



## Chris Howell & Cain Vineyard: Making Wines That Matter

Chris Howell, the talented General Manager and Winemaker of Cain Vineyard in Spring Mountain, shares his views on wine, grape growing, winemaking, Napa Valley, Spring Mountain and more....in a two part interview.

**What are the most profound changes you have found in the wine trade since you started in the business?**

The most obvious and wonderful thing is that more really good wines are now being made in more different places in the world than ever before. Traditional winegrowing regions, such as in France, Italy and Spain, or Argentina and Chile have reduced their production and consumption of common table wine, while at the same time, they have dramatically increased the quantity and quality of their fine wines. Also, newer winegrowing regions, like California, Oregon, Washington, Australia, New Zealand have all made huge progress in fine winegrowing. There has been so much evolution on both sides that the "New World::Old World" distinction no longer applies. Since the 1960's, the number of wines has been growing exponentially, so that today, the sheer numbers available to us can be overwhelming and bewildering. But it has never been a better time to be a wine lover!

**What makes a great wine... and what makes a good wine? What is the difference?**

A great wine is memorable, it creates a distinct impression, a focal point where the vineyard and the winemaking merge. A good wine is pleasurable.

**What traditional elements of wine production are fundamental to you? What elements are not?**

There is a French expression that goes something like this: "Wine can be made from grapes, also." For thousands of years, people have been making "wine," wholly, or in part, using substances other than grapes. For sure, the ancient Greeks and Romans did this, and the practice was especially problematic in Europe during the Phylloxera crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. As much as we commonly hear people say that their wine is "grown in the vineyard," it is also true today that many wines, even famous, very expensive wines, are made employing exotic ingredients and technology. People are never content to leave well enough alone.

In wine, "Tradition," is subject to interpretation, so I am careful not wrap ourselves up in a virtuous sounding idea, whose meaning no one knows. I don't believe in any dogmatic set of rules, because there is no magic formula other than, "Keep it simple." We don't deny enology, we just keep it at arm's length. We do use SO<sub>2</sub>, nutrients, innoculum when necessary, barrels, egg whites and filtration, but nothing is absolute, and in every instance we follow the general principle, "Less is More."

Honest wine, really and truly, is about the grapes and the simple elements of the ancient craft of winemaking. Happily, there is a growing cohort of artisanal winegrowers who tend their vineyards with care, and have enough confidence in the fruit, to be able to work in their cellars with limited, thoughtful intervention. Some of an older generation, now in their 80's, or gone, understood this implicitly, and today their traditions are being revived. I have seen this in the Loire, in Burgundy, the Rhone, the Languedoc, and in California. And, while it may never be mainstream, it seems that this trend is growing all over the world.

**Talk about the uniqueness of your land on Spring Mountain.**

One look at the place, and the most well-traveled wine lovers will say that they've never seen anything like it. The Cain Vineyard is cradled in a spectacular bowl, all to itself, perched on the crest of Spring Mountain, overlooking the Napa Valley. Steep, terraced vineyards have been sculpted into facets exposed to all points of the compass. It is somewhat cooler here; winds from the Pacific Ocean channel through a gap that, at 1900 feet, is just a couple of hundred feet lower than the prevailing ridgeline of the Mayacamas. Naturally, the hillside soils are thin, and unlike much of Spring Mountain, they are formed entirely on sedimentary, rather than volcanic, bedrock of sandstone and shale. These soils are relatively cold and high in clay, which tends to hold the vines back, resulting in piquant, aromatic grapes. I think that you can taste this in the Cain Five.

**What about your terroir made you decide to make Bordeaux grape blends?**

In 1979, the Cains were thinking "Mountain Cabernet." But, as we know, at least in their youth, some mountain Cabernets can be hard as nails. By the end of the 70's and the beginning of the 80's, blends were in the air, particularly those of the Cabernet family. And blending seemed to be a perfect way to temper the tough tannins, so Winemaker Lester Hardy and the Cains decided to create a blend of "all five" of the varieties best known in Bordeaux.

Of course, the Cain Vineyard is not in Bordeaux, and the soils, the exposures, and the climate could not be more different. In fact, the wine tastes like nothing else that I know. The surprising thing is that it works out. The lesson is that the signal of the Cain Vineyard comes through strongly in each of the varieties and all of the many blocks. The blending really works to create a balanced wine, but the originality of the Cain Five lies not in the varietal composition, but in the Cain Vineyard.

## What do you do at Cain, that makes you unique?

While the Cain Vineyard is unique, I am reluctant to say that any particular thing we at Cain might be unique. However, it may be true that many of the things we do are currently out of the mainstream of Napa Valley winemaking. In our country, I tend to find more common ground with some of the Pinot winemakers. In fact, I don't know a single winemaker working with Cabernet who follows our path, that is, who would make all of the choices we make.

One of the more obvious differences is our choice of ripeness at time of picking -- we tend to pick earlier, sometimes weeks earlier than many wineries have done recently, simply because we want to capture fruit with the energy at its peak, before the aromas and mouth-watering juiciness begin to fade. We don't desire 'unripe' fruit any more than we desire 'overripe' fruit -- rather, we believe in a continuum of ripening and it is up to each winegrower to choose the appropriate moment according to the vineyard, the vintage, and their winemaking values.

