



Chappellet (Napa Valley, California)

Growing and maturing an iconic reputation as a pioneer of mountain Cabernet on Pritchard Hill

— Phillip Corallo-Titus, Winemaker

Donn and Molly Chappellet founded the Chappellet winery in 1967, drawn by the beauty of the area, their love of wine, and desire to raise their family in Napa Valley. Looking to the hills to realize their dream of making quality Bordeaux style reds, they poured the proceeds of the sale of their business in Los Angeles into buying a newly-established vineyard on Pritchard Hill, on 640 acres overlooking Lake Hennessy.

Only the second new winery in Napa Valley since the ending of Prohibition in 1933, Chappellet is located in the eastern hills of the Vaca Mountains behind St. Helena. While not an official AVA it is home to several of Napa's leading wineries, and today is known for its iconic Cabernets, with wine critics waxing lyrical about consistent high quality of Napa Valley's 'true Grand Cru'. We talked with winemaker Phillip Corallo-Titus, who first worked at Chappellet in 1981, and has been the winemaker since 1990.

<Interviewer: Dion Lenting, Kiwi Copy, February 2020>

◆ Was it a risky decision by Donn and Molly to build their winery on Pritchard Hill?

Donn always had a vision, I don't think he thought of it as taking a lot of risk, but he would always take that path less travelled. He had good intuition, if he saw something like the idea of making a First Growth in California, a piece of land, the grapes that were going to be farmed, they were just his hunches and he had a lot of confidence in his gut feelings. He always seemed comfortable with what he had done, very connected to the vineyard.



Chappellet Vineyard Manager Dave Pirio, Winemaker Phillip Corallo-Titus & Assistant Winemaker Daniel Docher. (left to right)

◆ How much knowledge of hillside vineyards and making quality reds was there at the time?

It had been done, but not very much. There was a vineyard of 30 acres at Chappellet in the 1800s, where the winery is now, which is proof people were farming the benchlands and hills long ago. If you go back far enough the valley floor was a difficult place to grow grapes because of frost. In colder years you could lose your crop – they didn't have wind machines or sprinklers like we do now. The old-timers used to get out and start big fires in the vineyards, sometimes with tyres, to protect themselves and it wasn't very dependable. So vineyards were planted in the hills in part because of the quality, and part the cold air would drain down and not settle on the hillsides on most occasions, so you could generally grow grapes without getting frostbite. We still get frosts, but not like what I remember as a kid.

The Chappellet's bought a very young vineyard which had been planted in 1964. Donn was attracted to it because is already established and producing a tiny crop. All the ground had been prepared though there was still a lot of work to do because it was fairly raw, so they were able to grow with the maturing vineyard. It was fortuitous because people did not specialize at the time, but luckily nearly 40 acres of the 90-100 acres of vines were Cabernet. There was also a lot of Chenin Blanc which was the popular white grape of the day. That is what got the Chappellet's going down the Chenin Blanc road and we are still making it. Today there is no reason to plant it on Pritchard Hill other than heritage.

◆ How much replanting and re-orientation of the vineyard have you done over the years?

The vineyard's Chenin Blanc lasted the longest, making it to 40 years. It's not that we don't value old vines, we just haven't had very good luck with them. There is so much virus pressure on the vines, at 25-30 years old the leafroll virus really starts knocking down the quality of the grapes, you're not getting the colour, tannins, or sugar, so a lot got replanted. It was followed by red blotch which was an undetectable at the time, so there was more replanting. Other than Zinfandel, we don't have a lot of success with older vines in California. Now that the virus pressure is more under control we are hoping we'll see vines living to 40-50 years old and producing good quality.

Originally everything in the vineyard was on St. George rootstock, an old bombproof, drought-resistant stock, not the highest quality or quantity unfortunately, but it will live forever. Today, we try to have a lot diversity as we never know where the best quality is going to come from. In the vineyards we changed all our row directions to try to ensure the grapes get enough sun but not too much. It often used to be planted east-west, and you would get all of your sun on one side and get almost nothing on the other. So now everything is a little off of north-east to south-west, and we get a very even light dispersal from morning to evening.

◆ Do you have a consistent planting program?

We became very aware that to be a top producer of Cabernet you have to. We don't use the grapes from a new vineyard until the vines are about 5 years old when we feel they have the quality, and by 6, 7, 8 years old they are very good.

