

An aerial photograph of a vast, rolling landscape in California's Moon Mountain AVA. The scene is captured during the "golden hour" of sunset, with warm, golden light illuminating the hills and casting long, soft shadows. The terrain is a mix of green vineyard rows, dense forests of trees with autumn-colored foliage, and open fields. In the distance, a city skyline is visible through a light haze. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is serene and picturesque.

# MOON MOUNTAIN

Adam Lechmere spends a heady few days with the wonderfully diverse but close-knit group of growers and investors harnessing the great terroirs of California's "newest, oldest" AVA

When Orson Welles said that running a film company was like owning the world's greatest train set, he might just as well have been talking about a winery. Winemakers dream of being able to design their own winery, preferably with the backing of someone with very deep pockets. I have been shown around *chais* and *caves*, fermentation rooms and barrel cellars, from Montpellier to Carneros, by winemakers proudly explaining the reasoning behind the placing of this cone-shaped fermenter just here and that set of double doors just there: "When they are open, the breezes from the bay come right through..." But if a winery is a wonderful train set, what about the opportunity to design a whole appellation? To have thousands of acres of some of the world's finest terroir to nurture, replant, and control?

The Moon Mountain AVA, a subregion of Sonoma Valley AVA, is simultaneously one of America's newest and oldest wine-growing regions. Politically it came into being in October 2013, when it was officially recognized by the TTB (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) as an American Viticultural Area. But in winemaking terms, it is far older than that.

#### Human and natural potential

This part of southern Sonoma is steeped in history. Sonoma Valley, with the founding of the Sonoma Mission vineyards and Buena Vista in the early 1800s, is generally recognized as the birthplace of the California wine industry. Count Haraszthy was here, of course, busily commuting between the Côte d'Or and California, as was General William "Tecumseh" Sherman, who founded Bedrock Vineyard in 1854, and Benjamin Dreyfus and Emmanuel Goldstein, who planted Monte Rosso, "home to the oldest producing Cabernet Sauvignon vines in the United States," as official documents put it.

Historically no less important is Hanzell Vineyards, at the southern end of the AVA. Founded in 1957 by James Zellerbach, an ambassador to President Truman and a lover of Burgundy and Bordeaux, it claims to have the oldest Pinot Noir vineyard

and the oldest continuously Chardonnay-producing vineyard in North America; its founding winemaker, Brad Webb, introduced the world's first temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks, was an early pioneer of the use of French oak, and set a restrained style of winemaking that has changed little in half a century.

Ten miles (16km) long and up to 4 miles (6.5km) wide, Moon Mountain is on the western slopes of the Mayacamas range, abutting Napa's Mount Veeder AVA to the northeast. (At one stage it was suggested Moon Mountain should be part of Mount Veeder, and be a bi-county appellation like Carneros.) Its southern boundary sits on the town of Sonoma and Carneros AVA; its northernmost point is the tiny town of Kenwood. Elevations run from 400ft (120m) to 2,200ft (670m), with the highest vineyards at around 1,800ft (550m). The appellation has a 400ft lower limit for inclusion. Some vineyards, such as the historic Bedrock, at 200ft (60m) above sea level, lie just outside.

A map of the area shows how it is served by four great aquifers, deep canyons that run northeast to southwest, the district's 40 vineyards and dozen wineries clustered around them. Looking up into the hills from the main road, you can see the steep ravines, plateaux of grapes, small pockets of vines in the crevices of hills. "That's the sweet spot," viticulturist Phil Coturri says of one vineyard high above us. "This is the benchmark. Look at the uniformity of the canopy. This is indicative of what's happening here."

Portly, ponytailed, a friend of the Grateful Dead, marijuana devotee, and impromptu poet, Coturri is one of the foremost consultant organic viticulturists in northern California. With a staff of 160, he looks after 580 acres (235ha) in Sonoma and 120 acres (49ha) in Napa. He is deeply, personally committed to Moon Mountain, and there are few vineyards here that don't bear his stamp. Over the years, he says, Moon Mountain has been neglected. Wherever we go, he points out practices he wants to change, whether double-spacing ("that's called stupidity"), varieties in the wrong place, or too many chemicals. "The whole of the AVA needs serious attention," he says. "The worst vineyard, with 20 percent more attention, would fly."

