

REBIRTH OF THE

The second installment of our Hidden Gems series travels to Napa Valley's beautiful,

By Julie Fadda

Picture yourself driving along the twists and turns of a mountain highway, with a canopy of redwood, bay and madrone trees alongside the road. Overhead, dapples of sunlight beam through the branches so the landscape seems to sparkle. A clearing reveals vineyard rows that reach up the mountainside, surrounded by trees. The vineyards here aren't contiguous. They're individualistic and on varied slopes, separated by forests and time. Each has a distinct personality—much like the people to whom they belong.

Mt. Veeder is a place where individuals are intent on expressing their unique characteristics. Its remote feel attracts artists, recluses and, of course, winegrowers. Many are separated by acres of land, but all share a common goal: to grow top-quality grapes that make the finest wine possible.

The mountain is 25 square miles (15,000 acres) in size, and is the largest subappellation that's entirely within the larger Napa Valley AVA. It stretches from the Carneros region, just east of the

Sonoma County line, to the north as far as Glen Ellen and Oakville. Only 1,000 acres are planted to vineyards. The rest is made up of steep slopes, family homes and getaways, wild lands, hummingbirds, dragonflies and a history that's equally as rich as the deep, intense wine that's the true expression of Mt. Veeder.

Its history, however, is largely unknown, even though it was one of the first areas in Napa to be cultivated for winemaking. (Prior to that, the Coastal Miwok Indians inhabited the area.) The first wine produced is credited to Stalham Wing, who exhibited several bottles at the Napa County Fair in 1864. Mt. Veeder's Wing Canyon area, where his winery was located, is named for him.

If you drive up Redwood Road, you'll see where some of Napa's earliest wineries operated, including Hein Winery, which was the first commercial producer on the mountain. Today's Hess Collection stands next to where Wing's property was, and was originally owned by H. Hudeman, then Rudolph Jordan (credited as one of the first winemakers—maybe even the very first—to use



COOL

remote and forested Mt. Veeder.

pure yeast to control fermentation), Theodore Gier (who built a three-story stone winery there, and was a major contributor to the increased recognition of California wines) and finally the Christian Brothers, whose Brother John and Brother Timothy were world-renowned winemasters. The Nicholas Streich family built a small winery nearby in 1884, later named Castle Rock (after a rock formation on the property) and now owned by Yates Family Vineyards.

Near there, you'll find the original Fisher Winery, now known as Mayacamas Winery and owned by the Travers family.

Early visitors to the area called it Napa Redwoods, and were as attracted to its many health resorts as they were to its wine. The name was replaced over time, to reflect that of P.V. Veeder, a Presbyterian minister who spent much of his time in the area.

The Hess Collection's Mt. Veeder Summit Vineyard
[Photo courtesy of Hess Collection]

Through the generations

It was H. Hudemann's botanical garden and resort, Lotus Pond, which first drew visitors to the current-day Hess property. There's still a 70-foot-tall monkey tree, stone fountains, irrigation and a stone wine cellar from that era.

"There have been four generations of winemakers on Mt. Veeder," says Randle Johnson, consulting winemaker at The Hess Collection, who's been working on the mountain since 1977 (as cellar master at Mayacamas) and began as winemaker at Hess in 1983, when owner Donald Hess decided to produce his own wine at the encouragement of Robert Mondavi. Prior to that, Hess had been selling its grapes. "The first [generation] was the German settlers [who grew German varietals such as Riesling]; then post prohibition with the Christian Brothers and Mayacamas Vineyards [1940s/50s]; then in the 1970s to 1990s you saw Hess, Domaine Chandon, Rubissow-Sargent, Kendall Jackson and Robert Craig [among others]. Today's generation is interested in boutique wine and ultra-micro brands. There's a new wave of ownership. Some just want to be growers, most do Bordeaux reds and ask \$50+ per bottle.

