Regional profile

# Spring Mountain

The patchwork of vineyards in this elevated AVA are home to a contrasting assortment of single-minded traditionalists and wealthy newcomers, all attracted by this rugged, often remote terrain's ability to produce outstanding wines. Adam Lechmere spent some time with the locals

SPRING MOUNTAIN DISTRICT is one of the five great mountain appellations of the Napa Valley. It covers a lot of ground – its lower reaches abut the quiet residential streets of St Helena town, before the road climbs in vertiginous switchbacks up to 800m into the Mayacamas Range and the borders of Sonoma.

Wine has been made here since the mid-19th century – the Beringers, already established in St Helena, planted a vineyard in 1880. In its heyday, before phylloxera and Prohibition, there were some 250 wineries working on Spring Mountain. Today there are only 30, and you're unlikely to find a more diverse crew of winemakers and grape farmers in Napa, or indeed any American appellation.

There are rangy individualists like the Smith brothers at Smith-Madrone, whose ranch is a piece of Napa history, unchanged since they arrived in the 1970s. Their interesting range includes a Riesling that is ➢

**Below: Stony Hill's 'patchwork' of vineyards were planted by the McCrea family in the early 1940s**

## Spring mountain at a glance

**Area under vine**
405ha

**Number of wineries**
30

**Location**
Northern and eastern slopes of the Mayacamas range

**Elevation**
120m-800m

**Grapes planted**
More than half is Cabernet Sauvignon (225ha), the rest Merlot (77ha), Cabernet Franc (18ha), Petite Sirah (11ha), Chardonnay (21ha), Sauvignon Blanc (10ha); plus small parcels (less than 10ha) of Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Zinfandel, Malbec, Viognier

**Soils**
Shallow volcanic and sedimentary rock: primarily volcanic in the north, and sandstone and shale to the south. Well-drained, acidic, poor in nutrients, on steep slopes with very varied orientation

**Total production**
Between 60,000 and 120,000 cases depending on yield.

## Six producers to watch

### School House Vineyard

Founded 75 years ago, 6.9ha of dry-farmed Zinfandel, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah, vinified in a series of wineries including Stony Hill, Schweiger, Montelena and Pride Mountain. Its owners John M Gantner and Nancy Walker have an amused disdain for millionaires who buy up land and chase 100-point scores. 'I go for simplicity; let the wine make itself,' he says.

### Philip Togni

A founding father of modern Napa Cabernet, British-born Togni was instrumental in the creation of Chappellet Winery. With long stints at Cuvaison (Carneros) and Chalone (Monterey County) among others, he bought 10ha on Spring Mountain in 1975 and planted it to Bordeaux varieties. His 1990 Cabernet was ranked above the same vintage of 11 other Californian and Bordeaux Cabernets (including Latour, Margaux, Mouton and Haut-Brion) by a tasting panel in Brussels.

### Smith-Madrone

Stuart and Charles Smith work a remote 81ha ranch, first planted in the 1880s, crafting Bordeaux blends, Cabernet, Chardonnay and Riesling on rocky slopes. The Smiths have changed little since they planted in the 1970s, their Cabs especially showing a fine classic structure.

### Spring Mountain Vineyard

Napa aristocracy, SMV took fourth place with its 1973 Chardonnay at the 1976 Paris Tasting, and produces restrained and ageworthy red and white Bordeaux blends. Its La Perla vineyard, planted in 1873, is the oldest Cabernet planting on Spring Mountain. The range is now under the auspices of Australian winemaker Susan Doyle. She says of her 2013 Chardonnay: 'There's not enough acidity. We can lend ourselves to a more European style.'

### Stony Hill

The McCrea family planted in the 1940s and the winery has changed little since: the 1,000-gallon vats look like something Al Capone may have stored bootleg in. Winemaker Mike Chelini, who took over in 1977, is 'the oldest tenured winemaker in Napa', says owner Peter McCrea (who is of the same vintage). There is nothing old-fashioned about the wines, which are structured, fresh, restrained and modern. The 2014 Chardonnay from barrel is among the best I've ever tasted from Napa.

