

‘We drove through the fire in two cars, hoping at least one of us would survive’: The Napa winemakers who almost lost it all

Adam Lechmere tells the astonishing story of the Napa winery that lost almost everything in the 2020 wildfires but is now on a slow road to recovery

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At the end of September 2020, the Glass Fire – one of the most destructive of the wave of wildfires to hit [California](#) in recent years – swept across Spring Mountain, causing terrible but random damage to local wineries. [Cornell Vineyards](#), on the Sonoma side, lost many buildings; [Newton Vineyard](#), further down the mountain in Napa, was extensively burned, its newly laid-out gardens destroyed. [Smith- Madrone](#) and [Togni](#) were among the lucky ones, escaping with just a few scorched trees and some baked vines.

Until I saw it, I hadn’t realised how completely [Cain Vineyard & Winery](#) had been erased from Spring Mountain. There is, almost literally, nothing left. One of Napa’s – the world’s – finest wineries is now a concrete apron bearing the footprint of the big stainless-steel tanks, plus a couple of gateposts. About a tenth of the 90 acres (36ha) of vines survives, and nothing at all remains of the house, the winery and its attendant buildings.

Cain is one of California's most renowned producers. It was founded in the 1980s by Jerry and Joyce Cain and is now owned by the Meadlock family of Florida, computer entrepreneurs and original partners in the venture. Winemaker Chris Howell joined in 1990, having trained in France and worked at Château Mouton Rothschild and, later, at Peter Michael (over the hill from Cain, in Sonoma's Knights Valley).



Chris Howell and wife Katie Lazar (also seen in main image) have been running Cain for three decades; on one night in 2020, they lost their home, the winery and 90% of the vineyard Howell is recognised as a winemaker of rare skill. He crafts three wines, all from Bordeaux varieties: the Cain Five, a Cabernet-dominant blend of all five grapes; the Cain Cuvée, a blend of two vintages; and the Cain Concept, from non-estate benchland fruit. Because Howell is unafraid of Brettanomyces, the wines (to their fans) have wonderful complexity. Some critics consider them old-fashioned, while in her book Napa Valley Then and Now, Kelli White reckons they are 'as stylistically interesting as they are conceptually engaging'. Howell's wines appeal as much to the head as to the heart.

Early on a beautiful summer morning, I've come up to the vineyards with Howell and his wife Katie Lazar, Cain's sales and marketing director, in a bid to understand what they went through on the night of the Glass Fire and how narrowly they escaped with their lives.

Their experience that evening was similar to many: a friend had called them at around 8pm to say the fire was headed their way. And like everybody else, their first thought was to save the winery and the house. They had already soaked the walls, and only that week had cleared scrub and trees near the buildings. 'I was thinking then that I'd get Katie out and come back,' Howell recalls. Lazar shakes her head, possibly in mild rejection of her husband's old-fashioned chivalry. They married in 2002 ('There's our wedding tree,' they note as we pass a splendid, spreading oak, fatally charred.) They complement each other: Howell is deceptively slight, bespectacled, professorial. Lazar is calm but direct. She 'held it together' after they lost everything, Howell says. 'Without Katie, I would have withdrawn into myself.' Both are 70 but

in looks and manner seem a decade younger. Indeed, Howell, who already has a red wine stain on his shirt at seven in the morning, sometimes seems younger still.

You could feel the heat radiating from the fire half a mile away. And the sound of it... Like an army of jet engines

‘The intensity of the fire was beyond anything that we’ve experienced,’ Howell says, looking out over the rolling expanse of mountaintop vineland. ‘You could feel the heat radiating from the burning half a mile away. And the sound of it... Like an army of jet engines – an astonishing roar of hot wind.’

As the fire took over, they dithered. Howell wanted to stay and look after the buildings, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that they had to evacuate. There had been sheriff’s men telling them as much; several police cars came and went, but were now long gone. The smoke was rolling over the hill, and the heat was becoming more intense: ‘We saw firebombs being thrown up by the wind, pieces of burning trees.’ By this time, it was around 10:30pm, and they began to realise that their escape routes were being cut off.

