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FR INTERVIEW

Cain Winery's Chris Howell Is A Winemaker Who Lets The Grapes Do The Talking

The Napa veteran likes to let nature do its work

By Richard Martin

It's a blustery, rainy late fall night in Manhattan, and a group of wine writers are slowly filtering into Hearth, that homey Italian restaurant helmed by chef Marco Canora and wine guru Paul Grieco. Hovering around the table is Chris Howell, the winemaker for Cain Winery and the man who we've all come to see and to dine with.

Howell is well known in food and wine circles for Cain Five, one of three wines put out in the Cain name each year. It's made of five grape varieties — Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Malbec — all grown on the Cain vineyard on Spring Mountain, up on the edge of Napa Valley. It's too respected to call it a cult wine, but if you mention it to serious food people their eyes tend to light up.

You can't say something like this to Howell though. The Seattle native studied winemaking and viticulture in France — not to mention philosophy at the University of Chicago — and he's not about accolades or wine scores or hyper-marketing his brand. He's more of a soft-spoken, ponderous type, willing to share his knowledge and thoughts, but open to considering everything. As the dinner begins, he uncorks two bottles of old world Riesling — yes, a winemaker not pushing his own wines for a first course pairing. Throughout the dinner, which also featured some Cain wines from the vaults as well as recent vintages, I sat next to Howell and was impressed at how accessible a wine mind he has. I thought, who better to explain the current state of wine than this guy? So I called him last week, and we had a long talk about wine, life, food and more. Here's a condensed, edited take on that conversation.

Your wines at Cain are complex but drinkable. What are your goals when making wine?

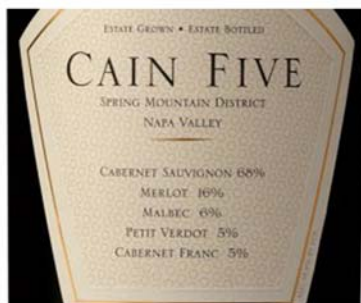
First of all, I am in love with wine, as I think many people are, and I'm always thinking about the wines that have sparked my imagination. The thing about wine is that fundamentally, it's sensual. It is about smell and taste and imagination. In the world of wine geekdom, most of the people are very literate and word-oriented and thought-oriented, and yet wine is pre-cognitive; it is sensual. So I'm always interested in the experience of the wine in the glass, especially at the table, and that it should not be a one-note song.



The Nose Knows: Cain winemaker Chris Howell. "The experience of wine is just extraordinary," he says.



Howell grows the grapes for Cain Five on Spring Mountain in Napa Valley.



Cain Five features a classic blend of grapes similar to what you'll find in a Bordeaux.

Does that literally mean when you're tasting a new batch of Cain Five, you're trying to pinpoint that experience?

Let me take you through the process as I see it. First of all, the harvest is what the harvest is and the grapes are what the grapes are. We're working with vineyards that we know, yet the beauty is, every year [it] is different. When we decide when to pick and work our way through the vinification, this is in essence cooking on the fly, and we're adapting to the situation. After the fermentation has settled down and the wines are fermenting in barrel and the wine begins to resolve, at this time of the year — December, January, February — then we're no longer cooking on the fly. We're evaluating, we're accepting, we're taking in what the harvest gave us. We're no longer saying what do we have to do. We're saying, what are the opportunities?

In other words, winemaking—

—That word is used advisedly, because winemaking is a subset of cooking, but it's much more driven by the original ingredients. And at least in the context where I work, it's going to be much less driven by the making. So "cooking" is a pretty wide bandwidth but usually it's all about this chef, that chef, and sometimes you hear the chef saying they want the original ingredients to show through. But in the world of wine, that is almost always the case and we're really interested in accepting each wine for what it is and not try to impose something on it. It's far more interesting if you don't try to fit it into a box.

What about with Cain Five?

For Cain Five, we're working with fruit from our vines on top of Spring Mountain and on that site, it has a limited range of possibilities, but the good news is that it has a very distinct personality, which is not about us as winemakers: it's about the vineyard. That personality shows through. Our goal is to work with it and bring it together in a wine that is complete and balanced and flowing — [a wine that is] well-integrated but really holds our interest. There is an element of winemaking for sure, but it isn't about control or making it conform to some predetermined expectation.

