

Cain: old-world flavors in Napa Valley

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[Photo of Esther Mobley](#)

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A view of the vineyards at Cain winery, in Napa, California, on Friday, July 22, 2016. Gabrielle Lurie/Special to The Chronicle

Visiting Cain is a commitment. The property sits directly on the Napa-Sonoma county line, at a ridge

that peaks at 2,600 feet on Spring Mountain. The drive from downtown St. Helena takes about 30 minutes — and the winding road is not ideal for the carsick-prone.

It's a commitment differently, too, because the Cain wines can be polarizing: rustic, earthy, subtle — and not averse to extreme reduction or the appearance of Brettanomyces, a yeast strain that can produce aromas and flavors politely described as “barnyard.” (Brett, as it's called, does not appear in every Cain wine.) The style provides a real contrast to what's typical in Napa, the land of squeaky-clean Cabernet. For those who enjoy European wines that taste like the centuries-old caves in which they were aged, Cain wines are indeed worth a try.

Tastings are customizable and always include a seated tasting of Cain's three current-release wines: Cain Cuvee, Cain Concept and Cain Five. If you have the time, ask to see the vineyard too; it's a remarkable property, dramatically sloped and looking down over much of Napa Valley. Visits that include a vineyard tour typically also involve opening a 10-year-old wine. All employees of the winery rotate through tasting-host duty, including longtime winemaker Chris Howell. If Chris is your host, don't pass up the opportunity to pick his remarkable brain. The maximum group size is four.

WHAT TO TRY: All three of Cain's wines are Bordeaux blends — and not always based on Cabernet. The flagship wine is Cain Five, a combination of all five Bordeaux grapes from the Spring Mountain estate property that tends to be more floral than fruity, singing of herbs and dried fruit. The Cain Cuvee is a blend of two consecutive vintages (NV11, for instance, is a blend of 2011 and 2010, NV12 of 2012 and 2011, and so on). The Cain Concept comes from benchland, rather than mountain, fruit.