

THE HIDDEN VINEYARDS OF LAMORINDA

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARK MIDDLEBROOK

The tawny hills of Lamorinda seem shaped by the ages solely for the purpose of hiding things: Clumps of oaks and bay trees; cattle, deer, wild turkeys, and the occasional mountain lion; pillows of morning fog; vineyards; and million-dollar homes all nestle within their folds. Many of these I easily spot while traveling the road out to St. Mary's College, but others I have only heard about. For instance, I learned about the vineyards only recently, when winemaker Dave Parker visited the wine shop where I work.

Dave, who is the founder and winemaker of Parkmon Vineyards in Moraga, arrived with some wines for us to taste: Parkmon Estate Vineyard Lamorinda Viognier, Lamorinda Syrah (a blend from three Moraga vineyards), and Contra Costa County Zinfandel (with most of the fruit from Dave's own vineyard in Moraga). Dave is also president of the Lamorinda Winegrowers' Association, which numbers 70 members, reflecting the number of vineyards in the Lamorinda area. Some of these plots are as small as 80 to 100 vines. The average size is one quarter to one half acre, and the largest is two and a half acres, with about 4,200 vines. Many of the growers are home winemakers who happily consume the wine that they make from their small plots. A few sell their grapes or have wines made by others and labeled for them. Dave makes wine from seven or eight other Lamorinda vineyards and sells some of it under his Parkmon label.

PARKMON ESTATE VINEYARD

Dave and his wife, Shari Simon, moved to the Rheem Valley section of Moraga in 2003. Dave grew up in Danville in the 1960s, when it was still mostly orchards, and he fondly recalls picking fruit off the trees to eat. He lived and worked in the Czech Republic before returning to the U.S. to work in software sales and development at Oracle, which is where he and Shari met. Dave made his first wine in 2001, buying 100 pounds of Viognier and 200 pounds of Syrah from Oak Barrel in Berkeley.

When Dave and Shari moved into their Moraga house, they decided to plant a few grapevines to make wine for their own consumption. The viticulturist they contacted commented favorably on the hillside area of almost an acre that rises above their house and pointed out that they could plant it all in grapes if they wanted to. By spring of 2004, they

had almost 1,500 vines planted on the hillside: Syrah, Viognier, Zinfandel, Grenache, and Mourvèdre.

As I pull up to their stately home on a warm June day, I'm not at all surprised to see vineyard rows marching up the hill from the house. Winemaking equipment dominates the driveway and the winery has overtaken their expanded garage, with barrels in one room and cases of finished wine in another. Dave leads me up the steps along the east side of the vineyard, which is bordered by fruit trees and owl boxes, explaining that they spray with a sulfur fungicide when they need to, but don't use pesticides or herbicides. "We're pretty sensitive to the environmental impact. We do use a little water for irrigation, but compared to landscaping, it's a drop in the bucket."

An acre is not large as vineyards go, and we soon reach the wooden bench installed at the top of the vineyard as a perch from which to enjoy the expansive views of the valley and the hills above St. Mary's College. Across the street lies another small patch of vineyard, planted by a neighbor emulating the Parkers' efforts.

"We get plenty of heat during the day," Dave explains as we sit sweltering on the bench, "but usually the fog and breezes come in later in the day." Temperatures can drop 20 or 30 degrees when the sun sets. These wide diurnal temperature swings characterize many of the world's great winegrowing regions. "One of the things that's cool about growing grapes in this area is the existence of different microclimates," Dave continues. Each valley and hillside experiences a distinct combination of sun, wind, fog, and temperature swings—not to mention the soil differences."

CAPTAIN VINEYARD

After we walk down from the Parkmon Vineyard, Dave drives me to see the largest vineyard in Lamorinda: Captain Vineyard in Bollinger Canyon, just north of St. Mary's College. Dave points out that this canyon sees especially broad temperature swings, from the 80s and 90s during the day down to the 40s and 50s at night. A stiff late-afternoon wind greets us as we step out of the car.



Lamorinda is the popular name for the towns of Lafayette, Moraga, and Orinda, which lie just east of the Caldecott Tunnel in central Contra Costa County.



Salah Captain and his two dogs, Shadow and Shady, greet us at the gate. Salah, who wears a broad-brimmed straw hat and pruning shears strapped to his belt, tells me that he and his wife, Susan, bought the house in 1988 but began planting vines just a few years ago. He was born in Iraq, educated in England, and emigrated to the U.S. in 1978. Susan's father came from Iraq to study at UC Berkeley, where he met Susan's American mother. The family moved back to Iraq, and Susan returned to California in 1981 to study at UC Santa Barbara, where she and Salah met. Winemaking began in Mesopotamia five to seven centuries ago, and this ancient passion for the vine seems to inform Salah and Susan's efforts in their young vineyard.

Salah is quick to point out that Susan has been the driving force behind planting and caring for their vines. She took classes, organized the research on what to plant, and continues to both direct and do the work in the vineyard. Their 2.5-acre vineyard descends precipitously into a valley north of the house. Together they built terraces and prepared them for the trellising, irrigation system, and vines that a vineyard consultant put in. Working these steep slopes clearly is a labor of love for them.

Through soil analysis and Susan's research, they determined that they should plant Petite Sirah, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot. Susan and Salah currently send their fruit to three winemakers: Dave Parker, Bill Webster of Little Valley Winery in Sunol, and Tom More-

house in Orinda. In exchange, they receive back some of the finished wine to consume during their deck parties, and they also send quite a bit to relatives in Europe.

THE WINES

These are early days for Lamorinda wine. Newly planted vineyards take three years to bear wine-worthy fruit and some additional years before the maturing vines begin to show their stuff.

The Parkmon 2006 Contra Costa County Zinfandel (\$24 retail), with 85 percent of the fruit coming from the Parkmon Estate Vineyard, showcases the spicy, clove-y side of young vine Zinfandel. Parkmon's 2006 Lamorinda Contra Costa County Syrah (\$24), 55 percent of which comes from the Estate Vineyard, is another well-made Lamorinda wine.

I've not yet tried any of the wines made from Captain Vineyard fruit, but the 2006 Captain Vineyard Lamorinda Contra Costa County Petite Sirah is purported to have all of the power, intensity, and tooth-staining ability for which the variety is famous.

Dave Parker makes and sells wines from other vineyards in Contra Costa County and beyond. My favorites are his wines from the 119-year-old Evangelho's Vineyard near Antioch, in eastern Contra Costa County. Parkmon's 2005 and 2006 Mourvèdre (\$21) and 2006 Zinfandel (\$25) from this vineyard show the value of ancient vines and sensitive winemaking. They also show that even the flatter parts of Contra Costa County are capable of producing some impressive wines. In coming years, we'll be seeing more of what the hillsides of Lamorinda can do.

Resources

Lamorinda Winegrowers' Association: lamorindawinegrowers.com

Parkmon Vineyards: parkmon.com

Wines from Lamorinda and other California vineyards

Happy Valley Cellars: happyvalleycellars.com

Zinfandel and Petite Sirah from a vineyard in Lafayette

Tassajara Cellars: tassajaracellars.com

Their Ward Vineyard Pinot Noir is from Lamorinda fruit

