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Napa off the map

Beyond the corporate players and cult hits is a side of the valley few people know

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Chronicle / Craig Lee

On the face of it, Sky Vineyards shouldn't even be in Napa Valley. Its mailing address is in Sonoma County. So is the turnoff to its long dirt driveway. Only as you climb near the summit of Mount Veeder and cross the precipitous ranch trail that divides the two counties, do you finally reach Sky's 14 acres of gnarled vines.

This is Napa.

No manicured estates up here. Just a couple of weather-worn buildings filled with nubby rugs, a wood stove, bare-bones kitchen and reams of paintings and sketches, one of which graces Sky's labels each year. The owner, Lore Olds, sits on the porch of his unpainted cabin, describing life above the fog line.

"This is probably Napa's s- chateau," he remarks, "and I say that proudly."

There is the Public Napa. Its established names sit imperiously on Highway 29 and Silverado Trail, courting visitors who come for a picture-perfect glimpse of where American wine came of age. Many began as modest family establishments in the late 1960s and early '70s, often growing to huge proportions as their fame spread.

Increasingly, they are now corporate affairs. When Warren Winiarski sold Stag's Leap Wine Cellars to Antinori and Ste. Michelle Wine Estates in July, he joined a long list of preeminent names who have turned over the

keys to big concerns: such wineries as Beringer, Beaulieu Vineyard and of course, the template-setting Robert Mondavi Winery.

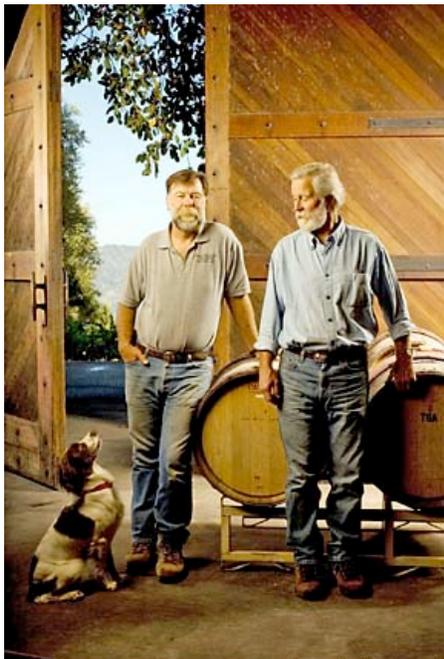
Then, there is the Private Napa. These are cult names like Colgin Cellars, Bryant Family and Dalla Valle, an elite tier with just the opposite goal: Keep the public away from the gates, and welcome a select few to worship at the altar of \$200 Cabernets. This second wave began in the 1970s but hit high gear in the booming '90s, when the model for a Napa winery went from public to private (in part, after walk-in tasting permits were frozen by a 1990 ordinance). Most newcomers now aspire to follow in the model of Screaming Eagle, whose very location is a closely kept secret to ward off supplicants begging for a place on its waiting list.

These two Napas share some common goals: preserve the valley's image as idyllic wine-fueled paradise, where the legend of the small family winery lives on, where all wine is wonderful and all vintages, like the children of Lake Wobegon, are above average. Without this buffed-up version of reality, Napa's rarefied image and high prices would be at risk.

Then there is a third Napa: wineries that stayed small without grasping for cult status. Call it the Alternative Napa. No single thread binds them, but their wines are well regarded enough to attract distributors and regular customers. While not cheap, the bottles are usually reasonable, at least by Napa standards. Most vintners arrived early enough to buy wineries before land prices went stratospheric. Typically, they have been out working in the fields as Napa matured

around them into a playground for the rich.

These scattered holdouts occupy an increasingly rare place. Here's a side of Napa Valley that's largely been obscured from view.



Chronicle / Craig Lee

Spring Mountain

Spring Mountain, west of St. Helena, might be the easiest place to exist off the tourist grid. Few of its wineries are open to the public. Many aren't even on the valley's equivalent of an official tourism map, maintained by the Napa Valley Vintners. You have to be a member to be on the map, and many of these hidden Napans have declined to join, quit in frustration or balked at annual fees that start north of \$1,200 and can exceed \$39,000. About 290 wineries belong - far fewer than the 495 wine producers licensed in Napa County as of June 30, according to state records, or even the 310 physical winery sites recorded by the county.

Smith-Madrone isn't on the map, and if ever there was a voice for the alternative view of Napa, it's Stuart Smith, who founded the winery in 1971. Fresh out of UC Davis with a degree in viticulture and looking for a challenge, he acquired a plot of wooded mountain land from a fraternity brother's uncle.

