

Until recently, Mike Beatty was under the impression that Black Sears was the highest elevation vineyard in all of Napa Valley. When I told him I'd just come from a vineyard at 2,700 feet, he sounded a little crestfallen. "Guess I'll have to change the brochure," he said.

But it's understandable that Beatty didn't know about the Harris 'Blue Ridge' Vineyard, on top of Mt. Vaca. About the only person who does know about it is the winemaker drawing fruit from its 35-year old vines, Girard Winery's Marco DiGiulio. "The location," he told me, "is off the charts."

a miniature golf course outside Vacaville, in Solano County, substantially east of its border with Napa. We drove up to the ridgeline from there, for a view of the three most commanding peaks of the area, Diablo to the south, Tamalpais to the west, and St. Helena to the north. Looking west, I could see the Pacific; when I turned around, I could pick out the peaks in the Sierra Nevadas. It was an awesome sight.

But Harris Blue Ridge hasn't always been an awesome vineyard. For about three decades Bob and Mary Harris were absentee farmers, Bob working in Los Angeles as a veterinarian while the vines did

don't have that youthful tendency to want to crank out more and more that you have to rein in."

An older, balanced vine will accumulate ripeness slowly, in line with its maturing flavors. And they're better equipped to handle heat spells, or at least more impervious. With younger vines, a few hot days at harvest can shrivel the grapes and spike the sugars up to freakish levels, a problem that invariably extends into the fermenting tank.

But the problem isn't merely that there are high sugars — it's how those sugars get processed. There is a 'slow release' quality to a dehydrated zinfandel grape, according to DiGiulio, which dramatically affects yeast growth. "With the raisins, you're constantly leaching sugar, and so you get these long lingering fermentations, and that's how you get those high alcohols," he explains. "In an ordinary fermentation you wouldn't get that same conversion rate. But when you just trickle the sugar in like that, the yeast gets more efficient, so you get more and more alcohol being produced."

DiGiulio blends this old-vines fruit with that of a hillside vineyard called Godward, northwest of Calistoga, practically next to Storybook Mountain,

ONE OF THE YEAR'S BEST ZIN

GIRARD'S NEW SPECIES OF NAPA MOUNTAIN ZINFANDEL

DiGiulio, a consultant for several wineries in Napa, made a name for himself as Lokoya's winemaker in the late 1990s. Spend just a few minutes with him, and you'll come away knowing that he backs away from nothing, not least the challenge of an old-vine zin plot splitting the clouds at nearly 3,000 feet. He's been making wine for Girard Winery since owner Pat Roney decided to resuscitate the brand in 2000. (The original Girard winery was sold and renamed as Rudd Estate in 1996.)

DiGiulio was being unwittingly literal about Mt. Vaca being off the charts. It takes some doing even to find it on a Napa Valley map, but it's there, in the southeastern corner of the county, cresting at 2,819 feet, about eight miles east of the town of Napa. But don't try to get there from the valley floor. It can't be done. That's why I ended up meeting in the parking lot of

pretty much whatever they liked. The Harrises sold the fruit to Beringer for its white zinfandel program. Eventually though, Beringer pointed out to them that the Blue Ridge fruit was higher quality than what the white zin program needed; this coincided with the Harrises growing inclination to take a more hands-on approach to the property. Over several growing seasons they pruned back the canes and whittled the vines into a low-yield architecture; and in the process, they discovered a unique high-altitude terroir.

The combination of altitude, poor soils, age, and a touch of leaf roll virus have stressed these vines into a grudging, miniscule output, an effort that translates into wine with grainy tannins and an especially bright, red berry fruit character. For all the Blue Ridge site has going against it, these old vines have learned how to cope with adversity, and have remarkable balance, putting out exactly as much fruit as conditions allow.

"Everyone talks about how great old vine vineyards are," says DiGiulio, "and they're right. They

to produce a structurally elegant wine. It's lighter than the others I've mentioned, but has a rich, red fruit character of currant and raspberry that works in tandem with its substantial tannin. "At Harris," says DiGiulio, "the fruit gets ripe, but not overblown. For lack of a better term, it's claret-like."

If DiGiulio is right, then the term "claret-like" — at least as regards zin — has taken on a new, more generous and more elevated form. Or perhaps the term really doesn't apply anymore, and should just be retired. With Girard's Zinfandel from the Harris Blue Ridge site, just as with the wines grown on Howell Mountain, Mt. Veeder, and Jerry Seps' 'Cotes de Napa,' the key to a Napa Mountain zin's character is clear — it's the tension that arises when generous fruit aligns with a firm, dynamic structure. It's what happens when you grow grapes at altitudes where heat gives shape to fruit character without distorting it. And no matter what words you use, it's what I want in my glass.

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Over the last 12 months, *Wine & Spirits* tasted 273 zinfandels. The following 10 wines received the strongest praise from our critics.

95 CHATEAU POTELLE 2000 Mt. Veeder, Napa Valley V.G.S. Zinfandel	92 GIRARD 2001 Napa Valley Zinfandel
94 DE LOACH 2001 Russian River Valley Saitone Ranch Zinfandel	92 NEWLAN 2000 Napa Valley Zinfandel
93 D-CUBED 2001 Howell Mountain Zinfandel	92 RANCHO ZABACO 2001 Dry Creek Valley Chiotti Vineyard Zinfandel
93 RIDGE 2001 Dry Creek Valley Lytton Springs Zinfandel	92 ROSENBLUM 2001 Sonoma Valley Maggie's Reserve Zinfandel
93 FROG'S LEAP 2001 Napa Valley Zinfandel	92 STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN 2001 Napa Valley Estate Reserve Zinfandel