

Limited access to mountain region resting high above Napa Valley makes its vineyards and balanced Cabs one of region's best-kept secrets

Discovering Elevation

— STORIES BY VIRGINIE BOONE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE GESELL

It's not a wine-making region you find in the guidebooks. Rocky and remote, the Atlas Peak appellation is a stone's throw northeast of the town of Napa and yet a Grand Canyon full of boulders away. To say it's isolated is an understatement. There are two roads up; those are the same two roads down. The roads don't meet, so get to the top of one road and it's the same road you'll be heading down.

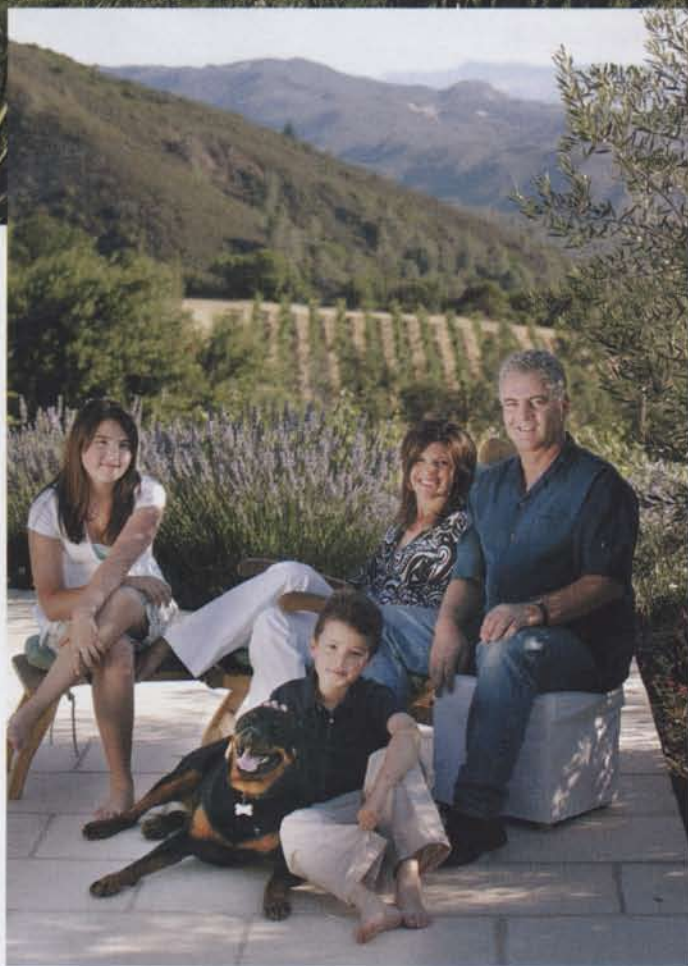
The dead-endness of it all lends a sense of commitment. Start pushing the gas pedal to make it up the hill and there'll be little chance of turning around until the top. A pleasant drive in the country this is not. And yet the chance to get off the beaten track in Napa is an intriguing one, especially to a winemaker. This can be a tough place to make good juice, but wholly worth the effort if you can stand the quirks.

"It's the last undiscovered appellation in the Napa Valley," says winemaker Darren Procsal. "People are starting to find out that this is a very great place to grow Cabernet Sauvignon, but it's a very challenging place. You have to be patient."

Patient enough to harvest after most of your friends up and down the valley have packed up and gone home. Procsal says up on Atlas Peak they're usually picking near the last couple weeks of the vintage. The rewards for all that waiting include Cabernets full of big, firm tannins and inviting notes of blueberry, cherry and ripe plum. The appellation's unusual range of orientations — grapes grow facing north, south, east and west — allows for

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Many of the vineyards of the Atlas Peak appellation sit near or above 2,000 feet in elevation, including those of Atlas Peak Winery, left.



Patrick and Linda Elliott-Smith with their children, Nicolas and Monique, on the patio at their Elan Vineyards home. Their rammed-earth house, top, basks in the sun above their 13½ acres.

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fuller flavors to develop. Its open topography — wide expanses of vineyards with lots of wind but not much fog — means the grapes get a chance to cool off from a full day's sun without withering. But conditions can change by the minute.

Procsal loves that about Atlas Peak, its inaccessibility both mentally and physically, what he terms its location at “the side of the side of the side road.” He thinks it adds to its intrigue. But it's also what keeps him on the road most of the year when he's not making wine, charged with spreading the Atlas Peak story and inviting interested wine drinkers to get to know his wines.

