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 chai 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 lake 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 portion of 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 Harraste was here, of course, busily commuting between the Côte d’Or and California, as was General William “Tecumseh” Sherman, who was here, of course, busily commuting between the Côte d’Or and 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 lake 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.

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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. Borcher 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 reveres it for its iron-rich soils and the powerful flavors they no hurry. “My role is to put things in place for the next generation of winemakers. I’m not going to pare down the varietals—that’s for the next winemaker to think about.”

It is the Repris team that decided to push for AVA status. Borcher 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 Coturni, 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.

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.”
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.