



Notes on the History of the Cain Cuvée – 2023

The Cain Cuvée project dates back to 1990, my first vintage at Cain, when I was first getting to know the Cain Vineyard and the Cain Five. It was early Spring and I was tasting through the results of the late, cold, wet 1989 vintage. In my year living in the Médoc, and working at Château Mouton Rothschild, I had learned that, implicit in the idea of the great red wines of Bordeaux, was that as a corollary to the “Grand Vin” there must also be a “Second Wine,” to ensure that the Grand Vin was composed solely of the best wines of the vintage. Perhaps the single best example of this in my memory at that time was the “Pavillon Rouge” from Château Margaux, which was created in 1978 by Emil Peynaud. In that single act, Château Margaux leapt from persisting as a mediocre pretender to the true Grand Vin that it was always meant to be.

Thus, in working with the wines of the 1989 vintage, I set out to compose two blends: first, the Cain Five, and second, a new wine, the Cain Cuvée. But, in the course of my first year at Cain, my thinking evolved. Despite the obvious reference to Bordeaux in the Cain Five, the Cain Vineyard is most definitely not in Bordeaux and its spectacular mountaintop bowl carved out of the Mayacamas bears zero resemblance to the vineyards of Bordeaux. Moreover, the Cain Five, while completely original within the context of the Napa Valley, and even Spring Mountain, is still not Château Margaux. And I didn’t think that a “second wine,” composed of a pot-luck of left-overs would be at all desirable, to me or to anyone else. So I set about creating a wine that I did want to drink: something lighter and fresher, something designed to complement a meal rather than take it over and fight with it. The first wine from this new approach became the 1991 Cain Cuvée.

To achieve our goal of lighter and fresher, we selected the parts of the Cain Vineyard that bore fruit that was lively and aromatic, but often without too much weight and depth. Think raspberries, delightfully perfumed and zesty. Then of course, we made sure to pick the fruit at its height of perfume and with good acidity, followed by a gentle maceration, careful not to over-extract the grapes, yielding the essence but leaving behind the heaviest, drying and bitter tannins. After all of this, obviously we took care with the use of the barrel in *élevage* not to extract too much oaky aroma and heavy wood tannins. After all, this is about fruit, not a piece of lumber.

If, in the 1990’s, in the world of increasingly ripe and riper, full-bodied and even sweet Napa Cabernets, this was a difficult story to tell and to understand, even so, Cain soon had emulators: Château

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—NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE CAIN CUVÉE, CONTINUED—

Montelena’s “Calistoga Cuvée” and Chappellet’s “Mountain Cuvée” come to mind, and soon there were others. But even today, in 2023, “lighter and fresher” are still not watchwords here in Napa, and so by the end of the decade both of these wines had reverted from Cuvée to Cabernet Sauvignon, both in name and style. In the meantime, a new “Red Blend” had popped up, “The Prisoner,” adding further confusion to explaining what we have been doing for three decades with our Cain Cuvée.

Through all of this, with our Cain Cuvée, we have stayed the course, all the while, gently evolving. The first step along that path was a recognition that much of the Cain Vineyard was either too valuable or simply not suited to the modest, easy-going ideal of the Cain Cuvée and we began to explore the Napa Valley proper for alternate sources to contribute to the blend. By the end of the first decade we had settled on a few places, often growing Merlot, that seemed to be perfect to blend with the strong personality of certain of the lightest wines of the Cain Vineyard. Cain remains the dominant element in the Cain Cuvée, ensuring its distinctive and unique character.

The second step in the evolution of the Cain Cuvée came with the next late, cold, wet vintage, which was 1998. With their light touch and lively aromatics, many of the wines from the Cain Vineyard were perfect for our Cain Cuvée, but they wanted a bit of plumpness, flesh on the bones. Fortunately we still had in our cellar many beautiful wines from the ripe and generous year of 1997. The blend of two vintages was born in that moment, our first “NV8,” and we’ve continued ever since. In the course of the next decade, the 2000’s, we learned that the sometimes slightly rough elements of older vintage benefited from a year in the barrel, becoming a perfect partner to the younger vintage. We also learned to vinify the younger vintage with a particularly light touch, so that it would harmonize with the older vintage. Once created, we would continue the *élevage* for another year prior to bottling in the following Spring after the blend was first composed.

Another step came in 2013 when we moved toward a still more gentle *élevage*, employing much larger 600 liter *demi-muids* rather than the standard 225 liter *barriques bordelaises*. These vessels have much thicker staves and offer much less surface area to the volume of wine they contain, thus exposing the wine to less air and less oak impact. You won’t see this in the NV11, or the NV12, and is just getting started with the NV13, however, by the NV16 and especially the NV17 and NV18 it has become a subtle, but significant factor in the roundness and liveliness of these wines.

Through all of these three decades, the ideal of the Cain Cuvée has remained the same. We’ve been fortunate to be able to continue the project for this long, and along that path we’ve deepened our understanding of how all of these elements come together to create a beautiful harmony—one that does not seek to impose, but rather to heighten your experience at the table.

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