He makes Cabernet for Atlas Peak Winery, which for years, given its name, has been the most likely association anyone has had with the place. For years the winery, part-owned by Italian winemaker Piero Antinori, specialized in Sangiovese, inspired by Antinori's native Chianti Classico. But a mountain appellation in Napa Valley is wasted if not given over to Cabernet Sauvignon; the varietal is ideal for the conditions. And Atlas Peak is too perfectly situated to deny its rightful fate.

“Atlas Peak's most valuable hidden resource is literally underfoot,” says Procsal, a broad-shouldered man, bald a la Bruce Willis and as imposing as the mountains he makes wine from. He softens over the course of a conversation but still, you can tell he's the kind who likes a challenge.

“We can harvest later and pick for flavor and optimal maturity. No grape develops as well in mountain conditions as Cabernet Sauvignon.”

Patrick Elliott-Smith would agree, being among the first to

plant Cabernet on Atlas Peak. But he'll never live down the fact he spent a year on his mountain property living in a tepee.

"It'll be on my tombstone," he says with a laugh. "It seems to stick in people's minds."

Elliott-Smith was born in the United States, but his family was French, and he was whisked back to France at the age of 12 to spend his formative years in Paris. Yet Northern California never left his mind. He returned in the mid-1970s for college and bought his first piece of property on Atlas Peak with his brother, both self-described "back to the land" types who figured they'd just farm.

"We both studied philosophy and neither one of us wanted to have an academic career," he recalls, talking of the force that had such an influence on them. "It wasn't the hippie movement in the early '70s, but still we foolishly got caught up in the romance of back to the land and creating your mini-utopia."

With no prior farming experience, they raised herbs and lamb for the two French restaurants in the Napa Valley at the time, La Belle Hélène and Domaine Chandon.

They started farming, organically and intensely. That included encountering boulders the size of cars and enduring a long drive on windy roads any time they needed anything, including the sight of fellow human beings. To drive from the bottom of Atlas Peak Road to the top can take 20 minutes in good weather, and your foot best never be far from the brake. Within a few years, Patrick's brother decided this wasn't the life for him, opting instead to work in Berkeley as a glass blower and artist.

They sold their original property, though Elliott-Smith himself was nowhere near done with Atlas Peak. He bought another piece of land, this time higher up on Atlas Peak Road, where nothing as ambitious as a vineyard had ever been developed, in

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Viticulturalist Tony Fernandez, left, and vintner Darren Procsal manage the 500 acres of Atlas Peak Winery.



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APPELLATION AT A GLANCE

What: Atlas Peak, an American Viticultural Area.

Location: Atlas Peak itself, at 2,663-foot elevation, juts skyward from the Vaca Range, the mountains that form the Napa Valley along the east, separating it from the greater Sacramento region. The appellation lies mostly within the Soda Canyon and Foss Valley areas, northeast of the town of Napa, east of Yountville and above the foothills of the Stags Leap District.

Year approved: 1992

Total acreage: 11,400

Vineyard acreage: 1,500

Wineries/growers: 12 wineries

— Ardente Espressione, Astrale e Terra, Atlas Peak, Biella Vineyards, Cobblestone Vineyards, Dominari, Elan Vineyards, Hill Family Estate, Jocelyn Lonen Winery, Krupp Brothers Estates, Rivera Vineyards and Vin Roc — most of them not open to the public. The four growers without wineries include Bella Quercia Vineyards, Bianchini Family Vineyards, Soda Canyon Ranch Vineyards and Stagecoach Vineyard.

Climate: Cool, mountain-influenced with temperatures 10 to 15 degrees cooler than the valley floor in summer. Above the fog line, the appellation gets full sunlight throughout the day, though nighttime temperatures drop very quickly from their daytime highs. Cooling afternoon winds. Rainfall averages about 38 inches annually; the area's varied topography also provides a range of exposures.

Soils: Rocky and volcanic in origin, with basaltic red color, the soils also tend to be shallow and well-drained. Steep slopes, thin soils and large areas of rock outcrop are the norm. The native vegetation is limited, mostly open grasslands with some scattered oaks, pines and scrub, with some hardwood forest on higher elevations and north-facing slopes with deeper soils.

