



RUTHERFORD

NAPA VALLEY'S CABERNET HEARTLAND

“The map is not the territory.”
— Marshall McLuhan

The evolution of viticultural areas has proceeded in the same way since the days of Pliny the Elder in ancient Italy, and probably, if we had records to prove it, long before that. It's deceptively simple. Appellations tend to evolve from large, general areas toward more precise definition and internal differentiation as the result of an increasingly tight interface of terrain, grape variety and human culture. People start cultivating grapes and making wine in a promising area, and before you know it (in the big picture, anyway) there are verticals of Romanée-Conti and Château Latour — wines from small pieces of land that have emerged over time, rising to prominence from their very roots, through terroir and winemaking to sustained critical consensus.

More than a century ago, Napa Valley began its long emergence as one of the New World's outstanding appellations, particularly for distinctive cabernet sauvignon. The past twenty vintages or so have begun to reveal the viticultural character of smaller areas within the valley through the cabernet medium.

Now, more than a dozen Napa Valley sub-appellations have been approved or are in the making. But none of them are more luminous than Rutherford, the valley's once and future cabernet heartland.

The distinctive character of a Rutherford cab has acquired the sobriquet *Rutherford Dust*. Reportedly the great Beaulieu Vineyard enologist André Tchelistcheff once sniffed a glass of Georges de Latour Private Reserve and commented, "I can smell the Rutherford dust." I have come to believe that all he really meant was that he recognized a wine from the de Latour estate — and yet many observers, including me at times, have noted a certain quality in Rutherford bench wines, a minerality perhaps, or a graphite-like scent of clean dusty gravel.

BY ROD SMITH

WINE • SPIRITS • DECEMBER 2007

3

The Rutherford AVA was only formalized ten years ago. But the name Rutherford has been synonymous with Napa Valley cabernet since the 19th century. There have been as many changes since then, large and small, as there might be in a primeval organism progressing from protozoan to quadruped.

Rutherford's historical prominence in the overall Napa Valley cabernet picture continues. Recent vintages have seen an explosion of wineries bottling Rutherford-designated cabernets — at least two dozen in 2000 (the current vintage for most wineries). And many Napa Valley wineries rely on a dollop of precious Rutherford cab to power up a Napa Valley blend.

"Rutherford is the historic center of cabernet sauvignon in California," notes Andy Beckstoffer, the largest grower in Rutherford, with some 400 acres in varied locations. "André Tchelistcheff told me that when he came to California in the late thirties there were only 120 acres of cabernet in the whole state. Half of that was in Rutherford, at BV and Inglenook. When I came here in the sixties there were still only six cabernet producers in Napa Valley." Today, virtually every Napa Valley winery produces cabernet sauvignon. Nearly 60 percent of Rutherford's 3,298 acres of vines are cabernet, accounting for about 15 percent of the Napa Valley's cabernet acreage.

It was no accident that legendary Napa Valley wine men of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Gustav Niebaum and Georges de Latour, founded their wine estates on the gentle slopes around a one-time train stop called Rutherford. It's a sweet spot in the valley, like the fabled sweet spot on a baseball bat or a tennis racket. And it especially favors cabernet sauvignon. Indeed, if a panel of viticulturists were granted divine powers and told to design an ideal cabernet environment, they would have a hard time trumping the Rutherford district.

Rutherford lies at a critical point in the valley's topographic and climatic continuum, between the flatter, more open lower valley and the narrower, rockier upper valley. Its vineyards grow on well-drained alluvial soils, basking in morning and midday sun but mostly (except on the eastern slopes) getting early relief from the harshest afternoon heat.

There's a tenderness to the summer blaze there, thanks largely to the slightly cooler exposure along with a localized Pacific

influence. A faint sigh of cool, moist air from the Russian River Valley via a network of mountain canyons tempers the hottest days.

It's not an immediately obvious influence. A person trudging through a Rutherford vineyard on a warm August day might not feel it. But the grape vines feel its cumulative effect throughout the season,



and it shows in their fruit. That moisture-sweetened heat infuses the grapes and radiates softly in Rutherford cabernets.

