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Oakville: Where Cabs Reach Cult Status

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America's West Coast is blessed with a number of prime areas for Cabernet Sauvignon, from Washington's Red Mountain to some special hilltop vineyards in California's Santa Cruz Mountains. But an appellation that has garnered a wealth of Cabernet fame and fortune is Oakville, a two-mile strip of land north of Yountville and south of Rutherford that runs across the middle of Napa Valley

and to the 600-foot mark on the slopes of the mountains that frame the valley—the Mayacamas to the west and the Vacas to the east.

Impact Players

What accounts for Oakville's ascendance? Clarke Swanson, who founded the esteemed Swanson Vineyards & Winery in 1985, remarks, "Wineries help define Oakville, which is a virtual Who's Who of Napa Valley." What American Cabernet fan has not heard of Robert Mondavi Winery, Far Niente, Groth Vineyards & Winery, Opus One, and Silver Oak? Have any wineries done more to establish Napa's "cult wine" mystique than Oakville's Dalla Valle, Harlan Estate, and Screaming Eagle? And Miner Family Vineyards, Oakville Ranch, Paradigm, Plumpjack, Rudd, and others have enhanced the reputation of Oakville's Cabernet-based wines.

The impressive list of Oakville wineries suggests an underlying reason for Oakville's success with Cabernet: a core of dynamic wine visionaries who recognized and invested in the area's excellent terroir for Cabernet. Well before the Bordeaux grape became Napa's *cause célèbre*, Hamilton Walker Crabb, a man with a keen interest in vines, bought 240 acres in the area in 1863, converted his crop from table to European grapes in the 1870s, and changed the vineyard's name to a Greek expression, To Kalon (roughly translated as "the beautiful"). By the 1890s, Crabb's property supported an 800,000-gallon winery, and his wines from To Kalon earned many accolades.

San Francisco real-estate tycoon John Benson purchased 400 acres in Oakville in 1873, planting 84 in vines. In 1885 he hired Inglenook's brilliant general manager and engineer, H. W. McIntyre, to build the magnificent Far Niente winery. But it wasn't until an energetic Oklahoman, Gil Nickel, bought the property in 1978, restored the winery, and instituted uncompromising quality standards that Far Niente became one of Napa's premier properties, and the winery remains a marvel of beauty and design.

Following Prohibition, Cabernet Sauvignon replaced German varieties in Oakville's established west-side vineyards. Martin Stelling replanted To Kalon, and Martha and Tom May planted their 34 vineyard acres south of To Kalon to Cabernet. In 1965 they sold the grapes to Joseph Heitz, who found the fruit so extraordinary that he did a separate *Martha's Vineyard* bottling in 1966—arguably Napa's—and Oakville's—first cult wine.

Robert Mondavi, America's nonpareil wine ambassador, established his now-famous winery in 1966 on a 12-acre parcel of the To Kalon vineyard within site of Highway 29. Over the years Robert Mondavi Winery purchased a total of 550 acres of To Kalon, which included venerable Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc vines. The latter were planted in 1945 and became the principal source of Mondavi's acclaimed *Fumé Blanc Reserve*.

Baron Philippe de Rothschild provided all the *éclat* Oakville could ask for when he partnered with Robert Mondavi in a wine project that became Opus One. His daughter, Baroness Philippine, has delivered the glamor following the baron's death, guiding the iconic Opus One winery to its completion

in 1991 and continuing her hands-on involvement to this day.

Any list of skilled winemakers who have made their mark in Oakville would include Zelma Long, Warren Winiarski, Mike Grgich, and Tim Mondavi (Robert Mondavi); Justin Meyer (Silver Oak); Nils Venge (Villa Mt. Eden, Groth, Plumpjack, Saddleback Cellars); Michael Weis (Robert Mondavi, Groth); Heidi Peterson Barrett (Paradigm, Screaming Eagle), Gary Brookman (Joseph Phelps, Miner Family Vineyards); and Joe Cafaro (Dalla Valle, Oakville Ranch, Emilio's Terrace).

Happy Medium

Oakville's climate and soils are ideally suited for ripening Bordeaux varieties. Tempering a warm and sunny climate, morning fog from cool San Pablo Bay blankets the southern part of Napa Valley, persisting longer in the day in Yountville, just south of Oakville, and vanishing sooner in Rutherford to the immediate north; cooling breezes from the bay often develop during growing-season afternoons. Oakville is warmer than Yountville and slightly cooler than Rutherford. The 35-inch annual rainfall comes mainly after harvest and before flowering, contributing to mostly successful growing seasons and harvests. Heat spikes are common and sometimes wreak havoc when they occur at harvest, accelerating the desired rate of fruit maturation.

On its west side Oakville shares with Yountville and Rutherford some of the alluvial-fan formations and complex soils that have washed down from the Mayacamas and spread out gradually across the valley floor toward the Napa River. These well-drained soils are an ideal milieu for Cabernet Sauvignon. Vineyards such as To Kalon (shared by Robert Mondavi Winery, Opus One, and Beckstoffer Vineyards), Far Niente's Martin Stelling, Martha's, Swanson, and Paradigm are exceptional Cabernet expanses on a Mayacamas alluvial bench. To the west and above these vineyards are the thinly soiled, steeply sloped vineyards of Harlan Estate, Bond, and Emilio's Terrace—all ideal environments for growing low-yield, high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon.