Elevations: 760 to 2,663 feet

Principal varieties grown: Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, Zinfandel, Chardonnay



WHERE TO TASTE

All are by appointment only. Some addresses have been left out to protect privacy, as many of these wineries are also family residences; directions will be provided when the appointment is made.

Astrale e Terra Winery. 707-255-1134, www.astraleeterra.com.

Atlas Peak Winery. These wines can be tasted at the William Hill Estate visitors center, the sister winery to Atlas Peak located lower on the valley floor, just past the Silverado Resort. 1761 Atlas Peak Road, Napa. 707-265-3024, www.atlaspeak.com or www.williamhillestate.com. Open by appointment daily, 10:30 a.m.- 4 p.m.

Biella Vineyards. 415-606-6629, www.biellavineyards.com. Vito Biella and his family live most of their time in Tiburon,

thus the 415 area code. That makes it even more important to plan ahead.

Dominari Wines. 707-226-1600, www.dominari.com.

Elan Vineyards. 707-252-3339, www.elanvineyards.com. The winery is also the family home, so call ahead to schedule an appointment and get the address.

Hill Family Estate. 707-944-9580, www.hillfamilyestate.com.

Jocelyn Lonen Winery. 4400 Atlas Peak Road, Napa. 707-257-2821, www.jocelynwines.com. A winery and tasting room is in the works, but visitors are welcome to come by and taste now.

Stagecoach Vineyard/Krupp Brothers. 3265 Soda Canyon Road, Napa. 707-259-1198, www.stagecoachvineyard.com.

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view of the 2,663-foot peak itself. Just below the peak is the Sutro property, owned by the famous San Francisco family, descendants of millionaire Adolph Sutro (Sutro Baths, Cliff House, Mount Sutro), who have long grazed cattle there. Betty Sutro, who is in her 90s and still comes up every weekend, has arranged for 2,000 acres of that property to go into a land trust.

At the time, the once and future appellation supported only two vineyards, one being Mead Ranch, which was originally planted to Zinfandel in the 1930s (Turley Wine Cellars is among those who source those grapes) but now also grows Cabernet Sauvignon. Cab has quickly become, as with so many of the mountainous regions in the Napa Valley, the appellation's signature variety.

There was no driveway, no electricity. Elliott-Smith set up a tepee so he could live on site while he figured out a way to plant vines, something few had yet done in this isolated, rocky stretch of land scored by only two roads, Soda Canyon Road and Atlas Peak Road. If the Silverado Resort weren't at the bottom of Atlas Peak Road, it might be impossible to describe how to get here.

Elliott-Smith was in no way daunted. He cleared five acres of very rocky, volcanic soil, then planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and a little Petit Verdot, four of the five principal Bordeaux varieties (minus Malbec, which he didn't think would grow well here). For the first several years, his fruit all went to Caymus, one of Napa Valley's most culty Cabernet brands. By 1992, Elliott-Smith started making a tiny amount of his own wine, which he named Elan, bottling just 150 cases.

Elan Vineyards now supports 13½ acres of grapes at a 2,000-foot elevation, among the highest vineyards here. Many of the grapes remain earmarked for others, though Elan gingerly tends to five acres all its own. Elliott-Smith, along with two longstanding employees, plus his wife, Linda, and two kids, Monique and Nicolas, do everything, from cane pruning their vines to deciding the final blends. But Elliott-Smith remains a man of the land.

"I believe the wines are made in the vineyard, so I pay fanatical attention to vineyard practices," Elliott-Smith says. "We farm organically, vine by vine."

Ohandthetepee, longgone, has been replaced by a grandrammed-earthhouse, its thick walls a natural insulator against

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WHERE TO EAT

Cuvée Napa: Fine dining for lunch or dinner, inside or outside. Cuvée Chef Octavio Barrera specializes in such favorites as braised short ribs, pan-roasted chicken and fresh local seafood. Pair with inventive wine flights or sit at the bar, which is especially lively on Thursdays and weekends, when Cuvée often features live music. 1650 Soscol Ave., Napa. 707-224-2330, www.cuveenapa.com.



Ranch Farms. Options at the casual, relaxed Grill include breakfast, lunch, dinner and plenty of appetizers from the bar. Its fancier counterpart at Silverado, **The Royal Oak**, done up in Italian porcelain and textured upholstery, is great for steak and seafood. 1600 Atlas Peak Road, Napa. 707-257-5400, www.silveradoresort.com.

