

Napa Valley's fifth mountain AVA is looming large, with careful grape selection and deeper understanding of the terroir resulting in top-tier wines.

BY
STEVE
HEIMOFF



ATLAS ASCENT



Antica
NAPA VALLEY
2007.

Antinori Family Estate
Twenty Six Generations

PRODUCED AND BOTTLED BY KRUTZ FAMILY CELLARS, SEBASTOPOL, CA
Krutz family cellars
CABERNET SAUVIGNON
STAGECOACH VINEYARD | NAPA VALLEY
2006

TRINCHERO
NAPA VALLEY
2007
HAYSTACK VINEYARD
CABERNET SAUVIGNON
ATLAS PEAK - NAPA VALLEY

Los Lagos Vineyards

2007
Atlas

Vino
BIALLA
Napa Valley

PEAK NOTING

Not too long ago, Atlas Peak, the American Viticultural Area in Napa Valley's far eastern section, was pretty much an afterthought. If you had asked longtime observers of Napa Valley wines to name Napa's best mountain appellations, they would have listed Veeder, Howell, Spring and Diamond.

But Atlas Peak? The most charitable response might have been to quote Chou En-lai on the impact of the French Revolution: "Too soon to tell." More savagely, just three years ago a Napa blogger (*napaman.com*) headlined his piece with a barbed, "Atlas Peak: the Appellation that Dares Not Speak its Name!"

It seems that even some of the best wineries sourcing fruit there refused to print "Atlas Peak" on their labels, preferring instead the more prestigious "Napa Valley."

Today, Atlas Peak is speaking loud and clear. The appellation has hit its stride, and now must be taken as seriously as its mountain siblings.

Cool-climate viticulture

Like Napa's other mountains, Atlas Peak, part of the Vaca Mountain chain and formed by volcanism, was the object of 19th-century immigrant viticulture. But it went into a long period of inactivity with the advent of Prohibition, and even though it was given appellation status in 1992, it was much slower than the other mountains to re-emerge from the doldrums. The mountain is 2,663 feet in elevation. Most of its vineyards are above 1,500 feet.

"One main problem," explains Glenn Salva, who's been involved in winemaking on Atlas Peak since 1986, "is that the threat of spring frost was too great to make the investment."

Frost? You might think Atlas Peak is in a warmer part of Napa. After all, it's the most inland part of the county; just on the other side is Vacaville and, beyond that, the searing Sacramento Valley. "There's a cooling influence that comes from the south, off San Pablo Bay," points out vintner William (Bill) Hill. "So it's cooler than Veeder, and definitely cooler than Howell, Spring and Diamond [mountains]." Having developed his vineyard starting in 1981, Hill is the Grand Old Man of the Mountain.

The mountain's cool climate had been its weak point, resulting in green, unripe wines that marred critical acceptance of wines produced in the 1980s and 1990s. Questionable farming practices, ill-suited to the climate, contributed to the problem.

The mountainside learning curve

The wine world was thrilled when, in 1987, Piero Antinori, the famed Tuscan vintner, purchased a chunk of land in the Foss Valley region and co-founded Atlas Peak Vineyards. (The original vineyard had been planted by Hill.) With the expressed desire to grow Sangiovese, the Tuscan grape responsible for the wines of Chianti, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon, Antinori excited wine lovers with anticipation of great wine, possibly along the lines of his Badia a Passignano, a Chianti Classico, or a super Tuscan, like his Tignanello.

Salva, whose involvement with the mountain began when he was hired as Antinori's vineyard manager, lists the mistakes the viticultural team made, starting with Cabernet. "We didn't want to plant AxR," he says, citing a rootstock that is not resistant to phylloxera. "But at the time, the nurseries only had certain rootstocks available, [and they were] wrong for a mountainside." And because of the wide spacing with which the vines were planted, they threw large crop loads, diluting the flavors. "We were getting ripeness by brix, but not in phenolics or structure," says Salva.

