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Making mountain cab

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES AT CAIN VINEYARD AND WINERY

By Kip Davis

In the southwestern corner of the Spring Mountain District AVA, the Mayacamas ridgeline takes a slight dip near the headwaters of Sulphur Creek. Centuries ago, the Wappo people routinely passed over this low spot while trekking between Napa and Sonoma valleys. West of the ridge is Sonoma County and the upper reaches of Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. On the Napa County side to the east, a bowl-shaped section drops from the ridge toward St. Helena and the Napa Valley floor less than four miles away. Here, neat rows of vineyard carpeted with lush cover crop trace the hilly contours between forests and rocky outcroppings.

Standing on the ridge, Chris Howell braces himself against a stormy wind as he describes the joys and challenges of growing grapes in the mountains. Howell is winemaker and general manager of Cain Vineyard and Winery, which was started in this remote section of Spring Mountain three decades ago by Jerry and Joyce Cain.

"I think it's important to say that with some enterprises like this, if you had any idea of what it was going to take you might never do it," Howell said. "That was definitely the case here."

Howell should know. He has guided Cain for 23 years, and calls it a long-term project that still excites and mystifies him.

"I'm fascinated with it all," he said, scanning the just-pruned vines surrounding La Piedra, a prominent rocky point that juts out of the center of the bowl. "For my first five years up here I almost never went off the hill."

Howell said the Cains came to Spring Mountain in the late 1970s with the vision of creating a vineyard and winery dedicated solely to producing a world-class blend of the five classic Bordeaux wine varietals — cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot. The Cain wine would be entirely estate grown and, therefore, be a true reflection of the "place."

While Bordeaux-style cabernets had already made a mark in the Napa Valley the concept of producing a "mountain cabernet sauvignon" was still relatively new in 1978, according to Howell.

"Al Brounstein (Diamond Creek Vineyards on Diamond Mountain) was just becoming famous, and Randy Dunn (Dunn Vineyards on Howell Mountain) was not yet known," he said. "Stags Leap District, which prevailed at the Judgment of Paris, nonetheless was still a vision. Napa Valley cabernet was primarily Rutherford and Oakville in the bench area. But they (the Cains) wanted to have a mountain cabernet and this was going to be Cain Mountain Vineyard. They decided that they were going to do it right. They had a great vision and great ambition."



Cain Vineyard, high on the mountain straddling Napa and Sonoma counties, grows Bordeaux varieties for a "mountain cab."

In 1979, the Cains found the historic McCormick homestead high on the mountain straddling Napa and Sonoma counties. The sprawling sheep ranch covered 3,000 acres and had been in the McCormick family for five generations beginning in the mid 1800s. A third-generation McCormick — Edna May "Babe" McCormick Learned — agreed to sell the couple a 550-acre portion of the family homestead in 1980.

"The Cains told her that they would carry the ranching tradition forward but now with grapevines," Howell said. "This was the first time that grapevines would be planted on this site."

The purchase complete, the Cains immediately began work creating their mountain vineyard and winery. They hired vineyard consultant Laurie Wood to begin developing the property and plant the first cabernet sauvignon in 1981. Design and construction of the winery was completed in time for the Cain's first crush of purchased fruit in 1982. By 1985, the property had been planted with all five classic Bordeaux varietals and the Cains created the first vintage of the estate's signature wine, Cain Five. In 1986, Jim and Nancy Meadlock, friends of the Cains, became partners in the mountain winery.

By the time Howell arrived as a consultant in 1990, nearly all of Cain's current 100 acres of vineyards had been planted but a potentially devastating problem loomed. The Cain vineyard was planted entirely on AXR rootstock, Howell said, and like many Napa Valley vineyards at the time, "it was all destined to fail due to phylloxera."

Howell also soon learned that the Cains had decided to sell their share of the business to the Meadlocks.

"It's a classical tragedy to see that," Howell continued. "I know the Cains had already heard that their vineyard would ultimately succumb and that a critical, life-changing decision was made that was a mistake. That choice years earlier to use only one rootstock and the choice of the wrong rootstock, I think, was a factor in their decision to sell."