Nestled amid fir and madrona some 1,900 feet up the slope, the Smiths' pragmatic wood-and-cement facility offers a perch from which to survey all of Napa's incarnations and intrigues. The trees of the Three Palms Vineyard are three minuscule dots. A rush of Friday traffic courses Highway 29, but sound doesn't filter up. Official Napa is a line of ant-size vehicles silently crawling below.

Stu Smith is sometimes portrayed as Napa's equivalent of Grizzly Adams, a mountaintop counterpoint to the valley's social climbers. But his long history here is more nuanced. He recalls early meetings of the Napa Valley Vintners, when pioneers like Joe Heitz and Peter Mondavi attended in person. In 1986, he served as chairman of the Vintners' sixth wine auction. But he grew weary of the politics and felt tension growing between longtime members and the newer, more well-heeled arrivals, who often sent their subordinates.

"I said to myself, 'I don't need this. I don't need to be an obstacle,'" Smith recalls.

Stu's brother, Charlie, joined him on the mountain in 1973. From 34 acres of vineyard on a 200-acre property, they make just 4,000 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and a benchmark Riesling. Theirs is one of California's most celebrated and age-worthy Rieslings, though production is down since phylloxera that swept clean the valley floor finally crept up the mountain in the 1990s, forcing the brothers to start replanting in 2000. Aside from a brief stint in the 1980s, they haven't bought outside grapes. Their most expensive wine is \$40 a bottle.

Others on Spring Mountain have similarly decamped from the roster. There's Shawn and John Williams, who arrived in 1978 and make just 1,500 cases of wine in a single room under their mountainside home. And there's Pete Minor, whose Ritchie Creek Vineyard set a template for small-time Napa. Minor's tiny hillside winery, making just under 1,000 cases of wine, served as a model for later arrivals. In turn, it was Mayacamas Vineyards on Mount Veeder that inspired Minor to abandon his Berkeley dental practice and move north. None are on the official map.

Reminders of Napa's past are all over the mountain, in counterpoint to its glitzy present. Old redwood vine stakes filled the woods when Minor arrived in 1965, and a ghost winery sat on what's now Pride Mountain Vineyards.

But modern Napa, and its prestige, have settled in. Aside from Pride, whose fans easily pony up \$60 or more per bottle, the Smiths' neighbors include Les Behrens. He came south from running an Arcata (Humboldt County) restaurant to launch Behrens & Hitchcock, whose waiting list is among the valley's most coveted. En route, you'll pass Vineyard 7 & 8, the elite winery owned by former Merrill Lynch executive John Steffens.

If there's a focal point for Stu Smith's frustration, it's that owning a winery has become a lifestyle choice, with consultants at the ready. It's no longer necessary for a proprietor to work the fields. What's lost are the little joyous moments of farming a vineyard, like putting sulfur on the vines by moonlight.

"When you're out dusting on a calm night with a full moon," he says, "it's magnificent."

Mount Veeder

Spring Mountain's contradictions seem mild compared to those on Mount Veeder. There you'll find large, prestigious wineries like the Hess Collection, owned by Swiss businessman Donald Hess, and Mount Veeder Winery, now owned by Constellation Brands, the world's largest wine company.

There may be fewer than 20 wineries in the sprawling Mount Veeder appellation, which covers 15,000 acres, but it's more than Bob Travers recalls being in all of Napa County when he arrived in 1968. Travers, owner of Mayacamas Vineyards, continues to make one of the long-lived Cabernets that helped establish Napa's reputation; in 1976, it was one of those chosen for the Judgment of Paris tasting.

Now Travers remains away from the tourist fray, still making the same 4,000 or so cases per year he did 30 years ago. At 2,400 feet, his dry-farmed vines yield just a ton or two an acre. But the wines are amazingly durable; Travers just re-released the 1991 Cabernet. "It's still a young wine," he insists.

Just down the road lies Sky Vineyards, where Lore Olds and his daughter, Mayacamas (call her Maya), grow mountaintop Zin and Syrah at 2,100 feet in the heart of Cabernet country.

In the early 1900s, this patch of the Mayacamas was a resort. By late 1972, when Lore Olds showed up, the site was long deserted. He had been working throughout Napa and Sonoma, including on a commune at Sonoma's Old Hill Ranch. He'd also been hunting for a vineyard, one high in the hills with an eastern slope so grapes could ripen in the morning sun's softer rays. This was perfect. Olds bonded the winery in 1979, the same year he went to work for Bob Travers as assistant winemaker.

