



COOL COOMBSVILLE OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The growers and winemakers—not to mention smugglers—of Coombsville have been enhancing the Napa Valley wine scene for decades. But, as Jonathan Swinchatt explains, it's only recently that this relatively small and cool-climate AVA has started to attract the recognition it deserves

Photography courtesy of Meteor Vineyard



Some 5 miles (8km) due east of the city of Napa in California, a curving wall of rock, concave to the west, rises abruptly from the valley floor, capped by Mount George, its peak at an elevation of some 1,900ft (580m). The wall forms the eastern boundary of a half-bowl, diameter about 4 miles (6km), whose center is occupied by a broad, irregular ramp that rises westward to an elevation of some 500ft (150m) before dropping abruptly to the valley floor at the open end of the half-bowl. The western edge of the ramp is a gently curving ridge—concave to the east and about a mile (1.6km) long—known as Alta Heights, a residential neighborhood overlooking the city with a western panoramic view that extends from San Francisco Bay in the south to St Helena in the north—a vista of such scale and presence that it can still the most active mind. The eastern part of the ramp is an area of irregular, hummocky topography occupied in part by the pampered fairways and greens of the Napa Valley Country Club. The ramp is encircled by a horseshoe-shaped valley, wide at the

ends of its northern and southern arms and narrow along the joining curve that lies between the mountain front and the eastern end of the ramp. The half-bowl and ramp are covered by a haphazard mosaic of modest houses, small ranches, horse farms, fields, and vineyards, with a few opulent mansions in the eastern hills. The area has been protected from the inquisitive eyes of wine tourists and the less interested gaze of up-valley wine professionals by the looming wall of Alta Heights that borders the Silverado Trail, the main eastern road into well-known, hard-traveled, and often overcrowded Napa wine country. People drive by Alta Heights blithely unaware that just a few hundred yards away lies a region that, over the past 30 years, has made, in quiet anonymity, fundamental contributions to the evolution of wine growing in Napa and, by extension, to wine growing throughout the country.

This unintentionally hidden place is known as Coombsville, and several of its contributions swirl about the slight but unmistakable figure of John Caldwell, known

to regular readers of this magazine as the impish rogue who smuggled French clonal material into the United States from Canada, getting caught in the process, initiating a series of events that resulted in, among other things, the legal introduction of French clones to the American wine industry (WFW 24, pp.74–79). More recently, Coombsville has hit the public eye, finally dropping its shy persona, ready to come out and undertake the task of establishing a presence among the 15 recognized AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) nested within the large Napa Valley AVA. This might seem an overwhelming task for a region with just 11 wineries and 1,000 acres (400ha) of vines up against such Napa powerhouses as Oakville, Rutherford, and the Stags Leap District, but Coombsville has an arsenal of attributes, including a distinguished, if also poorly known, history of contributing to some of Napa's most highly prized wines, a unique climate that might well be in tune with evolving American wine preferences, and a core group of winemakers who highly prize their association with Coombsville. And one can argue that it all began the day Caldwell got stopped at the US/Canada border.

Buried treasure

Perhaps you remember the story: After getting caught by US Customs and told that he must surrender the French vines he had already shipped to California, Caldwell (opposite) buried them beneath an oak tree in his vineyard-to-be, replacing them with cuttings from a certified California nursery. After the California Department of Agriculture confiscated the cuttings (thinking they were the French material), Caldwell planted his vineyard with the French clones, in effect initiating the modern era of winegrowing in Coombsville and, arguably, the Napa Valley. When Randy Dunn, among the original Napa "cult" winemakers, tasted Caldwell's first wine, he immediately made it a component of his 1986 Napa Valley cuvée. Word got out that Caldwell had something new and different; winemakers came flocking like techno-geeks to the latest electronic gadget, not wanting to miss out on what might be the next big thing. They left impressed by the somewhat mysterious quality of the wine, quite distinct from what they were used to in Oakville, Rutherford, St Helena, and Calistoga. Attributing the difference to the French clones from which the wine was made, they returned in the spring to buy Caldwell's prunings, twig by twig, more than recompensing him for the fines he paid to the US and California Departments of Agriculture. Today, Caldwell thinks that the difference people sensed in the wine was more Coombsville than French clone: "If they had been planted in Oakville, the clone would have reflected Oakville, and the difference in the wine would not have been so pronounced—it might not have created such a stir." But create a stir it did, seeding an interest in French clones that would eventually lead to a revolution in Napa viticulture. It happened something like this.