If a winery is a wonderful train set, what about the opportunity to design a whole appellation? To have thousands of acres of some of the world's finest terroir to nurture, replant, and control? The Moon Mountain AVA, a subregion of Sonoma Valley AVA, is simultaneously one of America's newest and oldest wine-growing regions

Previous page: Repris winery and its scenic surrounding Moon Mountain vineyards. Right: Consultant organic viticulturist Phil Coturri with visitors to Moon Mountain.



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Part of the charm of this region is the diversity of the people who are willing to invest in it. Apart from the roll call of some of the names in fine California winemaking—Cathy Corison, Aaron Pott, Andy Erickson, Greg LaFollette, Stephane Derenoncourt, Steve Kistler, Larry Turley—who all make wine here in one capacity or another, there is a growing coterie of wealthy enthusiasts buying vineland.

At a convivial dinner at the Coturri residence, a large comfortable cabin in the woods, an eclectic group has gathered. At one end of the table is the host, in purple T-shirt and voluminous shorts, a substantial baggie of pungent bud at hand. At the other end are George Hamel (the new owner of Nunn's Canyon vineyard, and 1,500 acres [607ha] on the valley floor) and his son John B Hamel II, in crisp white shirts and chinos with a crease you could cut tomatoes with. Then there's Robert Kamen, Hollywood screenwriter, also a keen smoker—who isn't, around here?—whose high, arid vineyards have a burgeoning international reputation. (Antonio Galloni, when still writing for *The Wine Advocate*, found his wines "stunning" and "enthraling.") Halfway down the table is Jeff Baker, formerly Mayacamas winemaker and now winemaker at Stone Edge Winery, where Coturri, of course, is viticulturist. Sitting next to him, another affable billionaire, private equity broker Jim Momtazee, owner of Repris, of which more soon. There is a collegiate feeling, a sense of common purpose, now that Moon Mountain is officially recognized. These are serious people making wines at the very highest level, but they're not going to forget why they got into the business in the first place. "This is making it fun again," says Baker, 67.

#### Experiments and investments

Baker has played a central role in Moon Mountain, not least because he was one of the founding winemakers of Repris, a winery that is in many ways typical of the regeneration of the region. It is nestled in the green wooded slopes under Mount Pisgah, a huddle of gabled roofs and distinctive round turrets surrounded by 75 acres (30ha) of vineyards. With the evening

sun washing the vines in mellow gold, you'd be forgiven for feeling you had stepped into some bucolic utopia. When Coturri talks about Moon Mountain AVA having all the advantages "of an experiment within a defined region," his words could apply, in microcosm, to Repris.

