

# Mountain Fruit at Its *finest*

**BERINGER PRIVATE RESERVE IS A TIMELESS EXAMPLE OF THE BENEFITS OF HIGH-ALTITUDE VITICULTURE** by Kelly Magyarics, DWS



**Treasury Wine Estates  
education manager  
Gillian Ballance, MS.**

**It's easy to associate** the Napa region with its namesake valley. But half of its AVAs are in the mountains, and the air up there has a profound effect on the wines they produce.

That was the key takeaway from “Mountain Fruit at Its Finest” as the December installment of Somm Sessions, a monthly series of educational taste-along webinars sponsored by *The SOMM Journal*, SommFoundation, and Treasury Wine Estates. Somm Sessions invites sommeliers, wine directors, buyers, and other beverage professionals to learn about and taste some exceptional bottlings while receiving the chance to win a \$500 scholarship, access to SommFoundation’s Global Diagram of Wine for one year, and even a spot at its annual Crush Camp.

Moderated by Lars Leicht, vice president of education for *The SOMM Journal* and *The Tasting Panel*, and Treasury Wine Estates education manager Gillian Ballance, MS, the webinar focused on the role mountain-grown fruit plays in Beringer Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, an iconic Napa Valley wine first released in 1978. Ballance recalled that Beringer Private Reserve was one of the first cult California Cabs on the wine list at New York’s famed Windows on the World, where she once worked as a sommelier, and said that she was thrilled for the opportunity to discuss the winery’s majestic higher-altitude vineyards and their impact on the final blend.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TREASURY WINE ESTATES



**The Steinhauer Ranch  
Vineyard sits at 1,800 feet  
on Howell Mountain.**

While grapes grown on the easy-to-cultivate valley floor lend opulence and richness to a wine, as Leicht pointed out, mountain fruit provides concentration, structure, and ageability. With higher elevations come cooler temperatures and larger diurnal shifts, both of which allow grapes to retain acidity and freshness, as well as more intense sunlight to draw out phenolics and a greater exposure to breezes that facilitate photosynthesis. At high altitudes, soils tend to be leaner and less fertile with better drainage, promoting the development of deep, character-building roots that cause vines to struggle and focus all of their energy on the grape. (“A good mother knows that to bear good fruit, you have to suffer,” Leicht told attendees.) Berries here are smaller, with a greater proportion of skin to pulp and therefore more anthocyanin, tannin, extracts, and resveratrol. As a result, the wines they yield are darker in color and possess tremendous complexity

couldn’t deny the positive results—though it would be another century before a tasting of hillside fruit from Chabot Vineyard led Beringer’s wine-making team to consider the potential for a high-altitude Napa Cabernet. Their success was cemented with the 1986 vintage, which won *Wine Spectator’s* Wine of the Year award in 1990.

The current vintage, 2017, is made with grapes from eight sources; 75% of the fruit hails from mountain vineyards, while 25% comes from St. Helena and Oakville vineyards on the valley floor. The blend comprises 96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Merlot; the more Merlot, Leicht said, the softer the style and the quicker the maturation process. Each lot is harvested and vinified separately, with 80–100% matured in new French oak barrels for 18–22 months before the wine is aged an additional year in bottle.

“There’s an underlying lushness on the attack, but then that beautiful minerality and earthiness comes out



**Beringer 2017 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$170)**

With Howell Mountain fruit serving as chief engineer, this sturdy red offers a majestic ride. Its grace is powered by brilliant blackberry and graphite overtones along with mellifluous tannins; roasted coffee and cedar act as base notes. **98** —*Meridith May*



**Howell Mountain was the primary source for the Beringer 2017 Private Reserve.**

along with savory notes such as earthiness, minerality, and spice.

In the 1870s, before the American wine industry was hobbled by Prohibition, farmers in Napa took advantage of the local Mediterranean climate, long growing season, and inversion effect to begin planting at higher elevations; fraternal Beringer winery founders Jacob and Frederick Beringer were among the first to plant vineyards on Spring Mountain, a small AVA above St. Helena. Though these pioneers bemoaned the labor and harvesting challenges presented by mountain viticulture, Leicht said, they

on the sides,” Leicht said. “It finishes with this . . . clean, minerally aftertaste that’s gorgeous and round, with a nice savory character.”

Mark Beringer—the winery’s eighth chief winemaker, who assumed his current role in 2015—deemed the 2017 vintage “brooding, dark, and luscious.” He admitted that it’s really meant to be cellared but promised that it does open up after decanting. “When they are youthful, they are all arms and legs and trying to figure it out,” he noted. “As they age, it all comes together.”

The great-great-grandson of Jacob and a self-professed “soil geek,”

Beringer is thankful for the opportunity he had to work with his predecessor, Laurie Hook, with whom he walked the vineyard rows and tasted through the lots to establish a baseline for the new release. He then experimented with techniques he implemented as vice president of winemaking at Duckhorn Vineyards, including optical sorting, open-top wood fermentation, and extraction methods. Despite late-season challenges—from a Labor Day heat wave to October wildfires—the 2017 vintage yielded enough fruit to make a quality Private Reserve, according to Ballance, who described it as having more power and depth than the relatively restrained 2016.

Beringer pointed out that though a majority of the grapes (62%) came from Howell Mountain, all of the wine’s sources brought something to the table. For instance, the Spring Mountain fruit that represents 4–5% of the blend adds minerality, dark fruit, grippy tannins, and a black olive-like savoriness, while the yield from Mount Veeder was capped at 1% to prevent the inky, spicy character of the small black berries from overpowering the other components. “It’s just like blending in a small amount of a varietal like Petit Verdot,” Beringer explained. “Mountain fruit can have an impact very quickly.” **T**