



THE RESURRECTION OF MOUNT VEEDER

After years of flying above the radar, the “hippie” wine growers of Napa Valley’s last frontier are having to make way for the coming of the suits. **Roger Morris** climbs a mountain to report on the Napa Valley grape rush

How can a mountain virtually disappear and then reappear again? During the 1970s, the red wines of Mount Veeder were the pride of Napa Valley, made flavorful by small mountain berries and bolstered with tannins that promised—correctly, it turns out—years of slow maturation. But over the last quarter of the 20th century, other regions of the valley such as Stags Leap and Howell Mountain became the hot new places to plant Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Interest gradually faded in this steep and densely forested flank of the Mayacamas range that separates western Napa County from eastern Sonoma County. It was as if the morning fog off nearby San Pablo Bay had dissipated, taking the mountain with it.

As Napa Valley became more wealthy and cosmopolitan, Mount Veeder remained a reflection of its rural, somewhat-wild past. “Mount Veeder has always been a [culturally] marginal place,” says Californian Aaron Pott, who has been a flying winemaker for Beringer and an on-the-ground winemaker at Bordeaux châteaux Troplong Mondot and La Tour Figéac and who now has his own small estate on the mountain. “No place in Napa Valley has more weirdos,” he says somewhat affectionately. “You have these long driveways going off into the woods, and, at the end, there are weirdos. So, I fit right in. It’s my favorite place in the valley.”

Photography courtesy of Fynn-Rae, Tesseron Estate

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Pott isn't the only one who has a newfound love for Mount Veeder, especially over the past dozen years. And this renewed interest is far from limited to weirdos and counterculturalists looking for a life off the grid. This time, the big corporate guys and gals have jumped in with both feet, buying up vineyards and wineries on the mountain. Most notable among them are the Jackson Family (with Lokoya and Mt Brave), Constellation Brands (Mount Veeder), Treasury Wine Estates (Beringer), Trinchero Family Estates (Trinchero), Hess Collection (Hess), and Cuvaision Estate Wines (Brandlin).

Two years ago, the Tesseron family of Château Pontet-Canet purchased a choice vineyard owned by the late actor Robin Williams, adding a Gallic touch to the Mount Veeder grape rush. And there has even been a whiff of financial scandal. Charles Banks, former owner of cult favorite Screaming Eagle and co-owner of one of Mount Veeder's iconic estates—Mayacamas Vineyards—was sentenced in June 2017 to four years in prison for defrauding former professional basketball star Tim Duncan, a longtime investment client.

Winemaking on Mount Veeder suffered a serious setback—as did the rest of Napa Valley and North Coast wine regions in general—when deadly wildfires swept through the area in early October, just as the harvest was coming to an end (see *WFW* 58, pp.22–26). Some wineries were damaged and some vineyards burned, but the 2017 vintage was mostly saved, and the winemakers of Mount Veeder are quickly trying to get life back to normal.

An early frontier and the last

In reality, Mount Veeder is not a single peak but part of a range that includes adjoining Spring Mountain as well as Diamond Mountain to the north. Mount Veeder is at the range's terminus, where it plunges downward into the cooler Carneros region and San Pablo Bay. It was about 140 years ago that Mount Veeder attracted its first group of winemakers, mostly German-speaking immigrants who had flocked into California after the Gold Rush of 1849. It was not an easy place to carve out a vineyard, with its steep slopes, dense stands of redwoods, and unfriendly rattlesnakes and mountain lions, but land was cheaper here than on the valley floor.

Then, less than 40 years later, Prohibition—America's experiment with temperance that lasted from 1920 to 1933—shut down California winemaking. The Great Depression that followed tempered any immediate reflowering, so winemaking faltered for the rest of the decade. Finally, after World War II, grape-growing and winemaking slowly began to reemerge on the mountain and in the valley. An early sign of revitalization began in 1971 with the establishment of Mayacamas Vineyards on Mount Veeder, using a winery constructed in 1889.

