



THE WINE PALATE

HIGH RANCH VINEYARD

LISA PEROTTI-BROWN MW

In a valley defined by long-established vineyards and an endless list of planting restrictions, it is increasingly rare to see a truly new site emerge with the promise of becoming a future benchmark. High Ranch Vineyard—a four-acre Cabernet Sauvignon planting tucked into the volcanic hillsides of Napa Valley's Coombsville AVA and perched above Kongsgaard's The Judge Vineyard—is one of those rare exceptions.

UNDISCOVERED

Owned by Connie and Shawn Guttersen, longtime Napa Valley residents with professional backgrounds spanning agriculture, sensory science, and sustainability, High Ranch symbolizes both a return to tradition and an experiment in exploring what the newer edges of Coombsville can produce. Although it is situated directly above one of Napa's most renowned Chardonnay sites—Kongsgaard's The Judge—High Ranch lacks nearby reference points for Cabernet Sauvignon. "The site is quite singular," Connie Guttersen says. "There really aren't Cabernet vineyards in close proximity to compare."



Dominic Bianco (viticulturist), Shawn and Connie Guttersen (owners), and Sam Kaplan (winemaker)

Yet singularity is exactly what drew the Guttersens—and winemaker Sam Kaplan—to this west-facing slope. Developed in collaboration with viticulturist Mike Wolfe and first planted in 2018 to clones 7, 4, and 169, High Ranch is an extremely small project: just 4.2 acres of vines on a 42-acre property. Production is tiny—about 100 cases each year—and there are only two producers of the fruit: the Guttersens and Vida Valiente, which holds an exclusive arrangement. The first vintage was 2021.

For a site so new, the story begins decades earlier.

High Ranch sits in the southeastern corner of Napa Valley, within the protected bowl of the Coombsville caldera. Its history traces back to the 1920s, when the Kongsgaard-Streblow family used the land as a ranch for horses and cattle. "In the 1970s, John Kongsgaard began planting the now-legendary Judge Vineyard on the High Ranch property as a tribute to his father, a longtime Superior Court Judge in Napa County," Connie explains. The Judge would later become one of California's most sought-after Chardonnays.

But long before the Guttersens owned High Ranch, they knew it intimately. They lived for more than a decade on nearby Montecito Boulevard and often hiked the hills above the property. "We admired the land for years," Connie recalls. "The way the High Ranch saddle caught the sunlight above the western rim of the caldera—there was something magnetic about it. The property was not for sale, and yet we kept asking."



The opportunity arrived in 2006. "One day, the extraordinary opportunity to purchase a significant portion of the land arose, and we knew it was meant to be," she says.

Soon after acquiring the property, the Gutttersens met local residents with long memories of the ranch. Connie recalls a pivotal visit with Lorraine Kongsgaard. "She shared vivid memories of the property: its days as a horse ranch, the fun her family had in the open pastures, and the frequent discussion that it would be a good site for a vineyard," Connie says. When Lorraine learned the Gutttersens intended to keep the original name, she was "pleased that we would honor her family's legacy and continue."

The vineyard itself occupies a rocky knoll overlooking the city of Napa and the wider Coombsville bowl. Its steepest sections reach about a 15% grade. "The site is mapped as the Hambright soil series," Sam Kaplan says. "It consists of a lot of shattered rock and very stony loam, with a small percentage of clay. The soil drains extremely well, and the loose texture is ideal for deep rooting."

In the rockiest parcels, Kaplan and Wolfe selected St. George rootstock. "Those areas are very stressed with a lack of available water," Kaplan notes. Three separate blocks were created across the slope, each with its own clone and rootstock combination to match the variation in soil depth and exposure.

The site is exposed from sunrise to sunset, with significant wind influence at the top of the hill. Combined with the volcanic rock, this creates conditions atypical for Coombsville, which is generally known for its cooler, slower-ripening sites. "The uniqueness of this site for Coombsville is how early and advanced the vines are throughout the growing season," Kaplan says. "Quite often I am harvesting this Cabernet at the same time as some up-valley and St. Helena sites."



While many Coombsville Cabernets are picked in late October, High Ranch can reach flavor and tannin maturity weeks earlier. "The amount of rock and rugged exposure drives the intensity," Kaplan says. "You need to be on your toes throughout the season because it ripens and can move quickly."

