

“I have been to the Mountain” as the saying goes. I visited this highly respected bit of real estate – Howell Mountain – in 2011. It was well worth the trip because I was brought face-to-face with an area that produces some of the finest red wines in America. Just being there made me want to probe further into the area to find out what really goes on.

For starters, we have to go back to the 1980s. The Napa Valley AVA was created in January, 1981. Howell Mountain is a sub-region of The Napa Valley AVA and was officially recognized as an AVA in January 1984. It is actually an AVA within an AVA.

In the words of the Howell Mountain Vintners and Growers Association, based in the AVA's main town of Angwin, Howell Mountain and its vineyards rise “above the fog.” There is no Howell Mountain Peak. The AVA is named for the tiny Howell Mountain township, which sits 1690 ft. above sea level. The AVA's vineyards are planted far above the Napa Valley floor, at altitudes of 1400-2200 ft. This elevation cools down the mesoclimate here, in lieu of the fog which serves as a climate moderator in the valley below.

Influenced by the local topography, diurnal temperature variation (daytime temperature variation as opposed to nocturnal temperature variation) is high here, giving the grapes the opportunity to bask in the California sunshine throughout the day and cool down overnight. Grapes develop intense color and flavor without becoming baked by stifling overnight heat. This shows in Howell Mountain wines, which are celebrated for their acid structure and aromatic depth.

The Howell Mountain AVA is actually a long thin area measuring two miles, at the widest point, by ten miles. The area faces northwest to southeast and is in close proximity to the town of Angwin.

The sunny southwest facing slopes are ideal for producing robust, complex red wines. The local Vignerons have honed their choice of grape varieties over the past few decades to cover the classic California “big reds”: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Zinfandel, and Petit Syrah. White wines barely figure in to the Howell Mountain wine Portfolio, however Viognier and Chardonnay have managed to get themselves noticed within the appellation's vineyards. Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel are noted worldwide for being big, powerful, and robust.

We have to give special mention to the soil because that is where it all begins. I am sure that you all remember back several million years ago the volcano known as Mount Konocti deposited volcanic ash throughout the Napa Valley. According to the description from the La Jota Vineyard, Howell Mountain received its share of this ash and it is broken down into two distinct types. They are a crumbly white decomposed volcanic ash called rhyolitic tuff and a red, iron-laden soil of clay and volcanic rock. The ash is covered over with forest loam. Vines develop good root systems in these well-draining, porous, nutrient POOR soils. This allows the roots to search, with an almost human-like effort, to search for water and nourishment. This effort STRESSES the roots to survive; creating a struggle that causes them to send their energy to the fruit that holds the seeds that will ensure another generation. The end result is tiny berries and clusters of grapes with very high flavor. This chain of events is repeated every year, giving us the gift of wines with firm structure, varietal intensity, and excellent aging properties.

Allow me to feature just one winery to see how it fits with all of the background information given above. La Joya Vineyards produces Cabernet Sauvignon, which is a typical Bordeaux Blend. It is 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10.5% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc, 4.5% Petit Verdot, and 2% Malbec.

The winery has deep roots in the Napa Valley. Back in 1888, winemaking pioneer W.S. Keyes planted some of the first vines on Howell Mountain. Ten years later his contemporary, Frederick Hess built a stone winery and established La Jota Vineyard Company. It only took a few years to achieve quality production as the two men won medals for their Howell Mountain wines at the Paris Exposition of 1900. Fast forward to the present and we find that the La Jota Vineyard Company proudly carries on this great legacy with its small production mountain Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. The source for all of the wines is the winery's estate and from nearby W.S.Keyes Vineyard. This ensures that the wines have captured the intense fruit and mineral complexity of these cool climate origins.

The grapes are hand-harvested into small 30-pound boxes to prevent crushing. The grapes are then brought into the winery for hand-sorting. After light crushing, the MUST is cold-soaked for gentle color, flavor, and tannin extraction. Winemaker Chris Carpenter ferments the juice with native yeast in a combination of open and closed top stainless steel tanks. The wine then undergoes in-barrel Malolactic Fermentation rounding the acidity and integrating the vanilla character of the French Oak. Barrel aging is near 19 months in French Oak.

WINESPEAK

The message here is to pass on a signal to the reader; and that is when you are shopping for wine, you may see labels that carry the name of the wine and that it was produced in Howell Mountain. If that is the case, you are in the high priced wine section. However be assured that the quality will justify the price. Be aware that the wines WILL require some aging, so there is plenty of time to plan for that special occasion.