

High-Altitude Magic

Mountain wines and their winemakers are a different breed

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Our jeep bounces over steep, rocky terrain as we ascend above the fog line of the Mayacamas Mountains. Rocks the size of Volkswagen Bugs surround the high elevations of the Hess Collection Winery's Veeder Summit Vineyard, and fences built to keep deer out are suspiciously mangled.

Here, at 1,600 feet above sea level, there is ash underfoot, and Mount Veeder winemaker Dave Guffy coaxes vines from the volcanic soils to produce grapes of beauty and power.

Mountain winemaking is not for everyone. Among those who need not apply: the physically unfit, or terminally thrifty; people prone to motion sickness or who are fearful of snakes or mountain lions; and anyone who doesn't believe in magic.

From the Napa Valley to Argentina's towering Mendoza peaks, mountain winemakers speak of a fourth dimension, a "mountain weirdness," says Guffy, that impacts the already challenging conditions present in maintaining mountain vineyards -- power supplies, water rights, erosion and wildlife.

The reward, of course, is in the glass. Grapes grown at high elevations produce wines that are generally higher in acid and minerality, lower in alcohol, and darker in color, says Guffy.

Cabernet Sauvignon, which makes up the majority of Hess Collection's 19 Block Cuvee, is big in structure with a firm backbone of soft tannins, ideal for aging. When they add that 11 percent Malbec, a high-altitude darling, the result is a supple wine.

"Malbec packs flesh on those bones," says Guffy. "The biggest advantage is that the harsh conditions and devigorating soils gives you smaller, concentrated grapes."

Bill Easton of Terre Rouge and Easton Wines in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley likes the mouthfeel of high-elevation wines. For his High Slopes Syrah, Easton acquires grapes from the red-soiled Oso Loco and Bailey vineyards -- both at 3,200 feet. He says those grapes ripen as late as mid-October and have lower sugar levels because of the high elevation. The result is a peppery flavor reminiscent of Syrahs from the northern Rhone. The 2003 High Slopes Syrah is rich and meaty with fine tannins and unmistakable cool-climate acidity.

The way Fernando Buscema of Mendoza's Vista Del Sur Winery describes it, there is science and poetry to this high-altitude art.

First, the science: The vineyards for his High Note Elevated Malbec lie in the Uco Valley, a desert oasis where altitude for wine-growing is 2,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level and soils are sandy and rocky. Controlled drip irrigation leads to low vigor and

naturally low yields, he explains, and because a water-stressed plant gives all its energy to ripening grapes rather than foliage, the heightened polyphenols and aromatics give the wines greater intensity.

Now, the poetry. The higher you go, the higher the sun's intensity, Buscema says, and the less natural filtration.

"Those strong (ultraviolet) rays can kill a grape's seed, " he says. "How does this impact the vine? The plants react like moms. To protect the seeds, they thicken their skins and produce dark color, like people when they tan."

Take the 2007 High Note. With its inky color, you'd expect a big, tannic Petit Sirah. Instead, the Malbec blend (17 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot) tastes of soft plums and spices with a smooth texture and silky finish.

For Randle Johnson, mountain winemaking is all about temperature.

"Altitude really equates to coolness, " says Johnson, Hess Collection consulting winemaker and director of winemaking for Bodega Colome in Argentina's northeastern Salta province.

Cooler temperatures mean the grapes hang on the vine longer, creating a slower, more balanced ripening cycle, he says. At up to 9,800 feet, the Colome vineyards in Argentina are among the highest in the world.

Enter mountain weirdness.

"In some mountain areas you can get inversion, where warm air rises from the valley floor and it's actually warmer at night up there, " Johnson says. "That's not such a bad thing if you're trying to knock back some of the acid."

Guffy, whose Mount Veeder vines grow in the American Viticultural Area of the lofty Mayacamas Mountains, has experienced it too. During the day, however, it is still up to 10 degrees cooler on Mount Veeder than the valley floor. And since Mount Veeder has many soil types, Guffy and his crew are like human soil mappers. They know the vineyards by foot and aren't afraid to plant Malbec and Gewurztraminer, not only in the same block but in the same row based on soil differences or sun exposure.

At the Veeder Summit Vineyard, Malbec is planted on the slope, where the red grapes get maximum sun exposure for ripening. And the flat part of the vineyard is planted to two acres of Gewurztraminer, which requires less sun.

"What's the saying?" says Guffy. "If you don't like the soil on Mount Veeder, walk three feet."

Five mountain wines

Hess Collection Mount Veeder 19 Block Cuv e 2006: Soft and supple with aromas and flavors of raspberry, sage and black licorice.

Hess Collection Mount Veeder Chardonnay 2007: Sans malolactic fermentation, the aromas and flavors of orange blossom and nectarine soar. Pleasantly flinty, especially for a California chardonnay.

Terre Rouge Syrah "High Slopes" Sierra Foothills 2003: Soft yet gutsy, with aromas of bacon and white pepper, and flavors of meat and dark berries. Mouth-hugging, rather gripping tannins.

2005 Bodegas Colom "Estate" Malbec: Intense in color and aroma, this blend includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Tannat, and a touch of Syrah. It has aromas of cassis and pepper. Soft and elegant on the palate, with a lingering finish.

Vista Del Sur High Note Elevated Malbec 2007: Deep purple with aromas and flavors of soft plums and spices with a round mouthfeel and silky finish.

- Jessica Yadegaran