Napa has two very different faces. On the valley floor, it’s about as secluded as Times Square, but up in the hills, especially in the wilder stretches of the Mayacamas range, on Diamond Mountain and Spring Mountain, it can be very remote. Cain’s vineyards sit on the ridge, on the border of Sonoma, a half-hour drive up a winding, densely wooded road. ‘There are three ways out,’ Howell says: ‘back down Langtry Road; over the hill to Sonoma; and down the canyon. We were intending to go over the hill, but Katie called her daughter, who said there was fire on that side. Then we realised that while we were messing around, the fire was coming up the canyon, so we couldn’t get out that way.’



The original stone entrance to the winery was the only structure to survive the flames.

By this point, many buildings on the estate had been incinerated, including the homes of vineyard workers. Cars were on fire, lighting the night sky. The hillside today is still blackened, the charred stumps of the Douglas firs giving it a stubbly appearance, like a badly shaved head. Lazar points to the road as it winds down the hill. ‘You see where all that is burned there? We drove through that – it was alight on all sides.’ They went in separate vehicles (their vineyard trucks, to which wine people get very attached; and, as Lazar says, ‘it just seemed what we needed to do – that way at least one of us might survive’), edging down the road at a crawl. It was a terrifying scene, the entire mountainside burning with a dull orange glow, the trees alight

on either side, the hellish heat and jet-engine noise. Visibility was nil; they couldn't use the truck headlights because they reflected off the smoke. 'The only thing that saved us was that Chris has been here 30 years and he knows the road,' Lazar says. 'I could see his taillights and nothing else.'

It wasn't until two days later, the Tuesday morning, that they could get back up the mountain to assess the damage. There were still patches of hillside smouldering, trees on fire. The big oaks would carry on burning inside for a week. 'As I drove up the road,' Howell says, 'I was still thinking the house might have survived. Coming through York Creek [about halfway to Cain], I could see vines and trees and structures intact. It gave me cause for hope.' He saw Rafa, one of the vineyard workers whose house had been razed, collecting chickens that had survived.





The Cain vineyards before (above) and after (left) the fire

Howell and Lazar had lived in the fine stone house on Spring Mountain for decades. (Lazar had also kept her house in the town of St Helena, which is where they are now.) They had thousands of books, ‘multiple collections: general English and American literature, philosophy and literary criticism, food and cooking, perfume, grape growing and wine, agro-ecology, modern history and political events, modernism, post-modernism, design, photography...’. There was an original 1801 edition of *L’Art de Faire le Vin* by Comte Chaptal, *Physiologie du Goût* by Brillat-Savarin, and the first book of Viticulture by Guyot. There were first editions of Elizabeth David, Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*... All were lost. It’s a cruel irony that they had taken carloads of their possessions down the mountain to save them from the 2017 fires three years earlier, ‘then carted them all back up again’. This time they only took some clothes and their passports. ‘I resent the few clothes I took. Why did I save you?’ Howell says.



As replanting gathers pace, the winery is taking the opportunity to experiment with other varieties, including Grenache, Tempranillo and Barbera

The books were ‘the breadcrumbs of our life’ that one could trace back through the decades. Professionally, much more was lost: 90% of the vines; the entire 2019 vintage in barrel, and 2020 in tank; plus half of their library of wines, going back to the mid-1980s. (The other half is stored off-site.) None of it was insured. The wildfires of 2017 and 2018 panicked insurers, with the consequence that policies on the winery and the inventory were not renewed. A state policy will cover some 15% of losses. The grapes were insured but not the vines themselves, nor the infrastructure.

