

{ appellation spotlight }

Attendees of the Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy at lunch in Rodney Strong Vineyards' Rockaway Vineyard.



Walking the WALK

THE ALEXANDER
VALLEY CABERNET
ACADEMY WAS A
SHOW-AND-TELL
OF TERROIR

by Randy Caparoso

Terroir means everything in the sense that all the natural circumstances in which a grapevine grows have a direct impact on the quality of the fruit it yields and consequently on the resulting wines. But the word means nothing unless we can talk about the sensory qualities of those wines in a way that differentiates them from their counterparts.

In May, the Alexander Valley Winegrowers association (alexandervalley.org) hosted the 12th annual Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy, inviting sommeliers from around the country to walk through different parts of the Sonoma County sub-AVA and then sit down to taste the actual sensory distinctions between their wines, thus putting two and two together: Terroir matters.

Before we recap our findings, let's cover some basic facts about the region:

- Alexander Valley, defined as an AVA in 1984, occupies the northeast corner of Sonoma County and is home to the town of Geyserville and the cities of Cloverdale and Healdsburg.
- It is not a gigantic AVA—approximately 20 miles long and 8 miles wide—but its 15,000 acres of grapes produce more than 25% of the wines grown in Sonoma County (which is home to 19 AVAs in total).
- Its climate, like that of most of California's coastal regions influenced by the Pacific Ocean, is squarely Mediterranean; it experiences cool, wet winters and dry, warm-to-hot growing seasons marked by significant diurnal temperature swings, which help to produce ripe fruit balanced by fresh natural acidity. The devil, of course, is in the details: A dramatically contrasting topography—ranging from valley floors of gravelly clay loam at 130–400 feet in elevation along the Russian River, which runs through the appellation, to gravelly benchlands at 600–2,800 feet to rocky mountain slopes—creates a wide range of wine styles now being explored by artisanal producers.
- Cabernet Sauvignon rules the Alexander Valley roost because the grape loves the warm climate and rich yet well-drained soils.
- For over 50 years, restaurants and sommeliers have come to depend upon the round, voluptuous, crowd-pleasing styles of Cabernet grown in the Alexander Valley, epitomized by pioneering brands such as Jordan, SIMI, Rodney Strong, Alexander Valley Vineyards, and Silver Oak. In recent years, however, around 20% of the Cabernets have been coming off of higher-elevation sites above the fog line, where heightened solar ultraviolet light and narrower diurnal swings are producing grapes with thicker skins and increased phenolic content, resulting in darker, more robust and concentrated variations on the Alexander Valley style.
- It is inevitable that, over the decades, growers and vintners have begun to pinpoint distinct subzones within their appellation. Although most of them still blend wines from these areas to maximize quality, in the years to come, we will better understand the distinctive sensory qualities of wines coming out of the five districts of Alexander Valley: Cloverdale, Geyserville, Jintown, Healdsburg, and Maacama.



The lineup of wines for a seminar on blending.

Day 1

WEATHER AND MICROCLIMATES

The first day of camp began at Alexander Valley Vineyards, the very site where Cyrus Alexander, the Valley's namesake, built his original pueblo near to where he planted the region's first grapevines in 1843. Alexander Valley Vineyards partner Harry Wetzel IV and his vineyard manager, Junior Macias, presented their **2022 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet Sauvignon**—a soft, silky, quintessentially valley-floor style of the variety that nevertheless possessed the intense cassis and herbal characteristics consumers have always found so captivating—as an introduction to the lush style indicative of the AVA's aforementioned climate.

Like their estate bottling, the **2021 Alexander Valley Organically Grown Cabernet Sauvignon** was aged in both French and American oak, which Wetzel candidly said is as much an economic as an aesthetic choice—prompting attendee Ryan Hess, sommelier at Badmaash in Los Angeles, to remark that strong value is also a “defining characteristic” of the Alexander Valley. The wine was deeper, spicier, and zestier than the conventionally grown bottling while retaining the lush profile of the region.

We also tasted the **Robert Young 2021 Thomas Meek Cabernet Sauvignon**, sourced from a valley-floor site dating back to the 1960s, which demonstrated both the velvet texture and tea-like complexity of the terroir, couched in the toasty richness derived from 100% French oak aging. The cushiony, ripe fruit profile of the **J. Rickards 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon**, meanwhile, was only enhanced by the use of 50% American oak.



