

HIDDEN RIDGE



LOCATED ON ONE OF THE STEEPEST VINEYARD SITES IN ALL OF CALIFORNIA, HIDDEN RIDGE VINEYARD STANDS ALONE

Surrounded by gnarled oak and Manzanita forests on the south and western slopes of Spring Mountain in the Mayacamas mountain range, there is a vineyard so remote it can be reached only by heavy-duty four-wheel-drive vehicles, by foot, or by helicopter. This is Hidden Ridge Vineyard, developed and planted by husband and wife team Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket to grow stellar mountain Cabernet Sauvignon. Made by winemaking team Marco DiGiulio and Timothy Milos at Bin to Bottle in Napa, efforts in the vineyard and the cellar have produced a \$45 Cabernet Sauvignon that sings loudly of its mountainous origins on slopes as steep as 55%.

When entrepreneurs Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket purchased the Hidden Ridge Vineyard property in 1991, they envisioned the former site of a private hunting club as the perfect location for a home in the country, truly away from it all. What they didn't realize, however, was just how difficult it would be to develop such a rural property for residential use. Ultimately, it proved a better home for grapes than for people, and they found that their Cabernet Sauvignon thrived on the otherwise inhospitable mountain slopes at elevations ranging from 900 to 1700 feet.

UNLIKELY BEGINNINGS

Hofacket and Ward's own journey to becoming vintners was not as direct as one might expect after tasting the results of their efforts in a lush Cabernet Sauvignon that speaks well of its mountainous origins. Their combined experience did, however, uniquely suit them for a life among the vines on slopes, where only mountain goats dare to tread.

Lynn Hofacket grew up in southwest Oklahoma on his family's wheat and cattle ranch where he gained hands-on experience in farming, learning everything from agricultural practices to handling and repairing heavy equipment. He played basketball in high school, earning an All-State title, and continued to play in college, first at junior college and then at North Texas State. He met Casidy Ward while working in real estate in Oklahoma City, and the two married a few years later. In 1989, they decided to move west, and after driving up the coast of California, moved to Santa Rosa. "It seemed like the best package," says Lynn. "The city was an hour away, the coast 45 minutes, Tahoe just four hours away, redwoods close, and the weather was good," he adds. They renovated a house in the area, and were looking for other properties to develop when they first visited the site of what would become Hidden Ridge Vineyard. "It had been on the market for several years without an offer," says Lynn. They purchased the 165-acre parcel in 1991 for \$140,000 and planned to build a dream home in the country for someone who wanted to live off the grid, completely "away from it all."



When it became clear that most people looking to buy a house in the country never quite envision something quite so remote and far-removed from civilization, Ward and Hofacket began brainstorming other possible returns on their investment. They considered an organic U-pick orchard, a wildlife ranch, and eventually, after researching and exhausting nearly every other possibility, it became clear that the only viable and potentially valuable crop in

the mountains was grapes. In the early 1990s, Hofacket enrolled in viticulture classes at Santa Rosa Junior College, and visited every mountain vineyard he could possibly gain access to in Napa and Sonoma counties, interviewing vineyard managers, engineers, and viticulturists as he went. It wasn't until a few years later in 1996 that the couple fully decided on planting the vineyard. At this point, Hofacket knew that if they went ahead with the project, he would clear the land and install the vineyard himself.

He purchased the heavy equipment—buying iron as it's called in agriculture—and hired a small crew of two men to help. His youth on a farm in Oklahoma had taught him how to drive heavy machinery and how to keep it running, so he knew his investment wouldn't go to waste. Plus, prices were low thanks to the Asian market crash in the mid-1990s which led to a worldwide surplus of heavy machinery for agriculture. Thus began six years of what Hofacket refers to as "the ultimate sweat equity project," working 12 hours a day, six days a week, to carve the terraces, plant the vines, and bring in his first harvest of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The challenges were enormous. If it wasn't navigating the steep slopes in a tractor, then it was in the form of "black goo"—a fungal infestation of grape vines that was plaguing nurseries at the time, making it virtually impossible to find clean rootstock. Hofacket shut down planting for a full year until he found a nursery in Winters with healthy plant material. The rootstock was then field-grafted to Cabernet Sauvignon, with the first vines planted in 2000.

"At the time, we didn't see ourselves in the wine business. We wanted to grow great grapes, and sell them to someone else," says Ward.

Ward studied Political Science and Petroleum Engineering at University of Oklahoma, and had worked for years in the business world. She'd gone back to school to get her MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, and shares Hofacket's determination and curiosity to see a venture through to fruition.