It is resplendent in some of the classic Rutherford cabs of yesteryear that I've tasted over the last year. The 1941 Inglenook is a case in point. From the succulent splash of 60-year-old sunshine at its heart, through layers of time-sculpted complexity, it's still a majestic wine. The 1951 Beaulieu, an elegant garnet beauty with deep, luscious flavor and a long tobacco-nuanced finish, is another good example. And the Inglenook '58 Cask F-10 has matured into the silky essence of sunshine itself — it seems to shine on the palate.

Rutherford was one of the earliest parts of the Napa Valley to produce wine commercially in significant volume. When Napa Valley pioneer George C. Yount arrived in 1836, he was given 11,814 acres of land by General M.G. Vallejo, Mexico's colonial governor in Alta California; the land grant still appears as Caymus Rancho

on USGS maps of the valley.

Twenty-six years later, Yount's granddaughter Lillie married Thomas Rutherford. As a wedding gift from Grandpa they received 1,040 acres of Caymus Rancho at a relatively wide spot in the valley between modern-day Oakville and St. Helena.

Four years after the wedding a railroad line was extended up the valley, with a Rutherford station stop among the burgeoning vines. Thus, the Rutherfords gave their name to what would eventually become some of the most revered viticultural land in California.

Even more than a century after that, the Rutherford AVA was not easily defined (see "Wrangling in the Rutherford Dust," *W&S* June '93). It embraces a wide cross-section of the valley, from well above the town of Rutherford to well below it, and from one side to the other up to around the 400-foot contour. The realities of the Rutherford American Viticultural Area defined by the BATF in '93 are quite a bit more specific than the nearly mythological state of enchantment conjured in the wine lover's imagination by the name Rutherford.

The so-called Rutherford Bench was the essence of the original AVA petition, and remains the heart of the AVA. The term bench is common in descriptions of river valleys throughout the West. It generally refers to a shoulder or bank of sediment between the valley floor and steep slopes — part ancient riverbank, part slough zone for debris from higher up. In this case, it refers to a single, large alluvial fan.

The benchland soils are diverse in specific profiles, but they have several things in common. They are composed of materials transported down the steep Mayacamas slopes over time, primarily by water. Their component materials are mainly marine (the uplifted Franciscan bedrock mélange) but also include volcanic material (decomposed lavas and ashes deposited during an explosive geological period known as the Sonoma Volcanics). And they are almost all aerated, well-drained gravelly loams — the exceptions being the same kind of patches and lenses of unsuitable material found in all appellations, including the likes of, say, Pauillac or Corton.

The benchland is also the appellation's historical locus. Here, the full range of the Napa Valley wine story can be tracked through waves of vineyard development, from the pioneers to the current cutting edge.

The fabled vineyards of settlers such as Thomas Rutherford were here before the 1880s phylloxera devastation, which virtually erased them as if they had never existed. The vines of Gustav Niebaum (whose 1887 Inglenook wines were the first in California to be estate-bottled rather than shipped in bulk) were reportedly propagated on resistant rootstock in time to survive phylloxera, and then survived Prohibition. Georges de Latour established Beaulieu Vineyard after phylloxera, and his vines also survived Prohibition.

Most of the great vineyards were planted after Repeal (1933). But not much happened until the first stirrings of a Napa Valley renaissance in the 1960s.

Freemark Abbey's Bosché is perhaps the most salient example. The 30-acre planting is among the valley's most privileged sites, adjacent to the original Georges de Latour vineyard and next door to Niebaum-Coppola. Its story is typical of the latter-day pioneer plantings.



John Bosché, who was born in Chile and became a successful San Francisco attorney, bought a vacation home in Rutherford in the mid-1950s. The property came with an old vineyard made up of diverse grape varieties. Not all of them were, shall we say, noble. Bosché began replanting to cabernet sauvignon in 1961, with local grower Lau-

rie Wood as viticultural consultant.

It was a no-brainer to sell the first crops to neighboring Beaulieu (as a component of the Private Reserve in some years), but Bosché kept his eye out for a producer who might want to make a vineyard-designated wine from his vineyard.