Maya grew up atop Mount Veeder, then attended Davis and worked in Australia before settling in downtown Sonoma two years ago and taking a job with Phil Coturri's Enterprise Vineyards management company. Now she farms many of the same plots from her dad's hippie days, with one big difference: "I can't even comprehend the amount of money that a lot of my clients have," she says.

Sky may be off the map, but it's hardly cut off from the world. Lore Olds, 61, grew up in Berkeley, where his mother, Betty, is still a city councilwoman. His girlfriend, Amy Dencler, works at Chez Panisse, which gets the fruit from his century-old quince tree.

Obscurity has its challenges. Sales are slow; if they improve, Olds will buy new barrels, enough for 15 percent of his wine. (It used to be 50 percent.) The family harvests virtually all the grapes themselves, hauling some 15 tons to a low barn filled with barrels, cases and a prosciutto Maya is curing.

The grapes go into an old hand press bought from Conrad Viano, whose family planted its Martinez vineyard in 1888. "The wine gets pressed however hard the local teenager can press it," says Lore.

"There's not many of us teenagers around here anymore," Maya replies. She's 32.

Highway 29

While many of Napa's stowaways are in the mountains, some are hiding in plain sight.

Cathy Corison's self-named winery is on Highway 29. The stretch of road between Rutherford and St. Helena where Corison has been making her wine since the last day of 1995 is ground zero for tourist Napa. But it's easy to miss the sliver of a sign pointing to the neo-Victorian barn, designed by her husband, William Martin, that houses her winery. Visitors find it anyway, park by the 1898 farmhouse out front and wander through large double doors up to the minimal tasting bar (two barrels and a redwood slab).

The winery's windows face the vineyard, not the road, and it's a telling indicator of where Corison's focus lies. Her pride and joy is the Kronos vineyard, 8 acres of benchland on the valley floor directly behind her winery between Rutherford and St. Helena. Planted on vigorous St. George rootstock in the early 1970s, the twisted **Cabernet vines are geezers**, offering just 11/2 tons of fruit per acre.

"I don't know anyone else who would put up with it," she says. "It's a gift as a winemaker, but financially it's a disaster."

But what a gift. The grapes from Kronos, frequently among the last in the valley to be picked, allow Corison to make wines in her signature style: viscous and full of fruit, with a hefty structure and doses of ripe tannin that portend a life

measures in decades. And all without topping 14 percent alcohol - a reminder of the modest Cabernets that defined Napa.

Such modest alcohol levels are a nearly impossible feat nowadays in Napa, and a bit of a lightning rod. Her fans view her as one of the final holdouts, willing to make a finicky, old-style Napa Cabernet; detractors (usually defenders of the over-the-top Napa style) find the wines harsh and underripe. Either way, Corison's choice is a deliberate reflection of personal style, a modest Rambler in a neighborhood of McMansions.

This will be Corison's 21st harvest from vineyards along the Rutherford bench, her contracts always sealed with a handshake. It's the sort of arrangement only a longtime Napan could have, and that Corison is.

She arrived in the valley 32 years ago, two weeks out of Pomona College with a biology degree, \$200 and a desire to unlock the secrets of great wine. A stint at UC Davis soon followed, and in 1978 she nabbed an internship at Freemark Abbey, then a gig at Spring Mountain's Yverdon (now Terra Valentine). From there it was off to Chappellet, where she replaced Tony Soter as winemaker.

But she wanted a wine with her name on it. In 1987, she secured her first bunch of grapes, and persuaded the Chappellets to let her make a few barrels.

Two decades and five locations later, her name is on every label she makes. It's a modest existence. Parked in the driveway are an original-model Prius and the same worn brown Subaru that used to carry her barrels in the early '90s.

But with just 2,500 cases of wine to manage - two Cabernets, a smidgen of Gewurztraminer and a tiny second label, Helios - Corison finds time to raise her two daughters, even hosting their school plays on a small stage in the winery's loft. "One of the ways I can do everything I do is to keep it small," she says.

And what of the valley's changes? She shifts in her seat, considering her words. Winemakers do not like to scatter dust on the official Napa line. "I'm a Napa Valley Cabernet maker," she offers, "and it's still a great place to do that." Only when we wander onto the topic of corporate Napa, and the recent Stag's Leap sale, do frustrations truly bubble up. "I don't know what else to say except it breaks my heart," she says. "Really good wine can be made by committee, but great wine can't be made by committee."

Corison is on the highway but not of it, making intense wines without high alcohol, resisting the Napa temptation to buy more grapes and grow the brand.

"It feels kind of lonely," she says.

