2020, the Glass Fire swept through Napa County—including the valley’s Spring Mountain District. Cain’s winery was destroyed, and while it initially seemed like the vineyard had largely made it through the fire intact, most of the vines ended up dying.

“Many of our blocks were lost, including some of the parts of the vineyard we thought we liked the best,” says Christopher Howell, the winegrower and co-general manager of Cain Vineyard and Winery. The vineyard slope factored into the fire’s damage; steeper slopes, says Howell, left the vines more vulnerable to fire, while ones on more level spots were less damaged. The permanent cover crop, a cornerstone of the vineyard and its resulting wines, may also have conveyed the fire to the vine, exposing it to more heat.

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Though the 2019 and 2020 vintages were destroyed, the vast majority of Cain’s finished wine was stored in two Napa warehouses that were not impacted by the Glass Fire. In 2021, the team made around 20 barrels of Cain Five—a vintage-dated blend of the five classic Bordeaux varieties, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, and Petit Verdot—and some base wine for the multi-vintage Cain Cuvée at a neighboring Napa Valley winery, which offered them some space for vinification.

“The Sonoma and Napa communities reached out to say, ‘What can we do to help?’” says Howell. “Even viticulturists from Oregon were reaching out. We have a strong, resilient community.” The 2021 vintage of Cain Five, he says, is fairly representative of the Cain vineyard, as they were able to work with small portions of all of the vineyard’s grape varieties and principal areas.

However, production will continue to be limited for the next three to four years as the replanted vines mature, and there will be a gap between the not-yet-released 2018 vintage and the small 2021 vintage. As the winery continues with their 10-year replanting project, the Cain team is finding new opportunities to rethink their vineyard strategy—including potentially experimenting with new varieties—and change their approach to current releases using library wines. *SevenFifty Daily* caught up with Howell to learn more about how Cain Vineyard and Winery has begun to rebuild over the past two years and what they envision for the winery's future.



Cain Vineyard, before the 2020 Glass Fire. Photo by Charles O'Rear.

## ***SevenFifty Daily*: What have you and the Cain team been doing since the Glass Fire in 2020?**

Christopher Howell: Following the devastation of the fire, which caused so much loss and trauma in our area, our first job was coming to terms with it all. We have a much better understanding of what we've lost and what remains, and we've spent a lot of time on erosion control, rebuilding infrastructure for irrigation, and replanting the vineyard.

It's a case of more than recovery because it gives us a chance to reimagine the vineyard as we've known it, but without exactly

recreating what it was. We know better how to trellis the vines and what the appropriate rootstocks are, and we can open ourselves up to other varieties.

Most people ask us about rebuilding the winery, and we consistently reply, 'It's about the vineyard first.' While eventually there will be a winery, we need more grapes first. Our first attention was towards recapturing some of the best parts of the vineyard to recreate Cain Five as we knew it. We have a lot of baby vines in the ground—Ashley [Anderson-Bennett, Cain's vineyard manager] and her team have planted tens of thousands of vines—and our focus is on developing a really extensive root system rather than producing grapes right away.

**You noted that steep slopes and cover crops may have amplified the impact of the fire on the vines. How will this change your replanting philosophy?**

We're still discussing how this information will factor into the future of the vineyard. We're not shifting away from the cover crop; it's the life of the soil. Rather, management of the cover crop will be our challenge. Will we learn ways to keep the cover crop from being too close to the base of the vine? Yes. Will that save us? Maybe. We're considering having animals grazing in the future as a working part of our ranch, but we're not quite ready to bring livestock onto the property just yet.

Just to note, after the fire, the cover crop came back with luxuriance the next spring—it was as lush and happy as ever, if not more so. For the soil, it's not all bad—it's just complicated.



Cain Vineyard, after the Glass Fire. Photo by Kelly Puleio.

**Cain’s foundation rests on Bordeaux varieties. What new varieties are you considering for the vineyard?**

We haven’t ordered any new varieties, but we had planted some things that interested us in the past. In the past four or five years, we planted Nebbiolo, Riesling, and an experimental hybrid that could possibly tolerate Pierce’s Disease, but they were so young that we didn’t learn much from them.

In 1992, we planted some Syrah, which taught us the value of varieties that ripen later and are drought tolerant. This could be Mediterranean varieties like Grenache and Mourvèdre—and having gone to school in Montpellier, I’ve seen what you can achieve with Carignan—but why not look as far as Turkey and Lebanon to consider alternative varieties? My wife [Katie Lazar, the director of sales and marketing and co-general manager of Cain] pushed us to go outside of our

boundaries, and we got some vines of Tempranillo from a friend in the Sierra Foothills as well.

## **How will the replanting of Cain Vineyard impact the identity of these wines?**

What is reassuring to us is that no matter the variety, our wines have always smelled like the place in which they are made—they've all smelled and tasted like Cain. Cain wine is particularly green—not vegetative, but somewhat herbal, with Douglas fir and citrus elements, along with a bit of what could be bay laurel. We have a particular plant growing all over the vineyard called tarweed, which has a citrus-herbal note.

Unlike much of our area, there's nothing volcanic in our soil; it's formed on sedimentary rocks and is slightly alkaline, with a fair amount of clay. These elements plus the altitude, which puts us above the inversion layer with warmer nights and colder days, are all factors in our particular style.

## **What should buyers expect in terms of availability of Cain's wines?**

Many people didn't know that we've maintained a deep library thanks to our owner's encouragement. After we sell the 2017 and 2018 vintages, we'll have an issue with current vintage availability.

However, we're also busy selling older wine; right now, we're enjoying selling the 2008. Unlike other library releases, where restaurants feel like they need to buy it now or they will lose it, we'll have enough to maintain a certain number of placements for about a year.

This has become a core part of our business model, and we plan to offer a current wine and a library wine on an ongoing basis. It's a cultural shift because most wholesalers aren't used to having old wine to sell, but it gives us an opportunity to help people explore wine with bottle age. And emotionally, having these wines is reassuring and comforting, and gives us something to look forward to in the future. Had we not had those wines, Cain would be in a very different place.