We realized if you don't replant you are going to end up with all old vineyards, and if you have a crisis and need to start over again, you will end up with all young vineyards. So, as part of our program for success, we decided we try to replant about 5 per cent of the vineyard every year, so that about every 20 years the vineyard is turning over.

As far as I can tell the prime of a vineyard's life, the best and most consistent quality is between 8 and 25 years old, it's at the top for colour, flavour, structure, and really consistent. We need to have a lot of our vineyard in that age bracket to have a good supply of the best quality fruit. When the vines are young, you get a lot of colour and fruit, but the phenolics are awkward. It isn't so much about the specific flavours you are tasting, but more about the intensity and the richness of the mouthfeel, and that comes with age – and also sometimes diminishes with age. It's about the vines being in the perfect place, regulating themselves and producing a lot of fruit, a balanced canopy. We have more options when the vines are healthy.

◆ From your time at UC Davis were you already focused on making Bordeaux styles?

We grew up in our family drinking everything, but back then the real love affair in California was with Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, and Zinfandel lost that race. It is still around but doesn't have the same stature. My father always bought a lot of Bordeaux, would age them for about 10 years before drinking them – he had a lot of patience. Coming back to Napa from university in the 80s, it was already all about Cabernet and Chardonnay, just as it was at Chappellet.

I think we have 33 different blocks of grapes, some of them are up to about 5 acres. There are so many different Cabernet clones, rootstocks, soils, and exposures, and it is amazing how a small difference in exposure like a hill that is rolling a little to the east or the west makes a pretty big difference. We broke the vineyard up into two and a half acre blocks based on soil types, and they become separate irrigation blocks.

We ferment in lots of small lots. To get the highest quality our favourite fermenters are 4, 6, 8 and 10 tons, mostly 6 tons which will make about 14 barrels. Barrel selection depends on the wine. The top wines like the Pritchard Hill Cabernet are all French oak. We like a lot of different oaks, and French oak is consistent but not always the best for our needs. When we get down to the Signature Cabernets we use a little bit of American oak as a spice rack kind of thing, and then Hungarian oak which is the same as French, but in a slightly cooler climate and tighter grained and we really love it.

◆**How do you approach blending and how much does it vary year to year?**

We are really good at blending because we have so much experience with it. We start with the top wine, the Pritchard Hill, and spend the most time on that. Coming up in late February we will be tasting all of the 2019 vintage wines. It takes about 3 days for the reds and 2 days for the whites, and we grade all the wines very simply on an A, B, C kind of rating. A lot goes into it, we know all the chemistry on the wines, their origins and the barrels they are in, then we blind them and are looking for what is good. Then we have a tasting of just the A's. Some we call out as controversial, and we get down to the most rock-solid cluster of A1 from the estate – these are the ones that can be blended with, to see if they make it into the Pritchard Hill.

There is a lot of scrutiny, and then a lot of blending that goes into it. My biggest role at the winery is trying to figure out what to do with all this wine we made – it is a lot of fun, and takes a lot of time.

◆**What kind of profiles are you aiming for with your different wines?**

The Pritchard Hill and Signature Cabernet are not so different from each other. The Pritchard is composed of those super selective A grade wines, and we are looking for a big, powerful but still elegant wine, dark fruited, chocolatey, espresso, with oak contours, the graphite minerality that comes from Pritchard Hill. And then we look for opulence so if somebody tastes it they should know immediately it is a great wine – they just go 'Wow.' It is designed to be that way and that's the beauty of having a big Cabernet estate with a range of fruit. The blend is always a high percentage of Cabernet, a small percentage of Petit Verdot and not much Malbec, because we have such good Cabernet now we are less reliant on some of the blenders.

The Signature is much more inclusive. In the past we used Merlot, but not recently because we don't have the quality Merlot as nobody is planting it. What we have is great Malbec and Petit Verdot and lots of different Cabernets, not all from the estate, but some from the vineyards that border the property. It is a more far-ranging wine with softer tannin, though still big and rich, a mountain wine, but with more immediate appeal. Compared to a valley floor or any other wine it is still a big and age-worthy wine – I've been drinking and collecting Chappellet wines for a long time now, and Signatures age just as good as the Pritchard Hill. They may not go the distance, but at 10 or 20 years you are going to enjoy that Signature much in the same way as the Pritchard Hill, which after 20 years still has more years ahead of them.

