

Knights' Day Is Coming

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Knights Valley is only a few miles north of Napa Valley, yet when it comes to its wine identity, it might as well be in Nevada. It's a beautiful winegrowing area, home to about 2,000 acres of vineyards and one of California's greatest wineries. Yet many wine lovers have never heard of it, much less know where it is, tucked in the southeast corner of Sonoma County at the base of Mount St. Helena. Mention Knights Valley to most and you'll likely face a quizzical stare.

Unless you bring up Peter Michael. Michael's is the lone winery in Knights Valley and one of the state's finest. Michael's Les Pavots 2007 (95, \$175) is a traditional Bordeaux blend that challenges Napa's best and invites comparisons with Pauillac. Its six Chardonnays—Belle Côte, Cuvée Indigène, Ma Belle-Fille, La Carrière, Mon Plaisir and Point Rouge—come primarily from estate vineyards, and each delivers a tight a beam of complex flavors. These are wines that gain depth and benefit from cellaring, where their differences become more apparent. The Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon blend L'Après-Midi (2008: 91 points, \$48) is classy, too, sleek and flinty. But Peter Michael's identity isn't closely tied to the Knights Valley name the way most wines are bonded to their appellations.

Beringer is the biggest player in Knights Valley. This Napa-based winery planted the first modern vineyards there starting in the early 1970s and has routinely produced elegant Cabernets from those grapes since 1976. The land cost less than Napa land, and there was plenty of room to plant. Knights Valley looked like a perfect place to grow Bordeaux grapes because of its range of soils, exposures and moderate climate, a vision that has been borne out by the wines. Beringer has long made a Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$27), as well as blends under the Alluvium label that are exceptionally consistent—a red Bordeaux blend (\$30) that is typically graceful and refined and a white made from Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon and Chardonnay (\$16).

Most visitors pass through Knights Valley on their way to somewhere else. They take in its tranquil views from the inside of a car or the seat of a bicycle. Winewise, there is little reason to stop. Smith's Trout Farm near Peter Michael winery is one of the valley's big summertime draws.

That is changing. Kendall-Jackson planted a vineyard next to Michael's and envisions a winery; Ditto for Delectus, which offers a Knights Valley Cabernet Franc and soon a Cabernet Sauvignon. In 2007, Napa's Philippe Melka harvested his first hillside grapes from La Mekerra Vineyard for his Métisse label (92, \$125). Knights Bridge has incorporated the area name and makes Cabernet and Chardonnay.

Climatically, Knights Valley is among the warmest in Sonoma County, though a shade cooler than Napa Valley, 5 miles south and separated by a row of forested hills. The soils range from loamy, volcanic ash on the flat valley floor to rockier hillsides, some very steep and picturesque. The confluence of breezes from the Pacific coast, Russian River and Mount St. Helena keeps temperatures mild. Mount St. Helena's towering presence dominates the eastern view, rising to well over 4,000 feet. The wind swirls constantly around the peak "like a ghost," says Nicolas Morlet, winemaker for Peter Michael. The wind never rests. Michael's property is fascinating in that Cabernet, Cab Franc, Petit Verdot and Merlot, warm-climate grapes, are grown close to Chardonnay, a cooler-climate grape, Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon.

Wildcard grapes Grenache and Syrah are newcomers to the area, but already proving a good fit. Helen Keplinger is buying both varieties from a small hillside vineyard in the valley's southwest corner and making two wines: a Grenache called Red Slope, which is a textural delight, with red and dark berry flavors, and a Syrah called Kingpin Rows that is the denser of the two.

The land and potential are there in Knights Valley. The valley is so small and narrow that it will likely retain its pastoral nature. Many local residents want to preserve the valley's countrified feel and oppose any new wineries or tasting rooms. That too may change. Knights Valley is poised for higher visibility, as its wines get better and command greater attention.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.



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