

# Robb Report

## The Upstart Napa Winery With a Cab Worth Chasing

MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN

High Ranch Vineyard has a winner right out of the gate.



On a 4.2-acre site perched on volcanic hillsides above the region's signature morning fog, High Ranch Vineyard has exposure to intense sunshine that yields early-ripening and deeply expressive Cabernet Sauvignon. The property has a view of the illustrious [Kongsgaard "The Judge" Vineyard](#) and similarly prized terroir, but greatness is being coaxed from the grapes grown from this site in its own right. Superstar Sam Kaplan has crafted a stunning first release for upstart winery, with its 2021 Coombsville Cabernet Sauvignon providing the perfect combination of vineyard sourcing and winemaking talent.

Before their 2006 acquisition of the 42-acre property, High Ranch owners Shawn and Connie Guttersen lived in the area for 12 years and knew its history with the Kongsgaard-Streblow family, who first established it as a cattle and horse ranch in the 1920s and planted grapes in the '70s. "We were drawn to its rugged beauty: the rolling hills, the way the sunlight caught the ridgelines, and the quiet, magnetic presence of the landscape," Connie says. Kaplan was blown away by the vineyard's potential even before the Guttersens asked him to map and plant it. "I was trying to find new virgin sites for Vida Valiente, so when the opportunity to work with Shawn and Connie popped up and I was able to help with the layout for High Ranch as well, it really felt like the stars had aligned," he says.

While a vineyard this size could produce one and a half times the amount of wine made by the two brands (the Guttersens also sell grapes to Drumwright and Kaplan for Vida Valiente's High Ranch bottling), the couple wanted to maintain extremely small, focused project. "Every step over the past 15 years has been

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about establishing and nurturing the vineyard to realize its full potential for this release and future vintages,” Shawn says. “In fact, we often drop fruit to increase flavor intensity. With this philosophy, our production will remain very limited.”

The High Ranch vineyard is located on a sloping knoll that looks down on Napa Valley and the [Coombsville AVA](#). With a 15 percent slope and soils consisting of shattered rock and very stony loam with a small percentage of clay, the soil is low in organic matter and drains extremely well. “The loose texture is ideal for deep rooting for the vines, two elements that are crucial for really exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon,” Kaplan says. Before planting, the winemaker walked the hillsides, which are exposed to the elements from dawn to dark, with viticulturist Mike Wolfe, dividing it into three blocks planted with different Cabernet Sauvignon clones and rootstock. “I like to think of planting vineyards like matchmaking, because perfect harmony in one site isn’t ideal in another, often even when the sites are geographically quite close together,” he says. And although the proximity to Kongsgaard’s vineyard might have swayed the team to plant Chardonnay, Kaplan was certain that this site is better suited to Cabernet.



An old hand from the new kid on the block  
Alexander Rubin

The wine is made at Arkenstone, which produces its own wine and acts as a custom crush facility for smaller producers under the watchful eye of Kaplan, who works with grapes from many vineyards throughout Napa Valley. Despite—or because of—drought-like conditions in 2021, it was considered an excellent vintage across the region. “What we saw at High Ranch was increased phenolics and excellent color leading to an expressive Cabernet Sauvignon with the essential elements to age well and evolve beautifully over time,” Kaplan says. Each block was harvested and fermented separately and aged in almost 100 percent new French oak. The first real harvest from High Ranch brought intense anticipation in the winery, but “the early aromatics and composition were extremely promising.” Utilizing a combination of pump overs and punch downs throughout [fermentation](#) for ultimate extraction, he says he knew early on that the wine was going to be “insanely delicious and very high quality.”

“Having tasted most everything that Napa Valley has produced over the past 32-plus years, I have a sense of what the ‘flavor of the moment’ wines taste like, versus those that will stand the test of time. The High Ranch is a showstopper: power, grace, and balance,” says wine consultant and collector Mark S. Pope, who founded Bounty Hunter Rare Wine & Spirits in Napa in 1994. “Like most of the wines that Sam Kaplan makes, this wine is built to be enjoyable a few years after release. If you can keep your mitts off this temptress of a wine, it will go the distance, 20 to 30 years.” Kaplan himself believes the wine will hold up for 30 years but thinks that maximum enjoyment will be derived from it within five to seven.

The fact that Kaplan has a longstanding following for his releases is an incredible benefit to an upstart brand. Wine collectors Phillip and Mary Riesland of San Diego were introduced to High Ranch Vineyard by Hayes Drumwright, proprietor of two other Kaplan wines, Memento Mori and Vida Valiente. "When we connect with a winemaker's style, we tend to follow their work closely," Mary tells *Robb Report*. The vineyard location doesn't hurt either. "High Ranch also immediately resonated with us because of the vineyard's history," she said. "The fact that it was formerly part of the Kongsgaard family holdings added a meaningful sense of place." The Rieslands added a full case of the 2021 to their ample cellar, which holds the likes of Harlan, Bond, Promontory, Colgin, Screaming Eagle, Hundred Acre, and Scarecrow.

High Ranch Vineyard 2021 Coombsville Cabernet Sauvignon has a bouquet of blackberry, cedar, dried thyme, and lavender. Flavors of purple plum, blackberry, clove, and cherry pipe tobacco are supported by opulent tannins that slowly recede into a long, drying finish. If you are eager to drink now, we recommend [decanting](#), but you are absolutely going to have to make sure you have another bottle on hand to enjoy in a few years.