"The Germans came up from the South Bay, heralded by Agoston Haraszthy of Buena Vista, who wanted them to come to Sonoma. What he didn't count on was, they were used to slopes. So they got to Sonoma and went over the hill to Redwood Creek in Napa for steeper terrain," says Johnson. Turns out, Mt. Veeder's earliest winemakers chose the area because they'd learned over time that mountain vineyards produce more intense wines and, thus, were worth the extra effort.

Old meets new

It was Ernest, Nicholas and Robert Streich who first settled the property where today's Yates Family Vineyard is located. It was 1881, and the Streichs mainly planted German varietals. They also built a stone winery in 1884 that still stands today, including its original Roman press (one of two in Napa Valley) and housing much of the original equipment: a labeler, a basket press, redwood vats, saws and a horse-pulled tiller among it. Though no longer in use, the winery is a true testament to the history of the area.

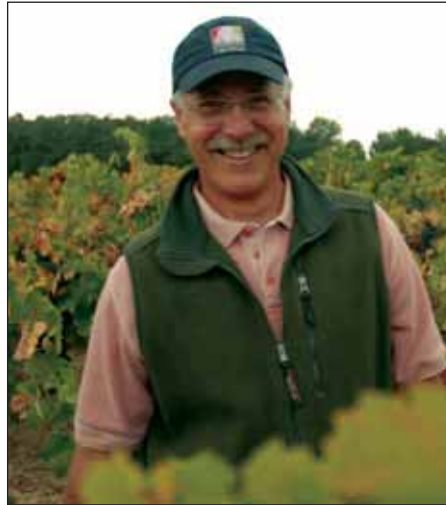
Perry Yates purchased the property in 1950, and his grandson Michael took it over in 1993. On its 270 acres, 37 are planted with mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

Mary Yates is a fourth-generation grapegrower and president of the Mt. Veeder Appellation Council. Her parents, Michael and Lynn Yates, own the winery, and Michael is co-winemaker with Mary's sister, Whitney Yates Hanes, who's also vineyard manager. "Come harvest, it's all hands in the picking," says Mary. "It's us and five vineyard workers doing all the work." They make about 800 cases annually, selling about 80 percent of their grapes.

The family started a commercial winery in 1999, originally named Napa Redwoods Estate; with the 2005 vintage, they changed it to Yates Family Vineyard. The winery produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Viognier (the

first was bottled this past June and will be released this fall). Its Alden-Perry Reserve, a Bordeaux-style blend named after Mary's grandfather and great-grandfather, is "a true expression of our vineyard." It exhibits dark fruit and anise on the nose with a hint of smoke, then opens up on the palate with cinnamon spice, pepper and jam. It's well rounded and its layers linger long after you take a sip.

Mary is getting married on the property this September (as did her sister a couple years ago). Meantime and beyond, she handles the winery's sales, marketing and finances. "This is my first year traveling to sell the wine," she says. "When you're at tastings and say, 'Mt. Veeder,' some people don't even know it's in Napa Valley."



Randle Johnson, consulting winemaker for The Hess Collection, has been working on Mt. Veeder since 1977.

Getting noticed

Getting the word out is a main goal of the Mt. Veeder Appellation Council (MVAC). "I remember going with my dad to annual tastings and vineyard seminars when I was a kid," says Yates. "I wondered why [the council] didn't do the tastings anymore, so I started things going again. The first meeting was March of 2008 and, since I'd gathered the people together, they told me to head it.

"We're a work in progress," she continues. "It's an eclectic group. We have so much fun doing it. It's fun meeting your neighbors. They're your most valuable resource on the mountain. We can ask each other vineyard questions, get referrals and such."