Another difference is that we do not seek to maximize extraction. We have found that ripe fruit yields its best in days, not weeks. In both cases, ripeness and extraction, we do not believe that "more is better."

The fact that we ferment with native yeast - those on the grapes and in the cellar - rather than inoculating with exogenous, cultured yeast, is perceived by modern enology to be risky, but obviously native ferments have worked well for thousands of years. We find that the resulting wines are always more subtle, more complex, and ultimately more satisfying.

Our use of barrels is not as a flavoring agent. Many people ask us what kind of barrels we use, but almost nobody asks us how we use them. We employ barrels in our *élevage*, that is we, 'raise our wines' through the gentle work we do in the cellar to develop them from the raw wines issuing from the fermentation, to the finished wines, ready for the bottle.

One more point is that we are not afraid to explore tertiary fermentations, for example, with Brettanomyces, because we don't believe that wine is only about the fruit. Historically, enology developed to identify and correct "flaws." In the process, much has been lost. Think of other fermented foods, such as cheese, soy sauce, kim chi, or beer, and you never think about just the raw ingredients. Why should wine be different?

All of this adds up to our esthetic values, which are lively, refreshing, balanced and complex wines. They may not create a dramatic first impression, but they create a lasting impression.

Even if this might not be mainstream, I don't feel alone here. There are people the world over who share this approach to winegrowing. They tend not be enologists. People like Henry Jayer, Noel Pinguet, and Pierre Morey, are exceptions.

## What other Napa Valley wine producers do you admire?

I admire winegrowers who care as much about the vineyard and grape-growing as they do about their winemaking. I particularly admire those who continue to learn and evolve, but who also have a clear sense of their esthetic values and the commitment to stick with them. In competitive, "blind," tastings, their wines may not stand out, but when you enjoy them at dinner, they'll keep you interested.

## What kind of reaction have you received on your decision to take the vintage year off the label of Cain Cuvée?

The main point about blending of vintages is the potential to build complexity and to create balance, something that I think we achieve in the Cain Cuvée. In 1998, we decided to try blending two vintages -

the light, fresh and perfumey '98 with the round generous '97. This was our first "NV8" Cain Cuvée. Of course, our customers were uncertain, but the result was delicious, and we never looked back.

Today, our customers are very comfortable with the "NV" Cain Cuvée series (each bottling is distinguished by a number), but I'm not sure they realize just how interesting the idea can be. If you think that at Cain we have been blending varieties since the first Cain Five in 1985, why wouldn't we want to give ourselves the freedom to blend vintages also?

## What trends in the wine trade upsets you?

"Upset" might sound a bit strong, but maybe it is appropriate. I am upset, disappointed, and concerned that many people in many sectors of the wine trade buy and sell wine as if it were spirits; ie. it's all part of the "alcohol beverage" trade. They think about, and treat wine as a "product" and a "brand." And indeed, most wine is just that. Even more surprising, many winemakers think of their work in just the same way - that is, they have a brand, and they are creating a product, which is more about their process, or a formula, than it is about the grapes. Also telling, is that way in which wine is handled, as if it were dry goods, when in fact, wine is a perishable substance, subject to damage by heat, cold, and rough handling.

The magic of wine is that which connects us to craft of the winegrower and to Nature. A lot of wine is sold on this basis; cynically, not much wine delivers on that promise. But those wines that reflect the vineyard, the cellar, and the hands, minds, hearts and palates behind them, those wines have stories to tell. They intrigue us, they mystify us, they tantalize us. Ultimately, it is these wines - I'll call them "Artisanal Wines" - that are the most satisfying, and indeed, the whole reason for our fascination with wine. They may come from a small, relatively unknown vigneron like Pierre Overnoy in Arbois, or from a world renowned domaine like Romanée-Conti. But they can never be grown in large quantities, can never be a standardized "product," and can never become a "brand."

We need to find ways to tell the stories of these artisanal wines - and there are thousands of them - to help wine lovers to distinguish these truly hand-grown wines from the labels and brands which have flooded the market.

## What do you see for the future of Napa Valley?

As a winegrowing region, the Napa Valley is maturing. We're beginning to see a differentiation of terroir, and the use of appropriate varieties and growing techniques in each. There is still much evolution ahead of us, but I think that the path is clear. The risk is that, through the pressure of ambition and money, these differences are effaced in the cellar through the quest to make "better" wines that, increasingly, tend to resemble one another.

The fact that the Napa Valley, as we know it, exists at all, we owe to our more than 45 year old Ag Preserve. In monetary terms, this land would be far more valuable for building sites, but in the long run vineyards are a higher and better use. We should see the vineyards of the Napa Valley as worthy of preservation in themselves and we need to remain vigilant to protect them from short-term commercial and political pressures. But there is more: we need to continue to monitor the effects of climate change, we also need to address the challenges of monoculture and mono-economy that accompany all heritage winegrowing regions, that is, we need to continue to care for the true sustainability of our Napa Valley.