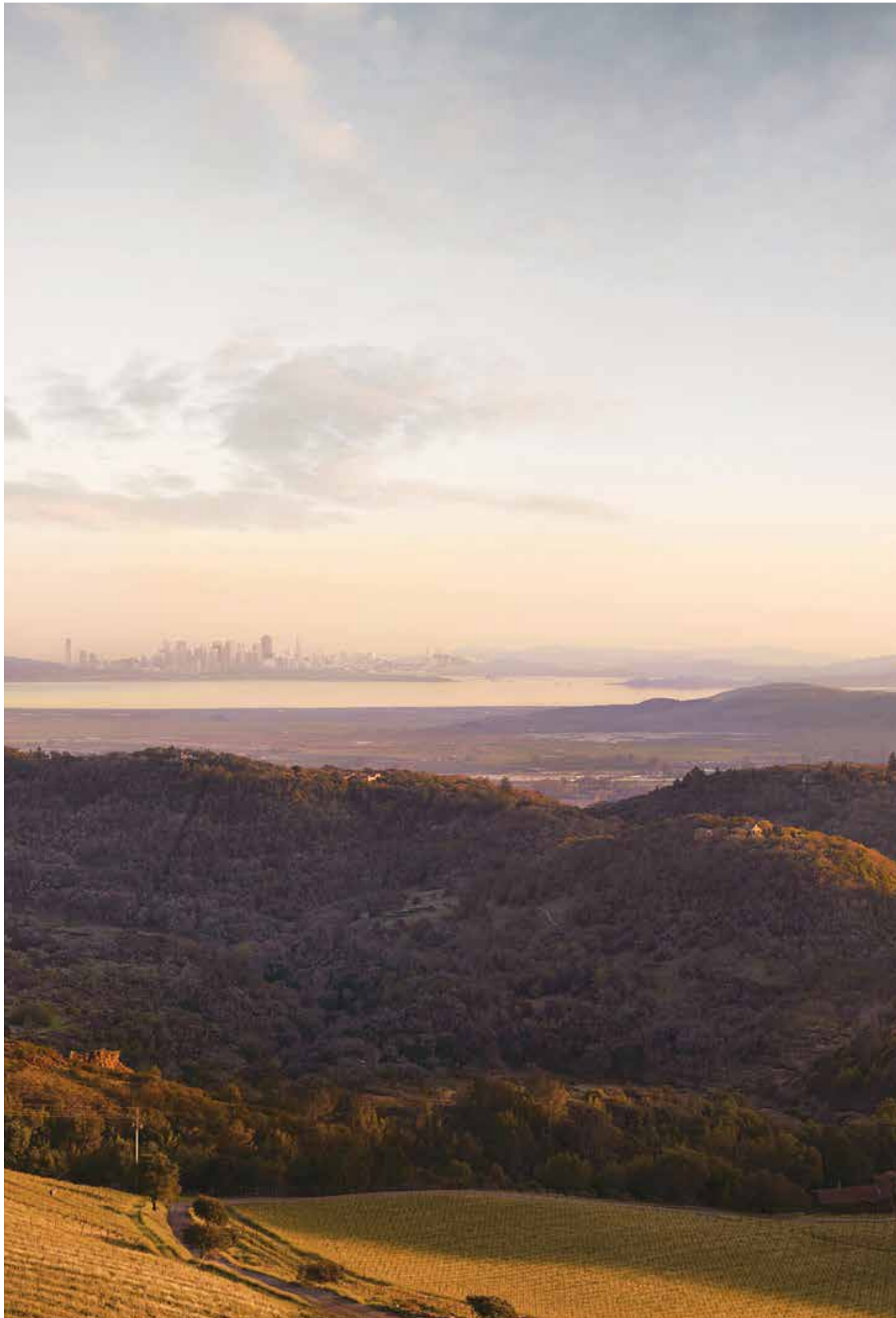
The winery has a convoluted history. Its vineyards are next door to Monte Rosso (it's not known whether Goldstein and Dreyfus planted here as well) and have passed through owners as diverse as a 1960s hippy commune, Chalone Vineyard, and Diageo, under whose auspices Baker built the winery, to his own specification, with a ring of small stainless-steel tanks in the turreted main building. He also supervised the digging of the 18,000ft (5,500m) of cave into Mount Pisgah. In 1996, the vineyards were razed by one of the periodic fires that have devastated the region over the decades, and Baker called in Coturri to replant. Thus started a revival: Coturri replanted extensively under strict organic principles, "higher-density planting, soils that are alive through cover crops and compost, upgraded trellises, lower crop levels, better vine balance. It has come a long way," he says.

Its fortunes were to change again for the better from 2010, when Momtazee negotiated the purchase of the vineyards and the winery from Diageo. Together with two partners, venture capitalist Christian Borchert and winemaker Erich Bradley, he changed the name of the winery to Repris and, as Bradley puts it, "pressed the reset button." Investment has doubled: As I understand it, Diageo was spending around US\$5,000 an acre on the vineyards, while Coturri has upped the spend to \$12,000 an acre.

For Bradley, they are still very much at the experimental stage, especially in the attitude to the suitability of different varieties. Repris is planted to Bordeaux grapes, several different Cabernet clones on different exposures; Rhône varieties—Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier; and Zinfandel and Mourvèdre. Coturri and others are of the opinion that Moon Mountain, with its spare volcanic soils, exposure, and nighttime heat, is ideal for Cabernet and the Rhône grapes. Bradley agrees, but he's in



Photography courtesy of (previous spread) Repris. (right) Sam Coturri



no hurry. “My role is to put things in place for the next generation of winemakers. I’m not going to pare down the varieties—that’s for the next winemaker to think about.”