Robert Craig agrees. Although his winery is located on Howell Mountain, he has deep roots on Mt. Veeder. Former general manager of The Hess Collection winery, he was an instrumental figure in getting Mt. Veeder's AVA status recognized. Today, he makes a Cabernet Sauvignon from a vineyard he helped develop there, PymRae, which is at 1,800 feet atop the summit of Mt. Veeder. "The vineyard has typical Mt. Veeder soils: ancient ocean bottom, decomposed sandstone and subsoil that's really amazing. It's petrified shale, which is extremely well drained. The terrain is steep. When rain falls, not much water is retained. The roots don't pick up all the water the vine wants. So the berries' juice is more concentrated," says Craig.

"I think over the next four or five years, the Mt. Veeder appellation will come into its own. There's a new group of people there who want to bring it forth as a strong appellation. They want to show people what's unusual about Mt. Veeder and its wines.

"In the old days, everyone was so individual that it was hard to get a consensus. It was like herding cats. Now [MVAC] makes it different. There's been a Mt. Veeder appellation committee since the mid 1970s, and there was quite a bit of activity again when it was recognized as an AVA in 1990. But it didn't catch on until recently. The new group is energetic, focused and very businesslike," says Craig.

Another MVAC member is Tom LaTour of LaTour Vineyards. "We're getting ourselves organized to become well known. Soon, there'll be signs letting people know when they're entering and leaving the area. It's important to make people aware they're in it. And some day, we'd like to have a Mt. Veeder

tasting room in downtown Napa," he says.

Relative newcomer Mark Holler is also involved. "The appellation council is a joint marketing tool to sell the wines and grapes," he says. "We share the place, but we have to invest in it, too. It's very important to make good wines."

Events are an excellent way to spread the word and showcase the wines. An annual "Napa Valley with Altitude" tasting at Ft. Mason in San Francisco (which also includes Diamond Mountain and Spring Mountain) takes place each April, and is a great way to taste the offerings from the area. This year, a Mt. Veeder tasting will take place October 3 at Lakeside Grill in Yountville (3-6 p.m.—visit www.mtveederwines.com for information).

Such character

The character of a place is its landscape and its people. "It's not easy to farm a mountain vineyard," says Yates. "It's very hands on—not for the timid. You have to get down and dirty with the land. It takes passion to want to live up here. It's a drive just to get a cup of flour."

"One thing you'll find in the mountains is, everybody does their own thing," adds Craig. "The economics of mountain wines are totally different than on the valley floor. It costs more to develop and farm, then the vineyard produces 60 percent of the crop you'd see with the same sized vineyard on the valley floor—but the result is wonderful wine.

"I thought Mt. Veeder really deserved its own appellation," he continues.

"There's a very distinctive flavor in the wines. Napa Valley as a whole is amazingly diverse for growing grapes. There are at least 46 soil types—more than in all of France. Layered on top of that are the microclimates. For a mountain growing area, Mt. Veeder is the closest to the bay, so it's the coolest of all the mountain appellations."

"This is what I imagined," says LaTour when asked why he chose Mt. Veeder for his vineyard. "Some may say there's better dirt in the middle of Oakville, but I don't think it's quite as romantic.

"There's a weather phenomenon here [LaTour's vineyard is located at the northernmost portion of the mountain, near its volcanic peak] called an inversion, where there are distinct temperature differences. Tomorrow will be 100 degrees in the valley; it'll be 80 here. So the Napa Valley heat will bring in the cool Sonoma Valley air; and vice versa when Sonoma Valley is cold."

"We can ripen Cabernet Sauvignon using the whole season," says Holler, whose Camalie Vineyard is located almost exactly in the center of the appellation. "It's harvested in October or sometimes into November. It gives a different quality profile. There's higher concentration and fruit intensity. The wines are inky with smooth tannins." This effect is due to the mountain's cooler air and well-drained soils. There's a longer, slower ripening season.

"Mountains have enormous diversity. The valley floor has uniformity. Due to different exposure, soil types and depths, mountain vineyards have more complexity," says Craig.

Hess is also located at the southern end of the AVA. "On Mt.