The official website of the Mount Veeder Appellation website neatly sums up how the mountain earned its cultural branding to go along with its winemaking reputation. "During

Above: Consultant Aaron Pott: "The more I make wines, the more I love the mountain." Opposite: A vineyard belonging to Constellation, one of several large new players.

Photography courtesy of (left) Claire Pott; (right) Mount Veeder Winery

Despite the recent spate of attention and influx of capital, Mount Veeder is still the least developed region of Napa Valley. For basically geographic reasons, it is likely to remain so. Although it is huge—16,000 acres (6,500ha)—less than 1,000 acres (400ha) are under vine. Its average annual production is about 40,000 cases, less than 2 percent of Napa Valley's total. "It's the last frontier in the valley," says Tom Gamble

the 1960s, Mount Veeder became a haven for people seeking a lifestyle closer to nature," it explains. "Among them were Arlene and Michael Bernstein [founders of Mount Veeder Winery], whose 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon was the first wine to bear the Mount Veeder designation on the label."

Another early winemaker drop-out who found his way to Mount Veeder was Lore Olds, who in 1973 founded the secluded and well-named Sky Vineyards at the 2,100ft (640m) level. After 45 years at the helm, Olds is undoubtedly Mount Veeder's reigning winemaker, though he is gradually handing over control to his daughter, Skyla Olds. "My parents were hippies growing up in Berkeley who decided to move to the country," she says. "I was a hippie child, and I was actually born on the property."

Although Skyla Olds went east to graduate from Wellesley and then finish law school, she has maintained her love for both Sky and the Mount Veeder lifestyle. "My folks also worked at Mayacamas Winery," which by then had been taken over by the legendary Bob Travers, "and my sister and I would walk 2 miles [3.2km] over fire roads to visit them. It was pretty idyllic, lost back in time. Even today, we're still off the power grid."

Indeed, despite the recent spate of attention and influx of capital, Mount Veeder is still the least developed region of Napa Valley. For basically geographic reasons, it is likely to remain so. Although it is huge—25 sq miles (16,000 acres, or about 6,500ha)—less than 1,000 acres (400ha) are under vine. Its average annual production is about 40,000 cases, less than 2 percent of Napa Valley's total. Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted variety—513 acres (208ha), 64 percent of the total area under vine—with Chardonnay (76 acres [30.5ha]) the only significant white grape variety. Mount Veeder is also the only Napa Valley region with more Malbec planted than Merlot.

"It's the last frontier in the valley," says Tom Gamble, whose Gamble Family Vineyards owns 40 acres (16ha) of vines on the mountain. Gamble, whose family has farmed grapes in Oakville for three generations, is one of the several valley-floor wineries now owning vineyards or sourcing grapes on Mount Veeder.

Myriad challenges and opportunities

The attractions of growing grapes on Mount Veeder are varied. It actually has two primary areas, though neither is officially recognized. The northern segment is warmer, while the southernmost part gets fog and cooling breezes from the bay. "The southern part is all uplifted sea floor of shale and



sandstone, while the other part has a volcanic overlay," adds Carole Meredith, who owns a small winery, Lagier-Meredith, with husband Steve Lagier. "One thing common to both is that Mount Veeder has shallow soils that drain quickly, which means less vigor and smaller berries."

If her name sounds familiar, Meredith is a retired professor and researcher at UC Davis, America's primary wine school, and is internationally known for her DNA work identifying the origins of grape varieties. It was she who traced California's Zinfandel to Croatia, and Meredith uses Zinfandel's ancestral name, Tribidrag, on Lagier-Meredith's small production of Mount Veeder Zinfandel.

The growing season on Mount Veeder is longer than it is in the valley, with budbreak earlier and picking normally later, but the diurnal temperature swings are less wide. "We're above the fog line," explains Chris Carpenter, who makes wines under the Mt Brave and Lokoya labels from adjacent vineyards in the mountain's northern section. "That means we get lots of light and thus concentrated flavor accumulation. We also get big tannins, so the wines can last forever." Carpenter also points out that while the mountain may be somewhat cooler, heat is relative. "It may be 97° F [36° C] on the valley floor, but it will still be 91°–92° F [33° C] up here," he says.