Can you briefly explain the differences between the three wines Cain produces, Cain Five, Cain Cuvee and Cain Concept?

The Cain project started in 1980 as a mountain Cabernet project, and those wines can be really tannic and hard as nails, and so the Cains decided to create a more balanced wine from their mountain vineyard, and that worked. Extending from that, we have two other Cabernet blends: one is Cain Concept, and these grapes are growing only on the valley floor, not on the mountain. They're two wines made exactly the same way but growing in completely different environments, and you can taste the effect of the different soil and climate. Cain Concept has a subtitle of Benchland because the best part of the Napa Valley is on the alluvial benches that border the edges of the valley, where the soils are more gravelly and better drained and the grape vines don't grow as vigorously, and thus they create wines of greater depth and flavor.

Okay, what about Cain Cuvee?

Cain Cuvee is my response to big oaky wines coming out of California. I've always wanted wines that are lighter and fresher. This is also a Merlot-Cabernet blend, but it's working with specific vineyards both on Spring Mountain and in the valley, and the wine is made in a different way to create a lighter, fresher style. The cuvee is our most "created" wine. The other two are more vineyard driven. The cuvee, we blend two vintages together, which is breaking another rule. Wine geeks tend to think wine has to be a single vintage. We've been blending two vintages since 1998. We always put in the trailing digit of the dominant year [on the bottle], so currently we're selling 2009 and it's backed up with 2008.

If you wanted to, could you manipulate these wines and make a really commercial California wine?

I look at it in the sense like, imagine I were not here, and I were replaced by someone else. What would they do? And I think it'd be fair to say that each individual has their own way of doing things and undoubtedly there'd be a change. How could there not be a change? In that sense, I would have to think that I should be able to do things differently, but when it comes down to connecting to the core values that I've already described, I find that I inevitably come to the same choices.

So you're tied to your philosophy?

I know for sure that I could wait for the grapes to get riper. I know I could do it. I personally believe it would be a mistake. I know in theory all you have to say is I'm gonna wait and come back in a week or two and that would lead to a different outcome. I could use the barrels differently in a way that would make them more apparent. But since I know how not to do those things, it's not that easy to make the changes. Maybe I couldn't. It's embarrassing to say it that way. It sounds egotistical. A chef would be able to do many different interpretations and recipes of the same dish, right?

Well it's good to have integrity, especially at a time when so many more people are becoming obsessive about wine. What's your take on the wave of younger guys and gals who are showing passion for the grapes?

I think that people are very interested in where their food comes from. And wine is just one more part of that story. What's interesting is that there can be a history and tradition. There's an opportunity to go deeper. I see wine shops all over the US with young guys there who are interested in all that stuff and I would say – you can't really get out of the fashion element, but try to get beyond trying to be cool and go deeper. The experience of wine is just extraordinary.

Given your background as a California winemaker who has studied a lot in France, do you lean on old world principles, or are you just learning from what's happening around you at this stage of your career?

Those two things are coming together side by side. When I got started in 1982, there was a real definite old world/new world paradigm. The idea was the old world made wines according to a long tradition going back centuries or even thousands of years, and the new world, we had the opportunity to do anything we wanted to choose the best practices from any part of the old world and any new idea that may be available in science or technology. That today has been turned upside down, so you have winemakers in the new world who are definitely inspired by the old world, as I would say I was, but at the same time you have plenty of winemakers and growers in Europe who are totally inspired by what they see outside of the old world.

So the paradigm has changed a lot in the past few decades?

When I came to California in the '80s, yeah I was interested in the old world traditions, but more importantly I thought there was a lot of knowledge in the old world that had not yet made it to the new world, and it turned out that was more true than I realized. We didn't know what we didn't know in the new world, and I think we're getting more up to speed. And at the same time when you're in a new wine growing region like California, you can't really copy anybody because you won't be like whoever you tried to be. You'll never be a Bordeaux or a Burgundy. You can't talk about making a Burgundian-style wine. What's the point? You're in California — and the same is true for every region.