### Lokoya

In looking for prime Napa hillside land for its high-end Lokoya series, in 2013 Jackson Family Wines bought the Yverdon Vineyard, which sits above 600m, off the Spring Mountain Road. With a reputation for producing one of the finest hillside ranges, Lokoya's winemaker Chris Carpenter teases out subtle differences between the Diamond Mountain, Mount Veeder, Howell Mountain and Spring Mountain AVAs. The blue fruit, cedary brightness and stony minerality of the latter are typical hallmarks of the AVA.

Stuart and Charles Smith of Smith-Madrone

**Above: the vineyards and winery buildings of Newton, which sits above the town of St Helena**

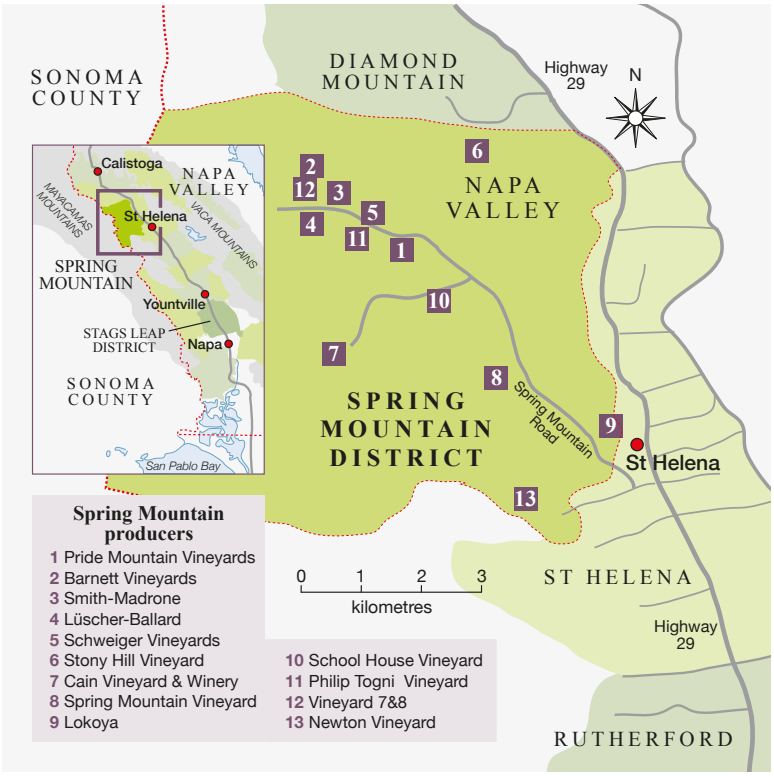
renowned and delicious *(see p44)*, though not as original as their Cabernets. On a quiet evening you can hear their shotguns booming from miles away – the estate is dotted with buckshot-peppered targets.

There are polished, millionaire-owned start-ups such as Vineyard 7&8 – or Newton, now owned by French luxury goods giant LVMH but an early pioneer in the region; its light and elegant 1981 Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the best Napa Cabs I've ever tasted. And there are hidden treasures like Stony Hill, started by the McCrea family in 1942, whose winemaker Mike Chelini pressed his first vintage in 1977.

While Bordeaux varieties dominate – more than 80% of the appellation's 405 hectares are planted to the five red Bordeaux grapes, 225ha of them Cabernet Sauvignon *(see box p41)* – Spring Mountain is far from homogenous in the way that Stags Leap District, say, is now almost entirely Cabernet.

Stony Hill's 65ha are a patchwork of varieties; most are the early Chardonnay plantings, with Gewurztraminer, Riesling,

Photographs: Smith-Madrone: Matt Morris Photography; Mick Rock/Cephas




Map: Maggie Nelson

*'It's known as a Cabernet appellation, but Cabernet wasn't grown here for 60 years'* **Peter McCrea, Stony Hill**

Syrah, Semillon, a bit of Pinot Noir and some Zinfandel. Growers John Gantner and Nancy Walker at School House are working with Syrah, Zinfandel and Pinot Noir, while Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc aren't uncommon in the AVA.

## United by difference

But times are changing, and the more desirable mountain fruit becomes, the more vineyards will be turned over to profitable varieties. Newton is undergoing a major revamp, which will see Cabernet vines rising from two-thirds to about 85% of its total plantings. A few years ago, Jackson Family Wines snapped up 10ha of Spring Mountain land for its Lokoya range of very expensive Napa mountain Cabernets.

