

AVA

Workin' on the Rockpile

ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S
TINIEST, NEWEST
AND MOST UNIQUE
APPELLATIONS

story and photos by Randy Caparoso

Rockpile is one of California's newest, and smallest, American Viticultural Areas. Created in 2002, it's located north of Dry Creek Valley and defined by 800 to 2,100 ft. elevations. **Carol Shelton**, who's made her living sourcing unique Zinfandels and Petite Sirahs up and down the coast, typifies the enthusiasm of the few winemakers working with this AVA: "Rockpile is absolutely my favorite wine-growing region."

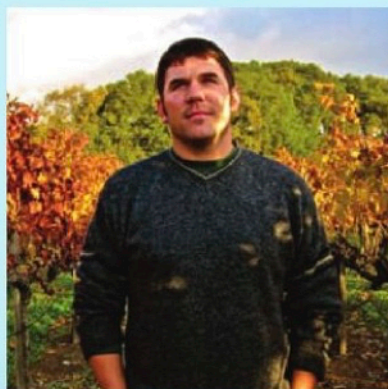
Kent Rosenblum was the first to put Rockpile on the map, making stunning wines at **Rosenblum Cellars** from the late 90s from positively puerile vines planted by Jack Florence Jr. in 1994. "From the beginning," says Rosenblum, "we knew Rockpile would be exceptional. If you're a grape grower, this is the place you want to be—magnificent views and shallow, rocky, high-elevation terrains that grapes love."

Rockpile is a rare combination of positives. Lake Sonoma, which runs below the eastern edge of the AVA, creates an inversion, sucking down the fog to expose these dirt-poor ridges. Rockpile's grapes see lots of fog-free sun, but constant, cooling wind from the nearby coast results in slightly elevated acidity and the intensity that comes from extended hang time.

Tasting Terroir

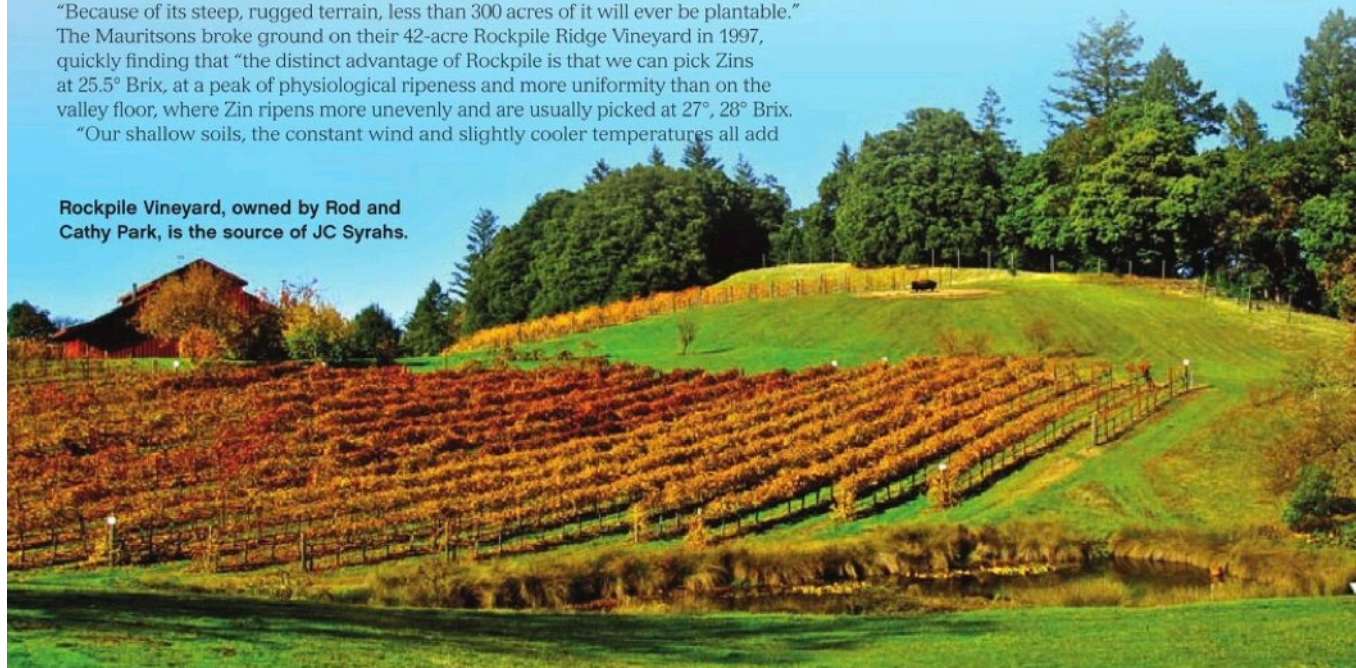
"Rockpile will always be special," says **Mauritson Wines** proprietor Clay Mauritson, whose family has lived on this narrow ridge since the 19th century. "Because of its steep, rugged terrain, less than 300 acres of it will ever be plantable." The Mauritsons broke ground on their 42-acre Rockpile Ridge Vineyard in 1997, quickly finding that "the distinct advantage of Rockpile is that we can pick Zins at 25.5° Brix, at a peak of physiological ripeness and more uniformity than on the valley floor, where Zin ripens more unevenly and are usually picked at 27°, 28° Brix.

