

# THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS COME ALIVE

THE REGION'S WINEMAKERS ARE MODERNIZING  
AND INTRODUCING NEW VARIETIES TO ATONE  
FOR THE ZINS OF THE PAST.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

When it comes to wine, it seems like there are two Californias.

First, there's the coast. That's where the action is, where cult wines are born and trends arise. The coast is the engine that drives wine quality in California.

Then there's the interior. It's usually seen as a sleepy place just trying to get by. And nowhere is interior California's wine country symbolized better than by the Sierra Foothills.

At 2.6 million acres, the Foothills is California's third biggest American Viticultural Area, behind only the Central Coast and the North Coast. Like them, it was authorized (in 1987) as a hodge-podge appellation, in an attempt to unify wines of its eight counties under a label of origin other than "California."

Spread along the flanks of the majestic Sierra Nevada, the region has much going for it: scenic vistas, Gold Rush towns, wild rivers, thick forests of Ponderosa pine and, higher up, the ski resorts and casinos of Lake Tahoe. But when it comes to wine, the Sierra Foothills has been resting on its laurels.

And very old laurels they are. By the 1850s, Amador and El Dorado counties boasted hundreds of wineries. Planted mainly to Zinfandel, their wines satisfied the gold miners' insatiable thirst, and fueled the raucous activities of San Francisco's infamous Barbary Coast.

In the past, I have not been a big fan of Foothills wines. Many have been rustic, showing classic faults of overripe, raisiny grapes, high alcohol, residual sugar and, in some cases, mold. I've attributed this to the fact that a lot of the wineries sell a huge quantity of inexpensive wine directly through their tasting rooms to indiscriminating tourists, so there's no motive on their owners' part to fix what ain't broken. I've wondered if some of the proprietors even taste the world's great wines, to understand where the goalposts—and their own limitations—lay. It's been a classic case of "cellar palate."

PHOTO: THE GALLERY COLLECTION/CONRES

But something exciting is happening in these mountains. A younger generation of winemakers has invaded, determined not only to perfect the Zinfandels, Cabernets and Rhône-style wines that have traditionally been produced there, but to introduce new Italian, Spanish and Portuguese varieties that may be better suited to the Foothills' dry, hot terroir.

### Bringing a coastal sensibility

Of course there have been great winemakers laboring in the Foothills all along. Bill Easton began making his *Domaine de la Terre Rouge* wines in the mid-1980s, and his Rhône-oriented wines have consistently garnered high scores from *Wine Enthusiast*, as have the Zinfandels he crafts under his Easton brand.

Other Foothills wineries consistently crafting fine, well-priced wines include Lava Cap, Shenandoah, Madrona, Renwood, Deaver, Ironstone, Sobon and Sierra Vista. Outside wineries such as Daniel Gehrs, Folie à Deux, Edmunds St. John and Elyse have made quality wines sourcing grapes from the region's vineyards.

But it's the influx of younger innovators that's really turning things around, and no one symbolizes that change more than Marco Cappelli.

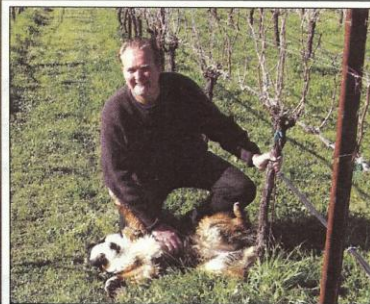
Cappelli was winemaker at Swanson, in Napa Valley, before leaving in 2004 for the Foothills, where he now consults for Toogood, Bray, Miraflores and Indian Rock, and will shortly release his first Cappelli wines.

When he arrived, Cappelli was acutely aware he had his work cut out for him. "Most small wineries [in the Foothills] rely on direct sales," he

notes. "From a business point of view, that made sense. But a lot of these owners aren't trained as winemakers, so the wines can be rustic. There's no imperative to polish them up."

"And," he adds, "a lot of their wines aren't dry, although people don't like to talk about it."

In Napa Valley, you couldn't get away with making rustic, sugary wines; the critics would blast you. Cappelli's wines at Swanson were always impeccably balanced. He has brought that coastal sensibility to the Foothills wineries he works for.



Top left: Marco Cappelli symbolizes Foothills' change and innovation. Top right: Original Rhône Ranger Bill Easton, an example to all young Foothills winemakers. Left: Naggiar Vineyards, the source and producer of fine Sierra Foothills wine. Next page: Twisted Oak produces a reliably excellent red blend, The Spaniard.