It is the Repris team that decided to push for AVA status. Borchers was struck by the anomaly of going to all the expense and hard work of making mountain wine yet still having to label the wines Sonoma Valley. After all, he said, “this is mountain wine from mountain grapes.” He and his colleagues got together with Coturri, Baker, and Robert Kamen, called a meeting of all the producers within the proposed boundary, and asked them for \$1,000–2,000, depending on the size of their operation. After that, the process was relatively plain sailing. From initial meetings with growers and winemakers, to the final stamp of the TTB, it cost some \$40,000 and took three years. There was little dissent; the core of Moon Mountain is very much a community of the like-minded, and the proposal was given impetus by the terroir and history of the region.

#### **Terroir and history**

First, the terroir. The climate of the valley is influenced by the Petaluma Wind Gap to the west and San Pablo Bay to the south. (Hanzell’s vineyards, in the far south, benefit particularly from the bay’s cooling breezes.) Throughout the district there is constant movement of warm currents of air rolling up the steep mountainside. The AVA proposal suggests “vineyards in [Moon Mountain] are slightly warmer than lower elevations in the Valley of the Moon.” Bradley agrees: “My experience is we get cooler days and warmer nights than lower elevations.”

Another key difference between Moon Mountain and the surrounding areas is soil type. Apart from pockets of distinctive white basalt soils, most notably in Robert Kamen’s gray-white vineyards (truly a moonscape), Tuscan Red Hill series soils predominate. They are volcanic in origin, deep red, almost purple in certain lights, friable, and low in pH. “Very nearly 100 percent of the soils found [in the AVA] are of volcanic origin and differ from soil characteristics in adjacent areas,” the petition says.

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Photography courtesy of Repris

Left: High Repris vineyards which, explains Repris partner and winemaker Erich Bradley, benefit from “cooler days and warmer nights than lower elevations.”

It’s easy to see how Monte Rosso came by its name—anyone kicking dirt in the hillsides here comes away with boots coated in red dust. The soil is also shallow and pitted with surface rocks. Morgan Twain Peterson, who makes Monte Rosso Zinfandel and Semillon, considers this ancient vineyard “a wonder of viticulture in the 19th century. [...] What it took to put in the vines back in the 1890s must have been jaw-dropping. In an era of nearly zero automation, no pile-drivers, no back-hoes, limited means to break up and terrace the rock, putting in the 350-acre [140ha] vineyard must have been one of the greatest feats of wine-growing history.”

Then there is history. Hanzell, with its ancient vineyards and antique stainless steel, might seem old. But when you see the long humpbacked ridge of Monte Rosso, you’re reminded that the 1950s are not that long ago. Planted in the 1890s, this is the geographical and spiritual center of the appellation. The AVA would have been named for it were it not for a clash with the Italian Monterosso, in Liguria. The majority of the vines are 100-year-old Zinfandel, but there are blocks of Cabernet (Louis Martini made the first ever varietal Cabernet Sauvignon in 1938 from here), 100-year-old Semillon, two types of Chasselas, Abourion, and that hotchpotch of varieties known as mixed blacks. Borchers is referring to Monte Rosso when he says of the petition, “We certainly ticked the ‘historical component’ bucket.”

There is history, too, in the pleasing continuity of young winemakers like Morgan Twain Peterson, who makes a bewildering variety of wines from all over the appellation and beyond, including half a dozen wines from Monte Rosso vines that his father Joel (of Ravenswood) leased in the 1990s. Joel lost his contract when Gallo bought the vineyard in 2002, and Morgan took on a new lease in 2008. Tasting through Peterson’s range in his winery—a warehouse on an industrial estate—you see the experimentation in action: from Monte Rosso, Zinfandel and Semillon from 130-year-old vines; Cabernet Sauvignon from Robert Kamen’s vineyards; and Carignan, Petite Syrah. Peterson would dry-farm Monte Rosso from scratch if he could. He reverts it for its iron-rich soils and the powerful flavors they

**EIGHT GREAT MOON MOUNTAIN WINES**

**Hanzell Vineyards Chardonnay 2011**

Delicious sweet fruit, salinity on attack, very delicate and restrained. Intense; the power creeps up. Incredibly sophisticated wine, with delicacy, finesse, and power.

