

# Pritchard Hill

Napa Valley, California



## ***CELEBRATED WINEMAKERS ARE FLOCKING TO THESE SLOPES OF THE VACA MOUNTAINS.***

*Kyle Schlachter is a Wine Location Specialist and Ph.D. candidate in geography, with a focus on Colorado's wine industry. He serves on the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board and also teaches physical geography courses at The University of Denver. He publishes Colorado Wine Press and has written for Palate Press, The Wine Cellar Insider, and Wine Spectator. To learn more about Kyle and his work, visit [www.colorado.winepress.com](http://www.colorado.winepress.com).*

KYLE SCHLACHTER, CSW

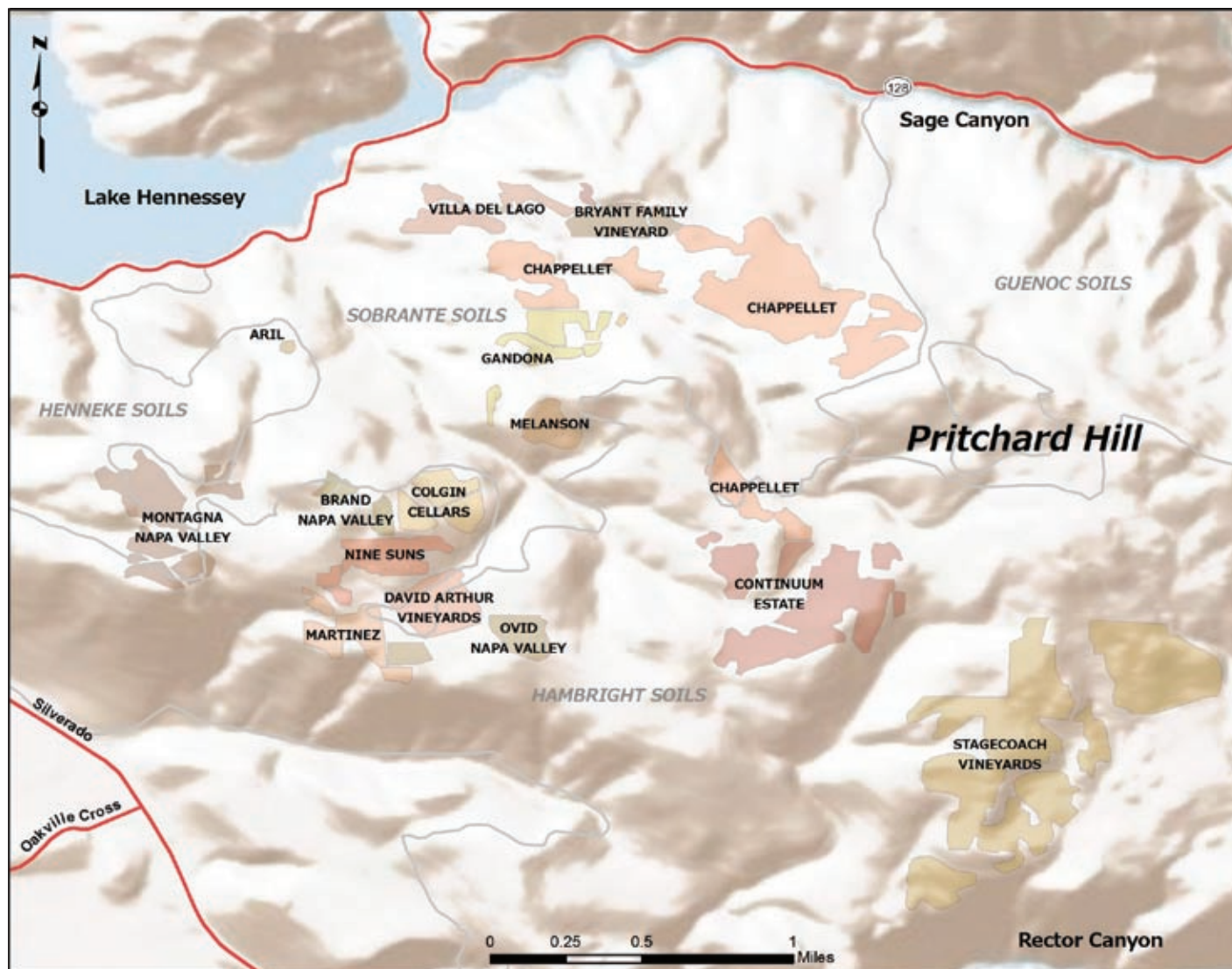
Hillside vineyards are not recent phenomena in the Napa Valley: four of the first seven subappellations to be identified within the regional American Viticultural Area (AVA) were mountain districts. And even before the federal government got into the business of defining viticultural boundaries in the post-Prohibition era—about the same time Robert Mondavi and Joseph Heitz were building their wineries on the valley floor—Donn and Molly Chappellet were pioneering steep-slope viticulture east of Oakville in an area known as Pritchard Hill. Their inaugural 1969 Cabernet Sauvignon, made by Philip Togni, is now a Napa Valley icon.

