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Laurie Daniel: From rocky plot come sought-after grapes

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for the Mercury News

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It's not in one of the Napa Valley's swankiest areas, like Oakville, Rutherford or Spring Mountain. But Stagecoach Vineyard, high in the rugged eastern hills, is the source of some of Napa's most sought-after grapes.

About a third of the 500-acre vineyard lies in the Atlas Peak appellation; the rest is part of the overall Napa Valley appellation. It sits above Oakville and vineyards belonging to such cult producers as Dalla Valle. To the north is Pritchard Hill, home to vineyards for other cult wineries, like Bryant Family.

Overseeing this remarkable piece of ground is Jan Krupp, a former physician who found the property in the mid-1990s. In 1991 he had planted a nearby 33-acre vineyard, Krupp Vineyard, and became a part-time viticulturist. When 750 acres in the area came up for sale a few years later, several other vintners looked at the remote property and rejected it.

Krupp, however, was intrigued. He hired a geologist and a water witch and found a good supply of water 400 feet below ground. He put together a partnership with his brother Bart and billionaire Gordon Getty to buy the property in 1995 and managed to gain an easement for a road to the property. In 1997 and 2002, Krupp added to the property, and it now comprises 1,200 acres.

Stagecoach — which takes its name from the fact that it was near a stagecoach route in the 1800s — is dramatic and rocky. Krupp estimates that more than half a million tons of rock have been dug out of the site, and piles of boulders dot the property and line the roads. Elevations range from 900 to more than 1,700 feet, with a variety of exposures and soils. "It gives us a big palette for our winemakers," Krupp says.

The variations also make it possible to grow a variety of grapes. Most are red, with more than half the vineyard planted to cabernet sauvignon, where Stagecoach has made its reputation. It also has a few whites, such as chardonnay, viognier and marsanne. About four dozen wineries buy Stagecoach grapes, including Viader, Duckhorn, Miner Family, Paul Hobbs, Cardinale, Caymus and Pahlmeyer. Krupp also produces his own wines.

A cross-section of wines made from Stagecoach fruit show stylistic differences, but most share a common thread of fine tannins and an interesting savory note ranging from anise to black olive to a briary character.

That's true of Krupp's own cabs, bottled under the Veraison and Krupp Brothers labels. The 2004 Veraison Cabernet Sauvignon has ripe black cherry fruit, a hint of black olive and very firm tannins, while the 2004 Krupp Brothers Cabernet Sauvignon is darker, riper and more extracted, but still has that savory note. The 2005 Veraison (\$60) is just now

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being released; the 2005 Krupp Brothers (\$110) will be available early next year.

As for currently available wines, the 2004 Levendi Stagecoach Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$68) displays ripe black cherry fruit, hints of anise and roasted coffee and generous oak. The 2005 The Advocate (\$75), a blend of petit verdot, merlot and malbec that's one of Krupp's wines, is dark and lively, with black cherry and cassis, a slight savory note and firm tannins.

Stagecoach is also gaining some recognition for its syrah grapes. The 2005 Black Bart Syrah (\$55) — named for Krupp's brother — offers lively blackberry and some peppery and briary notes. Winemaker Kerry Damskey uses Stagecoach syrah in a couple of his Palmeri wines. The 2004 Palmeri Syrah (\$53) shows lively blackberry flavors, a hint of roasted coffee and firm tannins. I particularly liked the 2004 Palmeri Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah (\$53, year-end release), a big, lively wine with flavors of black cherry, blackberry, roasted coffee and black olive.

Overseeing hundreds of acres of vineyards is a big undertaking, but Krupp is clearly enjoying himself. "This is wonderful," he says. "This doesn't seem like work most days."

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