The problems were similar with Sangiovese, but with a twist: "Piero wanted to grow only five acres," recalls Salva. "But Allied Domecq [whose money was seeding the project] took it up to 120 acres. So, even though we had the Antinori team on our side, with all their experience from Tuscany, the reality was that Sangiovese grown in high yields gives you

A Mixed Case of Atlas Peak-Sourced Wines

97 Krutz 2006 Stagecoach Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$70.

This is really a spectacular wine. It's hard to say why it's so superior to Krutz's 2005 bottling, but it's richer and more elegant in every respect. Combines immense power with great finesse. The refined essence of blackberries, black currants and spices thrills the palate, accented with the most beautiful coating of smoky oak. A great achievement that should develop in the bottle through 2018.

97 Paul Hobbs 2007 Stagecoach Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$150.

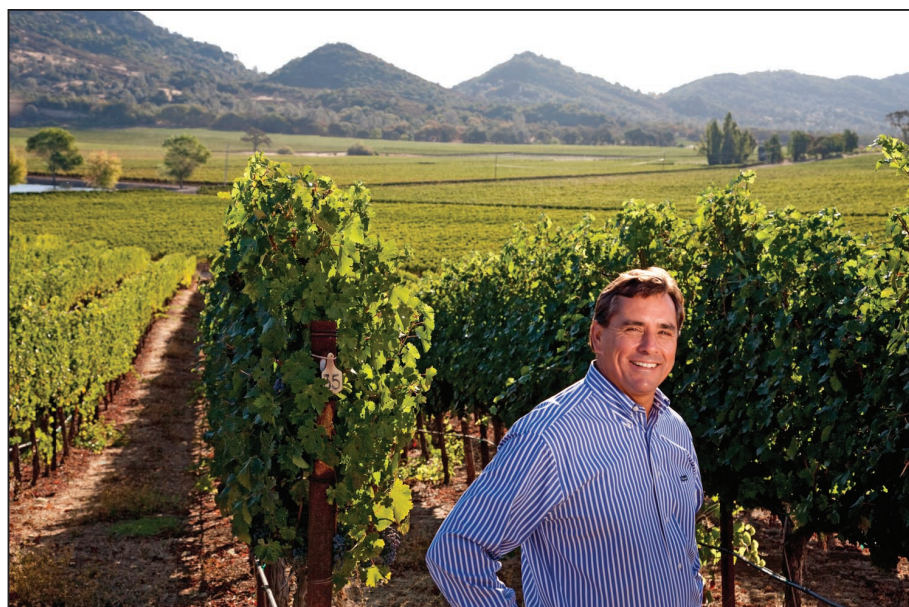
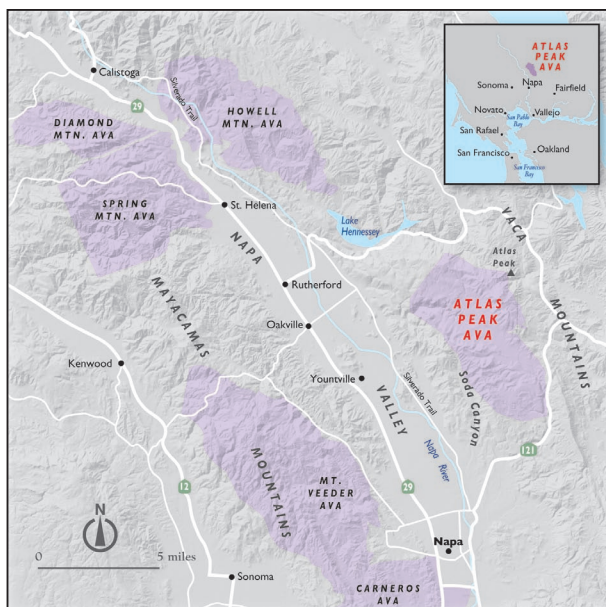
Awesome. A very great Napa Cabernet by any standard. Defines the modern style of soft richness, with lavish flavors of blackberry tart, crème de cassis, blueberry, dark chocolate and the richest, sweetest toasty oak you can imagine. It's soft and ripe enough to drink now, yet shows a subtle structure that suggests aging for a decade. Possesses the extreme complexity and finesse that mark the greatest wines.

