

Rock-solid vineyard

By [VIRGINIE BOONE](#)
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Dr. Jan Krupp was an internist in Pinole and a hobby home winemaker when he figured what he needed was a backyard vineyard.

The notion led him in 1991 to the Napa Valley and a 41-acre site in a remote area northeast of Napa, near Atlas Peak. This would be where he could indulge his love of growing, plant cabernet sauvignon and merlot and try to find some balance to his busy medical life.

But it wouldn't be long before folks started lining up to buy grapes off of Krupp's property and he figured maybe he could grow the vineyard into an even bigger business. So when, in 1995, a shrubby, boulder-strewn 750 acres became available up the road, he did what no one else was brave enough to do — he bought it.

"People like Jess Jackson looked at it and Bob Miner, Warren Winiarski," Krupp recalled, naming several pioneering vintners. "But there was no easement or road in, no water and too many rocks."

Krupp was driven by the quality of the grapes he had been growing lower down at his original site and by the grapes being grown at a nearby 1,500-foot-elevation vineyard in Atlas Peak called Briarstone, which producers such as Silver Oak and Duckhorn were enthusiastically touting.

He grabbed viticulturalist Rick Aldine, who was then at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars working with Winiarski. The two rented a backhoe and dug enough of a road so they could do some soil testing. At the end of it, Aldine, who was already buying some of Krupp's grapes, concluded that the grapes from this new parcel could be at least as good — maybe even better.

Stretching from 900 to 1,850 feet high into the southern side of the Oakville appellation's Pritchard Hill, home to such modern-day superstars as Chappellet, Colgin and Bryant Family, among others, the site promised plenty of south-facing slopes and rocky, red volcanic and shallow clay-loam soils, just what was needed for fine red wine grapes, especially cabernet sauvignon, to thrive.

But first, Krupp had to find water. He hired a geologist who drilled five holes, went down about 300 feet and found nothing.

"I figured if I didn't find water I'd just go back to building up my medical practice and be satisfied with my backyard vineyard," he said.

Krupp was persistent. He hired a water witch, who stood over a spot and told him if he drilled right there he'd find an underground stream.



Mark Aronoff / The Press Democrat
Jan Krupp moved a half-million tons of rock in developing more than a thousand acres of vineyard in the rocky hills east of Napa Valley with brother Bart Krupp.

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“I didn't think she was right because some of the neighbors hadn't had luck with water witches, but I figured why not?” Krupp added. “So we drilled and sure enough there was a stream 400 feet down.”

He went back to the original five drill holes, drilled another 100 feet down every one of them and they all had water, too. It was his last great hope. Krupp was 50, in the prime of his career and yet willing to risk it all for a prime plot of grapes. He moved to Napa permanently to develop what he would call Stagecoach Vineyard, today among the most sought-after fruit sources in the Napa Valley.

“When I started there was a glut of grapes, so I ended up having to make about 50 cold calls to sell the first nine tons,” he recalled. “Now people call every week for grapes.”

Part of the hill had been planted in the 1870s by German immigrants who would take the grapes to Oakville by horse and wagon. Naming it for those stagecoaches, Krupp developed about 100 acres of vineyard a year between 1995 and 2000 to meet the increasing demand.

Over the years, Krupp has added contiguous parcels here and there, growing his holdings to about 1,100 acres in all. More than half of the 630 acres planted to vines are cabernet sauvignon, the rest split in 30- to 50-acre plots of merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot, malbec and syrah. There are also small bits and pieces planted to chardonnay, marsanne, roussanne, viognier, tempranillo and petite sirah.

Krupp is out in the vineyard two to three times a day, walking the rows at 7 a.m. every morning with vineyard manager Esteban Llamas. The vineyard employs 120 full-time workers. The work has paid off in that a good 60 wineries are regular customers, including Caymus, Paul Hobbs, Pahlmeyer, Miner Family, Chappellet, Kendall-Jackson (for Atalon, Freemark Abbey and occasionally Cardinale) and Rutherford Hill. Smaller clients include Realm, Relic, Biale, PlumpJack, Alpha Omega, Palmeri and Continuum, Tim Mondavi's new project, just over the rise on Pritchard Hill.

Not all are vineyard designates. Among the producers who did designate early on is Paul Hobbs, who discovered the vineyard in 1999 and has been buying Stagecoach cabernet sauvignon since 2000.

“It's a naturally well-balanced vineyard, good drainage, good exposure,” Hobbs said. “But it can be a tough vineyard climatically. It took me a while to figure it out. My main concern was always managing the tannins, so we thinned much more. In the wine there's still a lot of meat on the bone, but with very juicy fruit surrounding it. It's really quite seductive.”

A tiny percentage of Krupp's fruit, 7 percent, goes to a more personal project, Krupp Brothers, a partnership between Jan and his younger brother, Bart. Since 1999 that has evolved to include Veraison Cabernet Sauvignon, Black Bart's Bride (a blend of marsanne, viognier and chardonnay), Black Bart Syrah, The Advocate (petit verdot, merlot and malbec) and The Doctor (tempranillo, malbec, merlot and cabernet), among other small bottlings. Aaron Pott and Nigel Kinsman make the wines.

Virginie Boone is a freelance wine writer based in Sonoma County. She can be reached at virginieboone@yahoo.com or visit wineabout.blogspot.com.

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