

# Napa Valley On The Razor's Edge

by: Corie Brown

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11.13.14 - It is quiet at Cain Vineyards. The hillside estate at the top of Napa Valley's Spring Mountain is far removed from the hustle of the valley floor. The air is crisp, days are short, winter has arrived and there has been rain. Just enough, says Cain winemaker Chris Howell, to ignite new life in the desiccated vineyards.

Napa Valley winemakers, or at least enough of them to signify the start of a trend, are rethinking the region's excessive tendencies. Lost for decades in a soulless race to please a handful of critics with dubious taste, these evolving winemakers are trying to reconnect with the soil and climate of America's most celebrated wine region. While their wines still reflect the strength of the valley's sunny climate, they are striving for lower alcohol levels and more restrained fruit flavors.

Howell doesn't have to change. He has been making terroir-driven wines for decades. And paid a price for that unfashionable decision. Overlooked by critics, his wines have been relative bargains, and most bottles are priced \$75 or below. Still, you could say that the newly chastened winemakers are playing catch up with him. And none too soon.

California's drought has Napa Valley on a razor's edge. Howell says rain is now a "miracle," a spiritual event. On Spring Mountain where the only water for the vineyards falls from the sky, those two inches will carry the vineyard through to spring.

"It reminds me that wine is about gardening, nature and the earth," says Howell. "Those of us on Napa's hillsides and completely disconnected from the water grid think about these things now."

There was almost no rain in 2013. By the spring of 2014, there had been 14 months with nothing beyond a few sprinkles. "It was a shock, a big wake-up. I didn't think we would have any grapes. None." Rain, not much, but enough, came at the perfect time in February and March of 2014 to save the vintage.

The recent rain falls far short of guaranteeing next year's vintage. "But the vines loved it. The soil came to life."

Cain's 90 acres of vineyards are scattered across the estate's 550 acres of some of the most rugged hillsides in Napa. The winery's Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines have a complex herbal quality that sets them apart from other Napa Cabs. His intense, dark wines have a lightness that allows them a seat at the dinner table. They have always been softer, less tannic and more nuanced, even lilted, than the heavier fruit-forward wines most often associated with Napa.



His old-school wines are the result of Howell's belief that the best wines reflect what is happening in the vineyard. Over the decades Howell has managed Cain's vineyards, he's dialed back the irrigation, dry farming the plots where the soils are deep enough. He has farmed organically for 15 years and now is bringing biodynamic — an extreme organic, somewhat metaphysical farming discipline advanced by Rudolf Steiner early in the 20th century — to Cain's vineyards.

“The more people pay attention to the whole ecosystem of the vineyard, the healthier the vineyard. And, in general, biodynamic vineyards are healthier everywhere I've visited them around the world,” says Howell.

That's given Cain a bit of protection against the ravages of the drought. “We live year to year now,” he says. “I always took the winter rains for granted. They always came. I didn't think about it. Now I know we can take nothing for granted. I feel closer to the reality of nature, to the vineyards.”

Howell delights in making wines that vary year to year. The drought will be but another marker. So soon in the winemaking process for the 2014 vintage, it's too early to know how it will change the wines.

How the drought affects his wines doesn't concern Howell. Using only the wild yeast from the vineyard to ferment his grapes, Howell has given control of his wines back to nature. These days, that is an act of supreme faith. “We think about the spiritual part of things more often these days,” he says.

Other Napa winemakers may never catch up with such radical thinking.

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