Convinced by the response to his first vintage that there was, indeed, something to these French clones,

Caldwell became interested in French rootstocks and began to pursue how he might gather enough, legally, to start a nursery. Enquiring at the Foundation for Plant Materials Service (FPMS) at UC Davis about importing the material, he was told they had in hand the rootstocks that he sought and that no one before had ever requested them. When asked how many he wanted, Caldwell ordered 500 of each of five different rootstocks, knowing it would take a year to produce those quantities from the few mother vines FPMS had in hand but figuring that in the meantime he could become a California certified nursery and prepare to play the role of a legitimate businessman. Caldwell did just that and planted the 2,500 vines in 1986.

The timing, though unplanned and serendipitous, was of genius caliber. By the end of the 1980s, phylloxera was in full attack on Napa vineyards, most of the vines having been grafted on to AXR-1, a very grower-friendly rootstock designated, mistakenly, by the experts at Davis as phylloxera-resistant. In 1989, Davis finally withdrew their recommendation of AXR-1, and growers—at the beginning of the extended undertaking of replanting the Napa Valley—became desperate for truly resistant rootstock at a time when Caldwell's 7-acre (2.8ha) nursery was the only source. Caldwell's business blossomed, and as it did, he began once again to contemplate clones and the possibility of legally importing French material. It would take a few years of research and negotiation, but in 1995 ENTAV (Etablissement National Technique pour l'Amélioration de la Viticulture), the French regulatory agency, agreed to release clonal material to Caldwell, coded so that he did not know what it was (they were still negotiating licensing) but available at least to begin the quarantine and indexing process that would establish whether or not the vines were free of virus.

In 1995, 1,200 vines divided among some 40 clones of several varieties went into quarantine at the Mount Vernon Nursery in Columbia Missouri. Survival rates, worse than the most virulent epidemic, were not encouraging: Two years later, just 100 plants emerged, a few of each of the original clones, the rest succumbing to the general disregard that is apparently native to the quarantine process. Knowing of the latent demand for French clones—he had been selling cuttings from his two producing clones for ten years by then—and not wanting to wait the five or ten years that it would take to build his stock by normal bud-wood propagation, Caldwell built himself a mist-propagation facility, in effect reproducing the climate of a tropical rainforest. First into the greenhouse went the 100 clones in 5-gallon (19-liter) pots, fertilized and encouraged in every way to grow new shoots at an accelerated pace. Then came an array of tables with trays of perlite under plastic enclosures lined at the top with mist sprayers programmed to release every 15 minutes. As soon as the rapidly growing shoots on the clonal mother vines reached an inch or so long with a single leaf, Caldwell would nip them off and place them delicately in a perlite tray, bathed in the heat and moisture of the misted canopy.



As soon as they developed a few roots, these toy-like incipient vines were transferred into small pots with soil, prior to planting in the vineyard at the tender age of about six weeks, with trunks perhaps an inch (25mm) or so in length, an eighth of an inch (3mm) wide, with a bit of top growth and a strong, if tiny, root system. Using this method, labor-intensive and difficult at best, Caldwell propagated and planted—in a single summer—between 12,000 and 15,000 clonal vines, establishing the foundation for a genetic revolution in vineyard stock in California and North America. Today, the process of matching rootstock and clone to site has become an integral part of vineyard planning and design—despite the uncertainties that accompany a lack of systematic performance data or long-term experience with the many rootstock/clone combinations that are available to plant on a diversity of soils throughout North America. And remember, once they are planted, unless you are very wealthy and in the wine game mainly for its much vaunted if often illusory glamor, you live with, and adjust to, the results for another 30 years.

From the start, Caldwell sold fruit to Randy Dunn and to Jason Pahlmeyer, whose winemaker at that time—Helen Turley—was at the beginning of her ascent to vinous stardom. The focus in Napa, particularly then, was on winemaking rather than place, so Turley got the credit, along with Jason, for the highly prized Pahlmeyer Cabernet, with not a mention of Coombsville or Caldwell on the label.

