

CAIN VINEYARD & WINERY

NOTES FROM CHRIS



—A CELEBRATION OF CAIN CONCEPT—

Please join us as we revisit more than fifteen vintages of the Cain Concept and consider what it taught us, what we've learned, and what we appreciate about this beautiful wine.

The Cain Concept was born of several impulses all coming together:

- 1) a search for the classic wines of the Napa Valley;
- 2) the need to complement wine from the Cain Vineyard as we replanted (1996-2003); and
- 3) the desire to better understand our Cain Five by separating our choices in wine-making from the critical influences of the Cain Vineyard.

We have long understood that our Cain Five stands alone among the Cabernets and Cabernet Blends of the Napa Valley. But for many years, we never understood exactly why that is. In the beginning, in 1991, in nearly my first meeting with Jim Meadlock, who has been an owner of Cain since 1986 (now nearly forty years – yikes!), he asked me if the Cain Vineyard was not one of the best vineyards in the Napa Valley. I responded then as I would today, that the Cain Vineyard is unique, unlike anything else, and in as much, is not typical of the Napa Valley. Today, I would add this:

The Cain Vineyard is unto itself.

So then, Jim continued, “Where are the best vineyards of the Napa Valley?” My answer, “on the Rutherford Bench,” was based simply on general reputation and not on my personal experience. Jim’s immediate reply was, “Let’s get some vineyard down there.” And I balked—for two reasons: first, because in 1991 I hadn’t the first idea of how to get started with that; and second, our whole purpose for Cain was to tend this challenging vineyard, at the end of a long, winding mountain road—in fact, I already had plenty enough on my plate!

Moreover, I understood then, something that is more common to hear today. The Cain Vineyard is not about a “brand,” it’s about a place. This is essential, because as we all know, in the world of wine, brands are infinite, many look and taste alike. Cain is finite and distinct.

Nothing can replace the Cain Five.

But still, Jim’s question was not forgotten, and he continued to push to explore the Napa Valley, and particularly the Rutherford Bench. So, eventually, after a few years, as we knew we would soon need to begin to replant the Cain Vineyard, and with real trepidation, I reached out to a few of the greatest growers in the Napa Valley. We carefully “stuck our toe in the water” and, in the

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course of a few vintages, got to know a few of the classic sites in the Napa Valley.

For me, it was an excellent education. We got to see the methods of several highly experienced growers and to learn how various sites responded. Not only that, but we often shared vineyard plots with more than one winery, giving us the opportunity to compare our results in the glass with those of other winemakers.

The first thing that we learned was that I wasn't wrong—some of the greatest vineyard sites in the Napa Valley truly are on the Rutherford Bench. The best of these vineyards yield grapes that seem to fall into wine like a perfectly fitting suit—no nips or tucks needed. The wines are delicious right from the start. ~~Okay~~, They may not have a great deal to say for themselves, but they're tasty!

Another thing we learned was that the very best sites consistently deliver very good wines—and that, almost independently of the viticultural techniques applied by the various growers. In a way, that lesson is both frustrating and reassuring. We learned that the hand of the grower, while important, is not decisive, and that ultimately, Nature rules.

What we did not expect to learn, was just how far our approach to wine-growing had drifted away from the current fashions that were developing in the Napa Valley. As others were working to literally *make* an increasingly powerful and impressive wine, we were moving in the opposite direction, doing less and less in the cellar as we sought wines of subtlety and complexity—wines that truly reflected their origins. Thanks to working in these vineyards, we got to see winemakers dramatically reducing crop yield and picking riper and riper. After that, what they did in the privacy of their cellars remained a secret ... but we can say this much: grapes were literally falling off the vine as they ripened beyond the point of no return. Though they were finally harvested with enough sugar to make a wine exceeding 17 percent alcohol—if the poor yeasties could make it—and almost no acid left, the wines magically turned up with at least some acidity and a slightly more reasonable alcohol in the range of 15%. Talk about wine made in the cellar. And then people ask why these wines don't age well; or why “red wine gives them a headache!”

Up at Cain, not only did we stay to our course of harvesting at moderate ripeness and hewing to minimal intervention, we backed off even further, by allowing the wines to ferment with their native yeast. In 1995, that was heresy. Today, it is the future. But most Napa wineries, having built a customer base for “Big Napa Cab,” are reluctant to explore minimalist winemaking practices.

We could see that the Cain Concept tasted nothing like most of the wines emanating from the Napa Valley. But we could also see that it tasted very differently from the Cain Five, grown in the Cain Vineyard. So our question was answered. What sets the Cain Five apart? Is it the blend? Yes. Is it the wine-making? Yes. Is it the Cain Vineyard? **Yes!!**

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Many people enjoy the Cain Concept precisely because it does reflect all of those things that have made Napa Valley Cabernets so deeply appreciated for now, some 150 years or more. Already in 1889, more than a dozen wines from Napa were awarded medals in France at the Exposition Universelle, including those from Beringer, Inglenook, and Charles Krug. In 1976, when a number of Cabernets from Napa were shown at a private tasting in Paris, one wine, from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, was liked even more than some of the great wines of Bordeaux. Quite simply, the Cabernet Sauvignons of the Napa Valley can be very pleasing. They can be generous, round, ripe, and satisfying. This is exactly what our Cain Concept delivers.

The Cain Concept reflects what many people seek when they come to the Napa Valley. What might at first seem mysterious and elusive, is really growing all around—most particularly, on the Benchland lining the edges of the valley, especially in the heart of it all, from Oakville to St. Helena. Here, for more than a century, the Cabernet Sauvignon vine has yielded beautiful, full, round, deeply fruity wines. There are a number of factors that lead to these great wines: the warm days and the cool nights, the well-drained but deep and moderately fertile soil that allows the vines to thrive through the always rainless Summer. But this is not everywhere—it's only in the Benchland. Frankly, in the center of the valley, the soil can be too fertile, too deep and hold too much water. In other places, the soil can be too thin or have too much clay—thus, it's a Goldilocks thing. But in the right spots, there's nothing like it.

Even so, as noted above, our Cain Concept stands apart from most Napa Cabernet of today, first of all, because we eschew excessive ripeness. We strive to capture the fruit in its fullness and before it fades. And then in our vinification, we keep our intervention to a minimum—we don't add yeast and avoid excessive chemical manipulation; we don't rely on the barrel to make the wine—it's only a place to allow the wine to develop naturally; and the wine is not sterilized at bottling. Some may call it "old school," but this predates anything taught in the schools of enology. At the same time, although we've been doing this already for thirty years, we think of it as, "Now," and we believe that it's the way of the future.

Because the Cain Concept is not picked super-ripe, and not over-processed, these wines have aged gracefully. In fact, a sommelier just reported enjoying a 2002, more than twenty years old. It was in a place that many of the big and bold Napa Cabs could never reach, but we weren't surprised. One simply can't help but love the generosity and friendly warmth of spirit that Napa Cabernet can offer ... when it's not overdone!



Christopher Howell, Wine-Grower

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