

## **Squeezing wine from a Rockpile** **Remote, hilly and, yes, rocky, Rockpile appellation grabs attention for its intense Zins, Syrahs and Petite Sirahs**

- Steve Pitcher, Special to The Chronicle  
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Kent Rosenblum makes more vineyard-designated Zinfandels every year than anyone on the planet: 17 currently, from 10 different appellations. Does he have a favorite?

"The grapes from Rockpile produce the most intense wines I've ever tasted," declares Rosenblum, 60, who has been making wine commercially since 1974.

Rosenblum is not alone in singing the new appellation's praises. Established in April 2002, the Rockpile AVA (short for American Viticultural Area) in the northwestern corner of Sonoma County is rapidly gaining recognition as the source of some of California's biggest, richest, most intensely flavored Zinfandels, Syrahs and Petite Sirahs.

Major wine competitions in 2003 and 2004 awarded at least 10 gold medals to five of these wines, which are made by talented specialists in those varietals, including JC Cellars, Seghesio Family Vineyards and Carol Shelton Wines.

There are no wineries in the AVA. In fact, there's not much of anything commercial in remote, bucolic Rockpile besides ranches and vineyards. Before the first modern vineyard was planted in this part of Sonoma County in 1992 --

Rod and Cathy Park's Rockpile Vineyard -- this was basically cattle country. The closest town is Geyserville, almost an hour's drive for most residents.

Windsor-based winemaker Carol Shelton buys grapes from Jack Florence Sr.'s Florence Ranch for her Rocky Reserve Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rockpile Zinfandel, one of four limited-production high-toned Zins under her eponymous label. Shelton says, "It took vision and guts to plant grapevines in the Rockpile region, but the vines clinging to those rocky, red-soil ridge tops are blessed with long daily sun exposure, and tempered by cooling afternoon breezes. I feel privileged to work with the fruit's inky intensity and dense structure for my Rocky Reserve Zin."

Rosenblum's Rockpile Zinfandel comes from Rockpile Road Vineyard, planted in 1994 by Jack Florence Jr. on a hillside just up the road from his father's ranch, 1,000 to 1,200 feet above Lake Sonoma. Last year, The Chronicle chose the 2001 Rosenblum Rockpile

Road Dry Creek Zinfandel as one of its Top 100 wines; the 2002 release of the same wine was chosen as a panel favorite last month in a Chronicle tasting of Dry Creek Valley Zinfandels.

"The Rockpile is special," says San Francisco restaurant One Market wine buyer Steve Izzo, speaking of the Rosenblum Zinfandel. "It's got great black fruit, but isn't jammy or over the top; it's an elegant style. But the best thing about the Rockpile Zin is its balancing acidity, which is unusual for Zinfandel and great for pairing with our cuisine, which includes grilled foods and items from the wood-fired rotisserie."

The younger Florence managed the century-old St. Peter's Church Vineyard in Cloverdale for Alameda-based Rosenblum Cellars, and used cuttings from its vines to establish his vineyard. The first crop off the vineyard went to Rosenblum in 1996, and since then Rockpile Road Vineyard has expanded to include Petite Sirah and Syrah.

"This vineyard produces some of the finest fruit for our vineyard- designated Zinfandel and Syrah programs, but the Petite Sirah is in a league of its own," Rosenblum says. "This was originally due to be blended with the Rockpile Zinfandel; however, it turned out to be such an absolutely knockout version of Petite Sirah that we decided to bottle it as a vineyard designate. The color of this wine is somewhere between black and the absence of light. It's a monster wine with manners."

Several Rockpile AVA wines are labeled showing the source of the grapes to be both Rockpile and Dry Creek Valley. Some wineries assume that consumers may not yet know what Rockpile signifies, but probably do know that Dry Creek Valley produces some great Zins. There's nothing deceptive about this labeling because most of Rockpile's vineyards were technically in the Dry Creek Valley appellation before Rockpile AVA was recognized.

One of the things petitioners for an AVA must demonstrate is that their proposed name has historical significance. So, why Rockpile? The answer is obvious.