Howell points out there is still some wine available; the 2018 is the latest release. The entire 2019 and 2020 vintages were destroyed

Seen in such stark terms, most commentators would conclude that was the end for Cain. But Howell points out that there is still some wine available for key markets (sold in the UK by Justerini & Brooks; the 2018 is the latest release). There’s no 2019 or 2020, but for the 2021 there will be both an Estate Cain Five (about 900 cases for private clients) and around 2,500 cases of a Spring Mountain Cain Five made from bought-in fruit.

And winemakers are a tough breed. They understand the pitilessness of nature. Lisa Togni is the daughter of Philip Togni, an old friend of the Howells whose renowned winery is Cain’s neighbour. In the bizarre randomness of wildfires, they got through the Glass Fire almost unscathed. They have learned some lessons, she tells me over the phone, chief among them that you’ve got to look after yourself: ‘Ultimately, you’re on your own.’ At the same time, she stresses how the community came together. At nearby Lokoya, the mansion belonging to Jackson Family Wines, private firefighters were on hand to protect the property. Lisa Togni called the estate manager, and he told the team to deploy to Togni. ‘I hardly know them, and they were willing to share their firefighters with us.’



‘We still despair. We’re still assimilating the shock,’ says Lazar. ‘Talking about it is therapeutic’ It’s striking how people talk about the fires. Stuart Smith at Smith-Madrone describes it as ‘like an insatiable beast’. Others, like Togni, talk about it as one might a malevolent enemy. ‘We won’t flee again. I was born here, and I’m not leaving. We will stay and defend ourselves.’ You can imagine a 19th-century frontierswoman saying the same.

What is it like to lose everything? ‘We still despair. We’re still assimilating the shock,’ Lazar says. ‘Talking to you is therapeutic,’ Howell chips in. ‘Katie says we have to talk to people – day to day, keep the team together, talk to customers.’ Up on the hill we’d seen a solitary tractor chugging between rows of newly planted vines. That’s Rafa, Howell says. ‘He’s been working here for 20 years. He still shows up to replant – that’s persistence, and strength.’

Back at Lazar’s house in a quiet street in St Helena, Howell puts on Lou Reed’s *Magic and Loss*. ‘The path to redemption from sadness is gratitude,’ he says. ‘All our friends gave us stuff. [Winemaker] John Kongsgaard gave us that armchair. You’ve got to have perspective; we weren’t alone.’ He names the major Napa producer, who wants to remain anonymous, who has lent Cain its facility for vinification. This year they will crush about 50 tons, from 10% of estate vines that survived and from bought-in grapes.

Many staff lost their homes in the fire. They have no thought of leaving. Replanting is under way

Howell talks about resilience, about his staff – many of whom have been at Cain for decades – who lost their homes but have no thought of leaving. Replanting is under way, and the winery will be rebuilt further down the hill, where they can tunnel into the hillside for caves.

Howell is a ‘deep wine thinker’, as writer Andrew Jefford has called him, and he’s also deeply inquisitive. While he’s clear that they will ‘recapture some of the best of what the Cain vineyard has given us’, he’s also grasping the opportunity to look at other varieties, like Grenache, Tempranillo and Barbera. And others that ‘might be found anywhere around the Mediterranean basin – Croatia, Greece, Turkey, Georgia, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco’. He adds: ‘This is purely an adventure, something to play with while we consider what might be best as we redevelop.’

I've walked several times in the Cain vineyards, and I've always oriented myself by the pyramid rock that sticks up like some giant Charybdis among the vines. It's still there, of course, untouched by the infernos of recent years. It's already surrounded by fields of young vines in their protective sheaths; very soon the hills will echo to the rumble of heavy trucks and the beat of hammers as the new winery is built. Cain will come back.

Howell looks out over the endless golden hills. 'When I started working here, I thought, "These vineyards are immutable, like stars in the sky. They will go on long after anybody that has worked here." But now I realise properties can decline and then come back.' He bends down and picks a tarweed flower and puts it to his nose. 'Look. You can still smell the tarweed.'