

Daniel: Cabernet's day has arrived at Atlas Peak

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The Atlas Peak appellation in the Napa Valley is far less familiar to consumers than appellations like Oakville, Spring Mountain or Howell Mountain. Perhaps that's because the Atlas Peak renaissance began with sangiovese, a grape variety that never really caught on. But today the appellation's vintners have turned their attention to a better bet: cabernet sauvignon.

Like many California viticultural areas, Atlas Peak - which is in the hills on the eastern side of the valley, above the Stags Leap appellation - got its first grapevines in the late 1800s. Perhaps because of their isolation, Atlas Peak's vineyards survived a widespread outbreak of the root louse phylloxera, only to be doomed by the onset of Prohibition in 1920. There were scattered plantings after Prohibition's repeal, but vineyard development didn't begin in earnest until the early 1980s. In 1986, the first winery was founded, Atlas Peak Vineyards, a venture involving Tuscan vintner Piero Antinori. A key component of the venture was to be production of sangiovese, the main grape variety used in Tuscany's Chianti wines. Unfortunately, the Atlas Peak appellation, which received federal approval in 1992, turned out to be a questionable spot for sangiovese. That was compounded by the fizzling of the whole Cal-Ital movement when sangiovese and other Italian grapes failed to find much of an audience.

However, Atlas Peak does appear promising for cabernet sauvignon and other red Bordeaux grape varieties. The soils are rocky, volcanic and well-drained. Most of the appellation is above 1,000 feet, so vineyards are usually above the fog, yet average daytime temperatures tend to be cooler than on the valley floor. In addition, the appellation's location toward the southern end of Napa allows for cooling afternoon breezes off the bay.

Growers have been selling their grapes to other Napa Valley wineries, and now increasing numbers of vineyard owners are producing their own wines. Some of those wines were poured recently at an Atlas Peak Appellation Association tasting in Napa.

The biggest player remains **Atlas Peak Vineyards**, which has nearly 500 acres of vineyards - a little less than a third of the planted acreage in the appellation. Even Atlas Peak is focused on cabernet these days, both from its home appellation and from other mountain appellations in the Napa Valley. Sangiovese still accounts for about a quarter of the vineyard, but the fruit is sold. Atlas Peak Vineyards produces a cabernet made from mostly Atlas Peak appellation fruit (the label simply says "Napa Valley"), but I'm partial to the **2003 Atlas Peak Claret (\$86)**, a blend of cabernet, merlot and petit verdot that carries an Atlas Peak appellation. The wine is ripe and dense, with black cherry fruit, a hint of chocolate and a slight floral note. It's very accessible now and should age well for five years or so.

Most of the wineries are considerably smaller. For example, **Astrale e Terra**, founded in 1997, produces fewer than 2,500 cases a year. The flagship is a cabernet-based blend called Arcturus. The **2002 Arcturus (\$39)** is plump yet structured, with ripe black cherry flavors, firm

acidity and hints of spice and black olive.

Elan Vineyards is one of the older operations, with the first part of the vineyard having been planted in 1980. Much of the fruit is sold, but since 1992 owner Patrick Elliott-Smith has made a little wine under the Elan label. The **2002 Elan Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50)** is a big, chewy cab, with flavors of black cherry and chocolate and very firm tannins. It will reward additional cellaring.

Krupp Brothers Estates is another operation that sells most of its fruit. The Krupps have three estate vineyards: Two are completely within the Atlas Peak appellation, while about a third of another, the famed Stagecoach Vineyard, is also in the appellation. The **2004 Krupp Brothers "The Doctor" (\$75)**, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, tempranillo, malbec and merlot, is a delicious wine, with ripe black currant and plum flavors and a note of roasted coffee.

Cobblestone began in Monterey County's Arroyo Seco area and takes its name from the river stones found throughout the vineyards there. More recently, its owners acquired property in Atlas Peak, where they grow red Bordeaux varieties. The **2003 Cobblestone Cabernet Sauvignon (\$39)** offers plenty of black cherry fruit accented by roasted coffee and an interesting minerality. It's a firmly structured wine but could be drunk now. The **2003 Cobblestone Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$69)** is bigger and denser, and the oak is more obvious. The wine is still very young but shows great promise.

Tiny **Bialla Vineyards** produces cabernet sauvignon from a vineyard at 1,700 feet of elevation. The **2004 Bialla Cabernet Sauvignon (\$93)** is a layered, complex wine with ripe black cherry fruit accented by notes of anise and chocolate. It's a big wine that's also very well balanced.

From another small winery, the **2002 Dominari Merlot (\$45)** displays ripe black fruit, juicy acidity and some savory notes of anise and mint.

Jocelyn Lonen Winery was pouring three lovely wines, all with Atlas Peak appellations, that will be released in mid-April. The **2004 Jocelyn Lonen Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35)** has flavors of bright black cherry, spice and a hint of dill. The **2004 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60)** is a little plumper with some obvious oak, along with ripe black cherry fruit and roasted coffee. It could use at least a few more months in the bottle. Finally, there's the **2004 Founder's Blend (\$85)**, a blend of mostly cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc, with a dash of malbec. The wine shows good depth and intensity, along with plenty of black cherry and spice. Atlas Peak clearly is an appellation on the rise. Wines like these should help the area start to move out of the shadow of its better-known Napa neighbors.