That became a real possibility when



Paul Godwin

Wood and five other partners founded Freemark Abbey in 1967. A year later, Freemark Abbey made three barrels of wine from Bosché's cabernet. BV had already spoken for all the fruit in '69, but the next year Wood and his partners were able to buy half of the vineyard's yield. Beginning in '71 they had complete control of the vineyard and all of its fruit, producing a few thousand cases of Cabernet Bosché each year.

The 1970 Freemark Abbey Cabernet Bosché was the first in a sequence that now stands at 33 vintages and counting. I tasted it earlier this year, and it was gorgeous — beautifully firm and vibrant, with a concentration that probably reflects the natural crop thinning of that year's relentless frost season, one of the worst on record. Subse-

quent vintages have shown a remarkable continuity of Bosché character (tobacco-like earthiness and a touch of green olive, among other things) through each discrete expression of a particular growing season.

The vineyard has continued to evolve. The partners began replanting and upgrading it in the eighties, before clone and rootstock became buzzwords. The winemaking has evolved, too. Throughout the nineties, Cabernet Boschés have been noticeably more luscious and approachable in youth, quietly but firmly on the leading edge of Napa Valley style. The '00 is generously perfumed and concentrated, with crystal-clear fruit flavors and nicely raspy texture. It echoes on the palate for a long time with a seductive earthy note that might be called Rutherford dust.

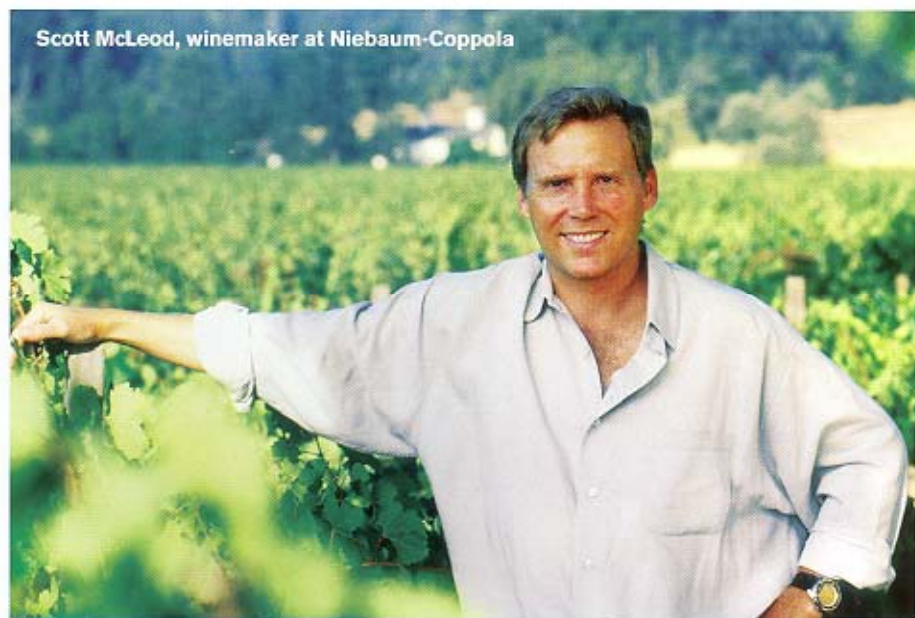
The iconic Rutherford bench planting is the original Beaulieu Vineyard, just south of Bosché. Planted by Georges de Latour in 1901 and still owned by his descendents, it has been replanted twice (in the 1960s and 1990s) and remains the core, along with another vineyard two miles south, of BV Georges de Latour Private Reserve. Until recently the Private Reserve was the classic expression of Rutherford bench cabernet sauvignon. A good example is the youthful 1986 that I tasted earlier this year, with its piercing cabernet flavor and clear earthy note. Yet during the 1990s, the Private Reserve program came to include fruit from

the historical perspective — by the re-invented Gustave Niebaum-Inglenook estate just to the south. Owner Frances Coppola has spent years piecing the original Niebaum property back together after the disastrous years under corporate ownership when the name Inglenook became synonymous with cheap Central Valley jug wine.

