



WINE ENTHUSIAST[®]

MAGAZINE

JUNE 2009

CABERNETS

FROM THE HEART OF NAPA VALLEY

PAIRING WINE WITH
CAJUN COOKING

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LUXURY TOURING
FOR LESS

TOP 10
WINES UNDER
\$10



Rutherford
Napa Valley, California, USA

Rutherford

The
Heart
of
Napa Valley

...and the
home of some
of California's
most iconic
Cabernet
Sauvignons.

from the ground, it's hard for the uninitiated to understand why Rutherford is anything special. It's a smallish place; you can take a leisurely drive around the Rutherford AVA (American Viticultural Area), stopping here and there to take in the vineyards, in about 45 minutes, because the district measures only about 2½ miles wide and 2 miles long. And except for some hilly areas, especially in the northwest, most of Rutherford has a sameness of appearance to the untrained eye.

But from a helicopter, you can appreciate how the Rutherford AVA constitutes the geographic heart of the Napa Valley. The appellations of this world-famous wine region are arranged like the petals of a flower, with Rutherford, Napa's most historic district, at the center.

Yet you need look no further than the wines produced here. The names roll off the tongue like First Growths: Rubicon, Beaulieu, Caymus, Flora Springs, Staglin, Quintessa and at least 25 others, along with scores of independent growers who sell their grapes to wineries throughout Napa Valley. (About 50% of the fruit grown in Rutherford is sold off.)

Cabernet Sauvignon is king, as it is throughout Napa Valley: 69% of all grapes planted in Rutherford are Cab. (Throw in the other Bordeaux reds, and this number rises to 84%.) Yet Rutherford's southern neighbor boasts the more famous, and expensive, estates, a fact that has not escaped, and somewhat exasperates, Rutherfordians. "Oakville cults have gotten attention from certain writers," observes Beaulieu's winemaker, Joel Aiken, drily. As Rutherford's (and Napa Valley's) largest private vineyard holder, Andy Beckstoffer, notes, "Oakville seems to be [known for] cult wines, while Rutherford is often seen as [a] grapegrowing [area]."

"There are certainly some very expensive Oakville wines that deserve their status," concedes Quintessa's winemaker, Charles Thomas, who used to work at Robert Mondavi and thus has had a foot on both sides of the line. But, he quickly adds, "We have similarly fantastic wines in Rutherford."

Much thought has gone into identifying a Rutherford character to Cabernet Sauvignon. An association of regional vintners, the Rutherford Dust Society (rutherforddust.org) for years has conducted structured tastings during

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

BOTTLE PHOTOS
JON VAN GORDER

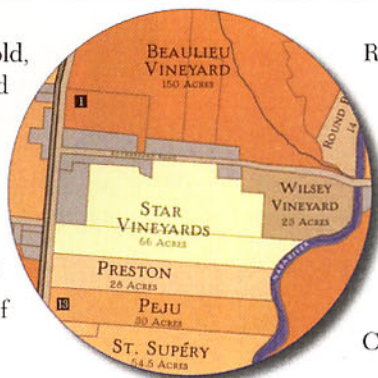
seen more in the Carneros hills.” Huichica is an old, unfertile soil that causes the vines to struggle to find nutrition. Thomas also notes that Quintessa is in the warmest part of the Rutherford AVA. “We’re probably 1–2 degrees warmer than the west side,” but the slight rise of the Quintessa hill helps to shelter the grapes from the late afternoon sun. He describes Quintessa as “classic Rutherford, with a thread of good intensity, yet elegant.” That’s an apt description of the 2006 Quintessa (92 points, \$145).

But when it comes to hills in Rutherford, you really have to cross the Silverado Trail and get up into the Vaca Mountains. There are two subdivisions here, north and south of Highway 128.

Just south is Frank Family Vineyards’ Winston Hill property, a largish (105 acre) vineyard. “It’s all rocky hillside, and we only get 2½ tons of grapes per acre,” says winemaker Todd Graff. The Frank Family 2005 Winston Hill Bordeaux blend (93 points, \$150) illustrates the concentration that these well-drained hills give to the wines.

North of Highway 128 is an increasingly important, although relatively small, growing area planted hundreds of feet up winding Rutherford Hill Road. These few dozen acres of vineyards have little, if anything, to do with the flatlands below. “It’s totally different up here than on the [valley] floor,” declares Mike Reynolds, the president of Kathryn Hall Vineyards. Here are many private vineyards that sell their grapes to others, and whose names are not well known to the public.

But here, too, is the Sacrashe Vineyard, which has emerged as a Napa Valley great growth, the



Rubicon of the East. Given superb viticulture, any Cabernet or blend from the Sacrashe Vineyard is noteworthy, as exemplified by Hall’s 2006 Exzellenz (97 points, \$150), with its aromatic complexity and overall power.

Pinot Noir, Chardonnay in Rutherford?

It makes no financial sense to grow anything except Cabernet Sauvignon and allied Bordeaux varieties in Rutherford, but that hasn’t stopped little El Molino Winery from making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the family’s 66-acre Star Vineyards, set between Highway 29 and the Napa River, just south of Beaulieu No. 1.

The average price per ton for Napa Valley Cabernet is \$4,728; for Pinot Noir, it’s \$2,588. “But for us, it’s about producing what you’re passionate about, and that’s Burgundy,” declares Lily Oliver, who, with her husband, Jon Berlin, makes some 1,700 cases of wine a year.

El Molino’s Pinot Noir, which, like their Chardonnay, carries a Rutherford appellation on the label, can be quite good in a balanced vintage, such as 2005. Cabernet Sauvignon loves Napa Valley’s summertime heat, but Pinot doesn’t.

Does the family ever look at the prices their neighbors get for Cabernet Sauvignon and wonder if maybe they should rebud the vines to the great grapes of Bordeaux? “No,” Oliver laughs. “I don’t think you can make great wine if you’re worried about what your neighbors are doing. Forget the neighbors! Do what you love.”

IF YOU GO...

Rutherford, population 525, is not a tourist mecca. Napa city, glitzy St. Helena and charming old Calistoga with its mud baths and geysers draw the visitors and destination-oriented diners. Rutherford (and Oakville) tend to be drive-throughs along Highway 29. In point of fact, Rutherford boasts only three restaurants. But they couldn’t be more different.



Auberge du Soleil is where you take the missus for Valentine’s Day,” cracks Todd Graff, the winemaker at Frank Family. The restaurant, inn and spa are located on an outcropping of the Vaca Mountains, with stunning views of the

Napa Valley and the Mayacamas Mountains. The food at Auberge is pricey—the six-course, contemporary French-Mediterranean tasting menu costs \$212 per person, with wine. aubergedusoleil.com

More accessible, both drive-wise and price-wise, is **Rutherford Grill**. A stalwart on the busy corner of Highway 29 and Rutherford Cross Road, the Grill is getting a little long in the tooth, with old-fashioned red leather banquettes and a slightly musty feeling. But it’s terrifically popular with locals, including winemakers, and represents the ultimate destination for comfort fare: bangers



and mashed potatoes, barbecued pork ribs, and a killer chicken and spinach enchilada. The extensive wine list, mainly Californian, features a

good selection of local Cabernets, at fair prices. hillstone.com

La Luna Market & Taqueria is where you’re most likely to run into the men and women who really make Napa Valley tick: the cellar rats, field workers, mechanics and vintners looking for



a quick, inexpensive nosh. Located just across the street and down the block from Rutherford Grill, on the Rutherford Cross Road, La Luna serves chile relleno, carne asada, quesadillas and tacos that have been keeping ‘em happy for many years. “We all need a place like La Luna,” says Graff.