Kaplan's winemaking approach for High Ranch emphasizes tension, precision, and longevity. "My approach is a team effort," he says, highlighting the leadership of vineyard manager Dominic Bianco. Harvest decisions are particularly crucial given the speed with which the site can shift in flavor profile.

Once in the winery, the Cabernet receives an extended 24 months of barrel aging in 100% new French oak. For Kaplan, the élevage is designed to frame—not obscure—the vineyard's character. With only 100 cases produced annually, each barrel plays a structural role.

The inaugural 2021 shows the qualities Kaplan expected: early ripeness, intense fruit concentration, and a tannin profile that is surprisingly refined for such a young site. If early indications hold, the vineyard could become one of the finest and most age-worthy expressions from Coombsville.



For Connie Guttersen, winegrowing was less of a detour than a natural extension of her work in flavor science. A New York Times bestselling author and longtime faculty member at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, she has spent decades teaching sensory awareness, Mediterranean culinary traditions, and the chemistry of flavor.

"It seemed to be a natural progression," she says of moving into grape growing. "While my professional background has centered on flavor science and nutrition, it opened a window into the world of wine."

Her two decades at the CIA exposed her to chefs whose work blurred the lines between art and science. "I discovered how beautifully the art and science of food, wine, and flavor come together," she says. Flavor creation in food and wine is connected, she explains, both shaped by environment and craftsmanship. "Understanding how varietal characteristics, fermentation, and aging shape aromas and flavors allows me to apply what I know about sensory chemistry in a tangible, creative way at High Ranch."

Her early life also played a role. "My husband Shawn grew up in an agricultural setting, developing a lifelong connection to the land," she says. "And I'm a first-generation Italian-American with family roots in the Piedmont wine region. From early on, I remember wine being part of everyday life and celebrations."

The Guttersens' first wine project began in 2009, almost a decade before High Ranch was planted. Those early experiments—exploring different Napa appellations, clones, and techniques—laid the groundwork for the more ambitious vineyard they would later develop.

By 2018, partnering with Kaplan and Wolfe brought the vision into focus. "Sam and Mike selected the Cabernet clones and designed the vineyard orientation that would capture the best expression of our footprint within the Coombsville AVA," Connie says. Their collaboration continues today, with Bianco managing the farming.

Connie's training in flavor chemistry informs how she talks about wine. "The science of flavor has always fascinated me," she says. "The way thousands of bioactive compounds such as flavonoids, phenolics, and antioxidants interact to shape the aromas and textures we perceive."

She uses everyday sensory experiences—persimmon skin, dark greens, extra virgin olive oil, pomegranate pigments—to help people understand tannin, bitterness, and other structural components. "When I talk about wine, I approach it through this lens of sensory connection," she says. "Understanding how unique flavors express a wine's origin—its terroir, farming practices, and winemaking techniques."

This is central to her vision for High Ranch: a site whose wines tell a clear story of place.

Connie is also candid about the current debates around alcohol and wellness. Her perspective is grounded in decades of nutritional science. "My approach to nutrition is pragmatic," she says. "Inspired by cultures that have long embraced traditional diets associated with longevity."



Much of her thinking draws on Ancel Keys's Seven Countries Study and subsequent research on the Mediterranean Diet. "More than fifty years after its publication, this landmark research remains profoundly relevant for maintaining health," she says.

Moderate wine consumption, she adds, is linked to lifestyle patterns—fresh foods, physical activity, and shared meals—rather than benefits from alcohol itself. "Most of us love food and wine, and sharing delicious, satisfying meals is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle," she says. "My nutrition philosophy is rooted in this balance—embracing science while celebrating the pleasure of eating...and, yes, enjoying a glass or two of wine."

For Connie, the story of High Ranch is ultimately a story of collaboration. "Winemaking begins in the vineyard," she emphasizes. "This would not be possible without our amazing High Ranch Team: Sam Kaplan, Mike Wolfe, and our vineyard manager and viticulturist, Dominic Bianco. Their shared vision and skilled craftsmanship capture the artistic expression of a wine that reflects the unique character of our hillside vineyard."

The hope is that visitors feel that connection when they taste the wine. "In a valley known for so many remarkable wines, our hope is that when someone enjoys a glass of High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon—especially if they have walked the vineyard themselves—they feel a sense of place and connection to the beautiful site and the passion behind the project."

In a region filled with traditional vineyards, High Ranch stands as a reminder that some of Napa Valley's most exciting stories are still unfolding. Some are just getting started—grounded in history, shaped by science, and spread across four rocky acres overlooking one of the valley's oldest volcanic landscapes.



