

## Napa Valley's Atlas Peak AVA rebuilds, rebounds

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Igor Sill of Sill Family Vineyards discusses construction and planting plans for his Atlas Peak property.

The Atlas Peak Appellation has had a tough couple of years, but as the area's vintners rebuild their homes and wineries, the AVA is becoming more resilient than ever.

"Atlas Peak has great volcanic soil for growing grapes," said Peter Stoneberg, President of the Atlas Peak Appellation Association. "We have a little bit of altitude, we go up to 2,600 feet so we are generally above the fog line, and we have a longer and slower growing season."

Located east of Oakville, Atlas Peak has a cool, mountainous climate with volcanic soils primed for Cabernet Sauvignon.

But with this elevation and rocky terrain come winding, narrow roads that hug the peak's mountainside, which aren't the safest to drive on even without alcohol's presence. While a beautiful drive along Atlas Peak Road, it may be intimidating for visitors to venture beyond the valley's main strip of tasting rooms and wineries, deterring folks from trying this AVA's wines.

"It is a twisty, narrow road and so it is not necessarily conducive to driving up, tasting wine at four different wineries and then driving back down," said Stoneberg. "So the county discourages tasting rooms up here, and we don't necessarily encourage them."

The rocky terrain also complicates the grape growing process — steep slopes, minimal topsoil and strong winds expected — but any vineyard owner along the way will tell you that this rugged terroir is exactly why they chose to put down roots on Atlas Peak in the first place.

"We like to say that they (our wines) are bold and powerful but soft," said Stoneberg. "When grapes are grown up here, because they struggle, the berries are small and so the skin to grape ratio is very high and we get very deep concentrated colors."

Stoneberg says there are over 100 wineries that buy grapes from Atlas Peak, many of which use this fruit to amp up blends from the valley floor that need a little boost.

"We can really punch up the aromas and color and tannins in a wine that otherwise might not have a lot of character," said Stoneberg.

For example, Alpha Omega has two, single-vineyard wines from Atlas Peak, in addition to a blend sourced entirely from that AVA. Winemaker Matt Brain notes the rugged tannins that come from these vines grown in rugged earth, and finds the soil on Atlas Peak as some of the most interesting in the valley.

But in order to do that, Atlas Peak needs a reliable vintage year after year. And after the 2017 wildfires obliterated many of the AVA's wineries and homes, vintners have had to band together, pool funds and generate solutions to sustainably keep their vineyards up and running.

“Atlas Peak is less at risk for fire now that it certainly was in 2016, because a lot of the excess fuels have been taken away, [and] we are trying to put 2017 behind us as much as possible and focus really on both what our wineries are doing now, as well as our efforts to proactively prevent fires before they start or spread,” said Stoneberg. “That is why we raised the money to buy the IQ FireWatch camera.”

Using funds raised from the 10th Annual Taste of Atlas Peak event sponsors, this camera will ultimately be used to monitor smoke 24/7 with hopes of pinpointing exactly where future fires are before they get out of hand. While a small act, these cameras should be able to cut down response time to fires and offer some peace of mind to Atlas Peak vintners like Philippe Langner.

Living and working on the AVA’s Kitoko Vineyard, Langner owns the brand Hesperian Wines and has been rebuilding his property since 2017.

“When I first came up three weeks after the fire, it looked like half of the vineyard was gone because it singed the leaves,” he said. “When we were able to come up more frequently and we cut into the vine, and we saw it was still green and healthy ... For me, that was the most important thing.”

While most of Hesperian’s estate vines were okay, the winery and Langner’s home burned down. Now, his new home is completed — and built of metal and other supposedly fireproof materials — and Hesperian will be digging into the mountain next spring to build the wine cave.

Initially, Langner was planning on building a tasting room and office space out in front of the cave, but has since enthusiastically shifted gears so that the whole structure will be completely underground.

“Now I think, do I need to do this? Should I invest in this thing that might get destroyed?” he said. “Even if the contractor company says they can do this and that to make it fireproof, I just myself, psychologically, cannot handle it ... everything will be underground, and we will put in some skylights so they won’t go bananas.”

Fear still lingers among Langner and other Atlas Peak vintners, with last year serving as a sort of test despite the fact that flames didn't hit most of the AVA.

"I had smelled the smoke at night, and it instantly woke me up and I didn't sleep that night," Langner recalls. "There is still some worry in the back of your mind ... There is always that 'what if?'"

But Atlas Peak vineyards like Hesperian and Sill Family Vineyards — which is located just down the road — they just want to rebuild and move on.

"We had an existing winery, it was already here, and I didn't want to make any changes," said winemaker Igor Sill of his new setup. "But the laws have changed, so we have had to change."

As with all winery permits, the Sills have had to maneuver their way through the bureaucracy and changing codes, which has ultimately set back the rebuilding process by nearly two years. What was once a lawn with a sprinkler system will now be a field of astroturf, stainless steel tanks will be nestled inside rather than out, and more and more land is reserved for seasonal creeks and the like.

"When you have these experiences in life, you always walk away learning something," said Sill of the process.

The main building and guest house on the Sill Family's property have been successfully built, but a tasting room won't be in the works anytime soon.

"The county doesn't want them up here, and actually, neither do I," said Sill. "In my next life, I want to get a tasting room in Yountville because up here ... This is why I am here: The solitude, the air is pure, and I get this beautiful breeze."

"Where else can you find this?"

So while it hasn't been easy for Atlas Peak vintners, they have stood their ground and are trying to come back more resilient than ever. Now that events are back they can serve their wines to

more mouths, and as facilities are finished and permits allocated, some wineries will be welcoming guests back to their estates.

Not the flashy type, these vintners (and their PR people) understand how important it is to draw attention to the AVA's product, while also working together to preserve the longevity of its vineyards through sustainability efforts and fire prevention.

"To get 100 points, wine is only one part of it," said the AVA Association's association executive director, Greg Sweval. "We are working with a bunch of individualists to help raise the prestige of Atlas Peak."

"It took me six weeks to get everyone together, no one wanted to talk about fire, and I said, 'Let's be the AVA that can ... Let's be the little AVA that can actually show leadership and address fire and talk about it,'" said Sweval.

"Because one year? Maybe you can put your head in the sand. But five years? No. So, I would love Atlas Peak to be the little AVA that can."

[https://napavalleyregister.com/news/local/napa-valley-s-atlas-peak-ava-rebuilds-rebounds/article\\_cbd6e934-8a8d-549f-a1b3-0c221ba2aef0.html](https://napavalleyregister.com/news/local/napa-valley-s-atlas-peak-ava-rebuilds-rebounds/article_cbd6e934-8a8d-549f-a1b3-0c221ba2aef0.html)