Despite the commercial rush to Mount Veeder as a place for growing intense, long-aging red wines, there are reasons why production there will most likely continue to be limited, a fact recognized even by corporate investors. One reason is the combination of steep slopes and dense forests. For years, Napa Valley has been very strict about not cutting trees unnecessarily and not planting grapes on slopes steeper than 30 percent, to prevent both erosion and water runoff. As it is, the Napa River floods all too often during heavy winter and spring rains. As an example of strict land management, Pott says he owns 210 acres (85ha) but has only 5 acres (2ha) planted and probably will not be able to expand to more than another 15 acres (6ha), chiefly because of the property's steep slopes.

The other barrier to expansion is also about water—but in this case the lack of it. Drip irrigation is still the norm in Napa Valley, and even those owners who have vineyards on Mount Veeder are not rushing to put water-consuming wineries next to their mountain properties. "You really need a good well," Pott says. Jay Schuppert is president of Cuvaison, which produces Mount Veeder wines under the Brandlin label, with the grapes trucked down to Cuvaison's modern winery near San Pablo Bay. On a tour of Brandlin's 38 acres (15ha) planted at around the 1,000ft (300m) level, Schuppert explains that those 38 acres are carved up into 15 different blocks. Among them are older, head-pruned vines from pre-irrigation days. "There's not a lot of water up here," he says, "so we are almost dry farming."

Dry farming and biodynamic wine growing were the intent of the Tesserons from the time they scouted out Robin Williams's Villa Sorriso estate and its Pym-Rae Vineyard. Shortly after the property was purchased, young Thomas Comme moved to Mount Veeder in early 2016 to plan for the first harvest. Thomas's father, Jean-Michel Comme, famously converted Pontet-Canet into a biodynamic property, and the younger Comme is doing the same at Pym-Rae.

"When I got here," Comme says, "the vines were in perfect shape. It was obvious that the owners cherished the vineyard and took great care of it." The only sticking point that the Tesserons had in buying the property was that Williams had built on it a 20,000-sq-ft (1,800-sq-m) mansion that would put most Bordeaux châteaux to shame, with its nine bedrooms and 17 baths. But it had no winery. It did, however, have more than 100 olive trees and a 19-acre (8ha), drip-irrigated vineyard with 25-year-old vines whose fruit was being sold to a neighbor.