Nevertheless, vineyards began to sprout up in Coombsville and to supply fruit to some of Napa's leading wineries. Farella Vineyards sold fruit to Mondavi while Austin Hills's property beneath Mount George supplied grapes to Mike Grgich (Grgich Hills Estate), who crafted it into beautifully balanced and lusciously aromatic Chardonnay of great repute. Warren Winiarski purchased Chardonnay from Haynes Vineyard (planted 1968) for Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and then, in 1996, bought Hills's vineyard, having been entranced by the seductive pear-like aromas of Grgich Hills Chardonnay. Coombsville fruit became a major component of Far Niente Chardonnay, Joseph Phelps's flagship red blend Insignia, Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet, Franciscan Cabernet, and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' Napa Cuvée. Far Niente eventually bought three properties, one of which supplies the botrytis-infected grapes for Dolce, its late-harvest blend of Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc. Tony Soter bought Coombsville fruit for his Etude Cabernet—a connection that remains after the

sale some years ago of Etude to Beringer. Now, with boutique winemaking a growth industry for the well-to-do as the landless or land-poor seek out high-quality fruit, many are finding their way into the neighborhood behind the wall of Alta Heights and into the vineyards of Coombsville. "As the business evolved from large producers having banks of 10,000-gallon [38,000-liter] tanks," says Tom Farella, "to smaller outfits with 1,000-gallon [4,000-liter] tanks or less, a number began to buy Coombsville fruit, and the region began to emerge." And as Coombsville emerges, its name and its vineyards appearing on an increasing number of bottles, curiosity arises as well. What, some wonder, makes this small, hidden enclave so different?

A geologic story

The geologic, topographic, and climatic diversity that make Coombsville both interesting and a bit difficult to grasp are the offspring of a violent, complex, and somewhat bizarre birth. The story about to be laid before

you, though based on observation of geologic and topographic realities, is at its heart a myth (as in "idealized conception"), as are most geologic explanations, based as they must be on indirect evidence and projection of surface configurations into the unseen depths beneath. The speculative tale turns on a single bold interpretation by geologist David Howell, who noted around 2002 that the steep slopes rising behind Coombsville, and

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a nested stack of similar ridges (the largest of which extends some 12 miles [19km] from north of Coombsville to the Rutherford District), have the form of landslide slip surfaces. He went on to describe a series of mega-landslides that resulted from the rapid uplift of the Vaca Mountains, so abrupt and extreme (geologically speaking; the actual rate was imperceptible to ordinary human senses) that the weight of the resulting range exceeded the strength of the rocks that comprised it, causing the mass to break along a series of curving surfaces down which slid a set of gigantic landslide blocks, the largest fully 12 miles long. As with most landslides, to make room for the sliding mass they thrust up toe deposits at their down-slide extremities, forming the hills that pop up in the valley, particularly in the Stags Leap District, the geographic center of the larger set of slides. In Coombsville, these "toe deposits" are found in Alta Heights and its ramp, which dip back (eastward) into the center of the slide, a characteristic geometry.

In the case of Coombsville, an additional complication



A satellite photograph highlighting the Coombsville bowl, whose unusual geologic birth results in unique physical characteristics

