

The Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy: Up close and personal

It's a truth often acknowledged that the best learning is done in the vineyard. So, where better for a conference on high-altitude Alexander Valley Cabernet than in lofty vineyard eminences, right in the middle of the valley? And then throw in a couple of parties—sorry, tastings—culminating in a barn dance in a smart ranch whose stable courtyard had a grand stone fountain, surrounded by stalls in a great sweeping circle. A band hammered out rockabilly, the evening sun shone on the hay-strewn yard set with dozens of white table-clothed and exotically decorated trestle tables, and hundreds of guests in their finery—yacht owners from Hawaii rubbing shoulders with Texans in bootlace ties—partook of the best of Californian hospitality.

The Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy, now in its fourth year, is a three-day series of seminars and tastings designed to “share the intimate details” of this 22-mile (35km) stretch of the Russian River. The academic bent of the conference was shown by the seminar titles: “Weather and Microclimates,” “Topography and Elevation,” “Geology and Soils.”

The first seminar featured Jake Hawkes, whose family have been farming Cabernet Sauvignon in Alexander Valley since the 1970s and who describes himself as “a bald guy in his 30s,” and Mark Houser and Harry Wetzel IV, respectively vineyard manager and third-generation owner of Alexander Valley Vineyards. Also on the panel was well-informed Stefan Soltysiak of Phelps.

Soltysiak set the bar high in his opening remarks. “Alexander Valley is making the finest Cabernet Sauvignon in the United States—therefore in the world,” he said. Naturally, said Houser, extolling the valley’s Mediterranean climate and its microclimates. “From here to Cloverdale there’s a 40-degree [22°C] temperature difference.” Hawkes was laconic. “It’s not so much the perfect place to grow Cabernet Sauvignon, but it’s a distinctive place,” he said, thereby making it sound far more interesting and worthy of debate. Hawkes backed the concept of subregions, while Wetzel feared that would dilute the message. “If you break it up, you lose some of the meaning.” “I disagree,” Hawkes countered. “It would be informative and

more interesting; it would point up the inherent differences between ranches.” And, he added, it would get some sort of recognition for the region. “Rutherford Bench and Rutherford work as a marketing concept. Why shouldn’t it work here?”

Underdog pugnacity

The weather was discussed: the strong northwest breeze down the coast, the upwelling of a natural pool of marine air; the Petaluma Wind Gap; the influence of San Pablo Bay. There are marked differences in temperature; while the northern part of the valley is more akin to Napa’s St Helena, the southern part is cool enough to be compared to Stags Leap District. The seminar was punctuated with a tasting of half a dozen 2010s, Silver Oak, Hawkes Pyramid Vineyard (a personal favorite), Souverain, Rodney Strong, de Lorimer, Medlock Ames.

The two-day peripatetic conference was notable for the frankness of the views of the speakers and the receptiveness of the small audience. (We were some dozen sommeliers and one or two journalists.) Heat and sun bring their own problems, and subjects such as low acidity were brought up and discussed. “Sometimes we have to acidulate,” Hawkes noted. Steve Heimoff, former journalist and now communications director for Jackson Family Wines, suggested that a recalibration of hillside Cabernet as something distinct from valley floor is needed. After all, “our notion of Cabernet Sauvignon terroir comes from Bordeaux, where elevation is irrelevant.” He said the effects of solar radiation, for example, were often overlooked. “UV rays are able to penetrate the skin of the grape, resulting in rounder and softer tannins.” Alexander Valley tannins are dustier, softer, chewier—they used to have a reputation for rusticity—as opposed to the “lush, finely ground, smooth tannins” of Cabernet’s from Napa’s valley floor. “Tannin intensity is the key difference.”

Over the course of the lectures and informal get-togethers, a distinct undercurrent of underdog pugnacity began to emerge. This could be summed up as, “You can ignore us if you like, but we’re not going to go away.” Gilian Handelman of Kendall-Jackson (an

Above: While it has its own AVA farther south, the Russian River also runs through the Alexander Valley.

All photography by Jon Wyand

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"all-round righteous babe"—her words) asked, "How many wine regions have valley floor and benchland and north-to-south valleys? This is very unusual."