Veeder, it's all about water. We have to capture water and store it in reservoirs," says Johnson. "Hess has the only artesian well on Mt. Veeder."

Taste the difference

Robert Craig, group historian for the Mt. Veeder Appellation Council, remembers, "In the 1970s, virtually all mountain wines were massive with huge tannins. They were sold on the basis they wouldn't be drinkable for 20 years." But, he says, "If you work with the tannins you can have them integrate with the wine. Ripe tannins add elegance."

Craig started his own brand in 1992, and the first Mt. Veeder offering was in 1993 (a Howell Mountain Cabernet and Affinity, which is a proprietary Cabernet blend made mostly for his wine club and for restaurants, were also released that year). He also produces a Sonoma Valley Chardonnay (Durell Vineyard, near Carneros). "We focus on where the grapes come from. I like wines to have a sense of place," he says.

Craig's 2006 Mt. Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon will be released in September. "It's the best we've made," he says. "Keith [Emerson, who joined the winery in 2006 as consulting winemaker] has an excellent palate; his wine has more power and polish." This wine has a blueberry nose, black fruits, a bit of cedar and some mocha. "The fruit is focused with a lot of core concentration, then spreads out from there," Craig adds.

Try something new

Randle Johnson started at Hess in 1983

and is now a consulting winemaker as well as winemaker for Arzein Wines (heirloom varietals including Petite Sirah and Zinfandel), another Hess Family label, and director of winemaking for Bodega Colomé, a Hess Family property in Argentina.

Hess Collection produces about 500,000 cases of wines annually; about 25,000 cases are Mt. Veeder-specific. Hess produces Mt. Veeder Chardonnay, which has tropical notes on the nose, musque characteristics and mineral on the palate with a creamy mouthfeel. Its 19 Block Cuvée, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc, has bright red fruit with a juicy, lush dark finish. The Mount Veeder/Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is the flagship wine. The first release was a 1983 vintage (a 1982 Reserve was released many years later); most grapes were sold in those days. The current release, a 2006, is smoky and meaty with a dark, masculine character.

Specialty grapes grown on the Veeder property include Malbec and Viognier. Johnson is very enthusiastic about Hess' Malbec, which he sees as an up and comer, especially now with Argentina making it so popular. "Malbec is like the second coming here," says Johnson. "Early in my career, Bordeaux reds were Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Then in 1991, a French investment group planted a vineyard that included all five Bordeaux blend varietals. They had extra Malbec and called Hess—it turned out to be absolute rocket fuel. It *really* turned my head. I researched it extensively, and now it's planted on all our ranches." The one I



Mary Yates is president of the Mt. Veeder Appellation Council.

Mt. Veeder Wineries and Vineyards

This is a list of wineries and vineyards that produce grapes and/or wine from Mt. Veeder properties.

Only the varietal(s) grown on Mt. Veeder are reflected on this list.*

Brandlin Vineyard (Cuvaision Estate Wines)

Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon (Bordeaux blend of estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Petit Verdot)
www.brandlinvineyard.com

Calafia Cellars

Red Table Wine (Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Petit Verdot)
www.calafiacellulars.com

Camalie Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenere, Merlot
<http://camalie.com>

Chateau Potelle

Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Zinfandel
www.chateaupotelle.com

Domaine Chandon

Chardonnay (for sparkling wine)
www.chandon.com

Elizabeth Spencer Wines

Cabernet Sauvignon
www.elizabethspencerwines.com

Franus

Cabernet Sauvignon (Brandlin Vineyard)
www.franuswine.com

Fohr Vineyards

(707) 255-1118

Fontanella Family Winery

Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Zinfandel
www.fontanellawinery.com

Godspeed Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Trinity (red blend)
(707) 254-7766

Hendry

Albariño, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Primitivo, Zinfandel
www.hendrywines.com