**Stone Edge Farm Cabernet Sauvignon 2009**

Jeff Baker's new project. Really lovely sweet plummy nose, with hints of briar and nettle stalk. Complex palate of herb and pepper, spice, chocolate, and ripe black hedgerow fruit, with a bracing whiff of bay laurel. The tannins are ripe and grainy, leading to a juicy, food-friendly finish. Delicious.

**Amapola Creek Zinfandel Monte Rosso Vineyard Viñas Antiguas 2010**

Dark ruby color, spice and tar on the nose. The fruit is dark, ripe, and luscious, chocolate-infused with top notes of mown grass and herbs. The acidity is bracing; the tannins are precise and attention-grabbing. This is all structure. Excellent.

Moon Mountain wines have a dark intensity that is certainly distinctive. They are structured, with a thoroughly modern stripped-down feel, tight-knit tannins, fresh acidity, and vibrant fruit

**Bedrock Monte Rosso Zinfandel 2011**

Lovely complex nose of antique wood, cigar box, hay, hot earth, and orange zest. Palate has masses of juice and very fresh soft tannins, slightly marred by a hint of drying oak at end. Great opening; finish needs more juice.

**Kamen Cabernet Sauvignon 2010**

Nose of earth, tar, and spice, then dark plum and damson fruit on the palate, with beguiling floral notes—even sweet clover. Very dry tannins, with precise grip carrying through to a juicy finish. Very fine.

**Lookout Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon 2008**

Made by Andy Erickson, formerly of Harlan, Newton, Screaming Eagle, et al. Fresh-mown grass on the nose; fine Cabernet typicity. Fresh, bright, dry tannins, very structured with black cherry and damson, and a fine, juicy finish. Very good.

**Turley Fredericks Vineyard Zinfandel 2011**

Lovely, leathery, slightly raisined damson nose, good tannic heft from the attack to the end. Complex potpourri, damson, dark cherry on the palate, and fresh blasts of mint toward the finish. Power and finesse.

**Derenoncourt Cabernet Sauvignon 2009**

From the 1,800ft (550m) Charlie Smith vineyard. Classic leafy notes on nose, then hot, sweet black fruit and dry, intense tannins dissolving to juice. Forceful, gauche, all biceps and swagger. Tannins will sweeten and calm down, leaving it structured and fine.

*(All of these wines are currently labeled "Sonoma Valley," but most wineries will gradually move over to "Moon Mountain, Sonoma Valley.")*

impart to its wines. "I have often mistaken a Monte Rosso Cabernet for Zinfandel," he says. "The wines smell and taste like Monte Rosso—far less like the given variety."

It's not only Monte Rosso. Moon Mountain wines have a dark intensity that may not be unique in Sonoma or high-elevation Napa but is certainly distinctive. Above all, they are structured, with a thoroughly modern stripped-down feel, tight-knit tannins, fresh acidity, and vibrant fruit. Courtney Humiston, wine director at Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen, Healdsburg, praises their "compact" nature. "They are concentrated and darkly fruited, but also earthy and structured. There is a deep, gravelly, brooding mineral character to the Cabernet that I love."

This character comes out even in the more conservative wines. Richard Arrowood has been making wine in southern Sonoma since the 1980s and considers it "wonderful Rhône and Cabernet country." He sold his winery (just down the road in Glen Ellen) to Mondavi in 2000 and now makes 3,000 cases from his own vines and from Monte Rosso under his Amapola Creek label. Arrowood, who collects vintage and modern shotguns and displays a plaque honoring the 2nd Amendment ("the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed"), sits oddly alongside the nonconformism of his neighbors. But though his wines don't have much in common with the avant-garde offerings of Peterson, for example, they have distinction. "This is all structure," I noted of his 2010 Monte Rosso Zinfandel. "Dark ruby hue, spice and tar, luscious acidity, spicy chocolate; fruit sits atop splendid dry food-friendly length; taste of herbs, mown grass, and dry hay."

