



THE NORTHERN PARADOX:

REFINED CABERNET FROM NAPA VALLEY'S WARMEST CLIMATES

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Head north in the northern hemisphere and a chill may set in. But not in Napa Valley, where the south is cooled by the nearby San Pablo Bay. The valley's shallow rooted young vines, replanted after the phylloxera scourge of the 1990s, have relied on that cooling effect to moderate their ripening. Now, as the vine roots are beginning to settle in, some of the extreme styles of cabernet made from dimpled fruit are shifting. Nowhere is that shift more apparent than in the valley's north, where the vines and their wines are finding new balance.

CALISTOGA CANYONS

One of the earliest signs of up-valley Napa's potential to grow great cabernet was Eisele Vineyard, a site planted back in a rugged Calistoga canyon created by a seasonal creek. The site has been continuously under vine since the 1880s, when it was primarily growing zinfandel and riesling. Cabernet arrived in 1964, when Napa was beginning to turn its attention towards Bordeaux varieties. The soils of the canyon's alluvial fan (rare in mostly volcanic Calistoga) grew ample, silky cabernet that caught the eye of vintners like Paul Draper of Ridge, who bottled a single-vineyard wine from Eisele in 1971.

The cabernet has been bottled as a vineyard designate ever since: Joseph Phelps claimed from 1972 until 1990, when the Araujo family began bottling their own wines from the site. Such an ongoing library of site specific cabernet is unusual anywhere in Napa Valley. Most of the current vines were planted in the 1990s, and have reached a healthy maturity.

In 2013, the Araujos sold the property to Francois Pinault, who made it part of his holding company Group Artemis, which also owns Chateau Latour, the Pauillac first growth. Artemis appointed Antoine Donnedieu de Vabres as general manager; he works alongside winemaker Helene Mingot at Eisele Vineyard.

As Donnedieu points out, the Eisele vineyard benefits from a noteworthy cooling factor that relieves some of Calistoga's up-valley heat. "Our relatively low elevation and exposure to the winds coming through the Chalk Hill Gap generally provide us with very cool nights that allow the plants to recuperate from the stress of warm days, even at the peak of summer," he says. That's part of the paradox of this place. In spite of the warm days we may have, the vines have always produced berries that keep their freshness."

The site's pitch-perfect cabernet soils, he says, do the rest: "Simmons Creek creates the alluvial fan that is the heart of this place. It is what creates the character of the wine, the finesse, the elegance." The alluvial fan of Eisele has a few special attributes," adds viticultural consultant Steve Matthiason. "The soil is deep but well drained. The water drains away early in the season for appropriate water stress and vine balance, but the roots can also grow very far down into the soil, buffering their stress to work in a healthy way all summer."

Eisele's alluvial fan also benefits from a small difference when compared to the famous benchland soils of Rutherford to the southwest. "The soil at Eisele in between the [alluvial] cobbles is very sandy," Matthiason says, "so the vines have lots of fine roots that aid with ripening."

It's a root system - deep reach plus fine hairs - that only develops with adequate vine age in the right sort of soil, like those in the heart of Eisele. "It's soil that means that despite hot weather, the wines are elegant, structured and aromatic."

DIVERSITY UNDERGROUND

Near the southern boundary of the Calistoga appellation, conditions change.

The Mayacamas Mountains and Vaca Range squeeze together in a tight S-shaped curve. It's the narrowest part of Napa Valley. Between the two sets of hills, the Napa River snakes through, generating a combination of alluvial and benchland soils.

The historic Larkmead estate lies right in the middle of the valley's snuggest section. Originally planted in the

1890s, the vineyards were re-established after Prohibition. Like many Napa Valley vineyards, it was almost completely replanted in the 1990s.

"Napa cabernet vines take a huge leap once they surpass 12 years of age," says Dan Petroski, who has made Larkmead's wines since 2006. "Below ten years, the wines can still be rather aggressive, and balance on the vine isn't great."

Petroski has seen that older vines are better at managing Calistoga's heat, and he finds that vine age is changing the way he and the team think about the vineyard.

"Now that our vines are 15 and 20 years old, we're pulling back out style," he says. "We're not making the wines of power and high impact flavor that we used to. Those wines are great. I love them and we've had good success with them, but now that the vines have reached maturity, and therefore also more consistency, it's time to show what Larkmead tastes like."

The estate hosts an array of soil types, from compressed ash to rich river valley loam and gravelly alluvial benchland. That diversity has become the focus of their new "black label" estate program, which singles out three of the most distinctive micro-terroirs on the property.

"We've identified three parcels that are actually touching each other but have different soils," Petroski says. The parcels, named Dr. Olmo, Solari and The Lark, are being bottled as singular expressions for the first time in the 2013 vintage.

The new cabernet program brings a refreshing shift in Larkmead's style. Where the previous estate wines were hedonistic and, at times, monolithic, the new bottlings offer a relatively trim presence in the mouth, and a

captivating diversity in relation to each other. “The Dr. Olmo parcel has a lot of gravel and rugged rock. It gives a high tone, a fresher style,” Petroski explains. “The Solari is a mix of denser soils, more loam. It’s a fuller, more generous wine. The Lark is all benchland Bale loam, like what’s on the St. Helena bench. It’s the part of the estate that gives that luxurious benchland style.”