The Chappellets own the trademark to the name Pritchard Hill, so you will see it only on their labels—but they are not alone in producing world-class wine here. Indeed, Pritchard Hill is now home to more than a dozen renowned wineries, including Bryant Family Vineyard, Colgin Cellars, and Ovid. Star winemaker Philippe Melka and Mondavi's son Tim have also staked claims in the neighborhood.

Pritchard Hill's powerful flagship Cabernet Sauvignons, many released in tiny quantities, are highly sought after by collectors and restaurants (see "The Emerging Napa Valley Cult Contenders" on p. 70). But Cabernet isn't the only



## TERROIR



cultivar yielding excellent results here. Chappellet has planted a few acres of Chenin Blanc, Melanson Vineyard contains a small block of Chardonnay, and David Arthur Vineyards' property grows some Nebbiolo and Sangiovese. Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, usually minor components of Bordeaux-style wines, make up a significant portion of the blends for Ovid and for Mondavi's Continuum Estate. Gandona Estate even produces a Port-style wine from 100% Touriga Nacional. And Syrah is emerging as a new hero: Colgin's IX Estate from Pritchard Hill is one of the most acclaimed Syrahs in the world, and Helen Keplinger, who discovered a fondness for the area during her recent short stint as Bryant winemaker, sources Syrah and Grenache from Stagecoach Vineyard for her own label.

The primary reason for the influx of these top producers is the unique terroir. "Pritchard Hill is Oakville east, but with altitude," Tim

Mondavi proclaims. "I think I'm making some of the best wines here at our hillside estate that I've ever made—and I've worked with some very good valley vineyards." Tim's uncle has also spoken highly of the area; Donald Long fondly recalls Peter Mondavi telling him back in the 1960s, after visiting the area where Long's David Arthur Vineyards would be planted, that "the vine is really going to like it up here."

"Pritchard Hill provides some of the best sites in all of Napa Valley," adds Melka, who served as winemaker at Bryant from 2002 to 2007. One of his newest projects, Brand, is located on a small plateau just a stone's throw from Ann Colgin's IX Estate block. Melka also sources fruit from Pritchard Hill's Martinez Vineyard for Tusk Estates, which he co-owns with Michael Uytengsu and Tim Martin. Portuguese-bred entrepreneur Manuel Pires, who has hired Melka to make wine at his Gandona Estate, observes that their

*Grounds in bloom at Chappellet Winery (left).*





*Donn and Molly Chappellet.*

The Vacas were formed between 3 and 7 million years ago during a geologic event known as the Sonoma Volcanics. The remnants of this volcanic field have been shaped by landslides and other erosional processes to form a bedrock whose complex mixture of andesite, basalt, rhyolite, and tuff—along with some sandstone, gravel, and conglomerate—spans a northwest-trending area approximately 55 miles long by 20 miles wide. From Ovid's stunning winery at the top of Pritchard Hill, one can easily see the Oakville plantings of Backus Vineyard (owned by Joseph Phelps), Dalla Valle Vineyards, and Screaming Eagle, their variegated reddish soils emerging from the fog as it recedes toward San Pablo Bay. "The red volcanic soils we see up here start at Rudd Estate [in Oakville], continue to Dalla Valle, and then go up the slope to Pritchard Hill," explains Melka.

Although the soils on Pritchard Hill are fairly uniform—shallow, well drained, and exceptionally rocky—three distinct series are found. Hambright soils form the basis of the southerly vineyards (Brand, Colgin, Continuum, Martinez, Nine Suns, Ovid, and Stagecoach); these so-called Lithic Haploxerolls have dark, organic upper layers that rarely develop beyond 6-12 inches in depth. As Colgin winemaker Allison



*Chappellet Winery vineyards (top left) and cellar (above).*

*Ovid winemaker Austin Peterson.*



"job is to try to restrain the power, masculinity, and up-front rusticity of the terroir."