Stony Hill owner Peter McCrea isn't about to change anything. But, he says: 'If I came into the business now, I'd plant Cabernet and Chardonnay. No question.' Gantner laments this: 'Of course more Cabernet will be planted. The only people who can afford to buy here are multimillionaires who hire high-tech consultants. They know they're not going to make any money, but that doesn't worry them. What they want are 100-point scores to show off to their friends.'

Stony Hill is a good example of a producer that is in the district but not of it (the current vintage is the first to carry the AVA on the label – previous bottles have been labelled simply Napa Valley), and McCrea says that viewing Spring Mountain as a singular entity really has no coherence at all.

'An AVA should have commonality in terms of climate, soil variety, topography,' he says. 'And Spring Mountain has none of that. It's known as a Cabernet appellation, but ➢

**Above: harvesting Cabernet Sauvignon at Vineyard 7&8**

**Above: Cain's winemaker Chris Howell and (left) the sloping, high-altitude, wind-exposed vineyards which give intensely flavoured grapes**

## Lechmere's picks: 10 top Spring Mountain District wines

**Stony Hill, Chardonnay 2007** 95/100
N/A UK **www.stonyhillvineyard.com**
Sweet and fresh with pure lime aromas. Honeysuckle and peach on the palate with flinty minerality, dancing acidity and top notes of exotic spice. Precise and utterly delicious. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 13%

**Smith-Madrone, Riesling 2013** 92
£22.99 **Roberson**
Orange blossom nose with hints of gasoline then white flowers on the palate and developing peach and pear fruit. Bone-dry minerality will soften. Curiously charming. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 12.6%

**Cain Vineyard & Winery, Cain Five 2010** 95
N/A UK **www.cainfive.com**
Creamy, savoury, opulent nose with coffee notes. Young, tenacious tannins, almost overripe plum fruit, then flavours of graphite, sour cherry and orange zest. Racy acidity; exotic and perfumed. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 13.9%

**Lokoya, Cabernet Sauvignon 2011** 95
£232 **Hedonism**
Almost raisined nose leading to a fresh and bright, open palate. Stony graphite minerality and open, juicy, fresh fruit with wonderful cedary brightness. Powerful and persistent length. **Drink** 2018-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

**Smith-Madrone, Cabernet Sauvignon 2010** 94
£44 **Roberson**
Vibrant blue fruit on the nose then a fresh and savoury palate with ripe, perfumed damson, finely structured tannins and refreshing acidity. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.1%

**Barnett Vineyards, Merlot 2012** 93
N/A UK **www.barnettvineyards.com**
Opulent plum and cherry fruit – ripe without being jammy. Fresh acidity lifts the fruit and dry, chalky tannins. Sweet and juicy with serious weight at the core. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

**Lüscher-Ballard, Cabernet Sauvignon 2008** 93
N/A UK **www.luscher-ballard.com**
From John Kongsgaard, this has lovely fresh-earth aromas and a palate of ripe blueberry and blackcurrant fruit, pencil shavings, cigar smoke, fine tannins and fresh acidity. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14.1%

**Pride Mountain Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon 2005** 93
£164 **Fine & Rare, Hedonism, Turville Valley**
Dense nose of dark fruit then a palate of sweet blackberry juice, a hint of tobacco and coffee, intense weighty tannins and a lovely juicy finish. Powerful but controlled. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

**Schweiger Vineyards, Dedication 2010** 93
N/A UK **www.schweigervineyards.com**
A Bordeaux-style blend: fresh raspberry leaf and mocha nose then ripe damson, black cherry, sweet cedar and savoury notes, finishing with fine sweet juice. Powerful yet restrained. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 14.8%

**Spring Mountain Vineyard, Cabernet Sauvignon 2009** 90
£62.50 **Whirly Wines**
Intense, savoury nose and a medium-weight palate of fresh blackcurrant fruit with hints of mint and earthier tones. Fine tannins and a delicate, dry length. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14.3