Established in 1984, Alexander Valley is one of California's oldest AVAs. Twenty-two miles (35km) long and 7 miles (11km) wide, it slots like a piece of jigsaw into the northern border of Sonoma, straddling the Russian River, bounded to the west by Dry Creek Valley, the southeast by Knights Valley and the Mayacamas range, abutting the pleasant town of Healdsburg to the south, and with Cloverdale marking its northern point. Vines have been grown here since at least 1840, when Cyrus Alexander was granted 48,000 acres (19,420ha) by the Mexican government. He thought it "the brightest and best spot in the world," and indeed it seems so on a fine May morning, looking down over vine-clad hills to the broad green valley floor.

In the modern era, Rodney Strong was one of the first to recognize the potential of the Sonoma hillsides at a time when growing grapes anywhere but the valley floor was considered difficult and unprofitable. His first Alexander Valley Cabernet, the 1974 from Alexander's Crown, a 66-acre (27ha) wind-blown hilltop, was a critical success, setting a benchmark for a style of Cabernet from the region: a rich, blackcurrant-and-damson palate with dry tannins offset by freshness and acidity.

Cabernet Sauvignon celebration

Now there are some 55 wineries in the AVA, ranging from major exporters like



K-J's Stonestreet, Rodney Strong, Jordan, Francis Ford Coppola, and Silver Oak, to much smaller operations like the Medlock Ames, a partnership farming 55 acres (22ha) of Bell Valley to the south, or family vineyards like Hawkes, now farmed by the second generation in the shape of Jake. There's an old-fashioned feel to the valley, with families like the Munselles going back generations. Bret Munselle, who farms 500 acres (200ha) of family-owned vineyards, is a descendant of Shadrach Osborn, who built the first serious commercial winery here in 1889.

The common thread running through these very disparate operations is a celebration of Cabernet Sauvignon: more than 60 percent of plantings here are to the noble variety. The hillsides and benchlands produce the best Cabernet. While the flood plain of the valley floor is fine for Sauvignon Blanc, its loam and clay produces high-vigor vines tending to too much greenness and soft tannins in Cabernet—not an ageworthy combination.

In the geology and soils seminar, Ed Killian of Souverain and Scot Covington of Trione described the alluvial benchlands, with their well-drained decomposed volcanic rock and gravel, and the hillside soils, thin and with more sun exposure, producing concentrated grapes with great aging potential.

A measure of Alexander Valley's confidence is the number of times Bordeaux was name-checked during the seminars. "You could call it Bordeaux-like," Heimoff said as he described the "herbaceous" quality of the best wines. Silver Oak winemaker Daniel Baron's

attachment to Bordeaux is palpable—he cut his teeth at Petrus and became close to Christian Moueix, who put him in charge of the launch of Dominus in Yountville. "Have you ever considered using American oak for Silver Oak?" he was asked. "Why would I?" came the reply. "Why use American oak after all the time I spent in France?" While many of the wines are 100 percent Cabernet, Bordeaux blends are also popular. Hoot Owl Ranch adds Malbec, while Trione, Cyrus, and others use all five varieties.

While Cabernet is what Alexander Valley producers have in common, there is a marked difference in styles. The valley is famous for its robust tannins and opulent fruit. It's the warmest region in Sonoma, the sun-exposed grapes—especially in the northern reaches, farthest from the cooling influence of the southern winds—developing thick skins that are perfect for what Handelman described as "muscular wines."

To modern critics and winemakers, though, especially in Europe, the word "muscular" can have unwanted connotations. The taste today is for structure above muscle, and some Alexander Valley styles can seem out of touch. At one end of the spectrum, you might consider Rodney Strong's Brothers Ridge 2010—a 15.5% ABV Leviathan—too powerful in every department, while at the other end,

Silver Oak has been producing beautifully balanced wines for four decades. As Baron said during a three-vintage vertical from 1998 to 2011, "It's a disservice to Cabernet to be frightened of herbaceousness." But even the most voluptuous styles can have integrity and balance. Stonestreet's Black Cougar Ridge 2005, for example—only 186 cases were made—comes from vineyards at 650ft (200m) and spends 17 months in French oak, half of it new. It has a sour damson palate and fine juice at the end, and for all its weight and power, it is balanced.

