

THE WINE NEWS

feature story



RockPile Where Brawny Reds Rule

By Gerald D. Boyd

An assemblage of Rockpile growers (from left): Marge Mauritsen, Alice and Bob

Gloeckner, Chris Mauritsen, Jack Florence, Jr., Gary Branham, Rod and Cathy Park.

Photo: JACK FLORENCE, JR

In a 1785 letter, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The small landholders are the most precious part of a state." Jefferson couldn't have envisioned 21st-century land development in California, but he would have been happy about what is happening at the northwestern edge of Sonoma County. Above meandering Lake Sonoma on a rugged ridge stands Rockpile Peak. This low-profile mountain has given its name to Rockpile, one of California's most unusual appellations, both in moniker and geography. The 15,400-acre Rockpile American Viticultural Area was approved in April 2002, making it one of the newest AVAs in Sonoma County. It has been so defined, in large part, for the distinctive character of its muscular red wines.

In one fashion or another, the word "Rockpile" is included in the majority of the nine vineyards planted within the appellation: Gary Branham has Branham's Rockpile Vineyard; Rod and Cathy Park own Rockpile Vineyard; Thom and Linda Mauritsen have Mauritsen's Rockpile Ridge Vineyard; Marge and Chris Mauritsen farm High Rocky Ridge Vineyards; Jack Florence, Jr. calls his parcel Rockpile Road Vineyard. His father and mother, Jack and Fran Florence, own Florence Ranch, formerly known as Rockpile Ridge Vineyard - the change was recently made to cut down on the confusion. Mick Lumetta has never incorporated the Rockpile designation on his Lumetta Ranch signpost; and growers Craig and Maja Ramsey, and the Gloeckner family have yet to name their respective vineyards.

"When I first went to visit [Park's] Rockpile Vineyard in 2001, I couldn't believe how long it took me to just get there," says Jeff Cohn, winemaker for Rosenblum Cellars, as well as his own JC Cellars. "I thought I was lost. It turned out to be a 45-minute drive from [U.S.] 101, through Dry Creek Valley, then up a dirt road." At the end of his trek, Cohn had risen 1,500 feet above Lake Sonoma, but the trip is worth the effort every time he makes it. "It's like heaven up there, it's so beautiful," he says.

"Heaven" is presently home to 150 acres of mountain vineyards, planted to zinfandel,

petite sirah, syrah, a little cabernet sauvignon and the odd parcel of petit verdot and the like. It is difficult to generalize about the Rockpile AVA because the terrain is so varied, with dips and swales, outcroppings and drop-offs. Carol Shelton, owner and winemaker for Carol Shelton Wines, an advocate of Rockpile fruit, says the elevation and shallow red, rocky soils of Rockpile are similar to Napa's Howell Mountain. She also notes that, "The fog begins to burn off earlier on Rockpile than it does farther down in Dry Creek Valley." And there's another bonus: "The view goes on forever!" >

Teetering on a narrow ridge, the Rockpile slopes have limited and often rocky soils, composed of loam and clay-loam. Jack Florence, Jr., owner of Rockpile Road Vineyard, points out that the rocks are not large enough to impede root penetration, allowing for good drainage. He notes, too, that temperatures are generally cooler by five to ten degrees during the day, and conversely warmer at night, than nearby valleys. Another climatic advantage: The Rockpile AVA is sited above the fog layer, which means drier, warmer, more sunny mornings during the critical autumn ripening season. Taken altogether, Florence, Jr. says, "This means that 100 percent of the wines achieve the concentration and intensity that only hillside soils can produce."

For the 2000 vintage, Shelton purchased her zinfandel grapes from the Florence Ranch, situated 1,200 feet above Lake Sonoma, because it yields the kind of dense fruit that has come to be associated with the AVA. "The zinfandel from Rockpile is much different than what grows in Dry Creek Valley," she says. "The fruit is fleshier and the tannins are finer. We refer to Rockpile zinfandel as zin with the heart of cabernet."