Pritchard Hill is situated in the Vaca Mountains between Lake Hennessey and the Atlas Peak AVA, with plantings at elevations of 700-2,000 feet. Every morning, these vines begin soaking up solar radiation while the valley floor is still veiled with fog. They also experience more moderate temperatures than are found down below, with less diurnal variation. "The cooling effect of the lake is beneficial to the development of beautiful aromatics and to even ripening," explains Todd Alexander, Keplinger's successor at Bryant Family Vineyard. Warmer nights have the added advantage of extending the daily growing period into the evening hours.

*Winery at David Arthur Vineyards.*



Photo by Kyle Schlachter (top left); photo © Daniel D'Agostini (top right); photos courtesy of Chappellet Winery (middle left), Ovid (bottom left), David Arthur Vineyards (bottom right)



## TERROIR

Tauziet explains, “The big rocks up here cause the roots to go down farther, faster in these thin soils.” Whereas Mondavi was used to getting 5-6 tons per acre from valley vineyards at Robert Mondavi Winery and Opus One, he says, “we only get about 1.6 tons per acre at Continuum.” The Sobrante soils found in the more northerly vineyards (Bryant, Chappellet, Gandona, and Melanson) are Mollic Haploxeralfs, slightly deeper (at 36 inches) than Hambright, with more clay content. Still, Del Dotto Vineyards’ new Villa del Lago estate produces less than a half-ton per acre here. Says Melka, “Prep work to remove boulders is very important” in both Sobrante and Hambright soils, which dominate most of Pritchard Hill and extend all the way down through the immense, 700-acre Stagecoach Vineyard to the Atlas Peak AVA.

Pritchard Hill’s third soil series, Henneke, is limited to slopes along the southwestern shore of Lake Hennessey. These shallow, well-drained soils form in serpentine rock, which is so rich in magnesium that it causes potassium deficiency and thus reduced vigor. In 2000, Donald Long’s



*Plantings at Bryant Family Vineyard.*

son Robert started Montagna Vineyards just down the road from his family’s David Arthur Vineyards (planted on Hambright and Sobrante soils). “Our Casadores block is all Henneke and is very low vigor,” explains Montagna winemaker Nile Zacherle, who is also the winemaker at

David Arthur. “Malbec seems to really perform well here. The Cabernet Sauvignon

*David Arthur Vineyards father-and-daughter team David and Laura Long (left); Brand winemaker Philippe Melka (below) and cellar (bottom).*



Photos by Kyle Schlachter (top), Heather McLaughlin (bottom left), Thomas Heinser (middle right); photo courtesy of Brand (bottom right)



## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

### Brand Cabernet Sauvignon

2009 \$225

This 100% Cabernet Sauvignon is opaque black in color. Pleasant floral and blackberry aromas emanate from the glass; flavors of blackberry liqueur, black-cherry jam, dusty cocoa, vanilla bean, and smoky tobacco compete with chewy tannins on the dense palate. Exceptionally muscular but not unbalanced; needs time to develop. 15.1% alcohol.

### Bryant Family Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

2009 \$335

The explosive, bright red-cherry and raspberry perfumes of this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon fill the room. Supple red-fruit flavors mingle with Christmas spices, chocolate, and spicy tobacco; the finish seems to go on forever. An amazingly brawny but friendly giant. 15% alcohol.

### Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Pritchard Hill

2009 \$135

75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Petit Verdot, 10% Malbec. Red fruits, flowers, tobacco, and earth tantalize the nose. Smooth flavors of raspberry, blackcurrant, spicy tobacco, and toasted oak complement a radiant minerality on the palate. Elegant yet powerful and vibrant. 14.9% alcohol.

### Colgin Cellars Syrah IX Estate

2005 \$175

After an intense nose of black fruits, spices, and sage, the texture is beautiful, with firm tannins that seem to be smoothing out over time. Plentiful blackberry, fig, plum, lavender, rosemary, and grilled-lamb flavors fill the mouth, leading to a long and sublime finish. This 100%-varietal wine is wonderfully balanced and complex; the high alcohol (15.6%) is not noticeable in the least. Will continue to age gracefully for years.

### Continuum

2009 \$165

77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, 7% Petit Verdot, 4% Merlot. Though still a bit shy, the wine displays

a subtly floral nose, with rich flavors of cocoa, tobacco, flowers, and black fruits hiding amid its silky texture. Should be fun to watch it develop. 14.7% alcohol.