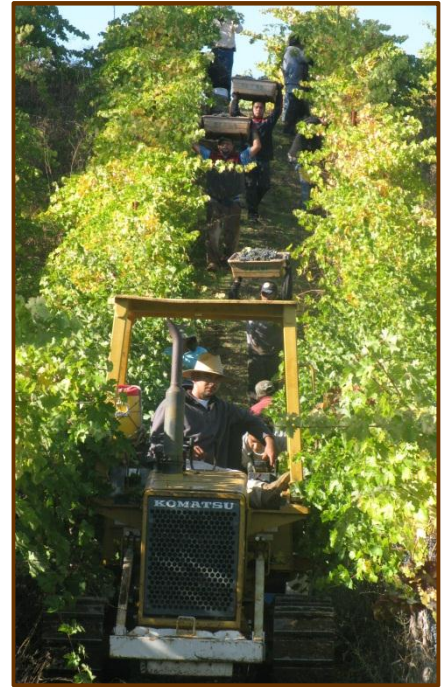
While Hofacket was reaching out to viticulturists and vineyard managers to seek advice on planting mountain vineyards, Ward was calling on some of the most-lauded Cabernet winemakers in the region to see if they would be interested in buying grapes someday. A few were intrigued enough to make the trek up to the site to see the vineyard in person. Marco DiGiulio was one of them. He thought the site was so unique and fantastically rare, not to mention the wildest California vineyard he'd seen. He visited in person in 1999—before any vines had been planted—and continued to stay in touch throughout the vineyard's development. When the vines bore fruit, DiGiulio was one of the first in line to purchase grapes. Other top winemakers in the Napa Valley were also interested in purchasing fruit from Hidden Ridge, but they could only take limited amounts in order to keep the Napa Valley designation on their

bottles because Hidden Ridge Vineyard is located within the Sonoma County political boundary. Federal law requires that wines bearing the name of a specific AVA or winemaking region registered with the TTB must be made from at least 85% grapes grown in that region.

Hofacket and Ward thought they'd try to build the vineyard's reputation by bottling some of the wine for themselves, and Hidden Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon was born, beginning with a small, "experimental" batch in 2001. Production is now up to 3,600 cases, with Ward and Hofacket keeping all of the fruit for the Hidden Ridge Vineyard label. "The way I see it," says Hofacket, "I spent the better part of six years of my life developing this vineyard and planting the grapes" now it's her job to market and sell the wine," he smiles.

THE WINES & WINEMAKING TEAM

When it came time for Ward and Hofacket to select a winemaker for Hidden Ridge Vineyard's own wines, it wasn't hard to choose. They'd hit it off with DiGiulio from the moment he first visited the vineyard site and his enthusiasm for the potential of their grapes had been a huge source of support and inspiration for the couple in the years before their first crop arrived. DiGiulio brought Timothy Milos in on the project early on, and the winemakers have worked together on Hidden Ridge Vineyard wines, collaborating on everything from when to pick to when to bottle.



"This is nothing like valley-floor viticulture. Not only are the soils and microclimate distinctly different, the air itself is profoundly different" of the rarified sort that one finds only in the mountains, and Marco and Timothy were some of the first winemakers to not only recognize that, but to celebrate it. We look to them to capture that difference in our wines as much as possible," says Ward.

THE VINEYARD: OUTSIDE THE AVAS AND THE LAST OF ITS KIND

There's no mistaking the distinct Spring Mountain *terroir* in Hidden Ridge's wines, yet the vineyard sits



in a veritable no man's land where AVA status is concerned. It's in Sonoma County, but tastes nothing like the other wineries from the same appellation. Most wines labeled Sonoma County without further sub-appellation designation are located miles away on the Sonoma Valley floor, and even further away in terms of winemaking style. Hidden Ridge Vineyard is also incredibly remote, making it difficult for less adventurous winemakers to check in on their grapes from time to time. Visitors who find they are completely without cell reception, first express relief, then hesitation" it's not hard to imagine being

stranded on the mountainside forever without anyone ever knowing your whereabouts. The closest neighbors to Hidden Ridge Vineyard (beyond hawks, deer and bears) are Pride Mountain Winery, Cain Vineyard and Winery, and Paloma Vineyards. Each has vineyards just across the county line, which cuts through the heart of Spring Mountain and allows them AVA designation as both Napa Valley and Spring Mountain District.



The soils of Hidden Ridge are Sonoma Volcanic Shales (volcanic basalt) and sandy clay loam, with an average depth of about 20 to 25 feet before hitting the bedrock; this is a very well-drained vineyard. These soils contribute to the tannin structure of the fruit. The vineyard is planted to 59 acres of Cabernet clones 337, 4, 7, 169, and one acre of Petit Verdot. The vineyard is divided into 21 blocks in three areas which carry the names of each section's geological description: Ancient Slide, Twin Cinder Cone, and Uplifted River Bed. Hofacket designed the terraces with inside and outside rows for maximum density (1,000 vines planted per acre). The terraces have less than 5% grade each, and follow the natural shape of the mountain for optimum sun orientation. Temperatures range from 55-degrees at night to 85-degrees during the day.

Harvest is a true labor of love: Ward and Hofacket work harvest along with a small crew to ensure things run smoothly. The grapes are hand-picked and driven down the mountain in an all-terrain utility truck Hofacket modified himself to hold grape bins. Once one gets a glimpse of the few stranded and broken down trucks that dot the property as testament to the challenges of farming on steep slopes, there's no question as to why Hofacket insists on driving the grapes down himself—the dirt road from the vineyard to the road can be difficult to navigate in any vehicle. He takes the grapes as far as St. Helena, where they are off-loaded onto a flat-bed truck for delivery to Bin to Bottle in Napa.

The couple is conscious of the responsibilities that come with owning one of the last true mountain vineyards to be planted in the Napa and Sonoma regions, and are incredibly mindful of their roles as stewards over such a rare and pristine property. 105 acres of the 165-acre property remains completely undeveloped and undisturbed, and the vineyard was designed to keep erosion to a minimum. Hofacket's wide terraces, which he engineered and carved on his own (with the help of a tractor he modified for the purpose) allow for any topsoil that washes downhill to be caught in the center of the V-shaped terrace for redistribution among the vines every year.



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