Shelton describes the profile of Rockpile Zinfandel as "more blueberry and spice with black pepper," compared to Dry Creek Zinfandels, which she says "have more of a blackberry profile." She makes four Zinfandels from different locations, but considers the Rockpile Zin her most consistent; there are currently two vintages (2001 and 2002) of Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rocky Reserve (\$32) in the market. She also made a small quantity of a 2001 Late Harvest Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Zinfandel dubbed Black Magic (\$20/375 ml). Shelton may add another Rockpile varietal to her repertoire in 2005. "Petite Sirah is coming back," she predicts. "It's riding on the coattails of Syrah's popularity and some people are rebelling against the trend toward lighter reds."

There's no doubt that petite sirah and syrah have both found places on Rockpile. Florence, Jr. says that the mountain growing conditions of his parents' Florence Ranch have reduced syrah's vexing vigor, allowing for some "exceptional wines." Jeff Cohn buys syrah for the Rosenblum bottling from Florence Ranch and gets a little syrah for his JC Cellars version from the Parks' Rockpile Vineyard.

Before being awarded its own AVA, Rockpile was considered part of Dry Creek Valley, an appellation that has long been recognized for growing exceptional zinfandel and petite sirah. Now that Rockpile is building its own reputation, comparisons are inevitable. "As a larger appellation, Dry Creek Zinfandels and Petite Sirahs cover more of a range than those of Rockpile," Jack Florence, Jr. observes. "With only 80 acres of zinfandel, much of it planted to the same clone, and just 10 acres of petite sirah, Rockpile wines are consistently characteristic of their narrow geographic range." Interestingly, it is not Dry Creek Valley that he thinks shares

similarities with Rockpile. "I find our neighboring appellation to the north, Mendocino Ridge, to actually be more similar to Rockpile in the characteristics of its Zinfandels and Petite Sirahs. This is so because, like Rockpile, Mendocino Ridge is an appellation determined by elevation," he says. "Also, because of less fog and better air flow at Rockpile, rot-prone varieties like zinfandel and petite sirah are able to achieve the concentration and intensity they need."

Zinfandel and petite sirah are the dominant varieties in the Rockpile AVA, but Rod and Cathy Park also believe cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petit verdot have potential. Most of the couple's grapes go to Paradise Ridge Winery in Santa Rosa, producer of one of only two Cabernets bearing the Rockpile appellation. "We planted cabernet [over zinfandel] because we are six miles farther west and 1,000 feet higher than the Florences' vineyards," Rod Park notes. "I was afraid that thin-skinned zinfandel might suffer in the early fall rains and cold weather we get up here." He adds that some tasters find his Rockpile Cabernet Sauvignon has none of the green pepper overtone that is often associated with Dry Creek Valley and Alexander Valley Cabernets. "This is what I expect of a high-altitude, stressed vine."

Dan Barwick, the winemaker for Paradise Ridge, says, "Our Rockpile Cabernet is a very complex wine with pretty fruit, nice tannins and ample flavors without ridiculous ripeness. The flavors are like chocolate-covered raspberries or black cherries," but notes that, in general, Rockpile Cabernet Sauvignon hasn't come close to realizing its full potential. He explains that Rockpile wines are very young, still a bit simple and lacking depth, "but they have a complex soft and feminine fruitiness that differs from cooler climate Cabernets. There's a lovely dustiness to Rockpile Cabernet and it has refined tannins. It's wonderful fruit to work with."

St. Francis Vineyard & Winery, located in Sonoma Valley, makes the only other commercial red wine using Rockpile Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemaker Lori Knapp says the 2001 Rockpile Vineyard red, sourced from the Parks' Rockpile Vineyard, is a blend of 60 percent merlot and 40 percent cabernet sauvignon; the 2002 has more cabernet. Both wines are sold in the St. Francis Visitor's Center and through the Wine Club. "What we are getting from Rockpile is exceptional fruitiness, so I'm also blending some of that fruit into our reserve wines," Knapp says.

