

A New Name in Napa with 2 Throwback Howell Mountain Cabernets

Almacerro's high-elevation tandem of 2021 Napa Cabernets is worth the climb

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Perched high on Howell Mountain is Napa's Almacerro. (Courtesy of Almacerro/Matt Morris)

Driving up Las Posadas Road to the top of Napa's Howell Mountain, I was struck by the eeriest *déjà vu*. And then I figured it out: I was passing through the former [La Jota](#) property that had been run by [Bill and Joan Smith](#). That winery had a heck of a run from the 1980s through the 1990s, producing some compelling Cabernet bottlings (and a solid Merlot too). As a fan of the wines, and long before I started covering any California wines, I visited it once in the early '90s.

The Smiths eventually sold La Jota (part of the 19th century Rancho La Jota land grant) and went on to chase Pinot Noir with their [W.H. Smith Wines](#), an operation that was among the first to bottle a [Hellenthal Vineyard](#)-designated Pinot Noir back in the day. La Jota changed hands a couple times, first to [Markham](#) and then to [Jackson Family Wines](#), where today it's under the very capable hand of [winemaker Chris Carpenter](#).

Next to their La Jota property, the Smiths had a homestead where they planted some additional Cabernet Sauvignon vines in 1997. Named Piedra Hill, the 40-acre property was

then sold to Frank Scherkenbach, who rechristened it [Almacerro](#). Included in Scherkenbach's purchase: 6.5 acres of Cabernet vines planted in 1997 (old by Napa standards). He hired the respected Mike Wolf to handle farming, [Françoise Peschon of Vine Hill Ranch](#) as consulting winemaker, and Matilda Scott, who had previously served as harvest enologist at [Arkenstone](#).



Almacerro winemaker Matilda Scott consults with vineyard dog Bowie. (Courtesy of Almacerro/Matt Morris)

The vineyard was then expanded to 11 acres in total, with the vines sitting at an elevation of nearly 1,800 feet on sparse, dusty white tufa soils. Cabernet Sauvignon remains the lead varietal here, along with Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Petit Verdot and a splash of Tempranillo for fun.

The 2017 vintage was the first Almacerro bottling, though it still hasn't been released. The team chose to start with the more generous 2018 bottling, and have since released 2019 and 2021 as well. They're considering going back and releasing the 2017 now that it has developed in bottle.

The modest winery facility has been steadily updated with a press and new vats that allow the team to handle individual lots without rotating tanks for additional incoming fruit.

“That way we can get a longer [maceration](#) time, which is needed for those Howell Mountain tannins,” says Peschon, who is working with Howell Mountain fruit for the first time. Ditto for Wolf.

“It’s a long day, with a lot of sunshine,” says Wolf. “The berries are very tiny and yet we still do a lot of [crop-thinning](#) to make sure it all gets ripe.”

“It’s warmer than I expected,” says Peschon, “but it’s still a late-ripening spot.”

There are two bottlings: a nearly pure Cabernet Sauvignon bottling sourced from the original plantings, and a Cabernet Franc–based blend from the new plantings. Production is limited, as the site is both low-yielding and the new plantings are just coming on line; the goal is to top out at about 1,000 cases total between the two cuvées.

Having two wines wasn’t the initial plan, however.

“I figured we’d make one wine, a Howell Mountain Cabernet, and tame it with some Merlot and Cab Franc,” says Peschon. “But we wound up not using the softer stuff entirely, and put the extra together on their own. Now we see them as sister wines that show different expressions of the site.”

Almacerro Cabernet Sauvignon Vertical Tasting

Both wines here show terrific tension, but they are quite different. The Cabernet Franc bottling (labeled as Estate Red) shows a distinctly bony, angular minerality that sits like a bas-relief against the fruit. The Cabernet Franc is joined by Merlot and Petit Verdot, with each parcel fermented in puncheon. The **2018 Almacerro Howell Mountain Estate Vineyard Proprietary Red** is settling in nicely, showing a cassis-soaked tobacco note and sleek iron edge.

The **2019 Almacerro Estate Red** shows a fresher profile, with a leafy edge lifting the fruit-laden core.

The **2021 Almacerro Estate Red** takes on a slightly higher pitch, with a chiseled feel and a white ashy note piercing the finish—a function of those white tufa soils.

The Cabernet Sauvignon bottling (fermented entirely in stainless and then given a 20- to 22-month [élevage](#)) displays a similarly chiseled structure, but with a dark black currant core backed by more of a charcoal edge, in contrast to the bright iron/white ash of the Cabernet

Franc blend. The **2018 Almacerro Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain Estate Vineyard** saw 80 percent new oak, and it shows—there’s a coating of toast. But that was a function of filling the cellar with new barrels to start. Now, as the aging program evolves, the best barrels are kept for second- and third-fill use, bringing the new oak percentage down quickly.

It shows in the **2019 Almacerro Cabernet Sauvignon**, which sports a mouthwatering freshness allied to a cast iron spine.

The **2021 Almacerro Cabernet Sauvignon** is the brightest of the three, with a litting tobacco leaf note darting out from a mix of red and black currant fruit that's dusted with charcoal on the finish.

Between resuscitating the old vines and planting new ones, and shifting on the fly from one wine to two, it's been a steep learning curve for the Almacerro team. But the qualitative progress of the three vintages in bottle is obvious, as are their two distinct personalities.

“It’s been eye-opening,” says Wolf. “We’ve got different rootstocks, clones, trellising, soil prep and more here. You’d expect the young vines to react differently from the established ones. But we’ve found the site is so powerful and distinct, it seems to be trumping all that.”



From left, Almacerro's Françoise Peschon, Lindsay Dale, Matilda Scott and Frank Scherkenbach. (Courtesy of Almacerro/Matt Morris)

“It has come on quickly, in a way,” says Peschon. “Which is surprising, because the last 10 vintages in Napa have been difficult because of varying extremes. If every vintage is easy, you can figure out new vineyard blocks faster. But having an extreme site is exacerbated even more so by external extremes. This site has seen frost and heat, drought, smoke and power outages, all of which provide challenges.”

But within the challenge lies the fun. The vibe among the team here is one of a shared vision, and an obvious joy in embracing the distinctiveness of high-elevation Howell Mountain Cabernet. If you like throwback-styled wines that bristle with minerality and require some patient cellaring, you'll want to get in on the ground floor with these high-rise Cabernets.