Silverado Trail

Across the valley floor at Miner Family Vineyards on Silverado Trail, Joe Cafaro leads me into the vast underground caves, past a long tasting table atop a Persian rug. He fumbles with light switches, then stops in front of a small alcove and points to a few dozen barrels, enough for an annual production of just 3,000 cases. "That's my life right there," he says.

When it came to getting his own slice of Napa, Cafaro faced a choice: the vineyard, or the winery? He skipped the edifice, instead leasing a small portion of someone else's space and equipment, a practice known as custom crush. Custom crush is hardly unusual - some of Napa's most expensive wines have been made that way - but most winemakers with as much staying power as Cafaro opted long ago to build their own wineries, a key component to the Napa lifestyle. He chose the land.

Cafaro arrived in Napa in July 1969, fresh out of Fresno State, and got a job at Charles Krug, where he worked with Bill Bonetti, who would later help found Sonoma-Cutrer. From there he moved on to many of Napa's hallowed names,



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including Chappellet (with the legendary Philip Togni) and Robert Sinskey Vineyards. In the late 1980s he helped launch Dalla Valle Vineyards, one of Napa's biggest cult hits. Still, as winemakers do, he dreamed of his own label.

In 1986, while making wine for Sinskey, Cafaro started buying grapes from growers like the Truchards in Carneros, and the Schweigers on Spring Mountain. They became the first vintage of Cafaro Cellars.

That scenario worked well - for a while. "Each one of my growers said, you're doing such a great job with our grapes, we're thinking of starting our own label." Many did, and the grape supply dwindled.

By 1994, he had a chance to buy a plot just outside the Stags Leap District boundary, toward the eastern ridge near Clos du Val and Shafer. In 1999, the 15 acres of fruit bore a harvestable crop. Two years later, Cafaro's grapes were all estate-grown, tailored to the leaner style of wine he liked.

"It wasn't that I was avoiding the valley floor and big tasting rooms and all that," he says. "It's just that I wasn't focusing on it."

Cafaro keeps just one consulting client: Phil Schlein's Emilio's Terrace. Otherwise, he has his few dozen barrels to mind and a vineyard to run. If there's a wistful note as he talks, it's that the next generation - young winemakers with talent but no deep pockets - have virtually no chance to follow in his footsteps. After nearly 40 years in the valley, Cafaro managed to grab a slice of terroir in the nick of time.

"That for me is the sad part," he says. "When I started, people were making wine in their garages," he says.

St. Helena

David Wight catches himself. "You won't tell people how to get here, will you?"

The location of Lewelling Vineyards, owned by David and brother Doug, along with their brother Alan, isn't exactly a Screaming Eagle-level secret. But it's not for visitors, either. Tucked out past a St. Helena Ford dealership west of Highway 29, its informal tasting room and office is the 1920s bungalow where David and Doug's mother, Janice, grew up.



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Napans love to brag about their ties to the land, but good luck finding a family with better bragging rights than the Wights. Their 30-acre plot, part of nearly 300 acres just south of St. Helena owned by the extended family, has been in their control since the end of the Civil War, first planted (partly in fruit trees) when St. Helena was just a tiny farm town. John Lewelling, the brothers' great-great-grandfather, was a Welsh Quaker who moved from North Carolina to California in the 1850s, and settled this plot in 1864.

"I think we may be the oldest family farming the same ground," David says.

The brothers went to St. Helena High with Tim Mondavi, and in 1992, they decided to take some of the grapes they were selling and make 500 cases of wine. David went to Davis to learn winemaking, while Doug handles the fields. (He also runs a vineyard-management business.) Now there are 1,200 cases a year, still a tiny fraction of what they grow. Most is sold to wineries like Beaulieu Vineyard and Caymus, but only their longtime friends, the Trincheros, can mention the Lewelling vineyard on the label. The brothers don't want their name associated with fruit they can't control.

The family may have long Napa ties, but the wine is amply modern - heady, opulent, high-octane stuff. Fame is creeping up in the form of Robert Parker, who gave their 2004 Wight Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon a mind blowing 96+ points. No surprise, then, that calls are starting to filter in from Wall Street big shots, demanding bottles. They sell their Cabernet in pairs - one regular bottle and one reserve for \$98, a regular bargain in these parts. Not bad for guys trying to avoid becoming the next big thing.

"With some bottles at \$150, \$200, a lot of people have been priced out of trying them." says David Wight. "That seems to be a shame to me."

With 80 acres of prime bench vineyard on coveted alluvial soils, the Wights couldn't help but succeed - as the BMW in the driveway attests. But it's newfound success. Doug and David are the first generation to make a living off the family land without keeping an outside job. "Our grandparents and great-grandparents would roll over in their graves if they knew what we were getting an acre around here," Doug says.