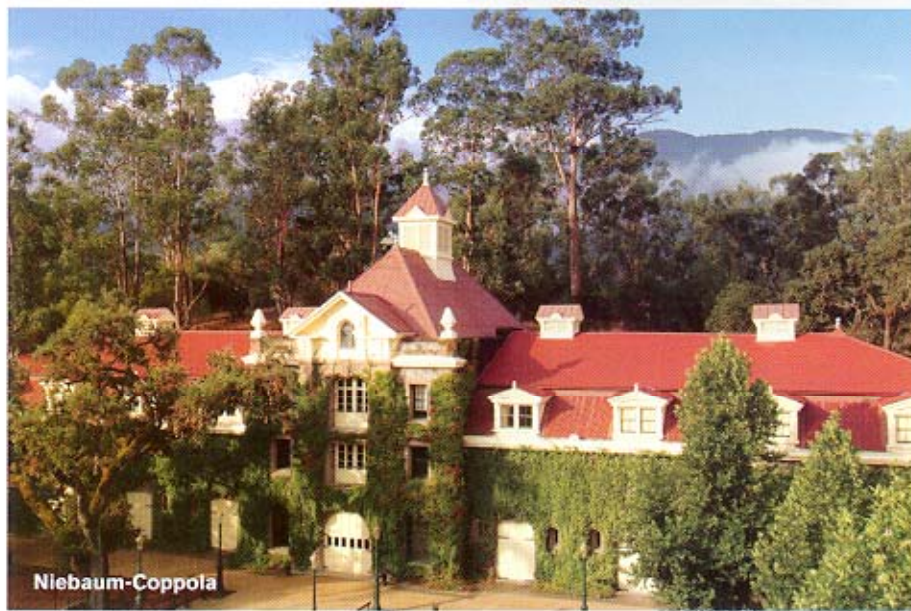
History came full circle during the 2002 vintage. In that year grapes from the historic Gustav Niebaum vineyard were vinified in the original Niebaum estate winery for the first time in 36 years. The room is

The gleaming metal gadgetry looks futuristic (the handheld pneumatic punch-down pistons, for example), yet it's simply bringing a mechanical advantage to tasks performed with muscle power a century ago — "Captain Niebaum meets Captain Nemo," as winemaker Scott McLeod puts it. The reference to 19th century sci-fi writer Jules Verne is apt. You might say McLeod is making wine in a time machine.

The little gem of a winery was considered state-of-the-art when it first produced wine in 1887. It was noted by early observers of



Scott McLeod, winemaker at Niebaum-Coppola



Niebaum-Coppola

a number of other Napa Valley vineyards. Still a legendary Napa Valley cabernet, Private Reserve is no longer the direct expression of Georges de Latour's "beautiful place" at the heart of the AVA.

Beaulieu's place as the iconic Rutherford estate has been taken — or regained, from

little more than a compact wooden box inside the old chateau, filled with big wooden tanks and lots of vaguely nautical-looking hardware, some old and some brand-new. No doubt it reflects Capt. Niebaum's maritime esthetic; it's easy to imagine it inside an old-time sailing ship.

the California wine industry. "To ensure a proper receptacle for the wines, Captain Niebaum erected a cellar and winery, which was completed in 1887, and which, for perfection of detail and elegant finish, has no equal in America," wrote Frona Eunice Wait in her 1889 book, *Wines and Vines of California*. Wait went on to describe a winemaking regime that is remarkably similar to the one practiced today.

I tasted several lots of '02s in the winery during crush. Some were in mid-fermentation and still sweet, like ambrosial syrup. The cabernet from the 35-year-old Garden block smelled and tasted like chewy violet candy, which McLeod said is typical. That historic wine is now resting in barrels, something to anticipate with pleasure. Meanwhile, McLeod produced two stunning cabs in '99: the powerfully intense, tightly-wound Rubicon (with about ten percent other Bordeaux varieties) and the richer, more rustic all-cab Cask. The '00 Rubicon (93 percent cab), an opulent wine with massive, supple tannin and earthy dark fruit flavors, still shows that piercing note of violets.