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## A Mixed Case of Sierra Foothills Wines

**93 Domaine de la Terre Rouge 2005 Sentinel Oak Vineyard Pyramid Block Syrah (Shenandoah Valley); \$35.** Made from the oldest vines in the winery's vineyard, Terre Rouge's Sentinal Oaks Pyramid Block is usually their best Syrah, and so it is in the 2005 vintage. It's a beautiful wine, soft, rich and opulent. The flavors of blackberries, ground black pepper, cherries, raspberries, chocolate, coffee, cola and Asian spices flood the mouth, leading to a dry, anise-tinged finish. Best now and for a few years. —S.H.

**92 Miraflores 2005 Syrah (El Dorado); \$30.** From the first sniff to the finish, this is really a good Syrah.

It impresses with its richness and balance, and the way it brings a taste of the earth to the ripe fruit. Grown at 2,600 feet in the Sierra Nevada, it's concentrated in currant, cassis, licorice, cocoa, pepper and Provençal herb flavors, and is most notable for its harmony and complexity. Absolutely delicious, a first-class Syrah. —S.H.

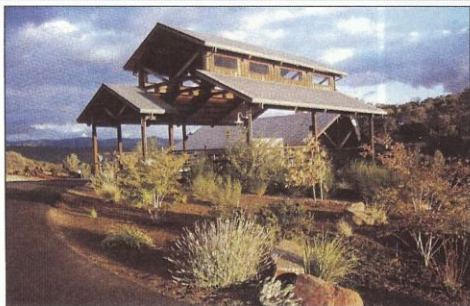
**92 Stonehouse 2004 Shultz Family Vineyards Legacy Cabernet Sauvignon (El Dorado County); \$38.** It's not at all heavy, but has a lightly elegant mouthfeel, more like Pinot Noir than Bordeaux. Yet the flavors are enormously complex, suggesting wild blackberries and cherries, with a

savory dash of cassis, pepper, cloves and cocoa. Standing in stark contrast to today's modern cult style of Cab, this one was born to drink with food. —S.H.

**92 Toogood 2005 Herbert Zinfandel (El Dorado); \$30.** The front label of this wine bears the name of the winemaker, Marco Capelli, who achieved fame at Swanson, the Napa Valley winery. The wine has the briary, peppery, rustic nature of many Sierra Foothills Zins, but has a balance and elegance that show true coastal sensibilities. The flavors range from fresh blackberry jam and black licorice to bacon, cloves, cinnamon and smoky oak. —S.H.

**92 Twisted Oak 2005 The Spaniard Red Blend (Calaveras County); \$45.** Twisted Oak has a pretty serious track record with this wine. The '05, a blend of Tempranillo, Graciano and Garnacha (Grenache), is very dry and complex. It's soft but firmly tannic, with juicy flavors of cherries, raspberries, pomegranates, licorice, chocolate, cloves and pepper. —S.H.

**91 Prospect 772 2005 The Brat Grenache-Syrah (Calaveras County); \$36.** This is a blend of Grenache and Syrah, and it's an enormously sensual wine. With a soft, caressing texture of velvet and satin, it carries intricate flavors of chocolate-covered raspberries, black cherries, licorice,



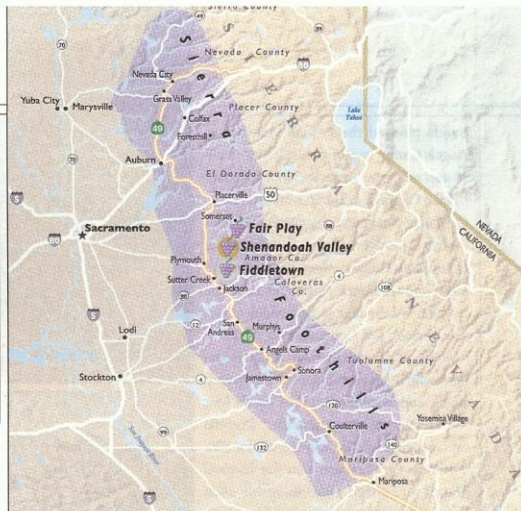
"I hired Marco because he was highly recommended and well-known in Napa," says Victor Alvarez, the owner of Miraflores, which is located above 2,500 feet in the El Dorado County appellation of Fair Play. Alvarez, a pathologist living in Yuma, Arizona, was determined that his wines would be "completely different from the brambly, semi-sweet wines" he found in the Foothills. "I will not," he declares, "tolerate raisins."

Up in Nevada County, in the Gold Rush town of Rough and Ready, another Napan is steering in a new direction. Ray Coursen is better known for his Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons, but when he decided to try his hand at Rhône varieties, he turned to the Foothills.

