



COLLECTOR'S CONFIDENTIAL: NAPA'S HOT FIVE

THE NEXT WAVE OF NAPA CULT WINES

By Richard Nalley

Photographs by David Butow / Redux

David and Monica Stevens' 750 Wines is a West Coast version of an old-line British wine merchant, hip and accessible rather than stuffy, operating out of a sleek loft—tasting room on a St. Helena backstreet. The Stevenses specialize in turning up impossible-to-find bottles and in slipping their clients behind the velvet ropes for private winery visits.

The Stevenses recently sent me to five of Napa's hottest new collector's wineries:

TUSK "The only way people get to come up here is if they are friends or friends of friends," vows co-owner Tim Martin, of Tusk partner (and Philippine food products heir) Michael Uytengsu's stunning mountain-top hospitality villa. These select few will be, presumably, well-heeled, since Tusk's tiny production sells for \$1,100 per three-pack. Fortunately, partner number three is world-class winemaker Philippe Melka, who put a velvet-textured, ultrasexy Cabernet blend into the bottle in 2008, Tusk's first release.

CHECKERBOARD Dennis O'Neil, a Florida property developer, and Stephen Martin, a San Francisco residential restorationist, bought 300 acres—

essentially an entire face of Diamond Mountain—from Dean Witter III. Rather than fencing the bobcats and black bears out, they have, *Jurassic Park*-style, fenced themselves in. Their plantings cover a range of elevations and soil types. ("We have everything in Napa all on one ranch," claims O'Neil.) Meticulous winemaker Martha McClellan hit a home run with the 2009 Checkerboard, a \$175 Cabernet-based blend with refined, perfumed aromatics.

DANA ESTATE Korean food importer Hi Sang Lee's love letter to Napa Valley is housed in an exquisite Howard Backen reenvisioning of a once-ruined 1883 ghost winery. The place is wildly overspec'd for its dropper-size 300 to 680 cases: Each of its three distinctive vineyard bottlings is vinified in its own winery-within-the-winery. The Dana ("DAH-nah") wines are eye-opening about the state of the art in American Cabernet (and at \$325, they darn well should be). Case in point: the vibrant, layered 2008 Hershey Vineyard, with its elegant Howell Mountain tannic firmness.

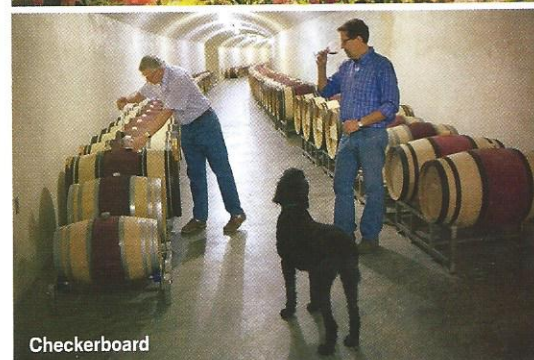
THE VINEYARDIST Bay area lawyer Dirk Fulton and his wife,

Becky Kukkola, searched for ten years before finding this hidden 1879 Victorian farmhouse high up among the volcanic soils on Diamond Mountain and, at the insistence of star winemaker Mark (Merus) Herold, swallowed five vintages themselves before finally debuting with their 2009—a sensationally rich and supple wine (at \$155) that will put this secret place on the map.

VINE HILL RANCH The Stevenses call this "the hottest property in Napa Valley," mostly because the Phillips family makes subtle, brilliant Cabernet, but partly because the backstory is captivatingly original for a Napa cult wine. The Phillipses didn't arrive here flush from some other-world glamour occupation. They came from...right here on this property! They've been farming it themselves for 50 years but selling off the fruit. Now they are cherry-picking about five percent from diverse sections of the vineyard and putting the grapes under the care of A-list winemaker Francoise Peschon. Shrewd move: The sophistication and sense of proportion in these reds (\$150) should shame the last anti-California-wine snob into extinction.



Tusk



Checkerboard



Dana Estate



The Vineyardist



Vine Hill Ranch