

# Cain Vineyard & Winery

## St. Helena, California

*FOR THE CAIN TEAM, WINEMAKING IS A PROCESS OF DISCOVERY.*



*Blending process with (clockwise from top left) enologist Mandy Donovan, associate vineyard manager Ashley Anderson, associate winemaker François Bugué, and winemaker/general manager Chris Howell.*

JOANNA BRESLIN, CSW

Perched in a spectacular setting 2,000 feet above the Napa Valley floor, Cain Vineyard & Winery has nonetheless stayed below the radar in the category of coveted Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines. While others strive for concentration and power, Cain has quietly hewn to its style and to the philosophy and methodology behind it.

Cain produces only three wines: the flagship Cain Five, blended from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec; Cain Concept, based on an amalgamation of benchland Cabernet Sauvignon grapes; and Cain Cuvée, a two-vintage blend of mostly purchased fruit from both benchland and mountain vineyards. "They're all Cabernet blends, but each one has its own personality and purpose," says winemaker Chris Howell. All three show a restraint derived from the tension between the

fruit and its supporting structure. "We are not interested in the immediate impact," says Howell. "We are interested in the last impression and the pleasure of the exploration."

In 1980, Joyce and Jerry Cain purchased 550 acres of the historic 3,000-acre McCormick Ranch on Spring Mountain. With Napa Valley wineries beginning to develop blends that involved Merlot and Cabernet Franc as well as Cabernet Sauvignon, consulting winemaker Chuck Ortman and Cain's first full-time winemaker, Lester Hardy, convinced the Cains to create California's first blend of all five red Bordeaux varieties. After bringing partners Jim and Nancy Meadlock on board in 1986, they completed the winery and kept planting.

Cain initially produced single-varietal bottlings: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc. The 1985 debut vin-

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*Cain Vineyard.*

tage of Cain Five was not fully blended until late 1987, and the vision for it took form while the wine was still in barrel. That vintage, and the two that followed, were drawn from both the young estate vineyard and from purchased fruit.

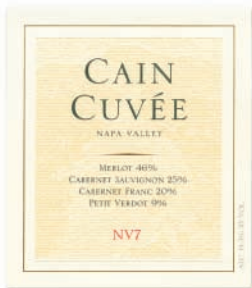
After more than a decade of passionate and arduous work, the Cains sold out to the Meadlocks in 1991. Howell had arrived as a consultant in 1990; a year later, he became the winemaker and general manager. A Seattle native, Howell studied ideas and methods at the University of Chicago and then chemistry and life sciences at the University of Washington. After a job as a chemist proved unsatisfying, he sought to combine his technical knowledge with esthetics and critical analysis by pursuing his love of wine. He left for France in 1982, enrolling at the School of Agronomy in Montpellier and interning at Château Mouton-Rothschild before returning to California in 1984. At Montpellier, the chemist who wanted only to learn enology was required to study viticulture as well. That dual discipline had a profound effect on his career.

Back in the United States, Howell worked at

Clos Pegase, Marimar Estate, and Peter Michael Winery in their formative stages before coming to Cain. When approached by the Meadlocks, he informed them that they'd have to replant their entire vineyard because of phylloxera. They hired him anyway. Howell further stipulated that Cain Five should be a manifestation of the Cain Vineyard. For five years, beginning with the 1990 vintage, it was made exclusively from estate grapes. Vineyard replanting finally began in 1995; the 2007 Cain Five, to be released this fall, is the first bottling since 1994 to contain only estate fruit.

There was no Cain Five in 1988 or 1989. The '88 had already been bottled and labeled when Howell decided to declassify it. That was the birth of Cain Cuvée. By 1991, the team wanted to go beyond the idea of a "second wine," and they began to select vineyard sources and vinify grapes specifically to create an alternative style. When the difficult 1998 vintage was in barrel, their tastings showed that lots from 1997 filled out the blend beautifully; since then, they've combined two vintages in varying proportions





for each rendition of Cain Cuvée. The current “NV7” is primarily the rich, round 2007, complemented by the leaner, more structured 2006. “Although each blend is unique,” Howell says, “our esthetic goals for Cain Cuvée remain the same: lightness, freshness, vibrancy, complexity, balance, and flow.”

Cain Concept, vinified similarly to Cain Five, began with the 1997 vintage. It is “our homage to the classic Cabernet Sauvignon grown in benchlands of the Napa Valley,” according to associate winemaker François Bugué. Comprising riper fruit grown in the warmth of the valley floor, it displays a more generous style than that of Cain Five. “The replanting of our vineyard gave us the occasion to come down from our mountain to explore the rest of the Napa Valley,” says Howell. “We found some amazing vineyards and initially used some of the wines to blend into Cain Five, but inevitably, we wanted to make a wine that reflected the best that the Napa Valley benchland has to offer.”

The unique character of Cain Five is attributable to the 87-acre Cain Vineyard, which is laid out in a bowl to provide every possible exposure. Elevations range from 1,400 to 2,100 feet, and the steep slopes are carved into double-row terraces. The thin, infertile sandstone, shale, and clay sedimentary soils don’t hold much water. Temperatures are cooler than on the valley floor, but in summer and early fall, the mornings can be warmer, and there is less diurnal fluctuation. Snow falls in winter, but there’s little spring frost. Although budbreak is about two weeks later than in the valley, the vines tend to catch up because they’re usually above the fog line. Drip irrigation from two ponds provides a meager, but essential, supplement to the 60 inches of annual winter rain.

