Silken Cabernet
from the Alexander Valley Hills
by Joshua Greene

In 1991, Alexander’s Crown was already a famous vineyard. It was the source of the first single-vineyard cabernet sauvignon in Sonoma County, growing on a small rise where volcanic rock had pushed up out of the center of Alexander Valley, well above the Russian River and its wide floodplain.

In the hills to the northeast, the Gauer Ranch was also a well-known vineyard, with its reputation built on chardonnay. White wine was still the stock in trade of northern California vineyards, and Gauer was already a legend for its Upper Barn parcel, a ridge high above the fogline in the Mayacamas Mountains.

On the eastern side of those hills, in the Napa Valley, the cool, late 1991 vintage produced cabernet sauvignons that would live for decades, and, along with the 60 Minutes report that same year about red wine and health, would further ignite the region’s cabernet explosion.

In the autumn of that same year, as I drove through Alexander Valley on Highway 128, most of the cabernet vines on the flats below were laden with fruit. It was November, the grapes were still unripe, and it made no financial sense for the growers to harvest them.

Today, 1991 remains one of my favorite vintages for Napa Valley cabernet. But the image that stayed with me from that same vintage in Alexander Valley tells a different story. For decades, even ambitious wines from the region were grown on the silty floodplain of the Russian River, on vigorous vines that often produced green, resinous flavors in the grapes. And wines from the hills were often made to mirror Napa Valley, though this side of the Mayacamas Mountains produce completely different character in cabernet. It wasn’t until recently that my perception of Alexander Valley cabernet began to change.

Rob Davis had already made 15 vintages of Jordan cabernet by 1991. He’s now on his 42nd season. Tom Jordan hired him, Davis recalls, “to make a Bordeaux to challenge the first growths.” Davis had learned the tools and techniques to make cabernet at UC Davis, but his professors, as he tells me now, “never talked about the importance of soil.” He learned that, instead, from André Tchelistcheff, the longtime winemaker at Beaulieu in Napa Valley who became a consultant for Jordan and a mentor for Davis.

Jordan built a chateau on a hill above the Alexander Valley, and bought vineyard land on the valley floor. Davis, who was charged with making a wine...
As the identity of Alexander Valley cabernet comes into focus, it’s not the green notes of the past, or the hyperextracted copies of Napa Valley styles. It’s pure currant flavor and silken tannins.

With “soft, silky tannins, elegance and finesse,” was also restricted to the estate vineyard. It was planted on deep loam, a fertile soil that didn’t drain particularly well. “The vineyard would flood when we’d get a half inch of rain,” Davis recalls. “You’d have ducks floating around the vines.”

It was also particularly susceptible to phylloxera; the plant louse chewed the estate designation off of Jordan’s labels in 1993. Meanwhile, Tom Jordan got the idea to plant the hillsides surrounding his winery, where the shallow soils are rich in serpentine. As Davis and his team found out, the vines at their hillside estate needed major additions of calcium to balance the high magnesium content of the soil, and the shallow root systems made it a bit like hydroponic farming.

As he explored other sources for cabernet in the Alexander Valley, he took Tchelistcheff’s advice to heart—an emphatic “no” when it came to growing cabernet in the floodplain, which the Russian émigré said would be better for hay.

In 2005, when John Jordan took over the winery from his father, Davis brought on Brent Young on the viticulture side, and Young, in turn, hired a soil scientist to study Jordan’s vineyards. They decided to sell the fruit from their vines on the flats and to develop partnerships with growers farther north, in Geyserville, where the valley floor has patches of gravel; they also bought fruit from the eastern hills.

By 2012, they sold the original vineyard, in the district they now openly call “pickle flats” (even at 24.5° Brix, with plenty of sugar in the grapes, “we would get that green-bean, underripe character”).

Recently, Davis introduced me to one of his growers, Bret Munselle, whose family has been farming in the region since the 1870s. He still farms a block of zinfandel that’s now 130 years old, though, after Prohibition, the family focused mostly on prunes. “We had a dairy for fifteen years, starting in the 1950s, and farmed alfalfa, but by the early 1960s, we were back to prunes.” The crops shifted again in the late 1960s, when California’s Central Valley farmers drove the price of prunes down and the Munselles switched to wine grapes. “It was all jug wine,” Mun-
selle explains, “red or white. And you got paid by the ton. We had cabernet in super-deep alluvial soils and got super-green grapes.” Munselle’s father and his generation were farming for varietal wines—“he talked a lot of quality, clean fruit”—while Munselle, who started in 2001, describes his career as “growing fruit for a winery. All of our blocks are specific to a winery.”

