

A man with white hair, wearing a red short-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans, stands smiling next to a red stagecoach. The stagecoach has a large, prominent yellow wooden wheel. The background shows a vineyard with green grapevines and rolling hills under a clear blue sky.

THE **SOMM** JOURNAL  
AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2016

KRUPP'S  
**LAST  
TAMING  
OF THE SHRUBS**

Dr. Jan Krupp, owner of Stagecoach Vineyard, moved mountains to plant some of Napa Valley's most prized grapes

story and photos by Jonathan Cristaldi

It's hard to imagine a time when a drive up Soda Canyon Road would lead you to a dead-end with nothing but wilderness beyond—thick mountain shrub brush, snakes and mountain lions and volcanic-basalt boulders the size of small houses. But that's exactly what Dr. Jan Krupp encountered in the early 1990s, when a unique real estate opportunity presented itself. The deal would lead to a herculean decade-long effort to conquer 750 acres that would eventually become the beginnings of the iconic Stagecoach Vineyard, as we know it today.

*Jan Krupp with Gabrielle Shafer, Viticulturalist for Stagecoach Vineyard, clearing more of the mountain to plant a new block.*

## Top of the Peak

I met Dr. Jan Krupp at the Soda Canyon Store in April. At age 70, slim and tan, sporting clever shades, he's an unassuming, soft-spoken force-of-nature who, as of that week, was taking piano, fly-fishing and yoga lessons. We started up Soda Canyon Road in his pickup.





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“In 1994, I bought 40 acres and planted [Krupp Estate] vineyard and thought I’d have that and my practice the rest of my life,” he said, “but growing grapes was more fun than my medical practice.”

Dr. Krupp credits a professor at Stanford with turning him onto wine. He also took classes at U.C. Davis and Napa College, read innumerable books and would eventually learn most of what he knows from the people who would become his clients—winemaker rock stars like Paul Hobbs, and Caymus’s Chuck Wagner—then later from consultants like Ann Kraemer; Bob Gallagher; Aaron Pott (who made wines for Jan), and today from Stagecoach’s Viticulturalist, Gabrielle Shaffer—with several influences in between.

Hoping for something beyond his first 40 acres of vines, in 1991 he happened upon an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for 750 acres, spread across a few miles, at 1,200 to 1,750 feet up the Vaca Mountain range. “Jess Jackson, Bob Miner, Warren Winiarski all looked at it,” but all turned it down, Krupp explained as we careened passed the first rows of Stagecoach vines, the summit of Atlas Peak drawing nearer. The reason? No one had been able to find water in that part of Pritchard Hill, “and there were too many rocks. So, I took it on, naively.”

Krupp hired a team of geologists who identified five potential water sources. Braving the harsh landscape, they drilled down 300 feet in each spot—nothing, *nada*.

“But then we contacted Jonathan Newman—a water witch,” Krupp continued. First, he told Krupp where to find an underground river. And in the very spot, 430 feet deep, there was indeed a fairly deep river. Krupp returned to the original five wells and continued digging down to 500 feet. They did, and miraculously, each well contained water—plenty of it.

Then, the problem was getting in and out. There was no “road” to speak of. And the process of building the one that exists today would surely have deterred most—but not Jan. After negotiating with 28 neighbors, and some 135 notarized legal documents later, a road was built—but it led straight to the middle of nowhere.

### **Dynamite Hill**

When he found the property, it was nothing but mountain shrub brush—the “thickest briar patch you’ve ever seen,” and there weren’t any surrounding vineyards. But for the

next five years, the Krupp brothers (Jan and his brother Bart are partners in Stagecoach) spent seven days a week clearing 125 acres and removing boulders, while planting 100 acres of vines each year.

At last estimate they figured some two billion pounds of rocks had been removed—some crushed for gravel to build their roads, some sold and most stacked—the famous rock piles of Stagecoach—a visual reminder of the effort it has taken to conquer Mother Nature.

By the turn of the century, about 530 acres had been planted, mostly to Cabernet Sauvignon and a substantial amount of other Bordeaux varieties, as well as some Syrah, Chardonnay, Marsanne, Viognier, Roussanne, Petite Sirah, Grenache and Sangiovese.

As of today, Stagecoach covers 1,300 acres with 600 acres planted to vine. The price to plant those vines has varied considerably through the years. Initially, costs ran Krupp around \$30,000 to plant certain blocks; lately, it’s a staggering \$250,000 per acre.

“We try to put those [quarter-million-dollar] blocks in the hands of some of the world’s best winemakers, and try to charge an appropriate amount for the work that has gone into them,” Krupp explained. With that kind of overhead, a \$20,000-per-ton price tag for truly coveted grapes is easily understood.

The pedigree of winemakers who have long-term contracts for grapes from the Atlas Peak AVA and Pritchard Hill areas of Stagecoach Vineyard reads like a list of *célébrités vigneron*s: Aaron Pott, Dave Phinney, Heidi Barrett, Helen Keplinger, Jean Hoefliger, Kirk Venge, Mark Herold, Pahlmeyer and Chappellet.

And it goes on and on, as does Dr. Jan Krupp’s destiny to conquer still-unconquered parcels of land, which explains why he recently acquired property above the highest planted areas on Pritchard Hill and is in the process of obtaining permits to grow grapes. If modern science made it possible, it seems as though Krupp would try to plant vines in some ethereal, undiscovered cloud-based terroir. And if anyone could do it—he probably could.

*My journey with Dr. Jan Krupp through Stagecoach continues in more detail on [sommjournal.com](http://sommjournal.com), with an in-depth look at the farming principles, rootstocks and vine training, along with tasting notes from what is arguably one of Napa’s own “Grand Cru” sites. —J.C. SJ*