*For full details of UK stockists, see p89*

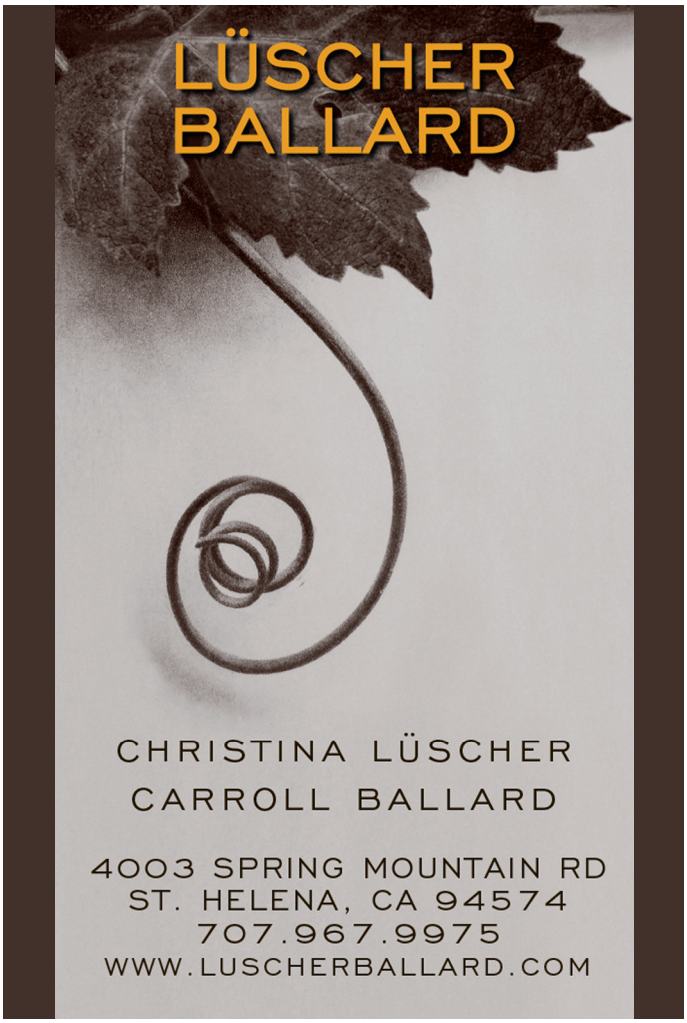
*'You're unlikely to find a more diverse crew of winemakers and grape farmers in Napa – or indeed in any American appellation'*

Cabernet wasn't grown here for 60 years.' Gantner agrees. 'The single common feature is that we're all located on this mountain.' He talks about the temperature variations between altitudes, and especially the varied soils. 'I dug 14 soil pits and they were all different. In one there was heavy black loam, while 200 yards away there would be another with round volcanic rocks and sandy loam.'

If there is a common thread, it's the distinct style of mountain fruit. For Andrew Schweiger, at the lovely vineyards his parents planted in the 1980s, it's 'complexity and small berry size, and fine acidity that develops during the day'. The fruit produces tannins that have to be carefully managed, he says. 'You could give Spring Mountain fruit to a monkey and he would produce a big Cab.' For Hal Barnett of his eponymous winery, another pioneer, it's 'fruit that's not as forward or lush as on the valley floor. It's got more restraint.'

## Ascending the heights

Cain is a mountain manor whose wind-blown grasslands and sloping vineyards embody the character of the appellation. The climate here is typical of high-level California vineland. The inversion layer (where warmer air rises from the valley floor) means there is less difference between night and day temperatures than down below, but the thin soils and exposure to wind ensure small berries with thick skins. 'Bud break is a week later than in the valley,' vineyard manager Ashley Anderson says. 'The growing season is shorter so we get more intense flavours. We don't need to extract much.'

Only one of Cain's three wines – the Cain Five *(see box left)* – is sourced entirely from Spring Mountain. A Bordeaux blend, it's a marvel of precision and exoticism. It's a difficult wine to classify, but perhaps unclassifiability is Spring Mountain's unifying factor. In articulating the character of the region and what he calls its 'mountain iconoclasts', Cain's winemaker Chris Howell asks: 'Is it about elevation, exposure and soil, or about winemaking? Perhaps some of the character in the wine comes from the characters who live and work up here.' D

*Adam Lechmere is a freelance wine and food writer for a number of UK and international titles*