### David Arthur Vineyards Meritaggio

2009 \$55

David Arthur's unusual blend of 68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Sangiovese, 9% Cabernet Franc, and 5% Petit Verdot offers a lot for a relatively low price. Strong and dense, it yields a bounty of black cherry, ripe strawberry, and currant with a strong, smoky roasted-coffee component, backed by chewy tannins. 14.7% alcohol.

### Gandona Cabernet Sauvignon

2009 \$190

This massive 100% Cabernet Sauvignon needs time to settle down. The alcohol is noticeable through the dark-berry, espresso, and vanilla aromas. Mouth-coating tannins provide a firm backbone for flavors of blackcurrant, blackberry liqueur, and dark mocha. 15.1% alcohol.

### Montagna Cabernet Sauvignon

#### La Presa-One South

2009 \$125

Bunches from only the south sides of rows in the La Presa block were used to make this bold 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Huge black-raspberry and cassis flavors harmonize with a healthy dose of rosemary and leather on the palate; smooth tannins coat the mouth on the moderately long finish. 15.1% alcohol.

### Ovid

2008 \$195

A wonderfully complex blend of 62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Cabernet Franc, 11% Merlot, and 4% Petit Verdot. Beautiful fruity, floral, and cedar aromas make you want to sniff the glass for hours. The intensity picks up on the palate, which features a focused, dark core of blackberry, cassis, leather, and cigar box and finishes spicy and long. 14.8% alcohol.

Gandona Estate owner Manuel Pires (left) and vineyards (right).



Photos courtesy of Gandona Estate

## TERROIR



Colgin Cellars' IX Estate vineyard.

is more fickle and tricky on this block; yield is normally very low." Nearby, Harmon and Joanne Brown's 1-acre Aril vineyard is planted to Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot on similar soil. Michael Wolf, who manages both the Aril and Martinez vineyards, explains that "Aril is a very challenging site because of the serpentine; the soil doesn't hold water well." The Martinez Vineyard at the top of the hill is more retentive, he says, due to the higher clay fraction of the Hambright soils—but wind can be an issue due to the altitude.

Aspect may play the greatest role in distinguishing among Pritchard Hill sites, particularly in terms of tannin development. According to Melka, "Different exposures produce dramatically different wines despite similar soils." Although many of the vineyards face west, Colgin's IX Estate block is an exception: "Our eastern expression allows the greatest pigment

development and shelters the fruit from the hot afternoon sun," Tauziet notes. "That exposure is probably the biggest physical difference between us and our neighbors."

Of course, Pritchard Hill growers don't rely solely on terroir to produce the best fruit. Aril, Colgin, and Ovid all use sap-flow sensors designed by Fruition Sciences to measure the water demands of individual vines every 15 minutes. Ovid winemaker Austin Peterson explains that the sensors give vineyard managers "a way to peek into the vine to see what it's thinking. We can maintain sugar levels where we want them until we reach phenolic ripeness." Obviously, these vintners are making the most of their small crops. As Mondavi observes, "Concentration, depth, and nuance can be found in all our wines. From their power comes refinement. The future is great for the properties on Pritchard Hill." 🍷

## KEY PRODUCERS

**Aril**

40 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(908) 512-5208  
www.arilwines.com

**Brand**

90 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-1199  
www.brandnapavalley.com

**Bryant Family Vineyard**

1567 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-0483  
www.bryantwines.com

**Chappellet Winery**

1581 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-7136  
www.chappellet.com

**Colgin Cellars**

P.O. Box 254  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-0999  
www.colgincellars.com

**Continuum Estate**

1677 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 944-8100  
www.continuumestate.com

**David Arthur Vineyards**

P.O. Box 112  
Rutherford, CA 94573  
(707) 963-5190  
www.davidarthur.com

**Gandona Estate**

1535 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 294-8000  
www.gandona.com

**Melanson Vineyard**

1537 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-7404  
www.melansonvineyard.com

**Montagna Vineyards**

141 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-8651  
store.montagnanapavalley.com

**Nine Suns**

200 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
www.ninesuns.com

**Ovid**

255 Long Ranch Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-3850  
ovidvineyards.com

**Stagecoach Vineyard**

3265 Soda Canyon Road  
Napa, CA 94558  
(707) 259-1198  
www.stagecoachvineyard.com

**Villa del Lago**

1551 Sage Canyon Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
(707) 963-2134  
www.villadellagowinery.com