WINERY INFORMATION

Region: USA, California, Napa Valley,
Coombsville

Address: 707 Montecito Blvd Napa, CA 94559

Open for Tastings: No

Major Grapes: Cabernet Sauvignon

Vineyard Size: 4.2 acres

Own Winery: No

DTC Mailing List: Yes

Vineyard Sustainability: NA

Year Established: 2021

Owner: Connie and Shawn Guttersen

Winemaker: Sam Kaplan

Website: <https://www.highranchvineyard.com/>

MOST RECENT REVIEWS FOR THIS WINERY

2023 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon -
97-99 points

2021 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon -
99 points

[MORE WINE REVIEWS](#)

2023 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon

Opulent, Bold, Black Fruit, Minty, Pencil Lead, Dried Herbs, Full bodied, Moderate Acidity, Subtle Oak, Grainy Texture, High Tannin, Needs Time

REGION: United States, California, Napa Valley, Coombsville

MAIN GRAPE VARIETY: Cabernet Sauvignon

REVIEWER'S COMMENTS: Deep purple-black, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon soars from the glass with a gorgeous perfume of lilacs, wild blueberries, black cherries, and black currant jelly, leading to hints of camphor, pencil lead, and tar with a waft of bay leaves. The full-bodied palate has a taut structure of firm, grainy tannins and seamless freshness supporting the densely laden, muscular black fruit, finishing long and minerally/earthy. This is only the second vintage made of this wine from this relatively new vineyard. No 2022 vintage was produced.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Roast Beef, Grilled Steak, Grilled Lamb, Venison

DRINKING WINDOW: 2028–2058

[Read the Winery Story](#)  [Read the Vintage Report](#) 

[Read the Monthly Review](#) 

SIMILAR PALATE MATCHES

2021 Monteverro - 96 points (99.7% match)

2022 Dalla Valle Cabernet Sauvignon - 96 points (99.4% match)

2021 Arrow&Branch Beckstoffer Dr Crane Cabernet Sauvignon - 99 points (99.1% match)



97-99 POINTS

Reviewed by
Lisa Perrotti-Brown

MORE INFORMATION

Color: Red

Type: Table

Dryness: Dry

Main Grape Variety: Cabernet Sauvignon

Blend: No

Alcohol: unknown

Certified Sustainability: Unknown

Tasting Date: November, 2025

Price at Tasting: Unknown

Average Price on Wine-Searcher: Not found

[Find it on Wine-Searcher](#)

OTHER VINTAGES OF THIS WINE

2021

2021 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon

Powerful, Bold, Black Fruit, Licorice, Violets, Minty, Full bodied, Refreshing Acidity, Subtle Oak, Velvety Texture, High Tannin, Ready to Drink

REGION: United States, California, Napa Valley, Coombsville

MAIN GRAPE VARIETY: Cabernet Sauvignon

REVIEWER'S COMMENTS: Deep purple-black, the 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon erupts from the glass with powerful scents of crème de cassis, blackberry pie, and plum preserves, followed by hints of licorice, cardamom, candied violets, and menthol. The full-bodied palate shimmers with vibrant black and blue fruit layers, supported by firm yet velvety tannins and fantastic tension, finishing long and wonderfully minty. This is the first vintage of this wine. It spent nearly 3 years in barrel, and it shows in these really polished tannins that will see this wine through for 3 decades+.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Roast Beef, Grilled Steak, Grilled Lamb, Venison

DRINKING WINDOW: 2026–2056

[Read the Winery Story](#)  [Read the Vintage Report](#) 

[Read the Monthly Review](#) 

SIMILAR PALATE MATCHES

[2021 Arrow&Branch Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon](#) - 92 points (99.4% match)

[2021 Memento Mori Beckstoffer Las Piedras Cabernet Sauvignon](#) - 97 points (99.1% match)

[2021 Vida Valiente The Estate Cabernet Sauvignon](#) - 98 points (98.7% match)



99 POINTS

Reviewed by
Lisa Perrotti-Brown

MORE INFORMATION

Color: Red

Type: Table

Dryness: Dry

Main Grape Variety: Cabernet Sauvignon

Blend: No

Alcohol: unknown

Certified Sustainability: Unknown

Tasting Date: November, 2025

Price at Tasting: Unknown

Average Price on Wine-Searcher: Not found

[Find it on Wine-Searcher](#)

OTHER VINTAGES OF THIS WINE

2023