"The name Rockpile has been associated with this area since the 1850s," says Cathy Park. "It appears to be a translation of an ancient Pomo Indian name for their territory around Rockpile Peak, kabe-chana, which means a place with many rocks."

Rockpile AVA is located entirely in Sonoma County, running roughly northwestward from Dry Creek Valley to the Mendocino County line, encompassing 15,400 acres on hardscrabble ridgelines above man-made Lake Sonoma. Approximately 2,500 acres (16 percent of the AVA) overlap the northwest corner of Dry Creek Valley, about three percent of that AVA. The remaining 84 percent of Rockpile was carved out of the broad Sonoma County AVA.

Out of all that Rockpile AVA, only about 1 percent -- 150 acres -- is planted with vineyards, all of them red varieties. More than half is planted to Zinfandel, followed by Cabernet Sauvignon (34 acres), Petite Sirah (10 acres), Merlot (8 acres), Syrah (7 acres)

and Petit Verdot (4 acres). Five acres are planted to various other varieties, including a rare-for-California red grape called Tannat. Growers consider the AVA too warm for most white varieties.

Rockpile Road, beginning where Dry Creek Road veers to the west into Stewarts Point-Skaggs Spring Road a few miles beyond Warm Springs Dam, pretty much runs the length of the appellation, dead-ending some 12 miles later at an orange ranch gate. The drive along this perfectly surfaced, Army Corps of Engineers-maintained road above Lake Sonoma is breathtakingly scenic.

So, what accounts for the character, weight and intense flavors of Rockpile wines? In what could be a very hot part of Sonoma County, the appellation combines the advantages of high elevation and northwesterly maritime breezes from the Pacific Ocean, which is only 5 to 10 miles to the west. The vineyards are planted from 800 to 2,000 feet above sea level.

Florence Jr., Rockpile Grape Growers president, says spring daytime temperatures here are 5 to 10 degrees cooler than in the Healdsburg area, about 15 miles away.

"Vines bud out later than much of the rest of Sonoma in the spring, and often mature well into the fall," he says.

But in summer, temperatures are slightly warmer during the day than in neighboring valleys because the region is often above the fog.

"This is especially true later in the season," Florence Jr. says, "and it makes the area particularly well suited to rot-prone varieties such as Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, which are allowed to ripen above the damp, cool conditions that can affect the lowlands."

Since Rockpile's vineyards were established from 1992 on, growers had the advantage of employing modern viticultural practices from the outset and having access to the best clones and choicest budwood.

Rod Park initially decided on Bordeaux varieties, rather than Zinfandel, for his 27-acre Rockpile Vineyard because of its elevation.

"At 2,000 feet, we tend to get the storms earlier and it rains more in this part of the region," he says. "Having grown Zinfandel on Howell Mountain for many years, I knew that the grape has a thin skin, and it rots very easily if it gets wet. So, I figured that with Zinfandel, if we got a storm in the fall, we could lose the crop. Cabernet, with its thicker skin, seemed a safer bet."

Park sells Bordeaux varieties to Sonoma Valley-based St. Francis Winery, where winemaker Lori Knapp turns them into Rockpile Vineyard Red, the 2001 version of which is a blend of 60 percent Merlot and 40 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. Paradise

Ridge Winery, also in Santa Rosa, buys Park's fruit for its Elevation Cabernet Sauvignon, which contains 8 percent Merlot and 3 percent Petit Verdot.

Rosenblum's winemaker -- Jeff Cohn, 42, who also crafts limited- production wines for his own JC Cellars label -- persuaded Park to add some Syrah and Petite Sirah.

"Upon entering Rockpile you can feel that this is the place Syrah wants to be," Cohn says.

Florence Jr. bought Rockpile Road Vineyard in 1992. "It was love at first sight," he says. "I knew the clear patches of land between the towering redwoods would make excellent vineyards, and raced back to town to purchase the land without even doing so much as a soil test. As one who made a career out of managing vineyards for others, perhaps I should have known better."

His intuition proved right, however, as it did again when he planted Zinfandel at the height of the Merlot craze in 1994.