Camp began with a seminar on microclimates at Alexander Valley Vineyards.

A seminar on geology and soils was held at ACTA Wine in Healdsburg.



GEOLOGY AND SOILS

That afternoon, Trione Vineyards and Winery winemaker John Duckett and ACTA Wine founder/winemaker Dustin Moilanen teamed up to demonstrate the impact of soil types on a lineup of wines, starting with the **Trione 2020 Cloverdale Ranch Block 21 Cabernet Sauvignon** from the northern reaches of the AVA. Dominated by the gravelly loam of benchland just east of the Russian River, this area produces a ripe, fruit-focused, distinctly floral style of Cabernet, zesty with acidity and plump yet still fairly concentrated. By way of contrast, the **ACTA 2021 Alexander Valley-Chalk Hill Cabernet Sauvignon** was, as Moilanen remarked, a “Goldilocks” of a wine—grippy yet velvety, fleshy yet muscular, and scented with both red and blue fruit—that reflected the combination of alluvial and clay soils in a vineyard whose boundaries overlap with those of the Chalk Hill AVA.

From there, we were mentally transported up into the hills east of Cloverdale at 1,000 feet in elevation, where rocky shale and sandstone soak in unabated sunlight to yield wines like the **Rodney Strong 2019 Brothers Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**. A decidedly darker, sturdier, chocolatier take on the variety, it remained as velvety and inviting as its counterparts.

If there were any lingering doubts that variant soil and geology affect a wine's character, the **Stonestreet 2019 Alexander Mountain Estate Cabernet Sauvignon** put them aside. Sourced from multiple sites set at elevations of over

2,000 feet well above the fog line, on craggy, chaparral-dotted perches exposed to wind, this was a savory, structured wine with relatively high phenolic content, showing a full range of aromas from red, black, and blue berries to wild scrub, forest floor, cedar, and nuances of 100% French oak.

Day 2

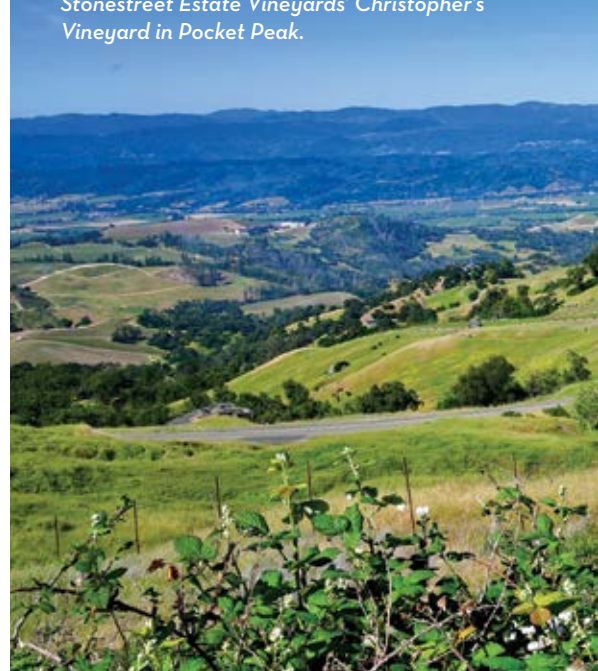
TOPOGRAPHY AND ELEVATION

The second day of camp started with a drive up, up, up to Stonestreet Estate Vineyards' Christopher's Vineyard in Pocket Peak, where we were greeted by Jackson Family Wines proprietor Christopher Jackson and Stonestreet winemaker Kristina Shideler. Pocket Peak, according to Jackson, is the proposed name of a prospective new AVA. While nested in Alexander Valley, this high-elevation area certainly merits recognition.

According to Jackson, it is all about the “constancy of wind, resulting in 15% less juice-to-skin ratios, thicker skins, and degradation of pyrazines in grapes like Cabernet.” Shideler commented on the “extremity of light at higher elevations,” leading to earlier budbreak and development of flavor compounds, which combine with narrower diurnal shifts than in the rest of the AVA (meaning the days are a little cooler and the nights a bit warmer) to give grapes “ample time to build out nicer tannin structures and polymers.”

