

High Ranch Vineyard: Coombsville's Next Great Cabernet Statement

Fran Endicott Miller



High Ranch Vineyard proprietor Connie Guttersen

High Ranch Vineyard has been building toward this moment for more than 15 years. That patience may be what is most compelling about this hillside estate. Long before their inaugural vintage earned a 99-point score from critic Lisa Perrotti-Brown, MW, Connie and Shawn Guttersen were studying the contours, soils, and exposures of their four-acre site above the Coombsville fog line, determined to understand the land before making a single bottle of wine.

They purchased the property with the intent of crafting Cabernet Sauvignon, but they never treated the endeavor as a shortcut to becoming a new Napa label. Their hillside sits on volcanic Hambright soils, with 360-degree light and a stony structure that mirrors the character of the neighboring Kongsgaard “The Judge” parcel. Early on, they brought in winemaker Sam

Kaplan, whose track record with Memento Mori, Arkenstone, and Vida Valiente is well-known, to examine the vineyard block by block. The three of them spent years observing how the site behaved through heat spikes, shifting fog patterns, and the incremental nuances that would eventually shape High Ranch's varietal identity.



High Ranch Vineyard. Photo by Alexander Rubin

"Over the past 15 years, the focus at High Ranch has been on the careful planning, permitting, and development of what would ultimately become a distinctive estate vineyard," says Connie. "The vision began with our team, led by Sam, as we evaluated the property's remarkable history and potential for winegrowing."

Located within the Coombsville caldera, the land carries deep agricultural roots, once part of a historic cattle ranch and later gaining prominence with the planting of the famed Kongsgaard "The Judge" Chardonnay vineyard nearby. Inspired by that legacy, Kaplan and viticulturist Mike Wolfe set out to shape a vineyard capable of expressing the same level of distinction from this rugged, west-facing hillside.

"The process was deliberate and extensive," Connie explains. "Permitting and development alone took roughly seven years, culminating in the planting of the vineyard exclusively to Cabernet Sauvignon in 2018."

Those slow-building efforts are evident in the estate's first release: the [2021 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon](#), available in extremely limited quantities

through the winery's mailing list. With only about 100 cases produced annually, it's poised to become one of the region's most elusive new bottlings. This wine is a reminder that even as overall wine consumption softens, there's still space—real enthusiasm, even—for small, intentional projects that aim squarely at the top tier.



The 2021 High Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon is the estate's first release

A Family Project with Long Horizon Thinking

Connie brings an unexpected lens to the world of premium Napa Cabernet. A New York Times best-selling author and nutrition expert with global culinary experience, she approaches flavor with an academic curiosity shaped by years at the Culinary Institute of America and organizations dedicated to health and sensory research. Shawn complements that expertise with a career grounded in environmental stewardship and sustainability. Together, they have cultivated the property not just as a vineyard, but as their home—an all-in, long-view approach that continues to guide every decision on the ranch.

"From the beginning, there was a deep connection to the land, even before we owned it," says Connie. "We lived nearby for years and spent countless hours hiking the surrounding hills. When the opportunity arose to purchase a significant portion of the property, we immediately understood it as a generational endeavor for our family."



Winemaker Sam Kaplan

That long-term thinking was reinforced early on. In 2009, the Guttersens released a first vintage under a different small label, sourcing fruit from select hillside vineyards across Napa Valley—an experience that helped shape their philosophy well before High Ranch was planted.

“Those early years allowed us to learn firsthand about Napa Valley’s diverse appellations and the critical role of thoughtful farming and vine quality,” Connie notes. “It became an important foundation for everything that followed.”

That mindset gave Kaplan room to design and plant the vineyard with an unusual level of precision. But what stands out most today is the site’s natural character: a rocky, elevated slope with steady sun exposure that naturally concentrates flavor while keeping the overall expression refined. Kaplan found the early results so compelling that he began using High Ranch fruit for a single-vineyard bottling under his philanthropic Vida Valiente label, an early endorsement of the potential here.



High Ranch Vineyard. Photo by Alexander Rubin

A Distinctive Coombsville Voice

While Coombsville is known for polished tannins and layered aromatics, High Ranch occupies a slightly different sweet spot. Sitting fully above the fog line, the vines absorb more sunlight than many neighboring sites, leading to earlier ripening and an intensity more often associated with higher-elevation Cabernet. Still, the wine carries the lift and balance that define the southern end of Napa Valley.

“Living just steps from the vineyard creates an intimate, daily connection to the site,” says Connie. “We witness the vines change with the seasons and gain a deeper understanding of how elevation, exposure, and weather patterns influence the vineyard year after year.”

The debut vintage reflects all of that: concentrated but not heavy, structured yet vibrant, and built for aging. And although the Guttersens have sold some fruit to Vida Valiente, this estate wine has always been the focus.

“Every step over the past 15 years has been about establishing and nurturing the vineyard to realize its full potential,” Connie says. “Each vintage builds on the last as we continue to learn, refine, and honor the land.”



How to Access the Wine

High Ranch operates primarily through its mailing list, where allocations for the Cabernet Sauvignon are offered directly to members. While tastings are not currently open to the public, interested collectors can sign up for access through the estate's [website](#).

Photos courtesy of High Ranch Vineyard