"I knew there was a risk involved," says Coursen, referring to the difficulties of marketing wines from a region few consumers know. Coursen hired a technical enologist, Mike Trotter, who'd earned his chops at Napa Wine Co. in Oakville. Trotter and Coursen both liked the terroir they found in the 1,300-foot Naggiar vineyard. The results: Coursen's blended red and white wines prove that the risk was worth it.

### Calaveras is jumping

To the south is the unlikely centerpiece of the Foothills revolution,



Calaveras County. Wineries such as Hatcher, Indian Rock, Twisted Oak, Prospect 772 and Newsome-Harlow, located in and around the old Gold Rush town of Murphys, are helping turn the region around. And the spirit is spreading to older wineries, such as Stevenot, which was founded in 1978.

Calaveras winemakers made their mark with lusty Zinfandels and tried their hand at the usual suspects (Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay) in order to satisfy the market. But the results were usually less than inspiring. Many among the new wave are turning toward the Mediterranean grapes that thrive in the Foothills' hot, cloudless summers. A classic example is Prospect 772; its inaugural 2005 releases, the whimsically named "The Brat" (a Grenache-Syrah blend) and "The Brawler" (Syrah and Viognier) represent the potential of Foothills Rhône-style wines.

After giving up on their hope of making Syrah on the Sonoma Coast (due to high land prices), Prospect 772 owners Ron Pieretti and Wendy

Dr. Pepper, smoky vanilla meringue, cloves, black pepper and other spices. Yet for all that fruity opulence, the finish is dry. —S.H.

**91 Sierra Moon 2005 Estate Syrah (Fair Play); \$30.** From this very high mountain vineyard in the Sierra Foothills comes this fine, although tannic, 100% Syrah. It has Northern Rhône aspirations in the peppery, leathery complexities that accompany the blackberry, currant and cedar flavors. Those aforementioned tannins are bigtime, but a good, grilled slice of beef will tame them. —S.H.

**90 Easton 2006 Zinfandel (Amador County); \$15.** Easton's basic Zin offers plenty of delicious pleasure.

It's a dry, smoothly tannic wine packed with wild blackberry, mulberry, mocha and (believe it or not) oillieberry flavors, which perhaps suggests a certain rural, old-fashioned quality. The wine is also superspicy in white pepper and nutmeg. Great value. **Best Buy.** —S.H.

**90 Elyse 2005 Naggiar Vineyard L'Ingénue Rhône White Blend (Sierra Foothills); \$35.** This blend of Marsanne, Roussane, Viognier and Grenache Blanc is very powerful in pastry-filling pineapple, guava, papaya, apricot and vanilla flavors, with oaky nuances of smoke, vanilla and caramel and a succulent edge of honeysuckle. It's well-balanced, with

crisp acidity providing a savory bite to the richness. —S.H.

**90 Newsome-Harlow 2007 Sauvignon Blanc (Calaveras County); \$16.** This is an extraordinarily rich, powerful Sauvignon Blanc so lush that it's hard to believe it's unoaked. Explodes in lime, green apple, fig, melon, pepper and vanilla cream flavors with acidity so crisp, it makes your mouth water. This is really a compelling Sauvignon Blanc. **Editor's Choice.** —S.H.

**90 Ironstone 2005 Reserve Chardonnay (Calaveras County); \$15.** Ironstone's Reserve Chard has been getting interesting of late, and the '05 is a fascinating study in vintage, con-

trasted with the '04. The vintage was a cool one, and the wine is loaded with acidity and minerality reminiscent of Chablis. You can taste things like granite and mica that give a rich tang of earth to the underlying pineapple and oak flavors. Finishes long and totally dry. **Best Buy.** —S.H.

**89 Amador Foothill Winery 2005 Sauvignon Blanc (Shenandoah Valley CA); \$12.** A wonderful Fumé-type wine, especially at this price, that reminds me of Sancerre. Bone dry and crisp, it has a minerally taste of the earth underlying the grapefruit, lime and gardenia flavors, and an exceptionally long, spicy finish. **Best Buy.** —S.H.

Sanda planted their small vineyard in Angels Camp, hoping to bring “new techniques and growing styles” to the county.

Like Cappelli, what Pieretti brought to Calaveras was a coastal sensibility. He was (and is) manager of grower relations at Rosenblum Cellars, which gives him intimate knowledge of Napa and Sonoma. And his winemaker is Rosenblum’s former vintner, Jeff Cohn. Among the “new techniques” Pieretti cites are deficit irrigation, which keeps the size of the grapes small, and keeping vineyard yields low. “These things are expensive,” Pieretti says, which is why his wines retail for \$36.

