



*Special Section*  
**NAPA**

# heart & soil

*Coombsville may be lesser known than other appellations in the Napa Valley, but prime quality is putting it square on the map.*

**Coombsville district  
may be some of Napa  
Valley's best wine**  
by Jeff Cox

HERE'S A LITTLE SECRET: PERHAPS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND RURAL PART OF THE NAPA VALLEY— seldom visited by tourists and the source of some of its best wine—is the Coombsville district.

Coombsville?

“Even lifetime residents of the Napa Valley are surprised when they discover the Coombsville area,” says Tom Farella, a winemaker from there whose 26 acres are tucked tightly against the looming volcanic Vaca Mountains east of the town of Napa.

The famous appellations strung along Route 29—Carneros, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, Spring Mountain, and others—make the Napa Valley the second largest tourist draw in California after Disneyland. But Coombsville to the southeast has no main roads. Its gently rolling hills are threaded with country lanes, reminiscent of how most of the valley looked 50 years ago.

One of its first wineries was started by Henry Hagen in 1881. His Cedar Knoll Vineyard Co. wine won a silver medal at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Prohibition proved

## Vineyard Tours

Note: All tours require reservations; all area codes are (707).

### ANCIEN WINES

\$25 per person, waived for wine club members.

Curtis Strohl  
(707) 927-6594

[ancienwines.com/contact](http://ancienwines.com/contact)

### CALDWELL VINEYARD

\$45 per person.

Joy Caldwell,  
(707) 255-1294  
(707) 340-0002.

[caldwellvineyard.com](http://caldwellvineyard.com)

### DAVIANA WINERY

\$50 per person.

Debbie Darrin  
(707) 251-0173

[davianawinery.com](http://davianawinery.com)

### FARELLA VINEYARD

#### AND WINERY

\$20 per person

Tom Farella  
(707) 254-9489

[farella.com/visitus.html](http://farella.com/visitus.html)

### FRAZIER WINERY

\$20 per person for tasting,

\$45 per person for tour and tasting.

Adam Caterino  
(707) 255-3444 x 107

[frazierwinery.com/visit.html](http://frazierwinery.com/visit.html)

### GHOST HORSE VINEYARDS

\$250 per person.

Todd Anderson,  
(707) 287-3510.

[ghosthorseworld.com](http://ghosthorseworld.com)

### METEOR VINEYARD

\$50 per person; Bill and Dawnine Dyer, winemakers.

Jason Alexander  
(707) 258-2900

[meteorvineyard.com](http://meteorvineyard.com)

### PALMAZ VINEYARDS

\$60 per person includes hors d'oeuvres.

Florencia Palmaz,  
(707) 226-5587

[palmazvineyards.com/tours.cfm](http://palmazvineyards.com/tours.cfm)

### PORTER FAMILY VINEYARDS

\$25 per person

(707) 927-0765.

[porterfamilyvineyards.com/tours](http://porterfamilyvineyards.com/tours)

### SCIANDRI FAMILY VINEYARDS

\$25 per person

Rebecca  
(707) 277-4999 x 3

[sciandrivineyards.com](http://sciandrivineyards.com)

### SODARO ESTATE WINERY

\$25 per person.

Kari DiFabio  
(707) 251-8216

[sodarowines.com](http://sodarowines.com)

### TOURNESOL WINE

No charge.

Doug Warner  
(707) 224-3960

[tournesolwine.com](http://tournesolwine.com)

### TULOCAY WINERY

No charge

Bill Cadman  
(707) 255-4064

[tulocay.com/](http://tulocay.com/)

### WHETSTONE WINE CELLARS

\$30 per person with lunch

Michelle  
(707) 254-0600  
[ubuntunapa.com/annex.php](http://ubuntunapa.com/annex.php)

fatal, however, and the vineyards and winery lay abandoned—although the house was occupied—until Julio and Amalia Palmaz began restoring the entire property in 1997. Today Palmaz and a dozen other wineries dot the district's 11,000-plus acres, nearly a tenth of which are planted to grapevines.

If you're partial to luxury Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons or Bordeaux blends, you've undoubtedly tasted Coombsville's contributions to many top label wines, including Screaming Eagle, Joseph Phelps' Insignia, Far Niente, Merryvale, Keenan, Pahlmeyer, Viader, Merus, Ovid, Mia Klein, and Patz & Hall.

But wine made exclusively from Coombsville fruit is the most interesting. The vines love the well-drained, mineral-rich but nutrient-poor soils that formed as the rock and ash of 5-million-year-old volcanism washed down from the mountains. Nutrient stress keeps the berries small and the flavors focused, yet the wines are not lush and fruity but rather elegant, sleek, and nervy, with an unmistakable flavor of the soil's minerals and a dusty texture some call "Coombsville dirt" but that might better be described as "Coombsville velour."

Coombsville's climate—cooling afternoon winds and moderate nighttime temperatures—allows the fruit to ripen slowly and evenly over a long period, yielding wines of great maturity without the high alcohol produced by fruit that's blasted into sugary ripeness by torrid afternoons.

"We do get structured wines, but they have soft tannins," says Curtis Strohl of Ancien Wines. "They are eminently drinkable." Debbie Darrin of Davianna Winery agrees. "What strikes me about Coombsville wines is the brightness of their fruit," she says. "They have a lively minerality. They're on the elegant rather than the concentrated side."

The tasting experience at Coombsville's wineries is more exclusive and intimate than at the better-known and crowded venues along the Silverado Trail and Route 29. All Coombsville visits are by appointment only, and wines are priced for the elite. Over a leisurely hour or two, you may walk through gardens, tour the wineries and their caves, have lunch, taste several bottles, sample from barrels and talk with owners and winemakers.

The region's destiny, however, is to become better known. Jonathan Swinchart is a geologist who co-authored "The Winemaker's Dance," a book that explores terroir in the Napa Valley. "We were talking about Coombsville becoming its own appellation," says winemaker Farella. "He said that it is not just an appellation, but given the quality of the wines and the encroaching climate change, Coombsville in the future will be the appellation."