"I obtained budwood from the old St. Peter's Church Vineyard in Cloverdale with hopes of recreating the classic, old-vine Zinfandel quality in a new vineyard high above Lake Sonoma," he says. "I had a hunch a winemaker like Rosenblum might bring some recognition to the vineyard, but never expected the wines, and then the AVA, to do quite as well as they have."

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## **ROCKPILE WINES**

Most of these wines were produced in limited quantities. Contact the wineries directly for more information.

## **CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

2001 Paradise Ridge Elevation Rockpile Vineyard Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon (\$33) -- Attractive scents of plum, black cherry, cassis and spice that expand with air, picking up a smoky note from the oak. Spice-tinged flavors of wild berries and black cherries, mocha and nicely integrated oak. Round and smooth with medium tannins; long and full finish.

(707) 528- 9463;

[paradiseridgewinery.com](http://paradiseridgewinery.com)

## **ZINFANDEL**

2002 Branham Rockpile Zinfandel (\$28) -- Subdued aromas of blackberry, black pepper and hints of leather and roasted meat. Big and chewy with ample berry and black currant fruit and medium-full tannins; needs a couple of years to loosen up. Contains 5 percent Petite Sirah.

(707) 942-1697;

branhamwines.com.

2002 Carol Shelton Rocky Reserve Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rockpile Zinfandel (\$32) -- Wonderfully fruity nose of blackberry and cassis tinged with blueberry and subtle dried herb. Big and robust with medium-full tannins, it serves up loads of ripe black raspberry and blackberry enhanced by cedar, oak, spice, dark chocolate and dried herb, finishing with a touch of vanilla.

(707) 575-3441;

carolshelton.com

2002 Mauritsen Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rockpile Zinfandel (\$29) -- Pleasant aromas of blackberry jam laced with cinnamon-clove spice. Rich and full-bodied, it serves up loads of ripe berry fruit, but bold tannins get in the way; a few years of cellaring should tame them.

(707) 431-0804

2002 Rosenblum Rockpile Road Vineyard Rockpile-Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$26) -- Spicy aromas of very ripe blackberry and cherry, black pepper, vanilla and dried lavender. Ultra-smooth, luscious and juicy with medium tannins, and loaded with ripe, extracted blackberry fruit, accented by notes of peppery spice and dark chocolate. Drinking fabulously now.

(510) 865-7007;

rosenblumcellars.com

2002 Seghesio Lumetta Rockpile Zinfandel (\$30) -- Fruit-forward aromas of black raspberries and cherries accented by black pepper, mocha and anise. Smooth and juicy on the palate with medium tannins and concentrated flavors of blackberries and subtle spice. Contains 5 percent Petite Sirah.

(707) 433-3579;

seghesio.com

**SYRAH**

2002 JC Cellars Haley's Reserve Rockpile Vineyard Rockpile Syrah (\$42) --

Attractive aromas of wild blackberry, boysenberry, smoked meat, vanilla, mineral and dried herbs. Luscious and concentrated, with flavors of berry, cassis, vanilla, black pepper and toasty oak. Ripe, supple tannins; finishes with a note of mocha amid dark purple fruit. Decanting recommended.

(510) 749-9463;

jccellars.com

2002 Rosenblum Fran's Vineyard Rockpile-Dry Creek Valley Syrah (\$42) -- Scents of cherry, wild blackberry, blueberry, dried herb and cocoa. Big and fleshy on the palate with medium tannins, it exhibits a deep core of black fruit and serves up layers of flavor that echo the nose; slightly hot in the finish. Decanting recommended.

## **PETITE SIRAH**

2002 Rosenblum Rockpile Road Vineyard Rockpile-Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah (\$34) -- Complex aromas of ripe, brambly blackberries, red meat and white pepper barely prepare you for the burst of fruit on the palate. This hedonistic, full-bodied wine is brimming with ultraripe blackberry and black currant with notes of dark chocolate, white pepper, mineral, licorice and a touch of oak; bold, but well tucked-in tannins. Best decanted for several hours.

-- Steve Pitcher

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