

CELLAR

Cabernet Mountain

After phylloxera, Prohibition, and neglect, one of the Napa Valley's least accessible wine areas is now thriving

BY ROGER MORRIS

We're becoming known as 'Cab Mountain,' says Sheldon Richards, whose family owns Paloma Vineyard on the Napa Valley's Spring Mountain. Spring Mountain is a large saddle of land stretching between Diamond Mountain and Mount Veeder behind St. Helena on Napa's western side. True to the nickname, more than half its approximately 1,000 acres of vines are cabernet sauvignon.

Spring Mountain officially became an American Viticultural Area only in 1993, but grapes have been planted there since the 1870s. At its 19th-century peak, it boasted almost 400 acres of grapevines, most of them zinfandel. In the first part of the 20th century, it fell prey to two plagues—phylloxera and Prohibition—and wine production effectively ceased. There wasn't another active winery on Spring Mountain until Fred and Eleanor McCrea founded their acclaimed Stony Hill Vineyard there, planting their first grapes in 1947 and releasing their first wine in 1952 (see *SAVEUR*, June/July 2006). In the 1970s, real estate broker Mike Robbins's Spring Mountain Vineyards

(whose buildings stood in for "Falcon Crest" in the TV series of the same name) brought the name into public view again, and today there are about 30 wineries in the appellation, many less than 15 years old. Few of these have tasting rooms, though, and access can be difficult—the roads are steep and narrow, and the rocky landscape is scattered with poison oak and populated by rattlesnakes—so Spring Mountain doesn't draw crowds of wine tourists.

Red-wine grapes—cabernet but also merlot and petite sirah—like it fine here, however. The highest point in the area, where many of the vineyards are located along the Sonoma County line, rises more than 2,000 feet, well above the marine fog layer, and the small mountain berries that grow there tend to be full of flavor and high in alcohol, with big tannins that promise cellar-worthy wines.

Tasting Notes

Spring Mountain is cabernet country, but among the 26 current releases from the region that we recently tasted were some non-cabernets, too, several of which are represented here. See *THE PANTRY*, page 99, for sources.

BEHRENS & HITCHCOCK WINERY PETITE SIRAH 2004 (\$45). Strawberry and bright cherry aromas, with luscious ripe fruit and an underlay of chocolate cream. Good length of flavor; but, like many of the high-alcohol Spring Mountain reds, a little hot.

FANTESCA ESTATE & WINERY CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2002 (\$65). Lots of mocha aromas and flavors, ripe blueberries, meaty-gamy notes, and a chalky-buttermilky finish.

FRIAS FAMILY VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2002 (\$65). An interesting mix of cedar and mint-candy aromas, with a core that tastes like a chocolate and cherry truffle. Still tannic and tight.

JUSLYN VINEYARDS PROPRIETARY RED 2002 (\$90). A blend of (mostly) cabernet sauvignon, with merlot and a bit of cabernet franc and petit verdot. A lovely floral and oak nose, very ripe blackberry fruit, and firm tannins.

PALOMA MERLOT 2003 (\$51). Big and complex, with fresh red berry aromas but darker, riper fruits, including blueberries, on the palate. Hints of white pepper around the edges, with vanilla beans and figs in the finish.

PEACOCK FAMILY VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2003 (\$75). Not a fast wine out of the bottle, but with proper airing shows a flowery fragrance, soft, honeyed flavors, and a ripe blackberry finish.

SCHWEIGER VINEYARDS CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2001 (\$48). In many ways, the favorite of the tasting, with its pungent fruit aromas, dark blackberry flavor, lots of tannins, and pleasant, gamy finish.

SHERWIN FAMILY VINEYARDS ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2003 (\$85). A smooth, elegant, black raspberry-flavored wine with dusty, pecan-shell tannins. Not long on the palate, however.

SPRING MOUNTAIN VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2003 (\$50). A singular characteristic in the "new" Spring Mountain's reds seems to be old-barrel aromas and flavors. This one shows dark fruits with some butcher-shop flavors, earthy chocolates, and a hint of brambles.

TERRA VALENTINE CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2002 (\$35). Lively fragrances followed by dark cherry fruit interlaced with chocolate. Deep and rich.

VINEYARD 7 RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2002 (\$85). A distinctive wine, tight and tannic, with dark purple fruit and an eggnog-egg cream finish with a pleasant bramble note.

YORK CREEK VINEYARDS MERLOT 2002 (\$36). From a famous vineyard spilling over the ridge into Sonoma County. Right Bank in style, with red and dark cherries, tobacco, and earth flavors and well-integrated tannins. —R.M.