95 Sequoia Grove 2006 Stagecoach Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$85.

A tremendous Cabernet, authoritative and exciting. Shows a great structure of acidity and tannins, with a cedar and sweet tobacco earthiness. Yet it's also explosive in blackberries, black cherries, red and black currants and anise liqueur. A real accomplishment, and a great compliment to the high-altitude Stagecoach Vineyard, which straddles the Atlas Peak and Napa Valley appellation lines. Now-2016.

94 Antica 2007 Antinori Family Estate (Napa Valley); \$55.

Grown on Antinori's original property, high on Atlas Peak, although you'd never know it from searching the front or back labels. It's a very fine wine, dry and elegantly constructed, with little of the babyfat, over-the-topness that affects some Napa Cabs. Within that firm structure are extraordinarily complex blackberry, black currant and spicy plum flavors. Delicious now despite the firm tannins, and should develop over the next 8–10 years, at least.



high-acid, simple, no-flavor wines.”

Patrick Elliott-Smith, whose Elan wines are now among the best coming off the mountain, agrees that the grapes of the 1990s tended to be underripe. “We jumped the gun on our harvest. Either our [brix] sampling was off, or we didn’t have the level of ripeness we thought we had.” The result, again, was hard, green wines that marched in the opposite direction from where critical and consumer taste was going, which was toward lushness and ripe fruit. Finding adequate sources of water for irrigation, too, could be a problem, because of the mountain’s fast-draining soils.

Salva takes a philosophical view of the missteps. “Were we bad farmers? In hindsight, yeah. But at the time, we didn’t know.”

Winemakers saw the potential

It was those critically panned wines that caused wineries to avoid identifying Atlas Peak on their labels. Dr. Jan Krupp, whose Stagecoach Vineyard is among the mountain’s best (a part of it spills over the appellation line), remembers that consumers were confused over whether the

Glenn Salva, estate manager for Antica Napa Valley, has been developing vineyards on Atlas Peak since 1993, when Piero Antinori (Antica’s namesake) first expressed interest in the region.

words “Atlas Peak” meant the wine was from the mountain of that name, or Antinori’s winery. Even he put “Napa Valley” on his Krupp Brothers wines, “because I wasn’t sure whether Atlas Peak would be a plus or a minus.”

But the quality of the mountain’s viticulture has improved so much, notes Krupp, that he’s sold his grapes to more than 60 customers, including the likes of Pahlmeyer, Caymus, PlumpJack, Biale, Chappellet, Alpha Omega, Miner and others. “There are more Atlas Peak AVAs on bottles

than there used to be, so we’re moving in the right direction.”

“We’ve learned how important the right rootstocks are, and we now have a clear understanding that we can ripen Cabernet on the volcanic hillsides,” asserts Salva. Growers used to plant Cabernet in more fertile swales of deep soil because it was easier to farm. Today, as says Krupp, vintners are planting Cabernet, Syrah and other big reds in rocky, thin soils, while reserving the swales for white wines, such as Chardonnay.

Hill notes that planting the grapevines in a northeast-southwest direction, to maximize their exposure to sunshine, also increases fruit ripeness, which is so important in a cool growing region. And, as Salva points out, the newer vineyards are being installed with very close spacing, which de-

94 Bialla 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$125.

A terrific Cabernet that gives all the richness and opulence you expect in an expensive Napa Cab, yet controls it with firm tannins, acidity, minerals and earthiness. Explosive in blackberry and cherry-pie filling and chocolate granola bar flavors that are so delicious, you can’t stop reaching for another glass. The grapes come 100% from the winery’s Atlas Peak appellation vineyard.

94 Krupp Brothers 2006 The Doctor (Napa Valley); \$75.

Napa red wine hardly gets more delicious than this. It’s so soft and velvety, so rich in chocolate, blackberry and smoky oak flavors, that you can’t resist sip after sip. It really defines the modern Napa style. The blend is Tempranillo, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec, and the grapes were grown on the winery’s estate vineyard in the heart of Atlas Peak.

93 Dos Lagos 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon (Atlas Peak); \$125.

From the winery’s estate vineyard high on the mountain comes this young wine. Although it’s tight in tannins and acidity, it’s extraordinarily rich in blueberry, blackberry, chocolate and roasted almond flavors, like a granola bar. Alcohol of 15.3% provides a slightly hot, sweetly tart counterpoint to the fruit. A gorgeous Cabernet to drink now with a perfect steak.

