Spring Mountain

The patchwork of vineyards in this elevated AVA are home to a contrasting assortment of single-minded traditionalists and wealthy newcomers, all attracted by this rugged, often remote terrain's ability to produce outstanding wines. Adam Lechmere spent some time with the locals.
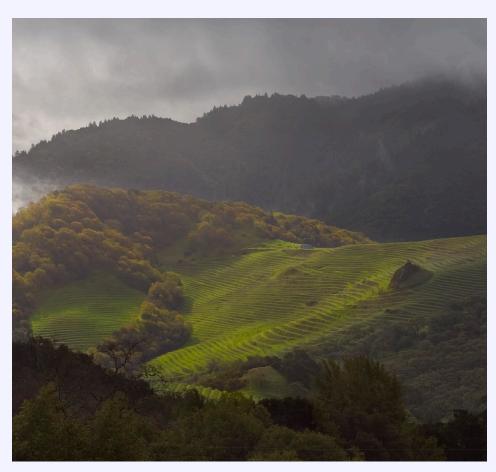
SPRING MOUNTAIN DISTRICT is one of the five great mountain appellations of the Napa Valley. It covers a lot of ground - its lower reaches abut the quiet residential streets of St Helena town, before the road climbs ln vertiginous switchbacks up to 800m into the Mayacamas Range and the borders of Sonoma.

Wine has been made here since the mid-19th century - the Beringers, already established in St Helena, planted a vineyard in 1800. In its heyday, before phylloxera and Prohibition, there were some 250 wineries working on Spring Mountain. Today there are only 30, and you're unlikely to find a more diverse crew of winemakers and grape farmers in Napa, or indeed any American appellation.

There are rangy individualists like the smith brothers at Smith-Madrone, hose ranch is a piece of Napa history, unchanged since they arrives in the 1970s. Their interesting range includes a Riesling that is renowned and delicious, though not as original as their Cabernets. On a quiet evening you

La Piedra | The Cain Vineyard | Photo Janis Miglavs

can hear their shotguns booming buckshot-peppered targets.

There are polished, millionaire-owned start-ups such as Vineyard 7&8 – or Newton, now owned by French luxury goods giant LVMH but an early pioneer in the region; its light and elegant 1981 Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the best Napa Cabs I've ever tasted. And there are hidden treasures like Stony Hill, started by the McCrea family in 1942, whose winemaker Mike Chelini pressed his first vintage in 1977.

While Bordeaux varieties dominate – more than 80% of the appellation's 405 hectares are planted to the five red Bordeaux grapes, 225ha of them Cabernet Sauvignon – Spring Mountain is far from homogenous in the way that Stags Leap District, say, is now almost entirely Cabernet.

Stony Hill's 65ha are a patch-work of varieties; most are the early Chardonnay plantings, with Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Syrah, Semillon, a bit of Pinot Noir and some Zinfandel. Growers John Gantner and Nancy Walker at School House are working with Syrah, Zinfandel and Pinot Noir, while Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc aren't uncommon in the AVA.

UNITED BY DIFERENCE

But times are changing, and the more desirable mountain fruit becomes, the more vineyards will be turned over to profitable varieties. Newton is undergoing a major revamp, which will see Cabernet vines rising from two-thirds to about 85% of its total plantings. A few years ago, Jackson Family Wines snapped up a 10ha of Spring Mountain land for its Lokoya range of very expensive Napa mountain Cabernets.

fruit to a monkey and he would produce a big Cab.' For Hal Barnett of his eponymous winery, another pioneer, it's 'fruit that's not as forward or lush as on the valley floor. It's got more restraint.'

ASCENDING THE HEIGHTS

Cain is a mountain manor whose wind-blown grasslands and sloping vineyards embody the character of the appellation. The climate here is typical of high-level California vineland. The inversion layer (where warmer air rises from the valley floor) means there is less difference between night and day temperatures than down below, but the thin soils and exposure to wind ensure small berries with thick skins. 'Bud break is a week later than in the valley,' vineyard manager Ashley Anderson says. 'The growing season is shorter so we get more intense flavours. We don't need to extract much.'

Only one of Cain's three wines – the Cain Five – is sourced entirely from Spring Mountain. A Bordeaux blend, it's a difficult wine to classify, but perhaps unclassifiability is Spring Mountain's unifying factor. In articulating the character of the region and what he calls its 'mountain iconoclasts,' Cain's winemaker Chris Howell asks: 'Is it about elevation, exposure and soil, or about winemaking? Perhaps some of the character in the wine comes from the characters who live and work up here.'

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Area 4 | The Cain Vineyard | Photo Chuck O'Rear

Stony Hill owner Peter McCrea isn't about to change anything. But, he says: 'If I came into the business now, I'd plant Cabernet and Chardonnay. No question.' Gantner laments this: 'Of course more Cabernet will be planted. The only people who can afford to buy here are multimillionaires who hire high-tech consultants. They know they're not going to make any money, but doesn't worry them. What they want are 100-point scores to show off to their friends.'

Stony Hill is a good example of a producer in the district but not of it (the current vintage is the first to carry the AVA on the label – previous bottles have been labelled simply Napa Valley), and McCrea says that viewing Spring Mountain as a singular entity really has no coherence at all.

'An AVA should have commonality in terms of climate, soil variety, topography,' he says. 'And Spring Mountain has none of that. It's known as a Cabernet appellation, but Cabernet wasn't grown here for 60 years.' Gantner agrees. 'The Single Common feature is that we're all located on this mountain.' He talks about the temperature variations between altitudes, and especially the varied soils. 'I dug 14 soil pits and they were all different, In on there was a heavy black loam, while 200 yards away there would be another with round volcanic rocks and sandy loam.'

If there ais a common thread, it's the distinct style of mountain fruit. For Andrew Schweiger, at the lovely vineyards his parents planted in the 1980s, it's 'complexity and small berry size, and fine acidity that develops during the day.' The fruit produces tannins that have to be carefully managed, he says. 'You could give Spring Mountain