Rhône varieties are also the favored grapes at Twisted Oak, alongside such Spanish varieties as Tempranillo and Graciano. “Our elevation, combined with the arid climate, is similar to the southern Rhône, and also to the center of Spain,” explains Twisted Oak’s co-founder, Scott Klann. Although he grew up in Murphys and worked at Stevenot and Chatom, Klann realized that the same-old same-old wasn’t working. “We can’t sell ourselves short,” he emphasizes. “We’re on a sharp curve here concerning wine quality.” At Klann’s other winery, Newsome-

Harlow—where they craft more traditional Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel and Meritage—the wines are also pushing the Foothills quality envelope.

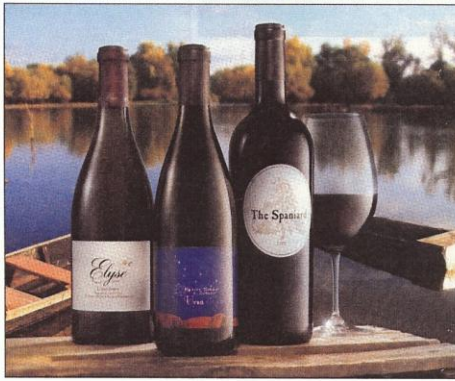
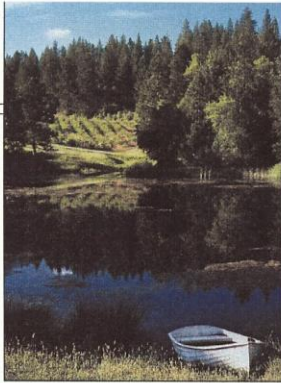
### Inspired by example

Many of the younger winemakers cite the example of Bill Easton. “He’s making fantastic wines,” Pieretti says.

Easton, one of the original Rhône Rangers, founded Domaine de la Terre Rouge in the mid-1980s, after working a stint at Davis Bynum in the Russian River Valley. Some Foothills producers “may have been dedicated, but they weren’t willing to take the financial risk,” says Easton, choosing his words carefully. Aware of his status among more contemporary winemakers, he says, proudly, “Many of the young people [here] have been influenced by our example. That’s a sign of traction for a wine region, when other people, like Twisted Oak, tell you they were inspired by a first-generation winery like ours.”

At Stevenot, just west of Murphys, winemaker Kate MacDonald has watched the local scene blossom for the last six years. She cites the increased skill and dedication of winemakers as well as the greater sophistication of consumers as increasing competition: “You can’t expect people to buy your wine simply because you’re local and it’s available,” she says. Stevenot’s wines have been on the uptick, and now, with their Iberian varieties, including Tempranillo, Torrontes, Albariño and Verdelho, it’s a winery to watch.

Then there’s Chuck Hovey, who got his start at J. Lohr before becoming Stevenot’s longtime winemaker. (When he left last year, MacDonald got his job.) He’s now consulting for startups, including



Top left: vineyards of the Foothills’ biggest winery, Ironstone. Top right: Ron Pieretti and Wendy Sanda, owners of Prospect 772 and makers of Rhône-styled wines such as The Brat and The Brawler.

Bodega del Sur, Dalton and Gianelli, as well as establishing his own Hovey brand. He’s working with Mediterranean varieties, including Vermentino, Fiano, Sangiovese and Tempranillo.

Hovey’s been tremendously impressed by how the wine scene is changing. “Over the last few years, it’s become a lot more professional, as people are funded better,” he says.

Perhaps the most surprising twist on all this new, fevered activity in the Foothills is that even the old standby, Cabernet Sauvignon, is being reinvented. Winemakers just don’t want to give up on it, and a couple examples are proving they shouldn’t. One comes from the Foothills’ biggest winery, Ironstone, whose Reserve Cabernets and Meritages have been terrific lately, while the other hails from one of its smallest and newest, Stonehouse.

The latter’s owner-winemaker is Mitch Shultz. Acknowledging that his region has not exactly been known for Cabernet Sauvignon, Shultz explains his decision to pursue the great grape of the Médoc. “To me, it’s the king of reds, and I felt that if I could produce a high-end Cab, I could set myself apart from anyone else up here.” He’s aware of the risk of persuading people to pay \$38 for a Cabernet with an El Dorado County appellation. “It will take a few years for people to change their attitudes about the Foothills,” he admits, “but it will happen.”

What will make it happen? Ultimately, Foothills vintners are going to have to educate the droves of tourists who buy straight from their tasting rooms that spending a few bucks more will give them better wine. And that won’t be easy. “Those direct sales are our lifeblood, so we have to be careful,” Cappelli warns. “We have to keep our customers in mind. They need the big reds, the rosés, the sweet wines.” It will be a delicate balancing act, but one that Sierra Foothills winemakers must accomplish if they want to share the spotlight on the world stage. ■

BOTTLE PHOTO: JON VAN COCKRE