As the vineyard was replanted, vine density was increased to reduce yields, and the vines were trained low to the ground for vertical shoot



Winemaker Chris Howell.

## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

### Cain Cuvée NV7 \$34

71% 2007, 29% 2006; 46% Merlot, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 9% Petit Verdot. The lightest and most approachable of the three Cain wines, this two-vintage blend shows forward aromas of plum, black cherry, and crème de cassis, along with dried herbs, tobacco, and Indian spices. Sweet red fruits with darker undertones emerge on the palate. A plush texture and medium weight are backed by mild, dusty tannins and refreshed by vibrant acidity.

### Cain Concept The Benchland 2007 \$60

57% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Merlot, 13% Cabernet Franc, 12% Petit Verdot. The Concept displays aromas and flavors of macerated cherry, blackberry, and black plum. Earthy bottom notes of dark chocolate, coffee, and mushroom anchor the broad and generous palate, focused by firm, dusty tannins. This wine demonstrates the Cain style in a ripe vintage, maintaining its balance while showcasing the lush, purple benchland fruit.

### Cain Five, 2006 \$100 Spring Mountain District

46% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Merlot, 13% Petit Verdot, 9% Cabernet Franc, 6% Malbec. Subtle aromas of dried fruits and leaves, coffee, and spice broaden to reveal cassis, tobacco, and leather. Give this wine some time to open up; the vintage is more restrained than 2007. Fruit comes into play on the midpalate, filling the mouth with a freshness that is not initially apparent. I did not detect *Brettanomyces* in any of the '07s, but it does show its presence in the 2006. To me, it seems moderate and in keeping with the other elements of the wine.

### Cain Five, 2007 \$100 Spring Mountain District

68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Merlot, 6% Malbec, 5% Petit Verdot, 5% Cabernet Franc; estate-grown and -bottled, due to be released Oct. 1. Dense, dark ruby in color, with little rim variation. Complex aromas of black cherry, freshly turned earth, coriander, fir, and sandalwood get a surprising citrus lift. Savory herbs, dark chocolate, and sweet espresso come through on the palate. This version is balanced and concentrated, with supple tannins.

Prices are current estimated retail.





*Cain Vineyard on Spring Mountain.*

positioning. Now, Howell and vineyard manager Ashley Anderson are experimenting with higher vines and wider cross-arms to reduce crowding and provide more shade. “A cross between VSP and California sprawl” is how Anderson describes it. In addition, Cain Vineyard is now organically farmed. “We started down this path initially to protect the health of the people working in our vineyard,” says Howell, “and then we realized that we were also enhancing the health of our vines and especially the soil. Today, we think also about the health of our watershed.”

A crucial decision every year is when to pick. Although “we strive to capture the freshness and the vibrancy of the fruit, we know that we can err in waiting too long,” says Howell. Hand-picking is necessitated by the terrain. Harvest lasts about six weeks, with the east-facing Merlot coming in first and the northwest-facing Cabernet Franc usually last. Yields are between 1 and 2 tons per acre, compared to typical Cabernet yields two to three times higher on the valley floor.

The other key to Cain’s style is the winemaking approach Howell and his team have developed over the past 20 years. Gentle destemming, native-yeast fermentation, and manual pressing are parts of the formula. Extraction is limited: grapes for Cain Cuvée might spend a week on their skins, with Cain Concept and

Cain Five macerating as much as a week longer. Blending is done in the spring following each harvest. Before bottling, most wines are lightly fined with egg whites. Although Cain Five and Cain Concept have been bottled unfiltered for many years, this practice is now being revisited. *Brettanomyces* has been found in the winery—and it’s sometimes perceptible in the wines—but no attempt has been made to eradicate it. “At the appropriate level, I find all aromas can be captivating,” says Howell. “Once any particular note becomes dominant, the winemaking has taken over, and it has become a problem.” In the right amounts, Bugué believes, brett can add sweet, floral notes of jasmine and roses. Howell points out that malolactic conversion was once considered a flaw, and winemakers tried everything they could to prevent it. “That’s where we are with brett,” he says—“it’s an open question.

“It is a commonplace to hear that ‘wine is made in the vineyard,’” Howell continues, “but we know that three-quarters of what we taste is the result of choices made at harvest and in the cellar. If you attempt to ‘make’ the wine, you will kill it. But the failure to intervene will also lead to death. Rather, the wine must be ‘discovered’ as each choice is made. The very part that is most interesting and compelling is the part you don’t control.” 🍷

*Joanna Breslin’s interest in wine began during her stint with Richard Melman’s Lettuce Entertain You restaurant group in Chicago. She later worked for wine distributors in Chicago, San Diego, and San Francisco. When Ana Mandara opened in San Francisco in 2000, with Larry Stone, MS, designing the wine list, she began moonlighting at the restaurant to gain floor experience and eventually became the sommelier and wine director. She has passed the Advanced exam of the Court of Master Sommeliers and holds the Certified Specialist of Wine diploma from the Society of Wine Educators and the Advanced Certificate from the Wine & Spirit Education Trust. Currently, she represents several importers and wineries through her company, Bridge2Worlds Wine Agency.*