

HIDDEN RIDGE

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RUGGED VINEYARD PRODUCES SMOOTH WINE

One of the truths of winemaking is that the best wines come from vines that struggle. I think the same is true of winemakers. A perfect example of that is Hidden Ridge Vineyard, owned by Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket. They produce a fantastic Cabernet Sauvignon on property that looks far better suited for mountain goats than grapevines. It's on the Sonoma County side of Spring Mountain in the Mayacamas Mountains, and you can only reach it with a four-wheel-drive vehicle, a helicopter or on foot.

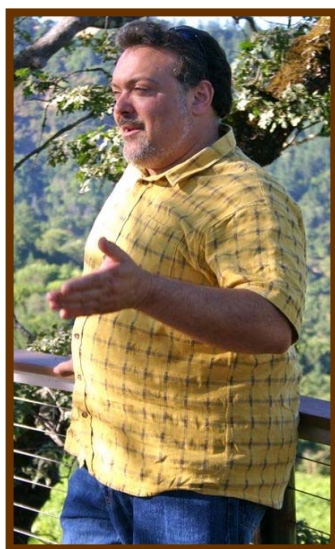
Casidy and Lynn took a small group of wine writers there this week in a trip that could have been part of a Disney World thrill ride. We bounced and jostled and shook our way up and down hills on a narrow dirt road, but no one complained. The breath-taking views of the vineyard and surrounding mountains were worth a little bouncing around.



Lynn Hofacket and his Hidden Ridge Vineyard

What we saw was 165 acres in a rugged mountain landscape, inside of which sits 55 acres of vines. It would be hard to find a prettier (or steeper) vineyard this side of the Mosel River in Germany. You're not likely to see another one like this in California any time soon because all the environmental regulations would make it difficult to win approval.

You might wonder what Cassidy and Lynn saw when they first viewed the property that used to house a hunting club. The Oklahoma transplants were living in Santa Rosa in 1989. They renovated a house in the area and were looking for other property to develop when they found the Hidden Ridge property. They fell in love with the land and thought it would be a great place to build a dream home for someone who wanted to escape city life. But they discovered building costs would have been prohibitively high. Then they thought about a hunting club or a you-pick orchard or a wildlife ranch. Eventually they decided it was the ideal place to grow Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. "It's simply the highest and best use of the property," said Ward.



Winemaker Tim Milos

Clearly, the couple had a vision. But turning that vision into a great Cabernet takes more than dreaming. In this case it took a lot of sweat equity. Ward and Hofacket did a lot of studying, taking classes at Santa Rosa Junior College, reading about the area's history and geology and contacting every mountain vineyard owner they could find. "We're unlikely people to be in the wine business," said Ward. "We had to learn about it all."

After all the studying, Hofacket started clearing the land in 1995. He bought the heavy equipment and hired two people to help him. He spent 12 hours a day, six days a week, taking out the trees and carving the terraces, even building a retention pond. He planted the vines and had to fight a fungal infestation called "black goo" that made it difficult to find good rootstock. After a year he found a nursery that had healthy plant material and he field grafted the roots to Cabernet Sauvignon in 2000.

Because of the steepness of the slopes (up to 55%) and the contours of the land, you couldn't just draw straight lines and plop in grapevines. They had to think about erosion and where the sun would hit the grapes and hundreds of other factors. "It was all common sense," said Hofacket in his typically understated fashion. Common sense also tells him there won't be any more vines planted on the property because the rest of the land is too steep.

"We would just send the tractor down to clear the land, and when the slope got too steep for the tractor to move, we'd hook a chain to it and drag it back up. When it was too steep for the tractor we knew we couldn't plant grapes there."



After clearing trees and moving rocks, Hofacket followed the contours of the hilly land to lay out the rows of vines. He planted double rows to try to hold the soil in better. He also has a small ditch in the middle of each terrace to catch runoff and keep it from sliding down the hill. “He built a little city for plants,” said Ward with a laugh.

He planted on slopes facing just about every direction except west, because the afternoon sun on west-facing slopes is too intense. He planted in what’s called a modified sprawl to get the dappled sun the grapes need. “Intermittent sunlight is what you want,” said winemaker Tim Milos. “The grapes only need about one to one-and-a-half hours of direct sunlight every day.”

The vineyard, which ranges from 900 to 1,700 feet in elevation, is planted only in Cabernet Sauvignon and one acre of Petit Verdot (to add color to the wine), but Lynn said there is a lot of diversity within the Cabernet. He planted clones 337, 4, 7 and 169. “Some are fruit forward and some give the wine some spine,” said Hofacket.” “You can see the complexity of the vineyard,” said Milos. “We pick several blocks together, we cross pick and we cross clones. How do you know when each block is ripe? You taste it.” Ward, Hofacket, Milos and a handful of other workers taste the grapes and pick when they taste right. They don’t believe in picking according to sugar levels or other technical methods. They like to do everything by hand.

They test whether the grapes are getting enough water by grabbing the leaves. Milos explained that if the leaf is cooler than the air or the same temperature, late in the day, it is getting enough water. You can buy an expensive piece of equipment to measure the same thing, but the Hidden Ridge folks believe in the hands-on approach to everything, including picking the grapes.

The slopes are too steep for mechanical pickers and they don’t pick everything at the same time. They wait until each group of grapes tastes ripe. Then they pick and load the grapes into a truck converted into a grape hauler. Then Hofacket drives the 4-wheel-drive grape truck down the mountain. I’m not sure if he doesn’t trust anyone to do it, or if he just can’t find anyone else crazy enough to do it. “We think we have the only 4-wheel-drive grape truck in Napa Valley,” Hofacket said. They take the grapes to a facility in Napa that small producers like Hidden Ridge use to make their wine. At first, Ward and Hofacket didn’t think about making wine.

“We didn’t see ourselves in the wine business,” said Ward. “We wanted to grow great grapes, and sell them to someone else.” They struggled getting all their grapes sold, so they decided to begin making their own wine with an experimental batch in 2001 designed to enhance the vineyard’s reputation. Eventually, they decided to keep all the fruit for their own wine, and now they produce 3,600 cases.

Because of the variety of ripening times, they’re usually crushing grapes up to Christmas, and sometimes into the new year. When they buy barrels they get them from different coopers so they don’t overwhelm the wine with any one flavor. Because of its remoteness the vineyard doesn’t fit neatly into any AVA. It’s part of Sonoma County, but it is not like anything grown on the valley floor. It’s a distinct Spring Mountain terroir, but because it is in Sonoma, it can’t be part of any Napa AVA. “This is nothing like valley-floor viticulture,” said Ward. “Not only are the soils and microclimates distinctly different, the air itself is profoundly different—of the rarified sort that one finds only in the mountains.”

When we visited the vineyard the grapes were about a month behind normal development because of cold, wet weather in the spring. There finally has been some hot weather and the grapes are experiencing what Milos calls “the grand growth.” Tiny grapes were popping out all over the vineyard. It’s when the vines send out more shoots and leaves. Now the winery team has to start cutting back some of that growth to allow the grapes to get the intermittent sunshine they need to ripen. They will cut back some runners and fold others back into the main plant so the people can walk between the rows.

And what is the result of all this hard work? The best \$40 cab you can find.



Milos and Hofacket say their wines are made with minimal intervention. They prefer to let the soil and the climate define the wines. Let’s hope they keep staying out of the way and don’t fall off the mountain.

This is a terrific wine that anyone can afford.

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