At the southern end of the bench, close to where Rutherford's alluvial fan overlaps the

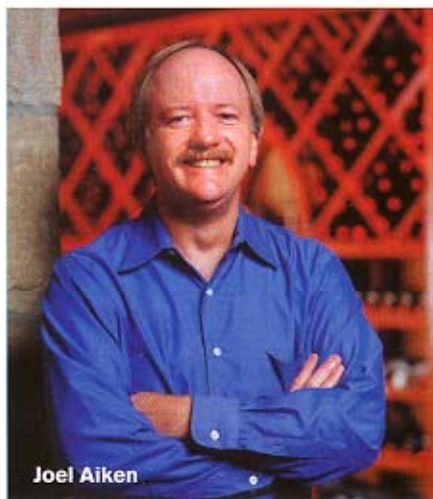
northern Oakville deposit, the Staglin, Rhodes (Bella Oaks) and Sycamore (Freemark Abbey) vineyards also yield distinctive wines. The Staglin '99 in particular is one of the most impressive Rutherford cabs in memory. Its perfume heralds clear, dark fruit flavors focused by the distinctive high-toned savor of cabernet sauvignon, carried over the palate on waves of fine-textured tannin.

The alluvial benchland merges with deeper river-bottom soils west of Highway 29. I've speculated that the wines from this deeper, less-well-drained loam may be a bit richer and more massive than those from higher on the bench, and look forward to seeing whether that plays out in coming vintages. The '02 Bell Cabernet from the Baritelle Vineyard, near the northern appellation boundary, is a good example. But do its deep, brooding fruit and teeth-gripping tannin say more about clone (it's entirely the low-yielding clone 6), wine-making, or terroir? Terroir has the edge in my mind. Other '02s I've tasted from vineyards between the highway and the river, such as Sawyer and Sequoia Grove, show similar breadth and richness.

Across the Napa River bottomland, the east side of the AVA has its own bench, composed of multiple alluvial fans and mostly volcanic materials. It receives less of the gentle morning sun than the western bench, and more blazing late day heat before the sun dips below the Mayacamas. Do these differences steer cabernet toward brawny fruit and denser, more velvety tannins? Time, and a lot of comparative tasting, may tell.

Merryvale-Beckstoffer Vineyards '00 strikes me that way. Its overt lushness, svelte tannin and powerful momentum through the palate had me guessing Stags Leap District in a recent blind tasting. But does that have more to do with clone (like the Bell, it's all clone 6), winemaking (native yeast fermentation, no filtration), or vineyard location? The fact that I find similar qualities in cabs from Caymus, Terraces, and Frank Family, all along the Silverado Trail, suggests that there may actually be a distinctive eastern Rutherford character.

The east side of Rutherford AVA also offers another historical case study in the new Quintessa estate. This is not only the most recent major development in the Rutherford AVA, but the last significant piece of the



Joel Aiken



Napa Valley floor to be planted in the 20th century. In fact, it may be the last great vineyard established in the valley, period.

San Francisco restaurateur George Mardikian bought the hilly tract of land near Rutherford in the 1940s, but never developed it. After Mardikian's death twenty years ago, his heirs refused to sell it — effectively holding the spectacular property in trust. Decade after decade, as the valley became a sea of world-famous vineyards, the promising 280-acre parcel between the Silverado Trail and the Napa River languished in its natural state.

With its five oak-crowned slopes like so many solar panels angled perfectly to the sun, its well-drained volcanic soils and large spring-fed pond, it was widely regarded as potentially one of the finest pieces of prime vineyard land in the valley. Vintners eyed it enviously, imagining the slopes and swales covered with vines.

When Franciscan Estates founders Agostin and Valeria Huneus acquired the Mardikian ranch in 1989, it was as if they'd reached back through time to seize a lost treasure. They did justice to the land, not only planting an intricately detailed vineyard (with block names such as Dragon's Terraces and Cruz del Sur) but also building a splen-

did architectural statement of a winery.

The '99 Quintessa has deep concentration and complex flavor, along with surprising finesse — which may reflect the contribution of some cooler exposures on the property.

In the spring of '01, I tasted several '00 Quintessa cabernets from barrel. They represented different combinations of soil, exposure and slope, and provided some insight to the complexity of expression on the estate. For example, the Dragon's Terraces wine



Paul Godwin

showed a roasted-slope character. The Cruz del Sur and Corona Norte demonstrated what a difference a soil shift and steeper slope can make in tannin structure. And the wine from the Howard's Million block was a velvety beauty with a fine weight on the palate. The finished '00 Quintessa, tasted recently, offers a focused cabernet nose — Bordeaux kicked up several notches — and concentrated flavor in a long, sleek trajectory through the palate to an elegant finish.