The Hess Collection

19 Block Cuvee, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Malbec
www.hesscollection.com

Jade Mountain

Syrah
www2.jademountainvineyard.com

Kendall Jackson Highland Estates

Cabernet Sauvignon (Veeder Peak)
www.kj.com

Konrad Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon
<http://66.82.73.54/Konrad/KonradHome.htm>

Lagier Meredith Vineyard

Syrah
www.lagiermeredith.com

LaTour Vineyards

Chardonnay, Syrah
www.latourvineyards.com

Lokoya Winery

Cabernet Sauvignon
www.lokoya.com

Marketta Vineyards

Mt. Veeder Blend (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec)
(707) 226-5944

Mayacamas Vineyards

Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc
www.mayacamas.com

Mount Veeder Magic Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot
<http://mtveedermagic.com>

Mount Veeder Winery

Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Merlot, Petit Verdot
www.mtveeder.com

O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery

Cabernet Sauvignon
www.oshughnessywinery.com

Paras Vineyard

Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Merlot, Syrah, Viognier
(415) 642-5500

Paratus Vineyard

Cabernet Sauvignon
(707) 738-7353

Random Ridge

Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernets (Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc blend), Fortunata (Sangiovese)
www.randomridge.com

Renteria

Cabernet Sauvignon (Tambor Vineyard)
www.renteriawines.com

Robert Craig Winery

Cabernet Sauvignon (PymRae Vineyard)
www.robertcraigwine.com

Rubissow Vineyards

Merlot; Tropettes (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot) and Cabernet Sauvignon; Rubissow-Sargent Reserve (100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon)
www.rubissowwines.com

Sbragia Family Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon (Wall Vineyards)
www.sbragia.com

Schulz Cellars

Zinfandel (Lampyridae Vineyard)
www.schulzcellars.com

Skaggs Vineyard

Grenache, Mourvedre, Syrah
www.skaggsvineyard.com

Sky Vineyards

Chardonnay, Syrah, Zinfandel
www.skyvineyards.com

Spotted Owl Vineyards and Cellars

Chardonnay, Syrah
info@spottedowlwine.com

St. Clement Vineyards

Syrah (Progeny Vineyard)
www.stclement.com

Strauss Vineyard

Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah
(310) 413-1200

Tallulah

Syrah (Bald Mountain Ranch)
www.tallulahwines.com

Vinoce Vineyards

Cabernet Sauvignon, Mt. Veeder Estate (Bordeaux blend), Sauvignon Blanc
www.vinoce.com

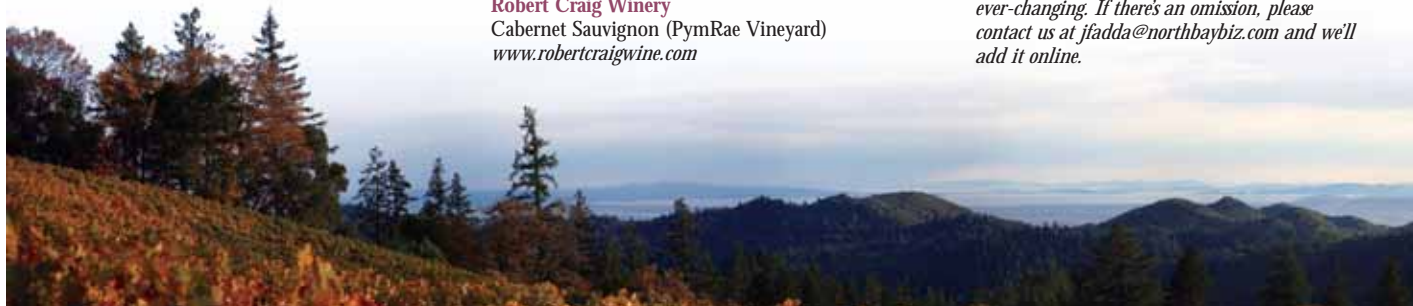
Wing Canyon Vineyard

Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot
www.wingcanyonvineyard.com

Yates Family Vineyard

Alden Perry Reserve (Bordeaux blend), Cabernet Sauvignon, Cheval (100 percent Cabernet Franc), Fleur de Veeder (100 percent Merlot), Viognier
www.yatesfamilyvineyard.com

**We attempted to be as comprehensive as possible in creating this list, but have been told it's ever-changing. If there's an omission, please contact us at jfadda@northbaybiz.com and we'll add it online.*





Robert Craig is group historian of the Mt. Veeder Appellation Council.

tried has pepper, tobacco and cedar on the palate—a spicy, juicy number for sure.