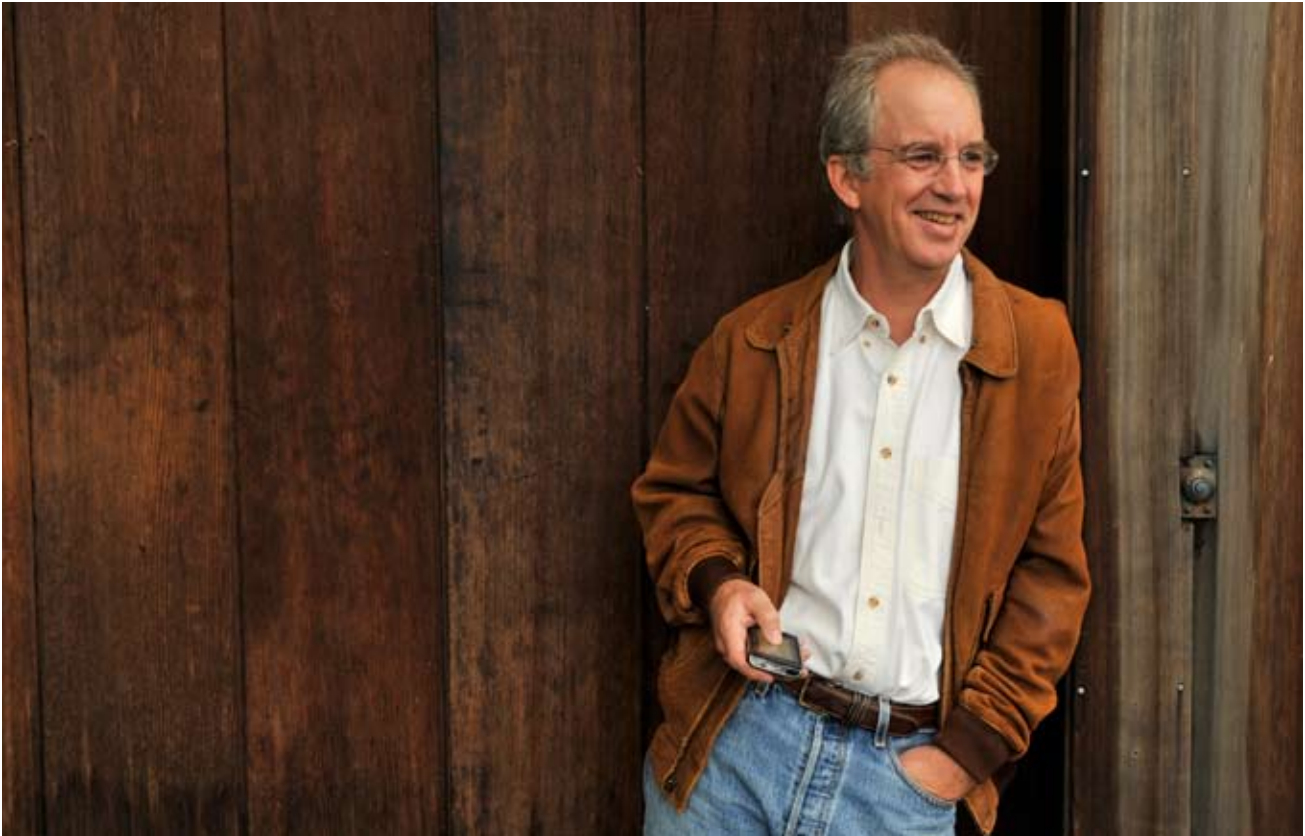
intrudes—the roundish shape of the slide surface, a geometric configuration distinct from the normal, more elliptical form. The geologic community—or at least that part, however limited, with knowledge of the Napa Valley—had long assumed that the form of the Coombsville bowl represented the outline of a volcanic caldera, a landform that follows an explosive eruption so extreme and violent (think, at your risk, of earth-based projectile vomiting) that the expulsion of magma leaves a void into which the surrounding land sinks, leaving a roundish depression. Howell allows that this might be the case, but he also maintains that the present topography strongly supports the landslide hypothesis, though the slide might well have taken place on a pre-existing plane of weakness such as the wall of a caldera. This series of events—an extreme eruption followed later by mountain uplift, failure of materials, massive landslides, and pushing up toe deposits—is impressive not only in its scale and force but also in the irregular, rolling, hummocky topography it left behind, which, acted upon subsequently by weathering, erosion, and deposition, is the foundation of Coombsville’s physical character, unique in the Napa Valley AVA.

This account, however, fails to address Coombsville’s diversity of substrate (the stuff in which the vines are planted)—and a complex mix it is indeed. The regional bedrock is formed by the Sonoma Volcanics, a series of lava flows, welded tuffs, ash-fall tuffs, and other kinds of volcanic effluvia that were erupted, quite violently, from about 7 million to 3 million years ago. These rocks form the steep walls and palisades of the Vaca Mountains. Contemplating their massive presence, we easily forget that during such eruptive periods, normal Earth surface processes continue: the sun shines, the rain falls, the rivers flow, erosion and deposition continue at their punctuated and erratic pace. Periodically, the results of these processes

are preserved within the stack of volcanic rocks, and such is the case in part of Coombsville. The northern broad arm of the horseshoe valley is carpeted by sediments formed by rivers and streams and accumulated in lakes during the time of formation of the Sonoma Volcanics. Some of these are diatom-rich lake deposits, material known better as diatomaceous earth, used in filters, some of which find their way into wineries. The upshot of this, in part, is that Coombsville soils have formed on a broad variety of parent materials including a diverse array of volcanic rocks, diatom-rich lake deposits, and at least three ages of river and stream sediments, the oldest some 4 million years old, the middle formed during the past 100,000 years, and the youngest laid down over the past 10,000 years. Each of these occupies particular areas within the Coombsville bowl, at different elevations and thus within slightly different climatic regimes, which provides not only a diversity of local terroirs, but also a segue into another complex subject of importance that may be Coombsville’s most fundamental attribute: its climate.