He mentions the Sunrise Block at the top of Wason Hill. “Before Jordan, that was going to another winery. They were hanging it for so long, the sugars were crazy. The sunburn was crazy. And the dehydration was heartbreaking. We put on as much fruit as possible, but the clusters would drop from 3.8 pounds to 1.3 pounds by the time we picked it; it was all raisined.

“When we started selling to Rob [Davis], the first truck came in and he said, ‘This is a little green.’ Then the third to tenth truck was exactly what he was looking for. Then the eleventh was a little green.” Without

Graham Weertz and his team are replanting Alexander Mountain Estate, switching from terraced rows with varied exposures to a range of panels planted vertically up the hills, each with a distinct exposure.
“At UC Davis, they never talked about the importance of soil. I learned about soil through André Tchelistcheff.”
—Rob Davis

the radical hang time, there were issues on two sides of the vineyard. Munselle decided to prune those more vigorous vines to grow more fruit. “If you’ve got a vigorous vine, you’ve got to leave fruit on there to get maturity,” he found.

Recent vintages of Jordan are focused on vineyards in the gravelly soils of the valley floor in eastern Geyserville, with about 40 percent coming from hillsides that rise up into the Mayacamas Mountains. While the winery’s silky, restrained style has always been popular in restaurants, it wasn’t until the 2010 vintage that is started earning recommendations from our panels, and exceptional scores from our wine critics. As it turns out, the vineyards tell the story.

Graham Weerts, who took charge of vineyard operations for Jackson Family Wines in 2016, has an intimate knowledge of the Alexander Valley through his work at Stonestreet, where he’d made the wines since 2004. Stonestreet gave him access to the vineyard Jess Jackson considered one of his most prized possessions: the Alexander Mountain Estate, formerly the Gauer Ranch.

Weerts takes me on a tour of the valley, starting at the center, where the Stonestreet winery is sited on the rise just below Alexander’s Crown. He drives south, to an area he calls Chalks Bend, where the Jackson family purchased the Fieldstone Vineyard two years ago. He describes this southeastern corner of the valley as much cooler than farther north. It’s near an elbow in the Russian River, where the watercourse changes direction and heads west toward the Pacific. “Fog rolls in along the river and stays longer in this area,” he says, showing off a two-acre block of cabernet sauvignon planted in 1968. “It’s an old Georges de la Tour clone on St. George rootstock. Tchelistcheff planted this vineyard.”

He drives us north, past “an ocean of cabernet sauvignon” on the flats, which once was planted primarily to sauvignon blanc and a range of other varieties. Then he takes a detour to an old mushroom farm on the floodplain, a vast, white, u-shaped one-story ranch, each of its bays now rented out to entrepreneurial winemakers.

As we head up into the “Geyserville corner,” he points out the Alden Ranch, high up in a saddle of the Mayacamas range. “It produces rich, plush fruit,” he says. “That’s Alexander Valley, but there’s nothing valley about it.” Then he points out Black Mountain and Geyser Peak, two of the high points in the range that create a barrier to the weather coming in off the Pacific. “Here, you get rainwater coming down off the hills, and gravel coming down with the water.” It’s a different underground environment than the silt that collects further downstream, and further west, on the Russian River floodplain.

Up on top of Alexander Mountain, Weerts is focused on the future, when heat waves may well be more severe, and managing sun exposure may become ever more critical. He’s busy replanting the steep, terraced vineyards, replacing the horizontal rows that follow the contour of the hills with vertical rows that can be farmed by “panel.” The panels have a specific exposure, so the work can be prioritized for that exposure, rather than attempting to farm, prune and harvest an east-facing terrace row differently from the same row as it wraps around to the west. As he replants, he is using “t-posts,” allowing him to easily switch up the trellis to accommodate new conditions that climate change may bring.
“We’re redoing 120 acres in the next two years,” he says, “then 40 acres every year after that. It will carry on ad infinitum. There are things that will just keep changing.”

That pace of change is apparent at Rodney Strong Vineyards as well, where all of the winery’s cabernet sauvignon, from the Alexander Valley bottling on up the range, is now from hillside fruit. Ryan Decker, who manages the firm’s 1,400 acres of estate vineyards, farms 300 acres in the valley’s eastern hills. “We shy away from the finest sediments, clays and silts,” he says. “We like the alluvial fans. If we’re going to be on the valley floor, we like to be north of the Geyserville bridge. There are a lot more creeks that feed the river up here, and more gravel in the soil.”

