

# Decanter

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## Jefford on Monday: High on the hill

Andrew Jefford | September 19, 2016

**Andrew Jefford hears the Napa Mountain story from one of its most thoughtful practitioners, Chris Howell of Cain.**



A lone tree on the ridgeline of Spring Mountain District AVA, Napa. Credit: Andrew Jefford

We left the 4×4 in a clearing, and walked up a track to some of the estate’s highest vineyards. The only sound, apart from the wind, were the cascading, slow-fade screams of the red-tailed hawks as they tussled for territory. The contours of the hills fell about chaotically.

Or so it seemed to me — but Chris Howell provided orientation. “We’re up on the watershed which divides Napa from Sonoma. A blanket of cold air comes in off the ocean, which lies 35 miles to the west, over there.” He pointed to where a zone of brighter light lay, seamed above the

late-afternoon horizon. I looked along the faint ridgeline he'd indicated. A single tree punctuated the tan gold of the grasses. The prevailing wind had given it an easterly stoop.

This is Spring Mountain, and were about to walk the steep slopes where Cain Five comes into being. Howell has grown this distinctively savoury, earthy estate wine since 1991, as well as the plumper and more sensual Cain Concept, a Napa benchland wine made from bought fruit and sold as 'library stock' (see notes below), and the lighter Cain Cuvée, which melds different sources and two vintages. I always enjoy talking to Howell, a philosophy graduate-turned-winemaker with a mind as rangy and unpredictable as the hills of the Cain estate (now owned by software entrepreneur Jim Meadlock).



Chris Howell in the Cain Vineyards. Credit: Andrew Jefford.

Howell trained as a winemaker not at Davis, but at Montpellier, between 1982 and 1984 – where his fellow-students were Miguel Torres and Alain Chabanon, and where he also got to know a PhD student called Alain Razungles, now Professor of Enology at Montpellier SupAgro. “I went there to study enology, and the first thing they said was that we’re going to study viticulture. What a gift!” He worked, too, in Pauillac at Mouton, where he remembers legendary cellar master Pierre Blondin sitting on a bench with him, in his beret and *bleu de travail*, pointing out that the volatile acidity considered a flaw by oenologists might be central to the character of a truly great wine. It’s a lesson he’s never forgotten, and he puts into practice with the Cain wines, which derive a small percentage of their complexity through a deliberate engagement with the unpristine.

He also learned about one of the fundamental differences between Bordeaux and Napa. “I remember walking home after my endless days at Mouton in 1983 – a warm year. Often it was one or two in the morning, but those September nights were balmy – it wasn’t cold. I could almost feel the plants breathing and ripening their fruit. Even in the night, plants do things. Here in the Napa Valley we have wonderful warm days, and dryer air than in Bordeaux, but we have much cooler nights. What does that mean? I think it preserves acidity to some extent, and certain aromas, and colour and tannins.”



Cain’s Chris Howell talks about the fruit in Spring Mountain District AVA. Credit: Cain.

The importance of tannins is a subject to which Howell, like many Napa wine craftsmen and women, has given a lot of thought. “It was Michel Rolland who first suggested that Napa tannins weren’t fully ripe. The problem is that a focus of tannin maturity has been taken to the exclusion of almost all other attributes. You can take tannin maturity to extreme levels if you wish, but it may be to the detriment of the whole character of the grape – the fruit and freshness and aromatics. If you wait until the seeds are completely brown, you will have shrivelled fruit, and you will lose the energy in the fruit.”

Napa has three or four different site types, depending on whether you distinguish between hillside and mountain. “The valley floor is, in essence, alluvial, of various origins – soils that have come spilling out of the hills. If we were in a climate where it rained in summer, this couldn’t be fine-wine country. But with Napa’s totally dry summers, the water-holding capacity of those deep soils is an advantage; you can dry-farm some of them.” There are even some good Merlot sites, says Howell, in the clay-rich, former pond bottoms along the valley floor.