Winemaker Chris Howell has guided Cain Vineyard and Winery on Spring Mountain for 23 years.

While phylloxera was a problem throughout the Napa Valley, it was a particular challenge for mountain grapegrowers whose vineyards were much slower to develop, Howell said. Replanting the Cain's property would mean a lengthy setback to the couple's original vision of creating a wine that was a true reflection of their mountain vineyard.

"They planted their vineyard first," Howell said, "then they built the winery and then they made the wine. The first vintage of Cain Five was 1985 and it was released in 1989. Then they were finally seeing the beginnings of what it was they had hoped to do but that took them 10 years."

The phylloxera problem, he said, meant the possibility of starting all over.

"When I got here I told the Cains that we have a problem," Howell said. "Your whole vineyard needs to be replanted and yet the only reason for being up here in this mountain vineyard is to make a wine that reflects this place. In other words, if you just make a wine from purchased grapes, why be up here?"

Fortunately, the Meadlocks shared the Cain's original vision, Howell said, and made a commitment to fulfill the dream.

"The Meadlocks asked me if I wanted to run the place," he said, "and that's how I got here — no plan, no agenda — and I've been here ever since."

Howell began to proactively deal with the phylloxera issue, and, during the past 15 years, he and his crew have gradually replanted the estate with several different rootstocks supporting the various varietals.

While Cain Five is still the winery's signature wine that follows the founders' original vision, Howell and the Meadlocks have expanded Cain's limited repertoire to include two other Bordeaux blends made mostly from non-estate grapes. This also allowed the winery to sustain production as its mountain vineyard was replanted.

Cain Cuvee, Howell said, was created to be "an easier, more approachable style of wine," made from purchased grapes sourced from the same mountain and valley vineyards each year. In an irreverent twist, Cain Cuvee is made by blending two different vintages.

Cain Concept, The Benchland is sourced from vineyards on the Napa Valley floor. About half of the blend is cabernet sauvignon from Oakville

and Rutherford. "This is not about a place," he said, pouring a glass of Cain Concept. "This is about the Napa Valley proper, but it's made in the same way as the Cain Five. You could call it our mid-level wine, it is all purchased fruit but, in fact, we put all the work into this (Concept) that we put into Cain Five."

Cain Five, as the name implies, contains all five classic Bordeaux varietals sourced entirely from the Cain mountain vineyard. The cabernet-dominant blend shows the characteristic intensity of mountain fruit, and, Howell said, is intended to represent the continued development of the estate's vineyards.

"I don't believe that control is the ultimate way to get where we want to go," he said. "It isn't about control, sometimes it's about letting nature take its course. Otherwise, it's just a product."

Tasted together, the three Cain wines provide three distinct interpretations on the classic Bordeaux blend and, according to Howell, emphasize the effect of nature — or "place" — in the creation of fine wines. Howell feels that it is important to retain this sense of place in fine wine.

"Today, since it's so easy to travel, it's logical that the wines of Bordeaux will begin to resemble the wines of the Napa Valley even as the wines of the Napa Valley pretended to want to emulate the wines of Bordeaux," he said. "This is a problem because if all the wines in the end taste the same, who cares?"

People like the Cains and the Meadlocks do care about this aspect of fine wine, and sometimes end up following their passion into the complicated and expensive world of grape growing and winemaking. Howell said. An earlier example, he said, is the story of Inglenook, founded by Finnish sea captain/entrepreneur Gustave Niebaum and later acquired by filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola.

"People very rarely get into it (the wine industry) for anything other than the love of the wine, initially, whether it's Gustave Niebaum or Francis Coppola ... everyone gets here because we love it. Some of us have a lot of money and we commit resources, others commit our lives."

The Cains started their vineyard and winery after a successful career in electronics. Like Niebaum, the Cains were both fascinated and frustrated by the unpredictability of nature and the tremendous role it plays in the product, Howell said.

"But they all got here through a love of wine and through passion and commitment" he said. "They are drawn to wine in particular because it has that connection to nature, because it does tie you to the land," he said. "That really sets it apart."



Jerry and Joyce Cain founded their winery on land they purchased in 1979 that was part of the historic McCormick homestead.