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Atlas Peak - the Appellation that Dares Not Speak its Name!

A typical scene from the “Shangri-La appellation,” Atlas Peak.

The growers and wineries of Atlas Peak, a craggy, rocky, mountain appellation on the eastern side of Napa Valley, ask why their wines aren't better known and don't get better press.

A local growers' association recently invited a jumble of journalists to tour the appellation to introduce them - and me - to the land where a lot of fruit for Caymus, Pahlmeyer, Paul Hobbs, ZD, Cardinale, Cain, Duckhorn, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Stags Leap Winery and Silver Oak comes from. That's right -- all of these major Napa Valley wines stuff the bright, intense, mineral-rich fruit grown in Atlas Peak into their “Napa Valley” wines, but choose not to tell you about the source. It's a wine-maker's secret.

But the secret stays secret, even on the mountaintop. Atlas Peak growers and winemakers compound their invisibility by making, and bottling, gorgeous, deep-fruited reds, which they label “Napa Valley,” instead of labeling them “Atlas Peak,” to designate the true origin of their fruit.

“We're afraid no one will know where Atlas Peak is if that's all we put on the label,” one local winery owner told me on the tour.

Of 25 wines tasted at an informal growers' and winery presentation, only two wine labels acknowledged that the wine was from Atlas Peak on the front label.

Compare this to more secure winemakers on the valley floor who are not only unafraid to label their wines by appellation, but even proud to do so. Think “Oakville,” or “Rutherford,” or “Stags Leap District,” on wine labels, an origin-naming practice that actually earns a winery more pizzazz (and sales, and maybe even more dollars, too). In marketing wine, it's largely about the specificity of appellation.

(For the uninitiated: Napa Valley is itself an AVA - an American Viticultural Area. Within Napa Valley there are 14 sub-appellations, designating

geographic or microclimatic zones, which produce different styles of wine. Atlas Peak is one of the 14 sub-appellations. Within the Atlas Peak AVA, there is one winery that has trademarked the name as its own brand - Atlas Peak. To be clear: whenever I speak of “Atlas Peak,” I am talking about the sub-appellation and not the winery of the same name. Got it?)

Based on my one-day visit to Napa Valley’s hidden wine Shangri-La (Atlas Peak), local growers have nothing to hide, nothing to cower from, and nothing of which to be ashamed. In fact, wine makers should be proud to label their wines “Atlas Peak.”

One of the reasons that tourists haven’t discovered Atlas Peak wines is that this mountainous region is not explorable in the average rental car. The roads - you should pardon the expression - between mountain wineries could be used to test a new medical procedure; drive fast over the rocky terrain in a four-wheel vehicle and you just might invent a method to break up kidney stones.

Another reason you haven’t heard much about this appellation is that most of the growers are small-timers. The largest estate property in the AVA, which is leased out, belongs to Piero Antinori, of Italy. He has so many other properties and ventures that he doesn’t appear to have had time to promote this AVA the way he has done in other regions of the world where he also owns land.

Grapes grown in Atlas Peak derive benefits that grapes grown on the valley floor of Napa Valley don’t:

1. They are grown in lean, volcanic soil, forcing the vines to work extra hard to nourish themselves. Mountain fruit often has a more intense flavor profile.
2. They are grown about 1,500 feet above sea level - which is even above fog level. When fog rolls in and covers much of Napa Valley (as it often does mornings in the warm summer growing season) the fruit grown in Atlas Peak is ABOVE the fog; it’s still being warmed by the early morning sun when the rest of Napa Valley’s fruit is fogged in. “We often get three or four hours more sunlight on many summer days than grapes grown on the valley floor, “ explains Tony Hernandez, vineyard manager for the Atlas Peak brand of wine.

“We get a later start in the spring because it’s cooler up on the mountain, but by mid-summer, our grapes have caught up with the valley floor in maturity,” he adds.

3. The mountain soil adds a discernible mineral quality that I swear I could taste in the reds; I tasted 25 current release Atlas Peak Cabs and Merlots and many of them had a detectable mineral component that added a pleasing complexity to the beverage.

Atlas Peak -- the peak itself - is a crown in the Vaca Mountain range. Vines were planted and a hotel built for tourists here in the 1870s. Today, the appellation has a meager 1,500 acres of vines planted, accounting for less than a third of a percent of all the acreage planted in Napa Valley.

Atlas Peak wineries, for the most part, have planted Cabernet Sauvignon and its sister varieties, often called “the Bordeaux blend,” which includes Petit Verdot, Cab Franc, Merlot and Malbec.

