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## Schweiger: Taming a Stallion

By James Laube

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### Schweiger: Taming a Stallion

There's a rustic, dusty earth and wild berry character in the sturdy 1997 Schweiger Cabernet Sauvignon (93 points, \$45). And it has a tannic structure that bodes well for cellaring. Once you set foot on the rugged terrain of this Spring Mountain vineyard, it's easy to see how the soil and climate nourish the grapes that produce this rather immense, intensely flavored wine.

Spring Mountain has a well-deserved reputation for hearty, tannic reds. But some of the newer versions coming from this appellation, west of St. Helena in Napa Valley, show a sense of refinement. It's as if the winemakers are succeeding in their efforts to rein in a wild stallion.

Growing grapes 2,000 feet above the valley floor requires patience and dedication. Not only is the area dense in forest with rocky soils, but it also experiences heavy rain during the winter. Growers have had to battle a fatal vine malady called Pierce's disease for decades; already, one section of the vineyard has been pulled and replanted.

But the Schweiger family -- Fred, 58, his wife, Sally, their son, Andrew, 30, and their daughter, Diana -- have been more than equal to the task. As Fred notes, so far they've avoided phylloxera, the vine louse that destroyed nearly two-thirds of Napa Valley's vineyards in the 1980s and 1990s.

On land his parents bought in the 1960s, Fred started preparations for a vineyard in the 1980s. For years, the grapes were sold to Newton, Cafaro, Fife (for its Spring Mountain District Reserve), ZD and Stags' Leap Winery. In 1994, the Schweigers began making about 500 cases a year, increasing to 2,000 cases in 1997 and approaching 6,000 with harvest 2000. "It's been a long-time dream," says Fred Schweiger. They've built their business from the bottom up, investing ambition, money and time.

Their vineyard covers 34 acres, its vines rooted in diverse, rolling knolls of volcanic ash, shale and loam -- a geologist's dream. Cabernet Sauvignon, with 25 acres, is the largest planting, with smaller plots of Merlot (5 acres), Chardonnay (4 acres) and just enough Petite Sirah to make a small quantity of the varietal. Along with the diverse soils, this part of Spring Mountain is unusually warm during summer and fall, even at night, says Schweiger.

Andrew, who has worked at nearly a dozen wineries, including Chateau St. Jean, ZD and Cain, makes the reds in open-top fermentors that are punched down by hand. The reds are aged in a variety of different oaks -- one experiment includes French, American and even a couple Hungarian barrels.

While Cabernet is the star, don't overlook the excellent 1997 Merlot (91, \$45), brimming with ripe, juicy, sharply focused fruit, or the 1998 Chardonnay (\$28). The latter is a fruity, complex wine that's made in a different style than the 1997 (\$30), a more Burgundian version with richer flavors and a smoother texture. "We let the style vary with Chardonnay, depending on the vintage," says Andrew. The '97 was 100 percent malolactic; the '98 only about 33 percent. With the addition of a new press and a new destemmer, "we're hoping to make even better wines," says Andrew. Barrel samples for both 1998 and 1999 were

very impressive -- something to look forward to.

-- J.L.

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