Mid-valley, Alexander’s Crown is 300 feet at the top, where the 15 acres of reddish-brown volcanic soil provide for the single-vineyard cabernet. The Rockaway Vineyard, above Geyserville, rises to 750 feet, with steep north- and east-facing parcels planted on sedimentary sandstone, while the Brothers Vineyard, farther north, in Cloverdale, tops out at 1,000 feet, with rocky, shallow, south-facing slopes.

Justin Seidenfeld, who joined the team in 2010, makes a single-vineyard cabernet from each, and blends several other cabernets from the three sites. Prior to moving west to Alexander Valley, Seidenfeld worked at Robert Mondavi Winery with Genevieve Janssens, where they regularly harvested between 23° and 24° Brix. But conditions on this side of the hills are different, and Napa Valley wisdom does not necessarily apply.

“We’re picking between 25 and 26 degrees Brix,” he says, “and we still have acids in balance and are getting the grapes physiologically ripe.” Decker has been accomplishing that by adjusting his irrigation as well as the levels of nitrogen in the soil. “Too much nitrogen is almost as bad as too much water,” he says. “You get huge canopies.”

Both Decker and Seidenfeld are fascinated by technology; in Decker’s case, it’s different options to measure water pressure within the vine, a project he started while at Fresno State and has since applied at Rodney Strong. He’s excited by the potential of a new technology being developed by C.J. Rogers at Clos de la Tech: a soil-moisture probe that will deliver information for each individual vine. For Seidenfeld, it’s a tank-monitoring program he wrote that tracks fermentation temperatures and automates pumpovers, allowing him to sleep more during crush and to resolve some issues without racing to the winery.

Working together, they’ve raised the game at Rodney Strong considerably, particularly with the release of their 2014 cabernets.

“In Napa Valley,” Decker points out, “there’s a willingness to spend money on farming. Costs can run...
Rodney Strong 2014 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon
From three estate vineyards on the hillsides and benchlands of Alexander Valley, this is an elegant cabernet with a lean frame. The floral scents turn toward ripe plum and dark berries, while the spicy tannins have a dark walnut-skin bitterness. Rather than being weighty with extract, this has tension and motion, a counterpoint to seared duck breast or grilled portobello mushrooms. (91 points, $28)

Medlock Ames 2015 Alexander Valley 50 Tons Cabernet Sauvignon
This is a selection from steep hillsides on the Bell Mountain estate, where Chris James and Ames Morison built the terraces after moving 50 tons of rock with some family help. They left most of their property wooded, and farm their vineyards under organics. This cabernet tastes like mountain-grown wine, with the cool freshness of high-altitude fruit. It’s fresh and fragrant, with notes of cherries and licorice, then staunch tannins close off the finish, seemingly as rocky as the site. This has the structure to age for a decade or more. (92 points, $85; 368 cases)

Stonestreet 2009 Alexander Valley Monument Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon
Graham Weerts blends this wine from a range of blocks along the main ridgeline of the Alexander Mountain Estate, rising from 1,200 to 1,800 feet. In 2009, the fruit ripened to black cherry and chocolate depths, producing a dense, juicy and silken cabernet that needs little more than a thick-cut sirloin. (92 points, $45)

“It wasn’t only the floodplain vineyards that muddied the image of Alexander Valley cabernet over the years; it may also be the cabernet shadow cast by Napa Valley. Ames Morison, who settled in the hills at the cool, southeastern corner of the Alexander Valley in 2000, started out using Napa Valley as a model for his cabernet. “We used techniques and approaches that people do with Napa Valley fruit,” he told me at his vineyard, a remote series of parcels adjacent to the 3,100-acre Pepperwood Preserve to the east. “The way we approached our maceration and tannin management was geared toward Napa Valley–floor fruit. But those grapes don’t have as much tannins relative to what cabernet can give here.” For Morison, the Napa Valley fruit requires more aggressive extraction and a particular style of barrels to build on the cabernet’s structure.

Morison has farmed the Medlock Ames vineyards organically since the beginning, working with thin, eroded hillside soils. And until he did a customer survey in 2010, he worked his thick-skinned grapes with long fermentations and a lot of extraction. The feedback he received led him to experiment with different ways of managing tannin development in his wines, from invigorating the soil to increasing the shade on the fruit on the vines, to shortening the length of fermentations as well as the length of time the juice spent in contact with the skins.

“That resiny, rosemary, fresh-herb aroma of Alexander Valley cabernet can be nice in small amounts, but it can dominate the wine.” —Ames Morison