And now, what inspires you?

I learn from what I'm doing now. I go back to France regularly. The people I learn from are people who are not stuck in their ways. They're people who are experimenting just like we are. It's a large community and we need to exchange and share.

Who are some winemakers you'd point people to who share these ideas with you, for the most part?

One long-term friend of mine, Ted Lemon at Littorai. Maybe Peay Vineyards. Philip Pogni on Spring Mountain. There are a half dozen wineakers here who have helped me even if I don't follow their path directly. In France, one guy I will mention who is no longer with us is Didier Dagueneau. His son,

Benjamin, is making the wines and doing an absolutely brilliant job. A guy I think is really interesting in Australia who I don't really know is at Giaconda; his name is Rick Kinzbrunner. I think the thing some of these people share is the desire not to impose themselves too much on the wine, and to keep asking questions. That's the most important part.

Where are some places you'd recommend for consumers to seek out bottles by winemakers who are more in line with your point of view?

In New York, the first place I think of is Chambers Street, right? But there's another wine shop I just found across from Gramercy Tavern [he couldn't recall the name; we think he means nearby Bottlerocket]. It's perfect. On the other hand in Los Angeles I found a place run by a gal who is totally in love with wine, Domaine LA, very low key. And then another shop I won't mention not too far from Pasadena, where the guys were all about being hip. Something about wine shops really reminds me of the movie High Fidelity. It's funny, but it's too bad in a way, because when the guys are really into the music, that's the cool part, and when they're shutting down clients because they don't know what they're doing, that's really too bad. That's always been a handicap with wine, that there's this huge status attached to it that really is being manipulated at every level by the most natural and the most status-elite people. I wish wine was being sold at farmer's markets.

What do you think the effect of Robert Parker stepping down from Wine Spectator is going to have?

Robert Parker is for the old white guy really, and maybe for the neophyte wine lover in Asia. I find that people who are really into wine today don't focus too much on what those old guys like. They're looking outside the boundaries in every direction. It's a much more diverse and complex world where there's not a simple convention. Can you imagine: Stacking up all wines on a little score based on one single number? That's pretty lame.

Another thing about wine you seem passionate about is the way it interacts with food. How important is it?

The best way to experience wine is with food, and not just a single dish but a couple of things, and then it's like having a revolving kaleidoscope looking at the wine and food pairing. That's far more interesting than just the wine by itself. We were just talking about this with regard to our 2008 Cain Five, which tastes very different depending on the food you pair it with and very different by itself. You can't tell people what they should be eating but we can give them some directions to go. Wine was really meant — and this is an old world tradition — to accompany food. The tradition of wine has not always been that. But from the 17th century at least, food and wine [began] being intimately associated at the table as a tradition that existed in Italy and France. It's something I strive to hold onto as opposed to just looking at the wine.

What wine trends do you like or dislike?

It's not a trend anymore but biodynamics. It's easier to find biodynamic wine than it is to get biodynamically grown produce at the farmer's market, and I think that's a bizarre paradox because the real basis of biodynamics was in gardening. It wasn't in wine. Somehow, some wineries just totally adopted it, and since growing grapes is about gardening, there's a natural connection.... There was a real trend in our country to look at farming as a technology. That's the way it's gone at our ag schools all across the United States, and yet fine wine is about gardening. So the biodynamic thing is good in that it gets you back to gardening. On the other hand, it absolutely looks like a cover for just getting in touch with your vineyard, which is what you really need to do, as opposed to focusing on esoteric aspects of how you grew the grapes. [This can] almost imply you're not confident and you don't really know what's going on. That's a perfect one to pick on because it's a mixed blessing. It's got a positive and a shadow side.

Any others?

Another trend I want to work on is ingredient labeling in wine. Wines are not transparent enough about what's going on and we need to be more transparent. You don't have a problem with ingredient labeling with most food. Why is that wine doesn't have to tell you what's in there. A guy who picked this up early on is Randall Graham [of Bonny Doon Winery]. You have a few wineries doing it and it's something I want to do too.