



publication date: 28 may 04

## In praise of California's Mountain Vineyards

Also in these western mountains is the extraordinary Long Meadow Ranch, restored to far more than its former glory by Ted Hall, once a Stanford weekend winemaker at Ridge Vineyards, subsequently a director of McKinsey and recently appointed chairman of The Robert Mondavi Corporation. Like others on the ridge, this property gives the impression of being entirely hidden in a secret and magically bucolic location even though its area is given proudly by Hall as "18 times bigger than Disneyland". Nowadays Long Meadow Ranch is not just a winery making unusually fine Cabernets but also a completely authentic frantoio (olive press) with its own handsome olive groves, a fully fledged organic farm raising beef and, for good measure, an Appaloosa stud.

As Hall pointed out when I visited there a couple of years ago, these mountain vineyards follow quite a different vintage rhythm from the very much more common valley floor vineyards. For considerable periods they are in bright sunshine while the valley floor is smothered in fog so, for instance, Long Meadow Ranch's 1998 Cabernet is exceptionally sophisticated and interesting, without the under-ripeness that plagues some valley floor wines.

All these mountain wines have a distinctive character. Thanks to their infertile soils and notably cool nights they do not fit the valley floor mould of velvety, opulent, sometimes overripe reds but tend to finish drier with more delicate, often intriguing fruit and brisk, natural acidity.

The only problem is that supply is necessarily limited. Not only are most already extant vineyards on this steep, difficult terrain fairly small, but we are unlikely to see many more. Strict ordinances on hillside terrain have seen to that, as readers of James Conaway's 2002 book *The Far Side of Eden*, reviewed here, will recall.

### **Recommended mountain wines**

#### **Long Meadow Ranch 1998**

Lagier Meredith Syrah 2000 and 2001

Paras Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 and 2000

Sky Zinfandel 1999