◆**Achieving iconic status – was it hard work the whole way?**

Chappellet had some outstanding successes in the early 70s, but then we had to line up with all the other great producers. When I came on board in 1990 it was a long road, because we had to replant all the vineyards, build a new winery to have more state-of-the-art, it seems like a long time, and we started have measurable success around 96-97. So we have been growing as a quality producer, and have been on a high plateau for a long time. Then we really punched through to another level when we built our new winery which made me realize it wasn't just our knowledge of winemaking, but also employing better equipment – a new crusher, optical sorter, and then in the winery perfect temperature and humidity control, it is just not one thing but the way everything comes together it became a game changer – you could feel it happening, you could taste it. All of a sudden you are like 'Wow, we kind of did something here' and we spent a lot of money, but on the right things. Absolutely maximizing everything you've got is the only way to make it happen to get up to that level.

The team have been together for a long time, both my assistants have been here 14 and 16 years, and a number of others in the winery 6 to 8 years. They all know what is going, we get together and work together so we are not reinventing the wheel every harvest.



◆**Just briefly, can you touch on sustainability?**

All the water we use in the winery and run off from the roofs is collected, goes through a bio-purification system that breaks down all the organic material, and then into a holding pond for use in the vineyards. The vineyards were all certified organic in 2012 – before that many but not all of them were. Organic required cover cropping, building up the soil and the micro-organisms, composting, bird boxes and more, and has been a big learning curve. Solar panels on our new winery produce more energy than we use, so heating and cooling is all covered in the new winery.

◆**What does the future hold for Chappellet?**

So now we can take our knowledge and the fact we have just finished replanting the last block and develop some new vineyards. We are working on getting permits to develop 20-25 acres of new vineyards on our property that used to be too expensive to develop, but with the current price of wine from Pritchard Hill we can afford it. It will allow us to make more of the same quality of wine so we can build the business, working towards a Bordeaux model of making 10-20,000 cases of great wine. For Pritchard Hill we're at 3,000 cases and our goal some day is to make 5,000 cases, the Signature Cabernet has been around 12,000 and we're like to make 15 or 16,000 once the new vineyards are producing. It doesn't sound like a lot if you are Robert Mondavi, but we kind of do this one case at a time, as it has to grow in quality as well as quantity. We hope to have vines in the ground by 2023.

《From Village Cellars》

We remember on our first visit to Chappellet being impressed by the beautiful view of the vineyards on Pritchard Hill overlooking Lake Hennessy. Looking at the network of vineyards on the steep terrain, respect grows for founder Donn Chappellet's passion and pioneering spirit to establish his winery here.

Hugh Johnson says of the Chappellet Signature Cabernet Sauvignon: "An extraordinary wine of profound and complex character displaying all the attributes expected of a classic wine of its variety. Wines of this caliber are worth a special effort to find, purchase, and consume."

PICK UP WINE

CODE
11194



**Chappellet
Mountain Cuvee 2017**

Napa Valley, California Alc. 15.2%
Variety: Cabernet Sauvignon 55%/Merlot 28%/
Malbec 8%/Petit Verdot 6%/Cabernet Franc 3%
RRP **¥ 6,300**



Made from fruit from vineyards around Pritchard Hill and Atlas Peak, this lush and layered Bordeaux blend opens with alluring fruit-driven aromas of cherry, currant and plum, with notes of graphite, cedar, clove and nutmeg. The berry and spice are echoed on the round, mouthcoating palate, where they mingle with hints of black tea, vanilla and savoury herbs.

CODE
10896



**Chappellet
Signature Cabernet Sauvignon 2016**

Origin: Napa Valley, California Alc. 15.3%
Variety: Cabernet Sauvignon 79%/Petit Verdot 12%/
Malbec 9%
RRP **¥ 11,500**



A classic hillside Napa Valley Cab Sav, luxurious and powerfully structured that is built for aging. Aromas of ripe berry, cherry, cedar and cigar box, with dark chocolate, espresso, vanilla and clove notes. On the palate, rich and well-knit tannins underscore silky berry liqueur flavours, with hints of bay leaf and anise.