93 Trinchero 2007 Haystack Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Atlas Peak); \$50.

A wonderful Cabernet, rich and dry. The alcohol is fairly high, but in keeping with the wine’s power. The fruity blackberry and currant flavors are balanced by refreshingly earthy notes of olives and sweet herbs. Should develop through 2013.





creases the vines' vigor. "We're now able to achieve not only sugar, but phenolic and flavor maturity," he says. "If we crop our vines at a low level, you get the grapes ripe and make some stunning wines, at lower alcohol."

"The exact correct path"

Today, some of Napa's biggest names are turning to Atlas Peak. Tim Mondavi says he buys Cabernet Franc from Krupp for his Continuum brand "because that red, rocky soil is so similar to our [estate] vineyard at Pritchard Hill."

Mondavi's nephew, Rob, says that when his dad, Michael, decided to issue M by Michael Mondavi, which he described as the top wine for the family's Folio Fine Wine Partners portfolio, he chose to source fruit exclusively from Atlas Peak. Michael Mondavi could obviously have procured grapes from just about any place in Napa Valley, "but the pure wine that Atlas Peak produces deserved our highest status, from a viticultural and enological point of view," explains Rob Mondavi. "The wine is unique and specific to the area."

Heidi Barrett and John Schwartz have partnered to produce Au

Left, a vineyard at the highest elevation of the mountain is the source for Au Sommet, the project by Heidi Barrett and John Schwartz. Right, Atlas Peak Cabernet Sauvignon in more fruitful times.

often have the peppery aroma characteristic of cool-climate reds.

"To me, you get a real mountain-style wine, with intensity, ripeness and concentration," says Patrick Krutz, the owner/winemaker of Krutz Family Cellars, who in addition to making splendid Cabernet wrests top Syrah and Malbec from Krupp's vineyards. "Because the vines are so stressed, the wines can handle any amount of oak I throw at them, even 100% [new]." Krutz refers to "that intangible 'it'" that marks a great Atlas Peak red wine. Hill believes Atlas Peak is on the verge of superstardom. "If there's anything you'd describe as the hottest region for Bordeaux reds in Napa Valley, it's the southeast side of the eastern [Vaca] mountains, including Pritchard Hill. And the bull's-eye is Atlas Peak."

Rob Mondavi acknowledges the rocky road that Atlas Peak, the AVA, has traveled in the past. "People in Napa Valley get nervous whenever a new area is being developed," he says. "They're skeptical about the quality of what's produced. But Atlas Peak is now in the exact correct path of its evolution." 🍷

A Mixed Case of Atlas Peak-Sourced Wines [cont.]

92 Cameron Hughes 2007 Lot 172 Cabernet Sauvignon (Atlas Peak); \$22.

Another of Cameron Hughes' terrific Cabernets at a good price. This wine will easily stand beside Cabs far more expensive, with its dry, crisply complex flavors of blackberries, cherries, currants, anise, mocha and oak. Serve this to your snobbiest friends without telling them what it costs.



92 Elan 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (Atlas Peak); \$65. There's a pepper note that might make you think this was a cool-climate Syrah. It's very rich and flamboyant in jammy blackberries, black cherries, currants, mocha and bacon, while oak adds even richer layers of toast. No question about the deliciousness factor. Provides a great mouth of Cabernet immediately, and probably for the next 5–6 years.

90 M by Michael Mondavi 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$195. Made from the winery's little vineyard on Atlas Peak, this 100% Cabernet needs time to come around. It doesn't show the voluptuous approachability of the 2005 or the 2007, which will be released next year. It's fairly acidic and tannic. But there's a luscious core of blackberries and black currants. Try after 2012, and might be a very long-lived wine.

88 Hill Family 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (Atlas Peak); \$65. Tons of delicious flavors of blackberry- and cherry-pie filling, blueberry granola, white chocolate, vanilla fudge and roasted almonds in this deliciously rich wine. Despite the opulence, it's dry. Could be better structured in acids, though, which may limit ageability. Drink now–2012.