

Tasting the Mountain Life

By Laura Jackson



Photos courtesy of Johndrow Vineyards

Intense. Earthy. Deliciously complex. Perfectly balanced.

Ways you might describe a fine wine as well as a life well-lived in the mountains. David and Maryann Johndrow, founders of one of Napa's hottest boutique wineries, Johndrow Vineyards, could tell you about both.

The Johndrows choose to live in Park City because of a deep love of the mountain lifestyle, and they chose Napa's Howell Mountain to grow grapes for some of their most successful and exclusive wines for many of the same reasons.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger...

Our lives are indisputably impacted by our outside environment. Adversity may challenge us to the very core, but what that difficulty produces is almost always better in

the long run. The same is true for grapes. Growing grapes on a mountain compared to the valley floor comes with its unique set of hardships. The temperature variance is greater. The soil is rocky, shallow and more unforgiving. And the yield of grapes is much smaller just to name a few. "But, for the grapes that survive the high-stress environment of the mountain, what you get in the end is a grape that is more concentrated and intense, and one that produces a beautifully complex and flavorful wine," explains Johndrow.

What makes Napa's Howell Mountain unique?

America's most famous wine region, Napa, is divided into 14 different subregions, called AVAs (American Viticultural Areas). Each AVA consists of its own separate microclimate and terrain, which allows the grapes growing in each to produce wines with such distinctly different personalities.

The Howell Mountain AVA is located about 2,200 feet above sea level. Because of its higher altitude, its daily growing conditions

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are cooler which helps protect the grapes from spiking summer temperatures. Another interesting feature is the inversion effect it gets at night. “Its evening temperatures can actually get higher than the valley below (even as much as 10 degrees higher), as the afternoon sun rises over the vineyard and warmth is trapped above the marine layer,” explains Johndrow. This unique microclimate grows exceptional grapes, especially for deliciously vibrant Cabernets.

Soil also makes a difference. The harsh, rocky soil on Howell Mountain is a deep red that is high in iron and minerals, partially due to the area’s decomposed volcanic ash, which also affects the taste of the wine, sometimes imparting a scrumptious smoky characteristic.

However, although the soil is rich in minerals, it is poor in nutrients, again causing extra stress for the vines. And it’s harder for the vines to find and retain water. All this extra stress on the vines results in the smaller, yet more intense and concentrated fruit. For example, Johndrow explains that up on the mountain, he may harvest an average of 2 to 2 ½ tons of grapes an acre, whereas down in the valley the yield is closer to 4 tons an acre.

Viva la Difference

Although the lower mountain yields makes production more expensive for the winemaker, the smaller, more concentrated

grapes are an asset to the final wine. While there are larger, juicier grapes in the valley, the extra liquid content in the plumper grapes can dilute their overall concentration and flavor.

Of course, it’s worth mentioning that just because a wine is produced in the valley verses the mountain in no way means it’s inferior, just different. For example, valley floor wines are often fruitier and softer. There are many outstanding valley wines from Napa and elsewhere, including a lovely Sauvignon Blanc from Johndrow Vineyards that has crisp and soft lemon and melon flavors, and finishes with tastes of peach and citrus blossom.





It's Worth the Wait

Grapes grown on the mountain simply take longer in many ways. They need longer to grow and are harvested a full month or more later than valley fruit. Because of the greater variances in daily temperatures, mountain fruit also experiences greater amounts of air pressure changes. Johndrow relates this phenomenon to how your car's tires react to that first Park City cold day, "The pressure goes down, so they suddenly become more deflated. Then when the temperature rises, the air expands and they are bigger again. The same concept of contracting and expanding happens with grapes. It's what I call their own internal exercise." Basically, mountain grapes have to work harder and longer to reach their peaks.

Mountain wines are generally more tannic, and often higher in acidity, due to their higher concentrations, so they can take longer to soften up and therefore longer to be ready for release. But Johndrow understands the value of that extra time, "Though they mature more slowly, they also age more gracefully." And years later the fine wine can elegantly develop into something somehow even better than when originally bottled.

Enjoy the Journey

In life and wine, it's never a straight line to one's destination. And the journey determines the final character. So, the next time you pour that glorious glass, think about the path the grapes survived to arrive at their final stop...and savor every last drop.