



# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

VOLUME XV, ISSUE 47  
FEBRUARY 3, 2011

## STONY HILL AT 60: A NEW DIRECTION

California's wine history has a lot of myths and even I have fallen victim to the traps.

A long time ago, a press release said Robert Mondavi founded his winery in 1966, the first winery in the Napa Valley since the end of Prohibition.

I bought that little fib, forgetting that Fred and Eleanor McCrea had founded Stony Hill on a remote and rocky Spring Mountain parcel in 1952. The project was launched even though there was some skepticism from the late wine maker Andre Tchelistcheff. And since Day 1, Stony Hill has been all about sensational white wines only.

A delicate, crisp, and age-worthy Chardonnay, a superb Riesling that ages as well as any you can find, and a filigreed Gewurztraminer with the balance to challenge Alsace are the primary wines. The small winery also makes a tiny amount of a *ripasso*-style dessert wine from Semillon.

Last Saturday we joined stellar New York wine maker Johannes Reinhardt (Anthony Road) on a brief tour at Stony Hill. Reacquainting ourselves with this magnificent project and its longtime wine maker Mike Chelini was a joy, not least because we were captivated by the property's first red wine!

I have long wondered how the delicate Stony Hill style would translate to Cabernet Sauvignon. Now I know: brilliantly!

Warning: These wines will not score 104 points. The arbiters of Napa Valley style have bought into another of the myths, and this leaves owners Peter and Willinda McCrea with a fabulous wine that needs the right observers.

We were thrilled to be among the first to try the wines. Since the 2009 and 2010 Cabs (the first Stony Hill will release) are not yet on the market, I won't say much about them other than they adhered to the classic Stony Hill model of moderate alcohols (under 14%), classic varietal character, low oak, and a food compatibility that is impeccable.

What we can say is that the first two wines made from the property's first red grapes, the 2007 and 2008 Cabernets, were sold at the winery for \$25 a bottle since Mike and Peter weren't sure they represented the best that could be made.

A small amount of the 2008 remains for sale at Stony Hill (707-963-2636).

I always experience a bit of trepidation when a new winery delves into Cabernet, or when an old one that never made Cabernet leaps into the fray. What I tasted here is verification that Stony Hill is true to Fred and Eleanor's dream.

Cheers for courage!

Dan Berger's newsletter is available for subscription at [www.vintageexperiences.com](http://www.vintageexperiences.com)