

Volcanic Hillsides and Historic Vineyards: Meet Napa's Mayacamas Region

By [Virginie Boone](#)



AERIAL VIEW OF SUNRISE AND A MISTY MORNING OVER VINEYARDS / GETTY

On the western side of the [Napa Valley](#), from roughly [Yountville](#) to [Calistoga](#), lies some of the best ground ever given to [Cabernet Sauvignon](#), strewn along the benchlands and hillsides of the Mayacamas Mountains. Here sit the western portions of the Yountville, [Oakville](#), [Rutherford](#) and [St. Helena](#) appellations and the entirety of [Mount Veeder](#), [Spring Mountain](#) and [Diamond Mountain](#). Hidden within its folds are a handful of ghost wineries, long abandoned, yet nonetheless, links to a distant past of homesteaders and pioneers—signs of the Mayacamas' long well-understood viability and endurance in agriculture.

The appropriately named Mayacamas Olds grew up at [Sky Vineyards](#) on Mount Veeder, established by her parents in 1973 at 2,100- foot elevation. As a child, Olds learned every aspect of the wine business from the literal ground up. She then earned a degree in fermentation science and an MBA in corporate sustainability, and has become a sought-after viticulturalist.



SLEEPING LADY IS AN UNDER-THE-RADAR SOURCE FOR CABERNET / PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRION WINES

“I’m 100% biased because I grew up in the Mayacamas,” she says. “But up in the mountains it feels magical—there’s a feeling of wildness from Mount Veeder to Diamond Mountain. The hillsides become less extreme with gentler slopes and more uniformity the more south you go, and you get cooler closer to the Bay.”

In its entirety, the [mountain](#) range encompasses 52 miles from north to south and reaches heights up to 4,700 feet, straddling to the [Sonoma](#) side, where the Moon Mountain AVA is another recognition of the range’s special charms. On the Napa side, the vineyards—many nestled within redwood forest—face mostly east, allowing them to breathe cooler air from the Pacific Ocean and avoid the direct sun and afternoon heat felt more acutely on the valley floor and Napa’s eastern side.

Geologist David G. Howell, coauthor of [The Winemaker’s Dance: Exploring Terroir in the Napa Valley](#), describes the main geologic takeaway as this: “The Mayacamas Mountains are less than 2 million years old and are actively growing, as are the [alluvial](#) fans that are commonly called the westside benchlands.” According to Howell, those vastly varied deposits account for a dizzying array of unique soil types.

The Once and Future King, Benchlands



The Chateau at Inglenook / Photo courtesy of Inglenook

Some of the most historic vineyards planted in the Napa Valley exist along these benchlands in Oakville and Rutherford, where gently sloping alluvial fans and rich [volcanic soils](#) provide good drainage and balanced vigor. Here, earlier ripening grapes with an intensity of flavor are possible, freshness is retained and [tannins](#) structured.

The [Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard](#), [Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard](#), [Martha's Vineyard](#) and [To Kalon Vineyard](#), are all here, as are the wineries and estate vineyards for [Bella Oaks](#), [Detert Vineyards](#), [Far Niente](#), [Futo Estate](#), [Harlan Estate](#), [Inglenook](#), [MacDonald Vineyards](#), [Promontory](#) and [Staglin Family Vineyard](#). Some of the land can be traced back to original Rancho Caymus plantings by George Yount in 1838, the beginning of viticulture in the Napa Valley.

“Many historic vineyards on the Napa side are roughly aligned with those geologic features called alluvial fans—the gravelly nature of which promote drainage and were therefore particularly suited to farming grapes,” explains Graeme MacDonald of MacDonald Vineyards, whose estate plantings were once part of the original To Kalon Vineyard. “In the pre-Prohibition era, To Kalon was not recognized for its Cabernet Sauvignon, but instead famous for Crabb’s Black Burgundy [Refosco]. If a site can transcend grape varieties and wine styles, it must truly be due to a sense of place.”

Some of these vineyards were once holdings and grape sources for [Beaulieu Vineyards' Georges de Latour Private Reserve](#) wines, under the post-Prohibition guidance of André Tchelistcheff. Later still, many of these same vineyards were sourced by Robert Mondavi for [Robert Mondavi Reserve](#).

Tchelistcheff was explicit about this stretch of land in conversation with Robert Benson in his book, *Great Winemakers of California*, saying, “This is the greatest region for production of Cabernet Sauvignon in [California](#),” defining it as starting from Oakville and going to Zinfandel Lane, on the southern outskirts of St. Helena, on the left side of Highway 29. His opinion was based specifically on the wines of Beaulieu, Mondavi and Heitz's Martha's Vineyard. Decades after Tchelistcheff's observations, it remains home to a who's who of fine vineyards and wineries making, indeed, some of the best Cabernets in California.