**Identity and prosperity**

Arrowood says his wines will carry the Moon Mountain label, but whether the wine-buying public will notice is a moot point. According to my (entirely unscientific) research, recognition of the AVA is minimal. Even local winemakers—from Russian River, say—will look blank until you tell them it's in Sonoma Valley. Part of the reason may be that it is home to producers whose reputation transcends and long predates the AVA.

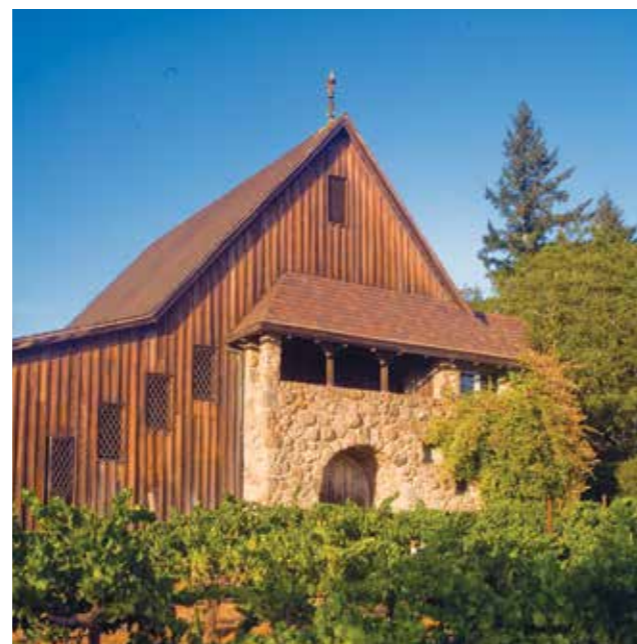
Hanzell has been a premier cru for decades; Steve Kistler makes some of his most acclaimed Chardonnay here; Larry Turley has a Zinfandel from Frederick's Vineyard, adjacent to another fine vineyard, Montecillo; Kamen's reputation is assured.

Hanzell will not label its wines "Moon Mountain," even the revived Cabernet from newly planted vineyards that comes on-stream at the end of the decade. "We will label it as Sonoma Valley, to be consistent with our other wines," sales director John Buckey says. Turley will continue with Sonoma Valley because they are not ready for "a complete label redesign," says sales director Christina Turley.

This does not bother Borchert, who says that Hanzell for one was "very supportive" of the AVA. He also stresses the long-term nature of the project. "All of us have a multigenerational perspective on this. We recognize that making great wine takes a long time, and we are planning for the very long term."

You would have to go far to meet a more committed group of proprietors and winemakers. "We're very lucky in our owners," Bradley said to me. Quite true; but as the region's reputation builds—as it surely must—is there a danger it will attract a different kind of proprietor? Hamel, Birch, Momtazee, and their neighbors were all drawn here precisely because it isn't Napa. Land is a fraction of the price, and there is none of Napa's conspicuous excess. That, however, may change. The average price of properties managed by Coturri is around \$200,000 per acre in Moon Mountain, compared to \$70,000 on the valley floor. Prices can only go up. Coturri tells me his ambition for the appellation is that it should be like La Livinière, the subregion of Languedoc's Minervois, whose wines command far more respect than their parent AOC. But then, "It's inevitable it'll become a Pritchard Hill," he says, referring to the most sought-after vineland in southern Napa, which is rapidly being taken over by absentee billionaires and celebrity consultants chasing 100-point scores.

Coturri is a realist, and he's not lamenting the arrival of the seriously rich. "It's good to have big money, because it means more attention to detail. If prices go up, I can do better work." ■



Photography by (left) MJ Wickham; (right) Debra Peterson



This page: Hanzell's Heritage winery and Ambassador Vineyard, established in 1957. Opposite page: Red Hill soil, volcanic in origin and typical of Moon Mountain AVA.