The Coombsville climate

Coombsville’s climate, however, is poorly documented at best—even the description accompanying a recent petition for AVA status amounts to a few terse paragraphs with no supporting references. The anecdotal and empirical information, however, is abundant, consistent, and revealing. In 1980, the county agriculture agent told John Caldwell that Coombsville was too cool to ripen Cabernet Sauvignon, advising him to plant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Twenty years earlier, Nathan Fay had been told that the Stags Leap area, some 8 miles (13km) north of Coombsville, was too cold for Cabernet, but he had planted it anyway and proven the naysayers wrong. Caldwell was a bit more judicious, planting a couple of



Dirk Hampson of Far Niente, who looks to Coombsville for cool-climate fruit for its Chardonnay blend, as well as for nobly rotten Semillon for dessert wine Dolce

temperature sensors along with the Chardonnay, quickly establishing that Coombsville did accumulate sufficient heat to ripen Cabernet. But Coombsville is, indeed, somewhat cooler than up-valley and its heat distribution distinctly different, due to the tempering influence of the maritime climate a few miles south in San Pablo Bay. In the spring, Coombsville warms earlier than the body of the valley, with budbreak up to three weeks before Calistoga in the north. During the growing season, morning fog and afternoon winds shorten the duration of midday heat; and during the fall, the maritime influence reduces temperature spikes and provides cooler conditions leading up to harvest, which runs late, often into November.

These general conditions apply across Coombsville, but temperature varies considerably with topography, the lower elevations and pockets within the hummocky surface pooling colder air, making the ripening of Cabernet in some spots a difficult proposition. Rainfall in Coombsville averages 25–30in (635mm to 760mm) per year, wetter than Carneros to the south, drier than the Oak Knoll District to the north. Winter rains often begin in October, a timing that can challenge the judgment and risk tolerance of Coombsville growers; picking before the rain assures that the grapes won't get pumped up (compromising intensity) but risks the dreaded tinge of "green" flavors, while waiting risks further rain and deterioration of quality before the drying sun arrives. Despite these factors, the Coombsville climatic regime provides wine growers with a unique potential cogently

expressed by Agustin Huneeus, founder-owner of Quintessa in Rutherford, Faust in Coombsville, and Veramonte in Chile: "When I was at Franciscan, I discovered that there was a lot or two that we purchased, that every year were the best that we bought. One of them happened to be next door to the property that we eventually purchased [Faust]. It was the coolest area, and by that I mean it was the latest to mature, and perhaps it ripened with less sugar. Now that's a very exciting thing in the Napa Valley—to have ripening without that enormous amount of sugar that will eventually allow you to make good, ripe, delicious wines without [excessive] alcohol."

Huneeus tells of being in Chile with Robert Mondavi, showing him the cool area in the Casablanca Valley that Huneeus was looking to buy. "Bob said he thought those cooler areas that had a little difficulty ripening the Cabernet were going to be the future of the grape. It hasn't turned out that way because the powers that be, in terms of influencing the market, like very hot-area Cabernet. But their influence is waning, and I think we are going to see Cabernets that are less powerful, less obvious perhaps, and with different flavors. Coombsville is like that."

Cool for Cabernet

The December 23, 2001, issue of *The New York Times Magazine* featured an article on cult wines in the Napa Valley. It opened with an account of a winemaking operation at that time located in a small cottage, its driveway, and a double garage in a modest residential

neighborhood in the city of Napa. The operation's first vintage had hit the market a few months previously with a 93 from Robert Parker, other rave reviews, and a desperate search for unavailable bottles by those who are focused on the overriding need to possess the next mind-catching wine. Its name was Merus, and it was the product of Mark Herold and Erika Gottl, then a husband-and-wife team. (After ten vintages, in 2008 there was a divorce, the sale of Merus to the ever-expanding Bob Foley wine empire, and the separation of Herold from Merus accompanied by a non-compete agreement that has, until recently, limited the application of his prodigious talents to varieties other than Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay.) Notably absent from the article was any mention of the source of the fruit that produced this "sublime" wine. Yet it would not have made an impression had it been printed in brilliant red caps—nearly 20 years after Caldwell had planted his French clones, Coombsville still lay largely unrecognized, surely by the wine-drinking public but also by Napa valley professionals.

