

WINE NEWS



The renowned Martha's Vineyard - Oakville, Napa Valley

Legendary California Vineyards

By Jeff Cox

Vineyards are a lot like people with special talents: Many produce good fruit, some produce excellent fruit and a favored few consistently produce world-class fruit, shining brighter than others for reasons that are largely intangible. While European winegrowers have for centuries celebrated certain parcels where climate, soil and variety converge seamlessly - Romanée-Conti and Chambertin in Burgundy, for example - through much of California's comparatively nascent modern wine era it was the winemaker, rather than the vineyard, who was doted upon. It has taken some time, but as the 21st century dawned, a subtle shift of attitude in the collective California wine consciousness (among publicists, brand managers and critics) refocused la cause célèbre from vintner to vineyard. If there is a recurring theme among these legendary vineyards, it's the fact that most have had to struggle to achieve their fame. For winemakers, struggle is a good thing because vine stress yields small berries with a high solids-to-juice ratio, and it's from the solids, or skins, that a wine's chief flavors are imparted.

MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Vineyard owner: May Family

Appellation: Oakville, Napa Valley

First planted: 1961

It's not clear whether Martha's Vineyard made the Heitz Wine Cellar label famous or if the late winery founder Joe Heitz made Martha's Vineyard famous, but vineyard and winery are exclusively and irrevocably wedded because of the truly legendary Heitz Cabernets (think minty, rich, chocolaty black fruit) that have reliably come from the property since the 1965 vintage.

Vineyard founders Tom and Martha May moved up from Santa Barbara to the Napa Valley in 1963 and bought a pretty Oakville vineyard already planted to cabernet sauvignon; it seemed natural to call it Martha's Vineyard - alluding to her name and evoking his Eastern Seaboard roots. Soon thereafter they purchased an adjoining property, planted it with budwood from their existing vineyard and brought their total vineyard acreage to 35. But no briny facets mar Heitz's quintessential 100 percent

Martha's Vineyard Oakville Cabernet, the current vintage of which is 2003.

Sited on the west side of the Napa Valley on a fan of fine alluvium soil that has weathered down from the Mayacamas Mountains, the vines' roots strike deep to find moisture during the annual summer drought. "If you dig down there," notes David Heitz, Joe's eldest son and winemaker, "you'll find decomposed rock." Drip irrigation is installed, but, Heitz says, "It's only used to keep the vines from shutting down due to lack of water late in the season."

Heitz enumerates a lot of good make Martha's Vineyard climate, the soils, low yields yields about 3,500 cases per "stronger in some years than Vineyard clone of cabernet clone with small clusters and shatter," Heitz explains, but



things that come together here to Cabernet so distinctive: the (about three tons per acre, which year), a minty character - others" - and the Martha's sauvignon. "It's a shy-bearing small berries, and a tendency to "where it came from is lost."

Interestingly, the vines are on modified Geneva double curtain trellises - a technique developed at the Geneva Agricultural Experiment Station in the Finger Lakes for very vigorous native American vines. It's not typically employed in California vineyards, but it cleverly opens the center of the vine to light and air, while keeping the clusters in bright shade.

The modified Geneva system must be an inspired choice because Heitz's Martha's Vineyard Cabs, aside from their minty quality, have come to be known for their impeccable balance. That balance makes them accessible early on, but also allows them to age gracefully for many, many years.

Heitz, 2001 Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville:

This quintessential Oakville Cab is seamless; indeed, if asked to name a perfect wine, I'd say this 2001 Martha's would fill the bill. It offers a bit of mint, bay leaf and sweet dried hay in the heady, sensuous nose. Lavish flavors of cherry and chocolate, sweet plum and currant. Rich and at the same time elegant; it's one of the most distinctive wines in the world and displays the much-sought-after terroir of its vineyard. I was simply floored by this wine. (Please ship me several cases immediately!) Score: 98

The article above is an excerpt from Jeff Cox's profile of 12 Legendary California Vineyards in the 2008 June/July issue of Wine News.