Tasting upcoming vintages of Solari, Dr. Olmo and The Lark out of barrel and bottle feels like finding an exciting new classic. They are obviously young, but their progressively greater freshness and transparency points to age worthy wines with clearly expressed site characteristics.

THE ST. HELENA BENCH

Many of the best vineyards in Calistoga grow on the small alluvial terraces fanning out of the Vaca Range and its canyons; St. Helena’s best sites are on the other side of the valley, where soils from the Mayacamas Mountains have accumulated into the same kind of gravelly benchlands that you find in Rutherford and Oakville.

Andre Tchelistcheff, during his tenure at Beaulieu Vineyard, taught Napa Valley winemakers about the value of well-drained benchland soils for bringing fine-grained tannins and balanced acidity. These alluvial soils were produced by creeks draining out from the foot of the mountains. Along the Mayacamas on the western side of the valley, the benchlands Tchelistcheff celebrated stretch from Oakville north through Rutherford and into the town of St. Helena.

Cathy Corison, who has built a reputation for Napa Valley cabernets of classical restraint, says the added warmth of

the northern end of that bench is what initially attracted her to St. Helena. Sommeliers and trade buyers are always surprised, she says, when she tells them that she works exclusively with vineyards on the St. Helena bench, in the middle of what is supposedly one of Napa Valley’s hottest regions.

Corison developed her career as head winemaker for both Yverdon and Chappellet, making cabernet from sites throughout the valley. In 1987, when she decided to start her own label, she turned to vines on Napa Valley’s western bench.

“I chose benchland surrounding Rutherford,” she says. “But when I started my project thirty years ago the sub-appellations [of Napa Valley] didn’t exist.” At the time, the benchland soils north and south of the town of Rutherford were considered as one entity. Only later, when the borders were drawn up, did her vineyard sources become part of the St. Helena AVA.

“Cabernet takes a lot of heat to ripen,” she says. “There aren’t too many places in the world that can get cabernet ripe with good natural acidity. There are plenty of hot places in the world where you can get the heat you need. But the reason you can make world-class cabernet here is because the fog rolls in every night.”

“A warmer year forces my hand,” Corison admits. “We get a short, hot year maybe two out of ten. It’s important to me to make wine with moderate alcohol and all the things that come with it. But hot years, I have to pick on a dime. The most challenging vintages are the ones where temperatures spike right around picking time.”

With 30 years now making wine under her own label, Corison offers one of Napa Valley’s few deep vertical collections of cabernet from a single winemaker.

Her beloved cool vintages - 1999, 2005 and 2011, as three examples - offer market depth and structural clarity, with a firm graphite character held in the tannins. The warm years are clearly their siblings. Years with high temperatures or heat spikes - such as 1992, 2004 and 2008 - show more succulent fruit while still retaining cooling notes of gunpowder and cedar in structural focus.

The Spottswoode estate, like Cathy Corison's vineyards, sits on the northern end of the gravelly bench that runs along the base of the Mayacamas.

Like Eisele and Larkmead, Spottswoode estate reaches back to the early history of Napa Valley. Established in the 1880s by George Schonewald, the property was purchased by the Novak family in the early 1970s. At the time, it was planted to a mix of varieties, as was common throughout Napa Valley: petit sirah, Napa gamay, French colombard and green Hungarian. In 1972, guided by the success of other nearby wineries growing cabernet on the bench, Jack Novak replanted a large portion of the site to cabernet.

I recently had the opportunity to taste a partial Spottswoode vertical that went all the way back to the first vintage, 1982. The wines were remarkably consistent, showing the hallmarks of the estate's well-draining gravelly soils: mouthwatering acidity alongside a wealth of fine-grained tannins carrying depth of fruit.

The 1992 vintage - not a cool one, especially in northern Napa - grew an especially great Spottswoode cabernet, a wine with the full structural power of the site, and layers of aroma and flavor that ranged from lifted scents of flowering herbs to black currants, the finish long and mineral, like crushed rocks. It has aged into a beauty.

Tasting older vintages of Spottswoode also shows the

challenge of young vines. Like Eisele and Larkmead, the estate vineyard went through a massive replant in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, for a handful of vintages, Spottswoode cabernet showed more ripeness and heft. "In the early 2000s, we had the last of the major replants coming online," says winemaker Aron Weinkauff when I ask him about that period at the estate. "As an industry, I think we were all playing around with ripeness as we were getting more used to the modern rootstocks, [their] lower vigor and, perhaps, shorter ripening periods." He suggests that the riper style was also a facet of vintage variation: "2002 and 2004 were very warm seasons with very hot harvest periods."

By the mid-2000s, the wines reclaimed their former freshness. In part, the Spottswoode team turned its attention to fine-tuned picking times.

"High temperatures affect alcohol levels and the pH of wines but, more than that, they affect the flavor profile," Weinkauff says. The situation gets harder in especially hot years. "Any dehydration and the fruit immediately tastes like raisins. To retain freshness it's ideal to pick before that starts," he says.

Case in point: the 2012 Spottswoode that Weinkauff made. It captures the fresh fruit universally found in a vintage and settles it into the structural integrity born of the site, resulting in a rare combination of gravitas and liveliness - the mark of a great Napa Valley cabernet vineyard. ■