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**Drinking with Esther**



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FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

## Wildfire destroyed this Napa vineyard. Did it burn its terroir?

By Esther Mobley, Senior Wine Critic

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I'll never forget the conversation I had with winemaker Chris Howell four years ago, just hours after the Glass Fire tore across his Napa Valley vineyard and home. At the time, according to Cal Fire, it was the tenth-most destructive wildfire in California history, leveling over 1,500 structures. One of those was Cain Vineyard & Winery, the Spring Mountain producer of some of Napa Valley's most unconventional Cabernet Sauvignon blends where Howell has worked for more than 30 years. The Glass Fire burned not only Cain's buildings, but also destroyed a significant number of its grapevines.

The conversation with Howell stands out in my memory as uniquely hopeful during a month when nearly everyone I spoke with had lost something dear to them. “The winery may be gone, but Cain remains,” he said. He meant that a winery could be rebuilt, but that the terroir that informs what the Cain wines taste like — the singular, mysterious combination of soil and topography and climate and so much more — could not be burned away.

Now, Cain is releasing its first wine made in the post-Glass Fire era, the 2021 Cain Five (\$150). Howell sees this wine as a kind of test for the Cain vineyard, a proof of concept for the idea of terroir that he discussed with me in the fire’s immediate aftermath. He had to make this wine in an off-site facility, without many of the typical winemaking controls he’s used to. The vineyard itself was changed too, with many of the surrounding flora, like Douglas fir trees, gone. Would Cain still taste like Cain?

After tasting the 2021, I can say that the answer is yes. The extreme, fresh woodsiness that I associate with Cain — notes like bay leaf, dried basil, mint — is here in spades, along with a grippy, rustic texture that speaks to its origin near the top of this mountainside.

Howell said that as the fermentation began, in a new winery where he was working as a guest, he was anxiously awaiting to see what the wine would taste and smell like. As soon as the vat started bubbling up, he felt relieved. “It was amazing that we found flavors that we could recognize,” he said.

“It wasn’t a miracle,” he admitted, “but to us it felt like it. To us this is a validation of all that talk about terroir.”

Making wine in a new facility might not sound like a big deal — some winemakers bop around to new places every year — but Cain has never been a typical winery. Famously, the wines occasionally betray traces of *brettanomyces*, a spoilage yeast that can imbue a wine with barnyard-like aromas and flavors. Brett is common in many European wine regions but considered anathema in Napa Valley, and it often lives in the cellars themselves.

Even in vintages where the Cain wines don’t taste bretty, I’ve wondered whether the ambient microorganisms in the winery may play a role in the flavors of these wines, which are emphatically unlike the archetypal, opulent, fruity Napa Cabernet.

Then there’s the vineyard, dense with trees like bay laurels, whose unmistakable fragrance is a hallmark of the Cain wines. After 2020, “we got to see how the forest responds to fire,” said Howell. Some species, like redwoods, were fire-resilient. Others, like Douglas firs, weren’t.

The cover crop, not the vines themselves, was what fueled the wildfire, Howell said. Although the scene looked devastating in its immediate wake, the land soon began to heal itself. “In the first year after the fire, the grass was luscious,” he said. “The ash from a fire can basically return minerals to the earth and so in fact it tends to increase fertility.”

But that winter, as he and his team began the slow, painstaking work of assessing the health of each individual vine, “there was more damage than we’d understood,” Howell said. Only around 10% of the vines survived, he now estimates. The rest were damaged beyond the point of repair, or in many cases, dead.

Little by little, they’re replanting, and taking the opportunity to reassess what they want this vineyard to be. Howell has replanted drought-tolerant rootstock, something that was not on most people’s minds when the vineyard was first planted in the 1980s.

The construction of a new Cain winery, like the completion of the vineyard’s replanting, is still years away. Howell and his team will remain in this liminal state, making small quantities of wine from the surviving vines in other people’s wineries. But those who love the Cain wines, as I do, should take comfort in the fact that Cain, the place, endures.

That should be comforting to those who love wines from fire-prone places everywhere, in fact. “I think we’ll be living with fire forever, and hopefully stop trying to put it out,” said Howell, alluding to a set of ideas that’s become more popular in California in recent years. “There’s some idea of nature that’s independent of humans.” The same could be said of wine terroir.

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## What I'm Reading

The year of winery buybacks continues: James MacPhail has bought back the brand he founded, MacPhail Family Wines, from Hess Persson Estates 13 years after he sold it, MaryAnn Worobiec reports in *Wine Spectator*. This follows three other instances of founders regaining control of wineries they’d sold, which Jess Lander reported on for the *Chronicle*: James Hall of Patz & Hall, Douglas Stewart of Breggo Cellars and Phil Hurst of Truett Hurst.

My colleague Elena Kadvany published an extremely fun package about how to get into the House of Prime Rib, which she has deemed San Francisco’s toughest reservation. You can play a choose-your-own-adventure game, read Elena’s insider tips for scoring a spot and take our poll about what you actually order once you get a table. I love HOPR, and for the record, my approach: split a martini, BYOB (usually an older California Cabernet; last time it was a 1988 Philip Togni), House of Prime Rib Cut, baked potato, chocolate cake.

Harvard’s Kenneth Mukamal and Eric Rimm, researchers who were accused of bias in an alcohol-and-health study a few years ago, address the endlessly confusing nature of the debate on this subject and make their own argument about anti-alcohol bias.