

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Old-School Meets Maverick at Merryvale

This historic Napa winery's beguiling Cabernets are classic and anything but at the same time. They're also poised for another great run



Merryvale's Profile Estate vineyard stretches across three ridge lines, affording it multiple exposures.



By James Molesworth

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Pop quiz: Bill Harlan's first winery was ...?

It wasn't his namesake estate. It was actually Merryvale, which he began with a small group of partners back in 1982. By 1991, an additional

partner, Swiss businessman Jack Schlatter, had joined. At the time, Bob Levy was winemaker, and the operation was in many ways Harlan's testing ground for his wines to come: Harlan, Bond and Promontory.

With his eyes on his own project, Harlan left the Merryvale group in 1996, with the Schlatter family taking ownership. Today, Jack's son René runs the business while winemaker Andrew Wright, 41, oversees production.

Wright's career started in the vineyards of Arizona. He moved to California to join Harlan's Napa Valley Reserve project, where he put in seven vintages before joining Merryvale.

The winery, right on St. Helena's main drag, across from Gott's, was the first built in Napa Valley following the end of Prohibition. Some of the original large redwood casks have been converted into swanky seating areas for tasting room patrons, but the wood rafters and old-school rusticity keep it rooted in the past.

After the elder Schlatter took control of Merryvale, he shifted away from purchased fruit, to an estate production model. The first vineyard purchase was in 1996, a 68-acre site (with 25 acres planted) on the east side of the valley that runs along three ridge lines in the Vaca range, overlooking Conn Creek Valley.

Now known as Profile Estate, the vineyard was fully replanted in 1997 by David Abreu, and today it's planted primarily to Cabernet Sauvignon, along with some Cabernet Franc and a touch of Petit Verdot. There have been some minor replants to add in differing vine selections—Eisele vineyard, Madrona Ranch and Spottswoode, among others—to counterbalance the preponderance of clone 337, which Levy had preferred during his tenure. There have been some shifts in trellising as well, but for the most part, the vineyard is now a fully mature 26 years old—the age at which some Napa producers write their “old” vines off for fear of dropping yields and replant.

“Not here,” says Wright simply. “The only question is really economic viability—if [production] drops way down. But as long as we’re pulling in anything close to 3 tons an acre, and the vineyard is healthy, we’d love to have a vineyard that gets to age 50, 60 or whatever.”

Sitting next to Bond’s Quella vineyard, Profile Estate is now farmed organically with a permanent cover crop. The site ranges from 600 to 900 feet in elevation, with vines spread across the three ridge lines. The parcels with eastern exposures produce a fresher profile, while those facing west offer a more robustly fruit-driven aspect, thanks to the afternoon sun.

As with many producers in Napa Valley, there are no 2020s here.

“We brought all the fruit in, but in the end, we poured it down the drain. Not everything was smoke-tainted—we did have some lots that [were]—but none of it was up to our standards,” says Wright. “So we dumped it.”

While Wright has adopted some of the more in-vogue techniques in the valley these days, including indigenous yeast, increasing heirloom vine material, reducing new oak aging and barrel toast levels, there is one way in which Merryvale hasn’t changed.

“I like a classic Cab. That’s what this site produces. It’s in vogue now to pick rather early, sometimes just a couple weeks after veraison. But I’m not going to shift drastically early to change the style. 24 Brix is fine with me. I don’t want 26 Brix, but I don’t want 22, either,” says Wright. “These volcanic soils can deliver harsh tannins, and you need to have the fruit around that for balance.”

As the vineyard has matured and Wright has gained experience with it, he feels that the increasing vine age has aided in gaining that balance.

“The tannins are definitely finer. The vineyard has a lot of power to it, but that power has moderated a bit. It still produces a big Cab, but

there's more elegance to the structure, relatively speaking," he says. "And that's why winemaking here has shifted a touch, to capture that aspect. There's a five-day cold soak, and then the ferments kick off. There is some pumping over in the first few days to get things going, but after a few days I back off steadily, moving the wine just to wet the cap and ease off on the extraction."

The vineyard is the only source for the top Profile bottling here, as well as the main source for a separate St. Helena Cabernet. The Profile bottling is certainly large-scaled and in line with modern Napa Cabernets, but the vineyard's soil, aspect and elevation are atypical, and the wine's ensuing persona is distinct.

"Conn Valley fruit is lots of blue and black fruit, along with savory, sage, chaparral, and even an umami sensation in some vintages," says Wright.

Tasting a range of 2022s from barrel, one shows a dark plum core laced with sage; another offers more of a violet note, with enticing loganberry and graphite. Working through several more, the graphite edge is a constant, providing an authoritative spine that is prominent in some samples, more buried in the fruit in others.

One sample of two vine selections co-fermented in cement tank shows a stunning core of cassis and plum fruit, with the structure only peeking out at the end amid a flurry of spice and chaparral notes. With the blend, Wright aims to express the site and put the differences between Merryvale's vineyards into sharper contrast.

"Blending is for the refinement of tannins. When I make two wines, I want them to be different," says Wright. "I don't want say a Napa AVA bottling that is just 1 degree of differentiation from the St. Helena bottling or the Profile bottling."

Merryvale makes around 10,000 cases annually, with a little less than half that being Cabernet-based (there's Chardonnay and Merlot as well). René Schlatter has continued his father's approach in shifting Merryvale

to an estate-only operation, purchasing additional vineyards along the way, including two sites on Mt. Veeder in 2021 and 2022, and a Coombsville property earlier this year. That growing range of sources should provide Wright with ample fodder to fashion the distinctly different cuvées of Cabernet he prefers.

With the winery's prime vineyard site now hitting its stride and additional sources coming on line, combined with conscientious farming and a light hand in the cellar, Wright is ideally set for a run of exciting Cabernets.

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