Morning Mists, Yountville to Rutherford



THE FOREST AROUND VINE HILLS RANCH / PHOTO BY OLAF BECKMANN

In the foothills of Yountville, just north of [Domaine Chandon](#), [Dominus](#) and [Blankiet](#) estates, is Sleeping Lady Vineyard, a 46-acre, under-the-radar source for Cabernet owned by the legendary grape-growing Bettinelli family. Grapes go to [Accendo Cellars](#), [Alpha Omega](#), [Fait-Main](#), [Covert Estate](#), [BRION](#), [Ad Vivum](#) and [AXR](#), among others.

It offers classic elements of these Mayacamas' benchlands below the fog line, with alluvial and fluvial soils and cobbly rock. First planted to vines in the 1860s, there is still an original

Victorian home on site and a refurbished barn, which serves as the cellar and tasting space for Brion Wines.

Julien Fayard makes the BRION and [Julien Fayard Sleeping Lady Cabernets](#). “The vineyard gets a lot of morning light and morning cooling,” he says. “Sleeping Lady is closer to the mountain and closer to the Bay, slightly sloped to the east and not prone to sunburn or heat damage. The grapes get a little longer hangtime, the [tannins](#) are more complete. There’s a lot of minerality and complex density.”

A few miles north of Sleeping Lady, three generations of the [Kelham-Phillips](#) family have farmed [Vine Hill Ranch](#), an exquisite piece of Oakville, since 1959. Tucked into the Mayacamas, it is behind the Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard (land the family once owned) and due east of Harlan Estate.



THE VINEYARDS HERE ARE PLANTED BETWEEN 1,800-2,400 FEET IN ELEVATION / PHOTO COURTESY OF MAYACAMAS

Forests surround the 350-acre property (71 acres planted to vines) on several sides. Records show a history of grape-growing as far back as 1884. There is a chunk of rhyolite on site, while the woodlands contribute a note of chaparral.

“Because the western slopes are in the shade 45 minutes before the east side [of the Napa Valley], you get luxuriant fresh-fruit characters in the wines,” says third-generation proprietor Bruce Phillips. “There’s vibrancy and freshness because of the soils and aspects.”

Vine Hill Ranch’s modern era begins in the 1970s, with a redevelopment of the vineyard overseen by Tony Soter, who once bought Vine Hill [Chenin Blanc](#) as the winemaker for [Chappellet](#). A phylloxera outbreak in 1985 led to yet another replant, this time almost entirely to Cabernet Sauvignon, which is split into seven distinct blocks and a variety of clones and rootstocks.

Vine Hill Ranch grapes have been an important part of many deliriously delicious Cabernets beyond the family’s, including [Lail Vineyards’ J. Daniel Cuvée](#), [Bond’s Vecina](#) and [Tor Wines’ Pure Magic](#), the latter of which co-ferments Cabernet Sauvignon with [Petit Verdot](#) from the modest 2-acre smidgen of which is planted at Vine Hill.

In Rutherford, the legendary Inglenook, with wines dating back to 1882, lies in the shadows of 2,400-foot-elevation Mount St. John. After years of changes in ownership and approach, proprietor Francis Ford Coppola brought the property back to its original form in 1995, restoring its grand chateau two years later.

After adding the 60-acre [J.J. Cohn Vineyard](#) in 2002, Inglenook in its entirety now encompasses 1,700 contiguous acres, 235 of them dedicated to organically farmed vineyards primarily on the benchlands of Rutherford. Closer to the mountains, at an elevation of 900 feet, the soils are shallow, and the vines cooled by afternoon breezes. On the Rutherford Bench, they sit on an ancient alluvial fan with diverse soils that are volcanic but also gravelly and well-drained. This is where much of the Cabernet Sauvignon is grown, alongside [Merlot](#) and [Cabernet Franc](#).

Looking Up, Mount Veeder to Spring Mountain



PHILIP TOGNI PLANTED HIS EPONYMOUS VINEYARD ON SPRING MOUNTAIN IN 1981 / PHOTO BY ADAM DECKER

“There’s an extreme climate, the diurnal swings are crazier on Veeder than elsewhere,” notes Olds. “It’s a good thing for wine; it adds complexity, richness and tannin structure.”