On the east side of Oakville, red volcanic soils in less-extensive alluvial fans from the Vacas spill across the Silverado Trail onto the valley floor and are excellent substrates for expressive Cabernet Sauvignon. Dalla Valle, Oakville Ranch, Joseph Phelps (*Backus* Cabernet), Rudd, Terra Roja, Screaming Eagle, and Gargiulo all share these soils. Here canopy management is critically important to help shade grapes from the burning afternoon sun.

In between, Oakville valley-floor soils are complex, having elements derived from the Mayacamas and Vacas, as well as deep clay-loam soils and riverbed gravel deposited from ages of Napa River and Conn Creek flooding. The soils in vineyards north and south of Oakville Cross Road belonging to Swanson, Groth, Franciscan Estate, Silver Oak, Saddleback Cellars, and others support a number of varieties beyond Cabernet, including Merlot, Petite Sirah, Sangiovese, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Sauvignon Blanc. These are excellent soils for expressing, in Groth Winemaker Michael Weis's words, "lifted aromas, black stone fruit, balance, elegance—a sense of unity" in Bordeaux varieties.

Essence of Oakville

Distinguishing Oakville Cabernet from neighboring appellations—especially

the

and wineries, are dynamic. Oakville is no different, except that the high prices wineries get for their wines allow them the luxury of pursuing wine nirvana and investing in the best vineyard and winery equipment, technology, and talent. Highly skilled viticulturalists and winemakers are naturally attracted to an outstanding terroir where no expense is spared to make exceptional wines.

Linda Neal, a veteran vineyard consultant who started making wines from her Terra Roja vineyard with the 2004 vintage, has seen the change from owner to third-party farming, noting that “vineyard management companies now farm 75 percent of the Oakville vineyards” and some family-owned properties such as Robert Mondavi and Robert Pei have become corporate entities. Despite these changes and many more, Neal concludes, “Oakville remains a wonderful farming community.”

Oakville newcomers such as Emilio’s Terrace, Gargiulo, and Tamber Bey are striving to make their mark. April Gargiulo asserts, “My father thought that Oakville was where you had the best raw materials to work with,” and there’s ample evidence in Oakville vineyards and wineries that her father’s judgment was sound. New wineries and old also benefit from membership in Oakville Winegrowers, which Tamber Bey owner Barry Waitte calls “a fabulous trade organization,” where the old guard and new owners can share insights and expertise.

Oakville—and the wine world—may have lost its charismatic leader, Robert Mondavi, but the wine talent in Oakville is deep, the superb terroir for Cab-based wines is intact, and people with acuity and drive continue to seek their wine destiny in this special strip of Napa Valley. Barring drastic climate change, Oakville’s Cabernet-based wines should be in high demand for many years to come.



What Is an Oakville Wine?

General Characteristics

Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon is powerful and multitextured, with complex and rich black fruit and fine tannins. Merlot is a success in the heavier valley-floor soils. Minor plantings of such red grapes as Sangiovese, Zinfandel, and Syrah are rich and complex. Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Gris express rich ripe fruit with savory notes and good extract.

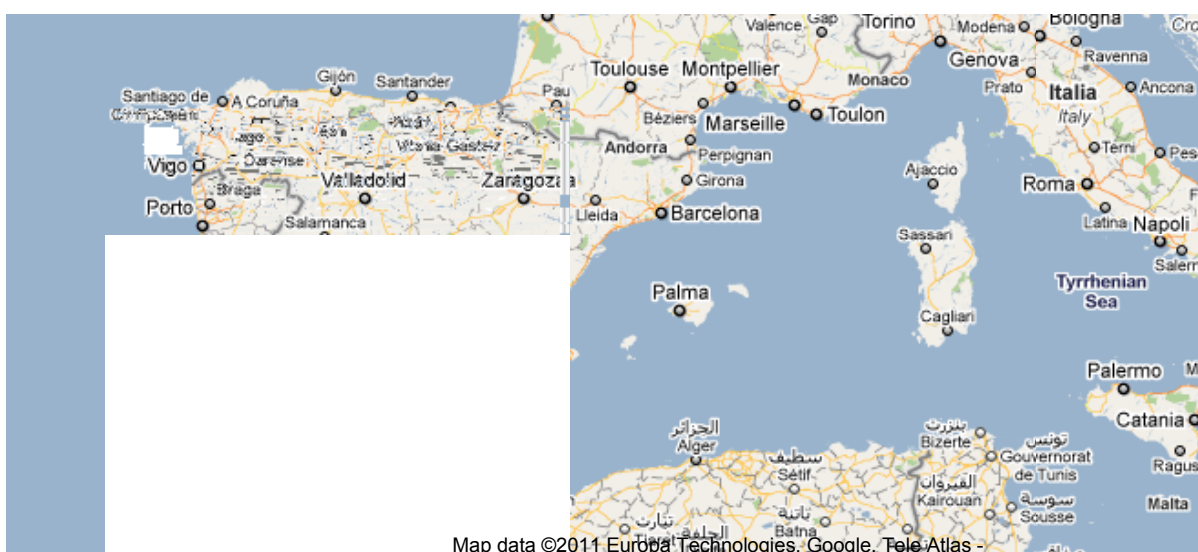
Aging

Reserve-quality bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines in very good years will improve with bottle age and can age gracefully for 15 years or more. Regular Cabernet and other red-grape bottlings should be drunk within five years of release. Oakville’s white wines are ready to drink upon release.

About the Author

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