Monticello Deli: A local institution with all you need for a midmorning pick-me-up, sandwiches to go and, most deliciously, a traditional Italian gelato bar. 1810 Monticello Road, Napa. 707-255-3953.

The Grill at Silverado: The manicured resort setting might scream Gatsby, but the food at Silverado is pure Northern California. Chef Peter Pakh has long believed in a philosophy of local and sustainable food, sourcing many of his ingredients from the resort's own gardens, in addition to grass-fed beef from Napa Valley's Gamble Ranch; other fresh stuff comes from nearby Forni Brown and Big

Soda Canyon Store & Deli: A favorite stop along the Silverado Trail, especially with winemakers and vineyard crews around harvest. Ideal for a coffee, lunch or all manner of picnic supplies. 4006 Silverado Trail, Napa. 707-252-0285.



Cuvée Napa Executive Chef Octavio Barrera, above left, creates delectable entrees using fresh local seafood, such as sole, above, for the Napa eatery's lunch and dinner menus.



The mother-daughter winemaking team of Brandi Jocelyn Pack, left, and Susan Curtis recognized the potential of Atlas Peak fruit early on. The two produce Petit Verdot and Cab at Jocelyn Lonen Winery.

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insulator against the summer's heat and the winter's cool, which often includes snow. The high altitude works wonders for the grapes, which sit comfortably above the summer fog line but enjoy enough of a cooling influence from the south-creeping fog that they grow slowly, the juices ripening at a casual pace. Harvest happens typically in mid-October.

Elan Vineyard's neighbor to the south is Jocelyn Lonen Winery, a newcomer with plans in the

works to open one of the few public tasting rooms. Jocelyn Lonen is a mother-daughter operation, the shared vision of Susan Curtis and Brandi Jocelyn Pack. Pack's parents, Susan and Lonen, originally came to Atlas Peak from the South Bay as a respite from their high-powered, high-tech jobs. Avid golfers about to enjoy their retirement, they figured they might start their own winery one day, but were in no particular hurry. That all changed when Lonen Curtis was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer six weeks after officially retiring.

"We all decided to move up to Napa together," Pack remembers. "He was given three months to live and he made it two years. During that time he transferred all his knowledge to me."

Now Pack and her mother soldier on as business partners and co-owners, growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot.

"We joke that I do all the work and she has all the fun," Pack says with a laugh. "The truth is she's much more social than I am."

Pack says that her family recognized how stellar Atlas Peak fruit could be early on, after tasting wines made by Jan Krupp, who owns Krupp Brothers Estates there.

"There's an incredible intensity here, very upfront fruit," she explains. "But the tannins are very balanced — big and complex, yet elegant."

Procsal, who experiments with Cabernet from several of Napa Valley's mountain appellations, including Mount Veeder, Howell Mountain and Spring Mountain, reserves his highest regard for Atlas Peak, stating simply, "We believe life is better up here." ♦

WHERE TO STAY

Milliken Creek Inn & Spa:

Luxurious and secluded, Milliken Creek has 12 posh rooms, many audibly and peacefully riverside, each designed in soothing shades of khaki, chocolate and cream. Soak in oversized spa tubs or lie among the trees for a personalized massage and grapeseed body polish. 1815 Silverado Trail, Napa. 800-835-6112, www.millikencreekinn.com. \$325-\$725.

River Terrace Inn: Convenient to downtown Napa and yet a hop, skip to the Silverado Trail, River Terrace has 78 rooms and 28 suites with Jacuzzi tubs and outdoor terraces, as well as spa treatments available in room. In addition to modern conveniences such as Wi-Fi, the inn invites guests to relax in an outdoor swimming pool, fitness center, art gallery and wine bar. Cuvée Napa is adjacent. 1600 Soscol Ave., Napa. 707-320-9000, www.riverterraceinn.com. Rates vary by season and time of week, but typically range from \$149 to \$349.

Silverado Resort & Country Club: The sprawling grounds of Silverado make even the most inveterate traveler feel a world away, with plenty of golf-course greens, a big separate spa and amenities galore, including two restaurants, The Grill and Royal Oak. 1600 Atlas Peak Road, Napa. 800-532-0500, www.silveradoresort.com. \$265-\$475. Three vacation homes (the Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot) are also available, \$475-\$1,035.



Freshly cut flowers add a touch of early autumn to a mantel at Napa's Silverado Resort & Country Club, known for its sprawling grounds.

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