Produced by Francis Ford Coppola, the **2022 Archimedes Cabernet Sauvignon**

A view of the Alexander Valley from Stonestreet Estate Vineyards' Christopher's Vineyard in Pocket Peak.



contains fruit from three vineyard sites that reach altitudes of 2,800 feet, making them the highest in the appellation. Florals, including rose petal, and even mildly peppery notes set the wine apart from the mainstream. By contrast, the **Jordan 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon**, culled from as many as 50 vineyard sites both valley floor and hillside, was more typical of the appellation in its plump yet acid-driven finesse. Meanwhile, the **Alexander Valley Vineyards 2020 Alexander School Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**, made from a single vineyard on the valley floor, was round, rich, fruit-focused, and mildly herbal.

Finally, the **Stonestreet 2019 Rockfall Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** soared in still different directions: Almost peppery with cardamom-like spices and distinctly acid-driven, it offered violet fragrances, lots of blue and black berry notes, coffee undertones, and dense structure. At 14.8% ABV, it in some ways resembled a Napa Valley wine yet was still true to the Alexander Valley in its svelte feel and intoxicatingly floral profile.

BLENDING THE BEST

Our final tasting, led by Francis Ford Coppola director of winemaking Andrea Card and Rodney Strong winemaker Olivia Wright, focused on the blending of vineyard sources to achieve different iterations of the regional style. The **Francis Ford Coppola 2021 Director's Cut**, for



Francis Ford Coppola director of winemaking Andrea Card leads a seminar on blending.

instance, craftily combines Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah (4.7%), Syrah (4.4%), and other grapes such as Cabernet Franc to double down on the sultry, balanced feel for which the Alexander Valley is known; the Petite Sirah and hillside-grown Syrah in particular added acid, meatiness, and distinctive spice elements to the wine's come-hither profile.

Wright talked about utilizing as many as 50 different vineyard lots in the **Rodney Strong 2022 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** to meld the sumptuous texture of valley-floor sites with the higher-flying, floral (especially violet) character imparted by the winery's three highest-elevation vineyards (Brothers, Rockaway, and the now-historic Alexander's Crown); 8% Malbec contributed a hibiscus tea-like fragrance. At \$35 suggested retail, the

wine presented an almost unbeatable combination of value, complexity, and pure drinkability.

The **Alexander Valley Vineyards 2020 Cyrus** provided another lesson in blending: Containing 64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot, and 2% Malbec aged in 50% each French and American oak, it achieved a plush, fleshy, more floral profile

compared to the brand's monovarietal Cabernets. In similar fashion, the **ACTA 2022 Deeds** (68% Merlot, 26% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 6% Cabernet Franc) was rich and fleshy, combining the velvetiness of the Merlot with the pungent herbaceousness of the two Cabernets to accentuate the qualities that have made Alexander Valley wines such a popular go-to, especially in restaurant settings.



The Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy class of 2025.

What the Somms Had to Say

According to attendee Marie Mertz, chef/owner of *Todo Un Poco* in Elk Grove, California, "The Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy was an opportunity to discover the true essence of Cabernets from this AVA. It's about more than value, which we always expect from this region. It's also about how well these styles pair with food."

"The Alexander Valley wines of today are definitely about terroir," said Erica Williams, wine director at *Terranea Resort* in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. "It's also pretty awesome to experience how scientific and technical yet [impactful] the effects of talented winemaking can be, particularly when it comes to producing wines that only make it easier to please our guests."

Heather Missad, director of wine for *Bowdie's Chophouse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan, added, "There is no shortage of complexity or sophistication in these wines. In between the tastings we were shown older bottlings of the same wines, clearly demonstrating how effortlessly they age. They definitely belong among the finest Cabernets we can offer in our restaurants."

George Staikos, founder of *The Educated Grape* in New Hope, Pennsylvania, stated, "I was not aware of the sheer diversity and quality of wines now coming out of the appellation, especially in the high-elevation sites. Alexander Valley produces compelling wines that deserve the attention of all the country's top buyers, on-premise and off."

Roibin McAndrew, beverage liaison for *Hospitality Restaurants* in Cleveland, Ohio, concurred while summarizing the enthusiasm of all the visiting sommeliers: "The restaurant group that I represent has been selling Alexander Valley wines by the glass for a long time, admittedly because of their QPR. But the Cabernet Academy left me with a deeper understanding of the region's terroir. It was humbling to finally be able to see the vineyards, talk to the vintners, walk through their caves. The wines speak for themselves, but I now understand the whole story!" S