One winery has tried to make a serious go at growing Sangiovese in the Atlas Peak appellation, but it has not been particularly well received. When I think of Really Great Napa Valley Wines that I have tasted and loved, not a single Sangiovese-based wine from the valley is on my list. Kind of tells me this ain’t the place, or time, for Sangiovese up on Atlas Peak. **Notes from a tasting of 25 Atlas Peak (appellation) wines**

The purpose of this website is NOT to attempt to play the ratings game, deftly played by Robert Parker and marketed so well by Wine Spectator. My game is not to dump the ratings of 25 wines tasted in your lap but rather to highlight the wines that I believe are chase-worthy, the ones that stand out above their peers. There were many fine wines tasted at the growers’ presentation. But three brands stood out and need to be identified in detail.

Spoiler alert! The first brand highlighted is made by my winemaking partner in a completely different enterprise. Jamey Whetstone is a consulting winemaker to several wineries and is my partner in Manifesto! Sauvignon Blanc. When the group of wine writers was taken to Jocelyn Lonen Winery on Atlas Peak Road, I actually had NO flipping idea who the

wine maker is, or was; Jamey has not spoken to me of his other wine consulting projects and I feel it would be unfair to the mother-daughter owners of Jocelyn Lonen, and to Jamey, if I excluded these wines from my report just because I have a business relationship elsewhere with Jamey. I have been a professional wine writer for nearly 30 years; I am not swayed, or influenced, by free dinners, expense-paid trips, or pre-existing business relationships. As long as that is understood, we can proceed.

So, about Jocelyn Lonen. It is run by a mother and daughter team, Susan Curtis and Brandi Jocelyn Pack. They took over the business after Susan's husband, Lonen, died from a brain tumor at age 56. I tasted three 2004 Joceyln Lonen blends and liked them all:

2004 Jocelyn Lonen Cabernet, Napa Valley (\$35) Made with fruit from nearby Stagecoach Vineyard, this mineral Cab exhibits ripe fruit flavors and has an uncommon balance for a wine of this price. Aged in only 50% new oak, which makes it much more enjoyable to drink young. 91 points

2004 Jocelyn Lonen Cabernet, Reserve, Napa Valley (\$60) This is a gorgeous wine, regal really. Lovely middle palate in both texture and taste. Rich with fruit and minerals. 92 points.

2004 Jocelyn Lonen Cabernet, Founders Blend, Napa Valley (\$85) Tied for my favorite wine of the tasting. Made from seven specific blocks of Stagecoach Vineyard fruit, which Whetstone handpicks. This wine introduces a level of deep, dark, wholly ripe plum that is not present in either of the cuvees above. Hugely intense, yet still elegant wine, with a gorgeous finish. Very complex. 93 points.

The wine that tied the Founders Blend as my favorite of the tasting was the 2002 Elan Vineyards Proprietary Red, made by Patrick Elliott-Smith. He grew up in Larchmont, NY, and in Paris, and landed in Napa Valley in 1975, when he bought his first land here.

Patrick looks like one of those guides you hire for a safari in Kenya and his knowledge of the mountainous appellation is rich. (Hey! The guy's planted enough vineyards for enough different owners in Atlas Peak over the last 35 years to know every nook and cranny, so he COULD be a guide if he

wanted...)

Patrick poured two wines:

2003 Elan Vineyards Cabernet (\$50) Lots of cloves and spice, minerals and mountain intensity. A mouthful of wine with a somewhat angular finish at this particular age. 90 points.

2002 Elan Vineyards Proprietary Blend (\$90, available to club members only) Patrick uses four of the five Bordeaux grapes to make this stupendous wine (no Malbec). There is elegance right out of the gate on the nose, the robe is gorgeous, the texture of this wine is silken, soft, yet complex on the finish. My notes conclude: "One helluva wine!" 93 points.

One other winery whose wines are worth searching out:

2003 Cobblestone Cabernet (\$39) The husband-wife team of P.J. and Camilla Ochland (sounds like Oakland when you say it properly!) hired the talented Sam Baxter (who makes Terra Valentine wines) to make two cuvees. I actually think there is great value in this, the lesser priced, wine. Lovely attack, very spicy, an indulgent wine that would complement any grilled meat. Ends with elegance. 92 points.

2003 Cobblestone Cabernet, Reserve (\$69) This is a marketing conundrum; how do you price a Reserve wine of nearly identical taste and sensual pleasure as your workhorse wine? The Ochlands have chosen to nearly double the price, but this wine is so similar in engine output, smiles to the gallon and race to the finish that I have to rate it the same as the workhorse above, 92 points.

The license says it all - Atlas Peak is the Mountain Home of King Cabs.

To get a better understanding of the Atlas Peak AVA, and of the various wineries in Napa Valley's Shangri-La appellation, go to <http://www.atlaspeakappellation.com>

To learn more about the three featured wines above, check out:

<http://www.jocelynwines.com>

<http://www.elanvineyards.com/html/index.cfm>

<http://www.cobblestonewine.com>