More than anything else, trying to make sense of Rutherford terroir by tasting current wines gives a lesson in the diversity of appellation character. Momentous changes have occurred in the Rutherford wineries and vineyards over the years.

The modern science of controlled fermentation was introduced to California in the Beaulieu cellars in the late 1930s. André Tchelistcheff became the pillar of a newly-energized winemaking community based largely in Rutherford, and that momentum has continued through three generations of winemakers as they've developed an increasingly Rutherford-specific winemaking regime. Their collective focus on tannin management (gentle crushing and pressing, sprinkler-type pumpovers, and cold-soaking, for example) is particularly evident in the sleek, supple wines that were once exceptional and are now almost routine.

Progress in the vineyards has been less immediately visible but perhaps more dra-

matic. The seemingly steady rise of red Bordeaux grapes in the appellation has actually been in a series of lurches, each coming on the heels of catastrophes or blessings.

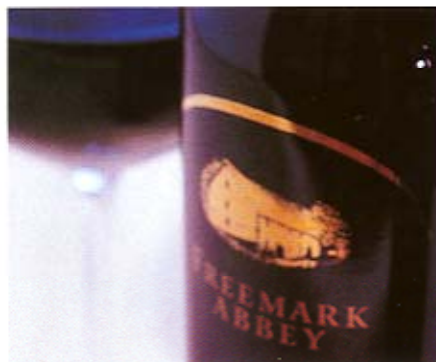
The first phylloxera infestation in the 1880s virtually wiped out California vineyards. Cabernet gained its foothold in Rutherford during the replanting, and surged again after Prohibition. The second coming of phylloxera, in the 1980s, necessitated replanting nearly three-quarters of the Napa Valley. This time cabernet (along with merlot) exploded.

Generally speaking, during economic downturns the Napa Valley wine industry has made it through largely on its solid cabernet sauvignon-based reputation. And economic booms, coming roughly once per decade between WWII and the turn of the millennium, have further stimulated production of cabernet, the so-called blue chip varietal.

The most recent replanting was particularly significant in Rutherford vineyards because it resulted in a consolidation of clones, selections and rootstocks particularly suited to the terrain — like the development of Rutherford-specific winemaking, this is a tighter interface between terrain, grape, and culture.

"Most of these vines are only seven years old or so," notes Beckstoffer. "The viticulture is changing every day. We're still learning

how to farm with this new set of clones and rootstocks. So character is going to come in



the future, with more vineyard designation and more attempt to show the vineyard rather than the winemaker."

As it had been in the first decade of the 20th century, Beaulieu was a major influence in the evolution of Rutherford's vineyards. Winemakers Tom Selfridge and Joel Aiken began a substantial test planting of cabernet clones during the early 1980s. By the time major re-planting was underway ten years later, several clones and selections had been identified as particularly suitable for the local terrain. Several of those, notably the so-called Jackson Clone (#6) were embraced by Andy Beckstoffer and other Rutherford growers, further differentiating the Rutherford vineyards

from the rest of the valley.

So the challenge to tasters in 2003 is to begin focusing on the AVA geographically. Are there differences between wines from different sectors? In the greater Napa Valley AVA it's become increasingly clear that wines from different parts of the valley have their own characteristics — the heroic proportions of Stags Leap District cabs, for example, or the raspy, black-fruit concentration of those from the Calistoga area. What about north Rutherford vs. the south, the bench vs. the valley floor?

Thus, even while working toward the intuitive principle of the classical European appellation model, which attempts to define viticultural homogeneity, the Rutherford AVA seems to be differentiating itself internally. It's up to astute observers and consumers to identify the winegrowing areas that have specific Rutherford character within their Napa Valley character.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of drinking well, tasting along with history is one of most rewarding aspects of a lifelong interest in wine. For thousands of years, generations of wine lovers have witnessed the emergence of wine regions and the development of their wine styles, at different times in many different places.

This is the age of New World wine. ■