“Along the edges of the valley,” he explains, “the soils are better drained and more gravelly, not so deep, not so rich in silt. Those are the alluvial fans we call ‘benches’, and include many of the great historical sites, and the definitive sites for Cabernet Sauvignon on its own. These are the wines which captured the attention of the world — Cabernets which not just fine by any measure but friendly and approachable, too.”

“When you head up on to the hillside,” he continues, “it’s another world. The soils are no longer alluvial; they’re thin, residual soils clinging to the hillside, derived from the parent material whether it be volcanic, sandstone, shale or mixed seabed. Although those soils are thin, some can be high in clay, so they may have some water-holding capacity.” These hillside and mountain sites tend to have later budbreak and ripening, though the lower yields and warmer nights allow some catching up.



Wild Cain vineyards in Spring Mountain. Credit: Andrew Jefford.

And so to the key question: are there verifiable, repeatable differences in flavour, structure or style between valley floor, benchland and mountain wine, or is the print of the winemaker still primordial? Several tastings have attempted to identify such differences, but none has yet succeeded. Howell, though, is convinced that a difference exists.

“The conceits that I accept are that mountain wines tend to have a stronger character; that they tend to age longer; that they are usually darker in colour and that they have more perceptible tannin. I’d also say that they have a different character of ripeness: less overt, sometimes even with some ‘green’ aromatics, and with a palate of greater finesse.”



Fog hangs over Spring Mountain District AVA in Napa Valley. Credit: Cain.

The reason for these differences, he stresses, isn't related to altitude per se; the Napa Valley's fog and inversion layers tend to make the normal assumptions about altitude hazardous here. Instead, look down to those thin soils. They mean lower yield, reduced vine vigour and in particular "smaller berries. Because much of the tannin and all of the colour and perfume is contained within the skins, smaller berries — with their much higher skin-to-juice ratio — may go some way towards explaining the basis for the conceits."

But there's something else, too. "The feeling in a mountain vineyard is always different. It is no longer civilised. There are patches of vineyard in the forest, the challenging hillsides, the disordered rows, the irregular vines, the scent of the scrub — all of this conspires to give a sense of wildness that more well-bred vineyards could never evince."

I relished my winding, half-hour drive up from highway 29 and the leafy edge of St Helena through the scented forests of Spring Mountain to the heights of Cain. It always amazes me how swiftly, as Howell suggests, you can leave the bustle and thrust of the USA's foremost wine artery and find yourself in a part-agricultural landscape of absolute loneliness and solitude. Ideal for a thoughtful viticultural observer of philosophical bent; not a bad spot, either, to fashion Napa wines which come closer to a true European ideal than most.

## **Tasting Cain wines**

### **Cain, Cain Concept 2008**

Deep though not saturated black-red in colour, with dark, brooding scents of black fruits, embers and earth. On the palate, the wine is vivid, textured and deep, with a fuller-lipped profile than the Cain Five, supported by ample tannins and rounded, almost glowing acidity. **92 points / 100**

### **Cain, Cain Five 2011**

The 2001 Cain Five is a wine of delicious precociousness: soft, honeyed, mellow and fragrant, with open, accessible, eminently scrutable flavours, but full of finesse, too. **90**

### **Cain, Cain Five 2008**

The aromas are quietly enticing, subtle and savoury. Some blackberry and black cherry fruit overlies the wine's closely woven, structured, satisfying flavours. There's nothing ostentatiously voluptuous or sweet about this Bordeaux blend; instead it puts you in mind of field and forest. **93**

### **Cain, Cain Five 2006**

Very attractive aromas here, suggesting that Cain Five in general needs longer for full aromatic development than its accessible textures when young might suggest. Truffle, meat jus and cream combine in the scents, while the flavour is smooth, harmonious, finely bevelled and warm, the black fruits melding seamlessly with secondary notes of bay leaf and anis. **94**