Complexity and diversity

There is also complexity. Fabien Jacob, the French-born sommelier at the steak-and-seafood house Bohanans in San Antonio, Texas, listed the flavors he found in the two days of tastings: boysenberry, leather, and cedar, crème de cassis and blueberry, red cherry,



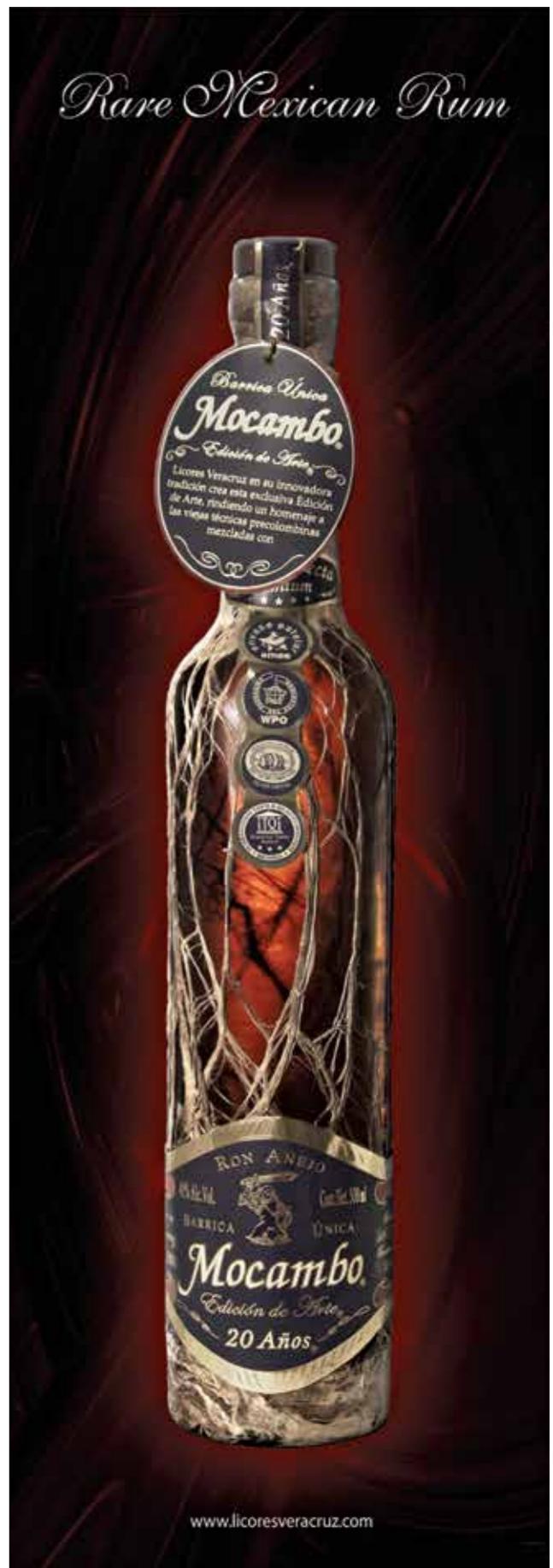
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redecorrants and plum, dried herbs, sage and tobacco, cardamom and nutmeg. He noted the "lushness and roundness" of the wines, and the concentrated flavors and "earthy minerality" of the higher-altitude wines. He noted their ageability: "I was blown away by several of the Hawkes and Rodney strong wines."

At the same time, the huge diversity in styles has prejudiced some critics against the valley as a whole. "Alexander Valley can be so overblown," one critic who works for a UK website told me some weeks later. It was not unusual to see two wines at the same tasting that might have come from different eras, let alone different terroirs. This was most starkly illustrated at one seminar, where two wines from opposite ends of the valley were side by side. The first was from Stuhlmuller Vineyards' Alden Vineyard at the extreme southern end of the appellation, on the borders of Russian River Valley and Chalk Hill, the second from Arbios Cellars in the (warmer) extreme north. Both are high hillside wines, both given considerable aging time in oak (Stuhlmuller for 20 months, Arbios for 36 months). Both are finely made wines; but to my palate, more attuned to European styles, the Arbios carried a hot dry blast of oak and cooked damson fruit that had me reaching for the water jug. The Stuhlmuller, by contrast, with an extraordinary 12.8% ABV, had herbaceous freshness, tension, energy, and fine sweet juice released by structured tannins.

Instruction and passion

The three days of the Cabernet Academy were deeply instructive. The passion of the winemakers here is not in doubt, nor their conviction that they are in possession of a small corner of grape-growing paradise. There are winemakers here who are pursuing balance, lower alcohol, and structure ("Focus on the structural differences, and don't worry about the fruit," Handelman advised the audience), and others who feel that power and weight are the natural products of their land. The Cabernet Academy aimed to tease out and examine the merits of each point of view by a serious examination of the terroir and all it can give to a wine, and it did so with intellectual rigour. Then it was time to party.



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