Herold had come on the region while working as a research enologist with Joseph Phelps—Coombsville grapes had shown themselves to be different in some way and of impressive quality. When the time came, he wanted them for his own wine, eventually working with several producers, including John Caldwell.

Prior to Caldwell, the plantings in Coombsville were limited mainly to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and most of the early modern growers and producers followed that lead. Dirk Hampson and his colleagues at Far Niente bought their first Coombsville vineyard in 1983, for a cool-climate component of their Chardonnay blend. Thinking the wine that came from it too structured, too acidic, and not as interesting as they thought it should be, they replanted with different rootstocks, different clones, and different spacing, and farmed it with different techniques. The result? Transformation from a "purely structural element to being one of the outstanding parts of the blend, bringing texture, oiliness, and a great depth of flavor." When Hampson was overcome by the urge to make a botrytis-based dessert wine, he went again to Coombsville, where he planted Semillon and produced Dolce. He eventually tried growing Cabernet Sauvignon in Coombsville but found that they could not, in an average year, attain the degree of ripeness suitable for their (Nickel & Nickel) interpretation of Cabernet. "In a normal year, it was a struggle to get it ripe enough, so it didn't seem green

compared to the rest of the 12 or so single-vineyard wines [we produce]." To put this in perspective, Hampson says, once Napa Valley wine growers got past the habit of thinking of their wines in terms of Bordeaux, that "with the intensity, reliability and amount of sunshine we get, along with the cool-down at night, we were ultimately able to get this phenomenally jammy, ripe, texture-driven thickness that, frankly, is nearly intoxicating. Forget about the extra alcohol. It is a lovely feel to get that kind of intensity of pure ripeness."

Vineyard manager Mike Wolf, a 30-year veteran of Coombsville, describes the fundamental Coombsville issue: "To produce really good Cabernet Sauvignon in Coombsville, you need to be more on top of things to take advantage of the coolness but not get greedy about it—you need to avoid anything that delays ripening." Andy Erickson, winemaker for Screaming Eagle, Ovid, Dalla Valle, and Favia (the wine he makes with his wife, viticultural consultant Annie Favia), expands the view: "I think Coombsville is warmer than it was 30 years ago, but viticulture has changed as well. People are

taking more care, and having less crop you can make some fantastic wines here. They can hang longer without dehydrating, yet they retain their acidity, so you get these beautiful, fresh, dark-colored, rich wines that are not over the top."

Those who grow Cabernet in Coombsville flirt with spring frost by pruning early to encourage budbreak, then thin clusters, drop leaves—at least on the morning

side—and open the canopy, all to encourage early harvest in the context of Coombsville's fall hang-time, which, says Meteor Vineyard winemaker-partner Dawnine Dyer "separates real ripening from sugar accumulation. You can actually see these two things separate: The sugars stop increasing at a rapid rate, but the vines continue to photosynthesize and the grapes continue to develop character. The tannins are quite resolved and soft, the fruit is fresh and aromatic, and the wines tend to give a nice balance between modern fruit and classical structure."

Meteor, bought and planted by one-time AOL president and multimedia wizard Barry Schuler, sits on a small plateau at about 350ft (110m) elevation on the Coombsville ramp, on old alluvial gravels. Nearby lies Dead Fred, named after the owner's deceased cat and from which Mia Klein makes a single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. Klein speaks of Coombsville flavor profiles: "In Coombsville, you don't just get the blue and black fruits that you tend to get in the warmer areas; you also get

Andy Erickson says of Coombsville, "You can make some fantastic wines here. They can hang longer without dehydrating, yet they retain their acidity, so you get these beautiful, fresh, dark-colored, rich wines that are not over the top"

more complex flavors, mineral tones, the sort of thing you get with cooler temperatures." Dead Fred is planted on soils virtually identical to those of its near neighbor Meteor. "At a recent tasting of Coombsville wines," reports Mike Wolf, "the only two that tasted similar were Meteor and Dead Fred. Different winemaking, but they just jumped out compared to the others—we were tasting the vineyards."

Warren Winiarski found Coombsville's distinctive character at the Hills property that he bought and renamed Arcadia. "They had originally planted Chardonnay clone 4 that had been developed for the [hot] Central Valley because it held its acidity," he says. "But in [cool] Carneros, planted for production, you get acidity in excess and nothing else. With the additional warmth in Coombsville, no matter how it's distributed, and on the right soil, you keep the acidity, not excessively, and you get this pear-like aroma, with freshness, elegance, and a high-cheekbones style that is so rewarding. Of course, maintaining this requires very little oak and very little malolactic fermentation." Arcadia's Chardonnay grows on diatom-rich soil.