With some 200 acres of open land, and agricultural restrictions barring them from building new houses, the brothers instead enjoy having their own chunk of Napa wildland. They hunt in the wooded hills, and fondly recall when the St. Helena Star would put photos of hunting season's first deer on the front page. It's a long way from their well-heeled neighbors' views of Napa Valley.

"We shoot skeet once in a while," Doug says, "so they get used to the idea of a gun going off."

THE WINERIES

cafaro.myshopify.com
corison.com
lewellingvineyards.com
mayacamas.com
skyvineyards.com
smithmadrone.com

A TASTE OF ALTERNATIVE NAPA

2002 Cafaro Napa Valley Merlot (\$22) From Joe Cafaro's estate vineyard just outside the Stags Leap District appellation, this brings a perfumed, leafy accent atop plush red fruit. Cafaro prefers a higher acidity in his wines, and this Merlot has a refreshing leanness to it, with a bright, tapered finish. It's a focused wine, with smoky bark notes from a mix of mostly French and a bit of American oak.

2004 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70) From a low-yield harvest, this offers up its share of oak, but with strong scented notes of sandalwood and herbs, and a strong plum note in back. It's young, but shows impressive aromas, tight-knit with all bright fruit upfront, fantastic balance and a warm, rich note to finish it. The tannins have some grip right now, but they're fine and ready to give the wine a framework over the years.

2002 Corison Kronos Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$125) A cooler vintage provided nuance in this old-vine specimen, about as classic an example of Napa Cabernet as you'll find. The nose is dusty, leathery and dark, rich Cognac scents mingling with black and purple fruit. The finish already shows off the perfect integration - a demonstration of grip and power, with cool dried herbs as an overtone throughout.

2004 Lewelling Wight Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75) From a prime spot of alluvial benchland just south of St. Helena, the Wight brothers have hewed this impressive, weighty wine. With 90 percent new oak, it's immediately approachable and ripe. A graphite note mingles with ample scents of wood, and it's bolstered by deep cassis flavors, with enough buoyancy to stitch together a massive wine (15.3 percent alcohol) so that it never hits too hard. With a long, fine-grained finish, it's thoroughly modern and refined, though its size is inescapable.

2004 Mayacamas Vineyards Mt. Veeder Chardonnay (\$35) A slight dose of oak adds a ripe, almost taunting creamy note, but then the gray mineral aspects take over and define it, along with lean citrus, grapefruit and tart apple. It's almost racy, but with ripe New World fruit at its core, and a finely textured finish, with well-managed white wine tannins, demonstrates the quality of the winemaking. Put it in a realm with wines like the Mt. Eden Vineyards Chardonnay: California Chards that defy the usual profile and provide great definition. The 2001 is also in re-release now, and it's even leaner and more focused, with beautiful beeswax and oregano scents to highlight the ripe fruit flavors.

2004 Sky Vineyards Mt. Veeder Syrah (\$40) The Syrah up atop Mt. Veeder is a newcomer, arriving in just 2000. But it's a curious beast - intensely floral, with the same vibrant, florid fruit that dominates Sky's Zinfandel (pictured above). That Zin can be light, almost Beaujolais-like, at times, but the Syrah has a pleasing weight. Built around a core of gray mineral flavors, it's got a juiciness that offsets its slightly tannic, if refined, texture. A bit rustic, but the texture, and bright purple fruit flavors, give it a nuance lacking in many Napa Valley Syrahs.

2003 Smith-Madrone Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40) Good luck finding folks whose Cabernet has less alcohol than their Chardonnay, but the Smith brothers can do it, crafting traditional wines from their mountaintop perch above St. Helena. At just 13.8 percent alcohol, this bottling from an uneven year hinges on a

basketful of dried herbs and tobacco notes, as mountain wine as it gets. It melds a luscious black fruit nose, lifted minerality from the dense volcanic soils, with licorice and blackberry. Sweet fruit comes to the fore, but standup steep-slope tannins are right there behind, proof that time will do well by this bottle. The richness never goes away, though, and the great balance portends an impressive life for this wine, even if it needs some time.

2006 Smith-Madrone Spring Mountain District Riesling (\$22) The Smiths' Riesling is always in short supply, and time does well by it. The '06 is a bit muted now, with more talc and ripe pear on the nose. It's steely, but hiding its full potential. For a hint of that potential, consider the 2001 Riesling, recently re-released. The intense petrol and mineral notes on the nose, and crackling sharpness on the palate, show how a grape like Riesling can find a welcome home in the hidden corners of Napa Valley.