Dating to 1889, and clearly named for the mountain range in which it sits, Mount Veeder-based [Mayacamas Vineyards](#) has seen its share of ups and downs, changes in ownership, fires and other challenges, and yet continues to produce some of the finest wines of the Napa Valley.

With vines planted between 1,800–2,400 feet in elevation, the 475-acre property has been farmed by viticulturalist Phil Coturri, who Olds now works alongside, since 2013. Much has been replanted and transitioned to [organic](#) farming practices, with an ongoing devotion to dry farming. It enjoys significant cooling from the San Pablo Bay, which helps both to build and preserve [acidity](#); Mount Veeder is considered the valley’s coolest, most temperate appellation outside of [Carneros](#), with shady afternoons.

Only 52 acres have vines, planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, [Chardonnay](#) and Merlot in predominantly ancient seabed and igneous rock soils, which contribute intensity to the wines. Both Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon have been planted here since the 1940s, well before either variety was much established in California.

One-time owner Bob Travers, who bought Mayacamas in 1968, brought it to worldwide attention via the 1975 [Judgment of Paris Tasting](#), when the 1971 Mayacamas Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon earned second place. Winemakers who have spent time here include Bob Sessions (who with Travers made the 1971), Lore Olds of neighboring Sky Vineyards (father of Mayacamas Olds) and Philip Togni.

Today's wines, made by Andy Erickson and Braiden Albrecht, are built to age, modeled after many of the site's historic practices, including partial fermentation in concrete and extended [aging](#) in neutral [oak](#), some of it in large foudres used continuously since the 1920s.

Another mountain producer is the same Togni who once worked at Mayacamas. Togni traveled to another elevated site on Spring Mountain in 1975, planting a vineyard of mostly Cabernet Sauvignon at 2,000-foot-elevation in 1981 and produced his first vintage in 1983.

At just 10.5 acres, the vineyard is divided into 18 separate blocks, all picked at different times. Since 2000, Togni has worked alongside his daughter, Lisa, to make the wines at the estate. The Cabernet is aged 20 months in barrel, with about 2,000 cases made each year.

After studying with Emile Peynaud at the [University of Bordeaux](#) and working at [Château Lascombes](#) in the 1950s, Togni came to Napa in 1958, where he made wine at Mayacamas Vineyard, Inglenook, Sterling, Chappellet and [Cuvaision](#), and also helped start [Chalone](#) in the [Central Coast](#). It was while at Cuvaision that Togni discovered the magic of Spring Mountain, getting grapes from [Smith-Madrone](#) and what is now [Pride Mountain Vineyards](#).

At high elevation with a mostly southeastern exposure, [Philip Togni Vineyard](#) in St. Helena is shaded from the hot afternoon sun, preventing sunburn and overripening. Above the fog line, temperature shifts from day to night are less extreme than the valley floor. Site and style give the wines an ability to age decades, possessed of fresh acidity and balanced alcohol.

Jewel in the Crown, Diamond Mountain



DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS / PHOTO BY ADAM DECKER

Celebrating its 50th anniversary of making wine this year, [Diamond Creek](#) was founded by Al and Boots Brounstein in the late 1960s, who planted three distinct vineyards to predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon on this 80-acre site (20 planted to vines) on Diamond Mountain. [Volcanic Hill](#), [Red Rock Terrace](#) and [Gravelly Meadow](#) describe themselves well. The first vintage came in 1972, the same year a fourth vineyard, [Lake](#), was established—the coolest of all.

Purchased by [Maison Louis Roederer](#) in early 2020 after the passing of Boots Brounstein in 2019 (Al passed away in 2006), Graham Wehmeier was appointed winemaker soon after, having worked previously at both [Cornell Vineyards](#) and Futo, both on the Mayacamas.

Wehmeier says being mostly eastern facing, even at elevation, means the vines face the morning sun instead of the evening sun, allowing for cooler temperatures during the afternoon. However, Diamond Creek is not high enough to be above the fog, which also helps to preserve acidity and keep the grapes in balance. An additional X-factor is having 50-year-old vines that act outside the norm, weathering heat events well. Taste from Diamond Creek's library and the wines will testify to the longevity and consistency of the site.

“There’s freshness all up and down these mountains,” Wehmeier adds. “You get less of a cooked flavor—the heat spikes are not as extreme. There’s floral, herbal and savory characteristics and fresh fruit flavor.”

That characteristic of fresh fruit with savory and herbal components is what has drawn winemakers to the Mayacamas since the 1880s and why wines from this region continue to reach new heights.

Taste the Mayacamas

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