The Judge, the inventor, and the path to AVA

Perhaps an outlier in Coombsville's panoply of fad-avoiding, independent wine growers, John Kongsgaard makes The Judge—a Chardonnay named in honor of Kongsgaard's late father—from a vineyard at the top of Alta Heights planted on land bought by his grandfather as a potential rock quarry. The ground is so impoverished that it naturally produces 1–2 tons (900–1,800kg) per acre (2.47ha) without dropping fruit. This produces a wine that, says Kongsgaard, "tastes like it was made from fruit, but the expression of this vineyard gets the fruit way back on the horizon, at the edge of your view, and in the foreground is more the mineral quality."

From grapes raised in poverty, he makes wine steeped in Old World tradition. "It's kind of an old-fashioned technique: two-year barrel fermentation and aging, no added yeast, no bacteria, very little sulfur, long lees aging... basically like they make good Montrachet. I've taught people—a few with vineyards that I think are up to the aging—how to do this, and the results never taste anything like [The Judge]. Even my Napa Chardonnay, made from Carneros fruit in exactly the same way is quite different. The Judge can take two to three times as long to ferment, sometimes 16 months."

The Judge, regularly reviewed and praised highly by Robert Parker and identified as a Coombsville wine, has surely done its part in bringing recognition to the region, but perhaps no one has done more than Julio Palmaz, inventor of the expandable cardiac stent. Attracted to Coombsville by the historic property once called Cedar Knoll, Palmaz proceeded not only to restore the original mansion and replant the vineyards but also to carve out, within the ramparts of Mount George, a four-level cave that is topped by the largest unsupported underground structure in the world—a domed chamber 72ft (22m) in

diameter and 54ft (16m) high, ringed around its upper third by a steel rail that moves the fermentation tanks, like so many carousel steeds, to the destemmer/crusher on the entry level at the top of the dome. Palmaz, an inventor with a fertile and creative mind, was perhaps more involved in the technology of the project than in its power of attracting attention, but attract attention it did, along with gossip, judgment, and all the bureaucratic hassle that accompanies such large-scale projects. By the time it was finished, in 2006, those who live and work in the Napa Valley surely had heard of Palmaz and perhaps Coombsville, but the context provided little insight into the still obscure history and potential of the area.

Then in 2004, Agustin Huneus gave Aaron Pott (his winemaker at the time) the charge of organizing a petition to designate Coombsville as an AVA. As part of the process, Pott held a broadly attended meeting at which he proposed two names: Coombsville and Tulocay. "I liked the idea of giving it a Wappo [a local Native American tribe] name. They were forced to live there when the Europeans arrived. They called their camp Tulocay, which means "redskin", and the area became known as Rancho Tulocay. [A word meaning "redskin"] seemed to me appropriate for a wine region."

Tulocay won the vote but was rejected by the TTB (Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) due to its use by a local winery. A new proposal, for a Coombsville AVA, is under consideration in Washington. A spate of very public controversy arose over choosing a name, some considering Coombsville to be, at the very least, a bit inelegant compared to Stags Leap District, Oakville, or Rutherford. Yet to drive Coombsville's winding and irregular byways is to explore a neighborhood rather than bask in the open and spacious beauty of the up-valley destinations; perhaps a name that evokes the feel of a country town is fitting. Pott, by the way, makes wine from Coombsville fruit. "The Cabernet Franc I picked from this one area came in at 22.5° Brix, which makes about 13% alcohol, and it's just fabulous: bold, good intensity, wonderful tannins, ripe and soft, and not suffering from high alcohol like those ones from up-valley that my wife calls 'oaky colas.'"

"Remember," says Agustin Huneus, "it was Americans who started denominating wines by variety—before, it was always by terroir. And terroir always had a specific profile to it: This is Bordeaux, this is St-Emilion, this is Alsace, or whatever. Coombsville is a cooler region, so it produces a more refined wine with less alcohol, perhaps a bit less density, with great concentration. But people in Coombsville do have some leeway in how they are going to develop their wines. If they [produce for] Parker, they are going to [make a mistake] because they will be doing the same as everybody else. Maybe difference does sell." And if, indeed, it does—there is little indication to the contrary—perhaps once again the wine growers of Coombsville will influence the evolution of wine growing in the Napa Valley. •