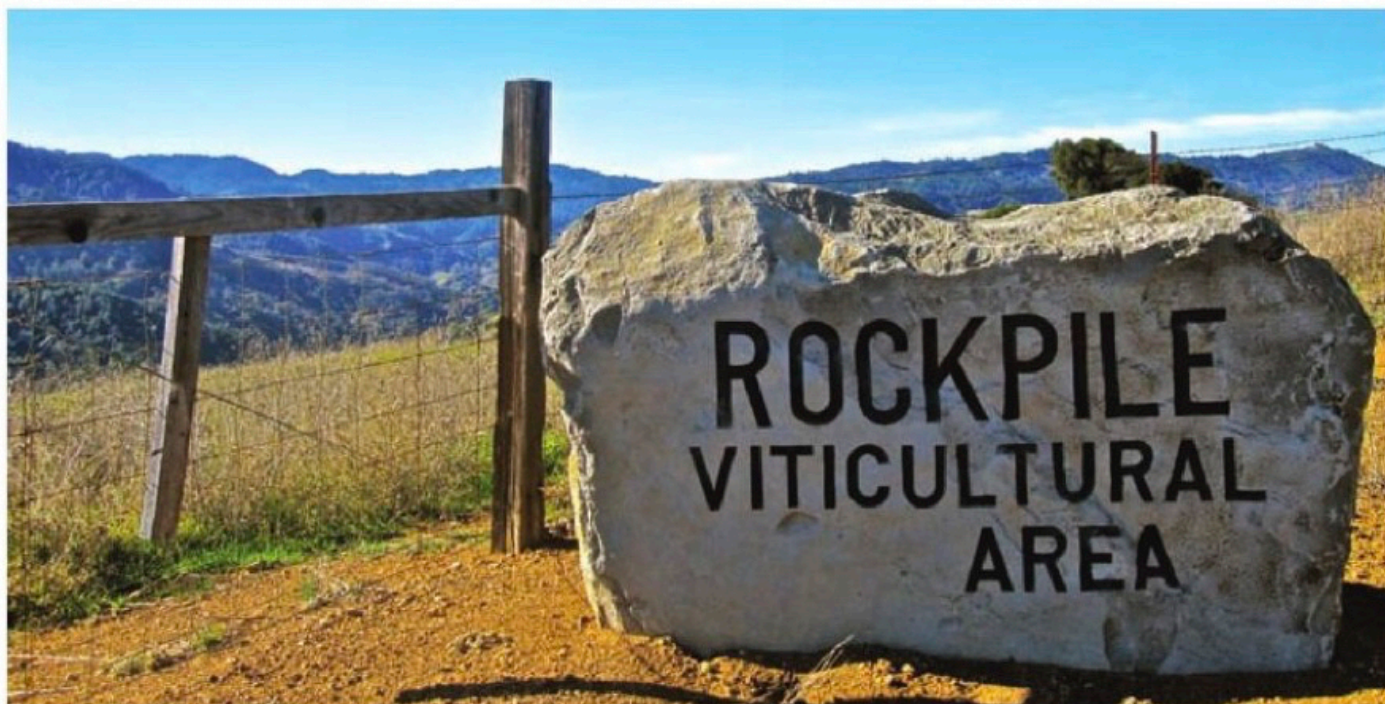
"Our shallow soils, the constant wind and slightly cooler temperatures all add



Clay Mauritson. The Mauritsons broke ground on their 42-acre Rockpile Ridge Vineyard in 1997.

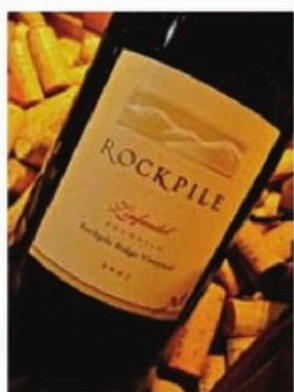
Rockpile Vineyard, owned by Rod and Cathy Park, is the source of JC Syrahs.





up to smaller berries, looser bunches, higher quality tannins and generally higher acids." Translated to finished wines, according to Mauritsen, "Rockpile Zins *feel* different in the mouth; there is plenty of body and beautifully ripe flavors without pruniness, raisining, or a fat, heavy, high-alcohol feel."

Assumption of terroir-related sensations is also common to virtually all vintners who work the Rockpile. "The chain of similarity I've always found in wines from Rockpile has been in structure and a strong sense of minerality, like crushed rocks," says Jeff Cohn, who makes ultra-rich Rockpile Syrahs under his **JC Cellars** label. "Can anyone say a flavor in a wine comes from a soil, through a vine's root system? Who's to say? We can certainly taste the difference between Cornas, Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, and we attribute the differences to the soil. Wherever this minerality comes from—whether through the roots, the leaves or from micro-particles of dust in the air—we have to say that it's part of Rockpile. It has a true sense of place."



Zin & Beyond

Other significant, and highly recommended, producers of Rockpile Zinfandel include **Branham Estate Wines**, **Bella Vetta** and Ulises Valdez's **Valdez Family** label. You can also look forward to extraordinary first releases (2009s) from **Sbragia Family Vineyards**, driven by Napa Valley legend Ed Sbragia, now settled in with his family at the end of Dry Creek Road just before it rises up towards the Rockpile AVA, and from Napa Valley's esteemed **Robert Biale Vineyards**.

But Rockpile is about more than Zinfandel. JC Cellars' Rockpile Syrahs definitely rule (second to none in California), and Branham, Carol Shelton and Mauritsen produce stellar Petite Sirahs, the latter

never really oversized or ultra-ripe in Rockpile, yet as black, iron-pumping and pepper-grinder intense as they come.

Also notably, both **Paradise Ridge** and **Stryker Sonoma** produce probably the finest, sleekest, most sinewy bottlings of varietal Petit Verdot in the state. Stryker Sonoma's Rockpile-grown Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot tend to toe a moderately scaled, refined line, and have been lauded for precisely that. On the other hand, Mauritsen's opulent, mountainous "Buck Pasture" (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot) is a graphic example of the huge potential of Bordeaux grapes in the AVA. Do not pass these alternatives by! ■■



Kent Rosenblum.