Reflecting on the comparison of Rockpile and Dry Creek Valley wines, and in particular Zinfandel, Florence, Jr. aptly describes the Rockpile experience: "Rockpile Zinfandels have all the forward fruit and varietal character that wine drinkers have come to associate with Dry Creek. However, I think Rockpile wines take this to a new level, with intense red fruit characteristics, good acids for aging, deep color, and the ability to reach the higher alcohol levels that the ripe fruit produces without tasting hot."

Rockpile-designated wines are only now trickling into the national market. Their mountain pedigree should attract wine drinkers looking for that big taste experience that goes beyond Dry Creek Valley while offering a challenge to Mendocino Ridge.

Contributing Editor Gerald D. Boyd is a Sonoma County-based wine and spirits writer.

Tasting Bar

The Rockpile reds that follow are made in very small quantities. A few producers, such as St. Francis, are selling Rockpile-designated wines in the tasting room only.

Branham, 2001 Branham Rockpile Vineyard Zinfandel - \$28: Very deep purple-ruby hue. Low-intensity aromas of black pepper and ripe blackberry; tight fruit, tactile and chewy with hard tannins; good length with underlying fruit. A hard, muscular wine that needs more time to loosen up. Very good

Branham, 2002 Rockpile Zinfandel - \$28: Deep ruby hue with brilliant purple tones. Bright blackberry aromatics with smoky notes; fuller and richer than the 2001, but still tight and unyielding; big tannins with ample fruit in the finish. Outstanding

Carol Shelton, 2001 Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rocky Reserve Zinfandel - \$32: Deep brilliant ruby hue. Forward aromas of blackberry and clove with hints of smoky oak; rich and bright, great texture, slightly jammy blackberry and spice flavors, bracing acidity and firm tannins. A little fleshy now, but will knit nicely with age. Outstanding

Carol Shelton, 2002 Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Rocky Reserve Zinfandel - \$32: Very deep ruby hue. Shy, smoky nose; flavors of ripe but not jammy raspberry and black cherry; good texture, elegant structure and balance. Needs more bottle time. Superb

Carol Shelton, 2001 Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Black Magic Late Harvest Zinfandel - \$20/375 ml: Medium-deep ruby hue. Ruby Port-like nose with underlying spice and coconut; sweet, mouth-filling fruit with ripe berry and coconut accents, supported by firm tannins and acidity; rich texture with good length. Late Harvest Zins are a rarity today, but after a taste of Black Magic one wonders why. Very good

JC Cellars, 2001 Rockpile Vineyard Syrah - \$37: Dense inky hue. Very deep, layered nose of berry, spicy oak, anise and earth; richly textured, sweet fruit flavors with vanilla and spice notes; balanced tannins with good length. Delicious now, this juicy Syrah will get even better with a few more years in the bottle. Superb

Mauritson, 2002 Mauritson's Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Zinfandel - \$29: Deep purple-ruby hue. Ripe scents of blackberry jam with sweet spice; full, upfront tannins, layers of ripe berry fruit, gripping tannins; long fruit and tannic finish. Outstanding

Paradise Ridge, 2001 Rockpile Vineyard Elevation Cabernet Sauvignon - \$33: Medium-deep ruby hue. Enticing aromas of dark fruits and smoky oak; high-profile black currant flavor with ripe blueberry backnotes, nicely integrated oak; bright finish with no heat. Outstanding

Rosenblum Cellars, 2001 Dry Creek Valley Rockpile Road Vineyard Zinfandel - \$26: Bright ruby hue. Spicy-jammy nose of raspberry-blackberry; concentrated, mouth-coating fruit flavors, sweet spice and pepper, refined tannins; finishes with a chocolate note. Superb

Rosenblum Cellars, 2002 Rockpile Ridge Fran's Vineyard Syrah - \$40: Dense inky hue. Raspberry nose with subtle toasted oak notes; rich texture, fleshy and opulent raspberry and anise flavors; balanced finish with a little heat. Outstanding - GDB

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