

# Napa Valley *Register*

## Immortal: a Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon worth finding

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Jess Lander



Few people have heard of Spring Mountain's Hidden Ridge Vineyard, even though its 2013 Impassable Mountain Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon — a Sonoma cabernet, mind you — received the coveted 100 points from Robert Parker.

The problem isn't in the wine; it's in the branding and marketing, which up until now, have been essentially nonexistent. Now with new, experienced ownership and a complete overhaul of the brand from Hidden Ridge to its new identity, Immortal Estate, these wine's won't be Sonoma's best kept secret much longer.

## The Hidden Ridge

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“If you want to show off to a winemaker friend and really blow their mind, that’s where I take them,” said winemaker Timothy Milos, a consultant winemaker who has worked with Hidden Ridge Vineyard since the first vintage in 2002, was produced. “There’s really very few places like it in California. You take people up there just to show it off; to say, Guess what I get to work with?”

Hidden Ridge vineyard is just as it sounds: hidden and on a ridge. About a 25-minute trip from the base of Spring Mountain, the final mile is like driving deep into a jungle. The nearest winery is over a mile away.

The 50 planted acres are on a little ridge on the Sonoma side of Spring Mountain, looking over into a dramatic bowl. The top of the vineyard sits at 1,700 feet, but its most distinctive feature is its incredible slope. At 55 degrees, it’s an anomaly, for the county has since set a 15-degree maximum. Planted in 1990 by original owner Lynn Hofacket, Hidden Ridge is lucky enough to be, as they say, grandfathered in.

“If you saw this piece of property, it doesn’t look like anywhere that you’d attempt to build a vineyard,” said Tim Martin, co-owner of Immortal Estate, who is spearheading the transformation of the Hidden Ridge label. “Lynn studied for about three years what the best of the best was doing. He was in construction by trade, and figured out how to create this amazing vineyard —the sloping, the terracing is like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Hofacket brought Milos in and they started making wines from the vineyard as a side project, with the intent to eventually sell the property. He didn’t put much investment into the business side of things, and by a stroke of luck, Robert Parker stumbled upon the Hidden Ridge wines at a Sonoma County Vintners Association tasting. He consistently awarded them high-90s scores, until most recently granting the Impassable Mountain 100 points. The 2013 Hidden Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 55 percent Slope, the brand’s only other wine, received a commendable 97+.

So what makes Hidden Ridge special?

In addition to the extreme slopes, Milos attributes much of the complexity in Hidden Ridge fruit to the vineyards’ exposure to the Russian River breeze in the early afternoons, resulting in cooler temperatures sooner than the St. Helena side of the mountain. This, combined with warm days, preserves the wines natural acidity and diverse fruit flavors.

Moreover, Hidden Ridge fruit is unlike anything else you’ll taste on Spring Mountain. While wines from many AVAs have a specific, identifiable style, Spring Mountain wines can’t be so easily placed.

“Take Pritchard Hill, for instance,” said Martin. “I love Pritchard Hill fruit, but it all has a very similar style, a style I love, but most of Pritchard Hill could be one thing. It could be owned by

one person, it could have one brand, and there are very similar themes. But you line up a bunch of Spring Mountain wine, and you're going to get all kinds of things; it's all over the map."

Look up "terroir" in the dictionary, and from Martin's view, you could find Hidden Ridge as the definition.

"This wine represents this exact place. There isn't a neighbor, there isn't something close. It's us, in the middle of the jungle, in this one place that truly represents itself," he said.

## Destigmatizing Sonoma

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Hidden Ridge wine had Martin's interest at first sip, but another point of sale for his involvement was the fact that these outrageously great wines were Sonoma cabernets.

Martin has 20 years in the Napa Valley wine industry under his belt. His first gig was studying under Robin Lail and helping to launch Lail Vineyards, and he's since worked on many other winery launches, in addition to starting his own project, Tusk Estates. But he also has family in Sonoma (Sebastopol, specifically), and has never felt pressured to pledge his loyalty to one side over the other.

"I was intrigued by this idea that we have drawn lines and said, 'Napa does this well, Sonoma does this well,' but these are arbitrary lines we drew on a map. Mother Earth didn't do that," said Martin. "So when I tried this wine for the first time it opened up my brain, I felt like I learned something, because this is a Sonoma cabernet that you don't expect to have these kind of profiles. I was blown away and sort of accepted this challenge of communicating to the world that Sonoma can make amazing cabs."

If you think he's in for an uphill climb, Martin says 'bring it.' In fact, he's already doing it.

How many Sonoma cabernets, if any, do you know selling for \$300? Martin came in and took a big risk, raising the price of the Impassable Mountain significantly to \$303. Fully expecting some backlash, he offered it to Hidden Ridge's mailing list. Then it sold out immediately with hardly a whisper in protest.

"I thought for sure all these people were going to tell me to take a hike. The fact that it sold out like that, that's a tribute to the wine, and the fact that the people who had been buying the wine knew what they had," said Martin.

"For me, this is my next Mt. Everest. I love challenges, and all these years, people are like, 'Well, it's Sonoma.' I used to hear that, and this is the kind of wine that's going to change people's ideas about appellations in general, and the silliness of it."

## Hidden Ridge 2.0

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This April, Martin and his team will release the 2014 vintage of Hidden Ridge wines as Immortal Estate, and Milos seems to think that these wines are even better than the 2013s.

Martin's decision to give the brand a new name stemmed from the fact that it simply wasn't working from a consumer perspective, even reminding some people of Hidden Ranch, the salad dressing.

But when Martin got the idea for Immortal, it came from someplace quite unexpected: a 1905 bottle of sherry he had at Torc in Napa.

"It was unreal, like 'stop everything' unreal. Then it hit me, that everyone who made this is gone. I realized in that moment that there's something about what we're doing here that we hope will live beyond us," he said. "Most of us in wine, there's something pure about working with your hands to create something that someone's going to enjoy years later. You're not around at that moment at Christmas or amongst friends, but you're hopefully creating a happy moment, and here I was trying something that someone created in 1905."

As the idea evolved, he found a more personal connection to Immortal as well: his father.

"The reason I got into this industry is because my father was a big believer in going for it. He always pushed me to take chances, to never settle, to be an entrepreneur and find your own way, and my father is really the reason I started all of this," said Martin.

"My father passed away this year and part of Immortal is that I realized when my father died, there are people in our lives that have imparted part of their spirit on you, and they live on in a way through you. My father lives on in a way through me, and I hope to be able to give back to the world so that when I'm gone, I live on through someone too."

While searching for the right graphic or imagery to represent the new name, Martin happened upon the perfect subject to grace the new labels: the Immortal Jellyfish.

Yes, it's a real, living thing.

"It's the only animal on the planet that can live forever. When it gets to its adult cycle, it reproduces itself and basically changes itself back into an adolescent and it starts over. In a way, it's sort of imparting itself on itself, which goes with our theme," he said.

"I love the fact that every day I get to work on something that I hope will outlive me. Lynn, the founder of the vineyard, he's part of that spirit. Here's a man who crafted this amazing property. He passed away, and yet, this vineyard lives on; it's like the spirit of him is there."

For tasting and acquiring Immortal Wines, visit <http://www.immortalestate.com> or email [info@immortalestate.com](mailto:info@immortalestate.com).