Hess also has a renowned contemporary art museum featuring works from owner Donald Hess' personal collection.

Love the land

"I fell in love with this spot," says LaTour Vineyards owner Tom LaTour, former CEO of Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants (and now owner of LaTour

Signature Group). He grows Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay on the Mt. Veeder property he purchased from Donald Harmes in 1999. "The vineyard is very peaceful." It's so peaceful there's even

for soil moisture monitoring.

Holler only makes about 80 cases of wine for family and friends. The rest of his grapes are sold, mostly to Sherwin Family Vineyards. His vineyard is made up of 95 percent Cabernet Sauvignon (French clones), a small block of the "happiest Merlot on the planet," and some Carmenere (not commonly grown outside of Chile), a "funny grape—vegetative but when blended with the other two, it's quite good." The one I tried had an herbaceous nose followed by minerals and dark fruit on the palate. His Cabernets are deep, dark and masculine—just as one would expect Mt. Veeder Cabernet to be.



Mark Holler, owner of Camalie Vineyards, built his Mt. Veeder home using green building techniques.

"It's not easy to farm a mountain vineyard. It's very hands on—not for the timid. You have to get down and dirty with the land." —Mary Yates, Yates Family Vineyard

a resident ceramics artist, Lynn Mahon (www.lynnmahon.com).

LaTour's dreams of making his own wine began to seed during his years in hospitality, which included exposure to wine and the winery lifestyle. And the more he worked in the industry, the further his dream to make his own wine developed.

His Chardonnay style reflects his "personal taste expressed to others: Big, bold, buttery." Michael Terrian is winemaker (he's also the winemaker at Hanzell) and Tom Prentice is viticulturist.

LaTour uses half his grapes and sells the other half. In 2008, the winery produced 1,000 cases of Chardonnay and 800 cases of Syrah, as well as some Oregon Pinot Noir and Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon. LaTour's wife Barbara does sales and marketing ("the hard stuff"), while he's more involved in the agriculture and winemaking. Their goal is to eventually produce about 5,000 cases of wine annually.

His Syrah vineyard is propagated budwood from Australia's Barossa Valley. When it hits your palate it's cool, with meaty characteristics, white pepper and nice acidity. Blended with only 1 percent Viognier, "this wine is particularly good with red meat," says LaTour.

Mountain magic

Prior to purchasing his vineyard in 2000, Mark Holler worked for Intel as a device physicist in semiconductors. Since founding Camalie Vineyards, Holler has applied his understanding of data analysis in interpreting the latest viticulture research results. "UC Davis is a great resource," he says. "My knowledge is fresh, but I value my vineyard manager's 30 years' experience on Mt. Veeder as much as the latest research." As part of his approach, Holler developed Camalie Networks, a wireless vineyard monitor mainly used

"No matter what I grow here, it's more intense [referring to the fruit trees on the property]," he remarks. "What makes that happen? There's some sort of magic here."

Mt. Veeder is a place with an incredible history, but also with a future that's equally as dynamic, thanks to the characters who make it their home and place of work. And it's not a place you're just going to stumble upon. Most of its wineries, with the exception of Hess, are open by appointment only. Then again, things that take some extra effort are so often well worth it. Just like Mt. Veeder wine. ■



Tom LaTour, owner of LaTour Vineyards, sees winemaking as a natural extension of the hospitality industry.

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