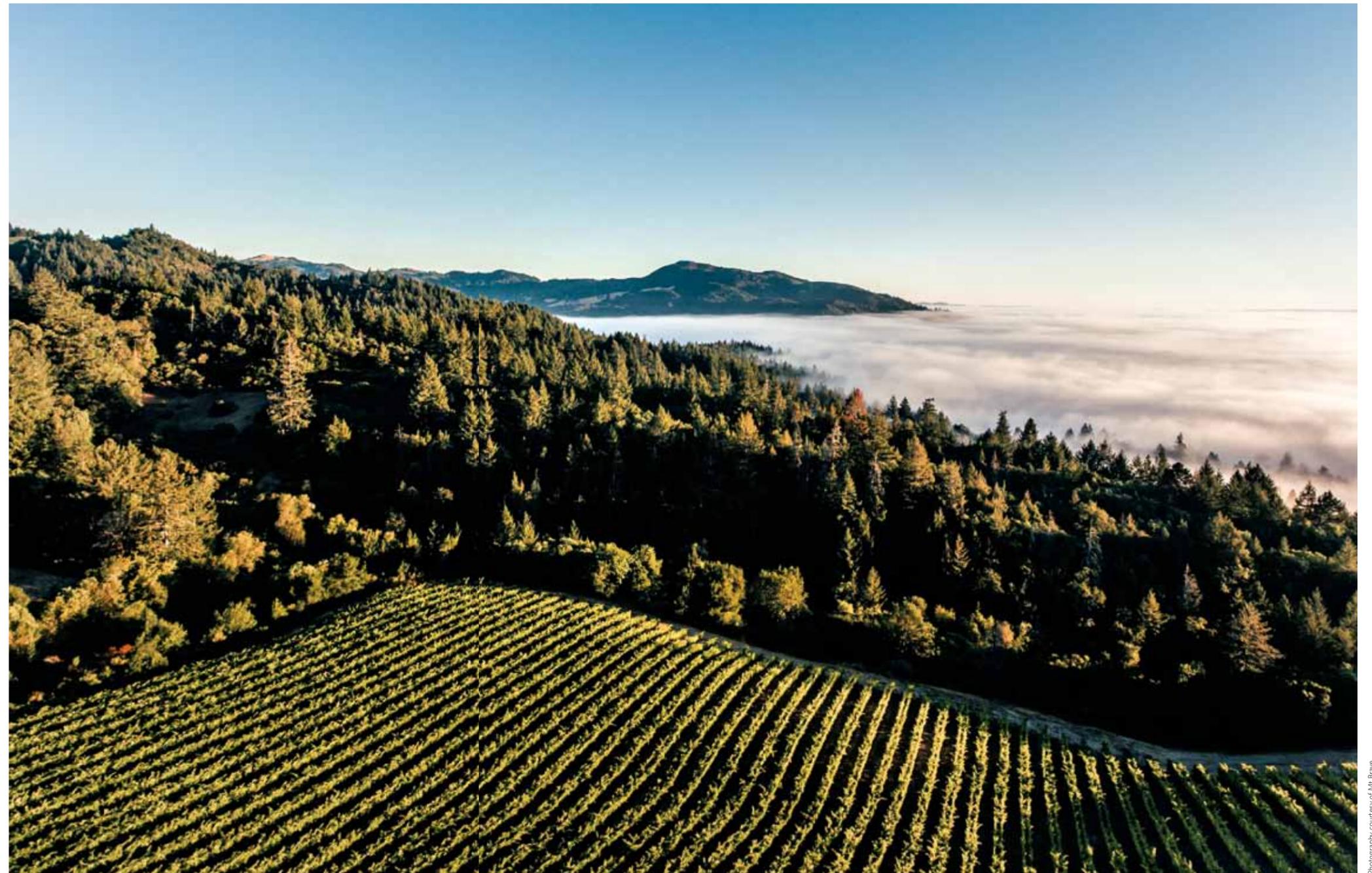
"First, we wanted to stop the pesticides and get rid of the chemicals," says Comme, who must rattle around in the huge mansion. When he arrived, the valley had seen a wet winter, so,

as he says, "We didn't have to turn the water off, because it hadn't been turned on. Besides, the roots are very deep."

Comme went looking for a small winery where he could do a custom crush for the 2016 vintage, which was just a few months away. "I found a place on the other side of the valley," he says, "so we have to truck the grapes down one mountain and up another. We had tanks specially made for us, and they almost didn't get here on time." Comme says that he's happy with the facility he is renting and plans to continue making wine there for the foreseeable future. "I wanted two tons an acre," he says somewhat sheepishly. But he had done too much crop reduction in the vineyard, so he "got a little less." The wine,

which is still in barrels, will produce somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 bottles when the first vintage is ready. Incidentally, the Tesserons were eager to show off their New World wine, selectively pouring barrel samples at Pontet-Canet during the annual en primeur tastings in spring 2017.

Even though Pott may joke about the history of weirdos on Mount Veeder, he is enthusiastic about its renaissance. "In the 1970s, Mount Veeder produced some of the best Cabs in the world," he attests. "Then it went into a dark period. As a consultant, I make wines all over the valley and have made wines around the world. But the more I make wines, the more I love the mountain. ■



Right: A Mt Brave vineyard, where winemaker Chris Carpenter says, "We're above the fog line, [which] means we get lots of light and thus concentrated flavor accumulation."

Photography courtesy of Mt Brave