

“Terroirs of Syrah”

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The Varietal Expression of Mountain Syrah

Talk of *terroir* abounds in our industry. Translated literally as “soil,” this French term has come to mean so much more. We use it to describe not only the terrain on which vines are grown, but also to quantify the effects of soil, elevation, angle of incline, orientation to the sun, effects of climate, and water drainage for any particular vineyard.

When defining the qualities of world-class syrah, I believe the definition begins in the *terroir* of mountain vineyards.

During my early days of winemaking I had the opportunity to work with Ed Gauer, the crusty, octogenarian owner of the famous Gauer Ranch located in the mountains surrounding Alexander Valley. The wines we produced were subtle, balanced, and intense and consistently showed the signature of the ranch’s rocky hillsides. Although we did not produce Syrah, my education in mountain viticulture ultimately led to many hillside projects from India to the Pacific Northwest and California.

At the same time I was exploring a passion for the complexity and nuances of syrah and I believed that by nurturing the characteristics of syrah through the “hardscrabble” life of a mountain vineyard, the perfect harmony of syrah and terroirs would develop.

The most definable characteristics for a true mountain syrah are driven by the following *terroir* attributes:

- **Mountain soils are more limiting**, therefore the vines produce smaller berries with more concentration of flavors - flavors so developed that you want to bring bunches home to share around the table! You know everything you need to know about the finished syrah from that ripe cluster.
- **Mountain vineyards tend to be much cooler**, often varying 8 to 10 degrees from the valley floor in both Napa and Sonoma. This results in juicy flavors, not sticky cooked fruit.
- **More sunlight and more hang time.** In cool years the fruit will benefit from being above the fog line receiving more sunlight and moderate temperatures. In hot years, the cooler mountain climate allows for fruit maturation over a longer, steady growing season.

Characteristics that also define great mountain vineyard sites include: altitudes that challenge tractor and grower, scrub oaks, huge rocks, steep windy slopes and other obstacles. It is not unusual to use explosives as a viticulture tool and tales of bravery and fortitude make up the legends of most grand hillside vineyards. Not unlike

California's own pioneering spirit, it's not hard to imagine these tough farmers and rough vines working in tandem to defy the odds and produce resilient clusters with intense depth of character.

A Look at Two Perfect Hillside

Palmeri has achieved the perfect harmony I described by making its home on two spectacular mountain vineyard sites.

Palmeri Stagecoach Syrah and our Syrah/Cabernet blend come from Stagecoach Vineyard, a sweeping panoramic highland, which parallels the old stagecoach route along the Vaca Ridge on the eastern ridge of the Napa Valley, north of Atlas Peak. The mountain grapes are grown between 900 and 1,700 feet elevations on southwest facing vineyards carved out of rocky, rust colored volcanic earth.

The Van Ness Vineyard was planted in three small one acre micro-vineyards, each capturing the best light, the steepest slope, and the most gravelly and slight soil bed. This vineyard reaches from 700 to 1,200 feet above the Alexander Valley in Sonoma County. The vineyards are planted in the same four clones, and are usually harvested within two to three weeks of each other.

A Winemaker's Alchemy

In terms of winemaking style, we are big advocates of small, 4-5 ton lots made in exclusively open top fermentation tanks and punched down by hand. All of the Palmeri wines are made in squat, round tanks without tops, creating a very broad palate mouth feel in the finished wines. It is a very gentle method of maceration for the first half of the fermentation, punching down three times a day. I allow a cold soak for three days before inoculating with a Rhone yeast culture. I am not a believer in extended macerations with Mountain Syrah so we gently press the wine within three days of dryness.

We age the wines for at least 18 months in 50% new French oak and 50% barrels have been used once or twice. The wine is raked at least three times in its life before bottle, where it rests for at least 8 months before release.

As makers Mountain Syrah, Palmeri is committed to the ongoing pioneering spirit of hillside vineyards, which should not exist without conscientious land stewardship. To that end, we are active proponents of diligent water conservation and soil management; creating safe wildlife passages; and utilizing natural pest management, such as our featured Bat friends. With mindful attention to *terroir*, we all benefit at *la table*.

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