

# OVER THE MOON

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If you've spent any time around Sonoma or Napa, you've undoubtedly been told you can see San Francisco from such and such location. And you've maybe hiked up to such and such location and squinted into the distance, straining to make out the metropolis across the bay. Just as likely, you probably saw nothing and schlepped down some or the other hillside in disappointment. A visit to Repris Wine's Moon Mountain Vineyard, high above the city of Sonoma, is unlikely to end in any such disappointment, and not just because when you squint from its highest elevations you'll maybe discern the arches of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance; not merely because the perch affords you an overview of nearly the whole southern end of Sonoma Valley with Petaluma and Marin past it and of the near fantasy spectacle of the Moon Mountain Vineyard itself tapering into the winery's spires—but because in the midst of all this splendor you're also quite likely sipping the fruits of this rejuvenating landscape.



Saying the setting is storybook only gets you part of the way there, though peering from the observation area in one of the blocks at the upper reaches of Moon Mountain Vineyard and looking down into the basin at the turrets of the winery framed by rolling hills, you half expect to see hobbits scurrying about and maybe a dragon or two. In short there is almost nothing like it in Sonoma Valley. And, yes, on a clear day, you can just

about see San Francisco, though it seems like another realm.

Not so very long ago Christian Borchert lived in that faraway land. Now it looks to him as might a city in a snow globe.

“We want to make the wine this place deserves,” says Borchert, who, with long-time friend Jim Momtazee and winemaker Erich Bradley cofounded Repris in 2010. Borchert is a relative newcomer to Sonoma, but Moon Mountain slowly

reeled him into its orbit.

A successful venture capitalist originally from Denmark, Borchert built a house nearby in the mountains on the eastern edge of Sonoma Valley in 2008 and gradually shifted from staying on weekends to living here full time and commuting to work in the tech corridor. Borchert even planted some of his own property to vine, during the course of which he met Sojourn and Audelssa winemaker Erich Bradley. The two planned a little winery project behind Borchert’s house.

Around this time Jim Momtazee, a friend of Borchert’s from his days as a student at Stanford, who works in private equity, had in mind a cozy little weekend spot among the vineyards in Wine Country. What he didn’t have in mind was 286 acres and an 11,000-square-foot winery. But when he found Moon Mountain Vineyard for sale he fell in love. Some of the winery buildings seemed incomplete, as if the original builders had begun them and then ran out of money before completing their vision, but everything was in place and the surroundings were unreal. Borchert, by this time a full-time Sonoman, had been accompanying him on his house hunting. He too was mesmerized by Moon Mountain. They started talking about what Moon Mountain could become. The “little vineyard project” Borchert and Bradley had started suddenly took on a much larger scope.

## THE VINEYARD’S HISTORY DATES BACK TO THE DAWN OF CALIFORNIA VITICULTURE.

*Reconstruction on the winery will begin in 2013 but the distinctive turrets will remain untouched.*



*Christian Borchert samples cabernet grapes at Moon Mountain Vineyard.*

The group negotiated the purchase of the whole deteriorating Eden from then-owner beverage conglomerate Diageo, with Momtazee purchasing the property (which included the house that had started the quest), but struggled to find a name that incorporated the property’s rich past—from which it became unplugged.

Situated on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas just over the county line from Napa, Moon Mountain Peak reaches 2,000 feet, and the eponymous vineyard that just touches its base sits comfortably at about 1,800 feet. The vineyard’s history dates back to the dawn of California viticulture. Historic Monte Rosso Vineyard abuts the property, but when Benjamin Dreyfus and Emmanuel Goldstein first planted these slopes in the 1880s as Goldstein Ranch, the two properties were one. Whether or not the area now called Moon Mountain Vineyard was planted back then is not certain though.

What is certain is that Alex Horn, an eccentric actor from San Francisco, led retreats and operated a commune—some called it a cult—on Moon Mountain in the 1960s based on the teachings of Russian spiritualist G.I. Gurdjieff. Horn and his followers sought a higher conscious-

ness through “The Fourth Way.” One path to this higher consciousness, taught Horn, involved intense manual labor. And so it was that Horn convinced his visitors, many of whom had paid for the opportunity, to plant something like 50 acres of grapevines by hand (“That program is still available today,” jokes Borchert).

The next tenants, vineyard company Calplans, had little use for the meditation center and amphitheater Horn had built, but the vines were quite attractive. Calplans added acres of additional planting in the ‘70s, working with Phil Coturri, who then was well on his way to becoming one of the premier organic and biodynamic viticulturists in Northern California. Coturri would remain involved with the property on and off for the next 30 years and, in fact, now manages Moon Mountain Vineyard for Repris. The more than 20 insectaries and dozens of fruit trees and bird habitat you’ll now see when you walk the vineyards are his recent additions.

The existing facility and the 18,000-square-foot wine cave blasted out of volcanic rock in a low-lying hillside date back the ‘80s heyday of the property when the Chalone Wine Group landed on Moon Mountain. Winemaker Jeff Baker built the



The round fermentation barn was built with Bordeaux-style open-top fermentation tanks.



turreted winery to his own exact specifications and Bordeaux-style inclinations, favoring a semi-circle of open-top fermentation tanks. When Repris winemaker Erich Bradley first laid eyes on the set-up a few years ago he could barely believe his luck. For one, he says, it was way ahead of its time for the '80s and, perhaps more important, it's exactly the way he would

have set it up himself.

The fermentation barn itself is nestled in a redwood-planked circular cathedral, which in turn fits nicely into the curved hillside in which rests the blasted face of the wine cave. The cave has an Old-World, primitive feel, rare for one so recently built. The claw marks of excavators, illuminated by flickering light, are

## THE GRAY ASH LEFT IN THE WAKE OF THE FIRE HAD A SILVER LINING.



Repris co-founders Jim Momtazee and Borchert were gradually pulled into Moon Mountain's orbit.



Phil Coturri has farmed the property on and off for more than three decades.

apparent throughout the dank tunnels. Baker knew when he carved these caves from porous volcanic rock in early '80s that mold would grow here—and if he was going to have mold, he wanted some with a provenance worthy of the wines that would be aging under it. On a trip to Château Lafite Rothschild in Bordeaux, Baker managed to convince someone there to let him plate mold from the caves, which he brought back and propagated in Sonoma. While it makes no difference to the wine, Repris still boasts Francophile mold.

In 1996 a devastating fire burned significant portions of the vineyard. Baker called upon Phil Coturri to replant. Coturri transitioned the entire property to organic practices at that point and has been farming it ever since. The gray ash left in the wake of the fire had a silver lining. While Baker had been bringing in interesting clones (some of which still survive), says Coturri, the viticulture was behind the times. He would know. He planted much of the vineyard between 1974 and 1980. "We had 40 vines to the acre. Now in some places we have 2,000 vines to the acre. That's five times as many plants

giving me the same tonnage," explains Coturri. With many vines planted in the '70s and acres left behind by the Gurdjiefians lost, Coturri seized the opportunity to bring the vineyard up to modern viticultural and organic practices.

"When I first learned how to grow grapes I was growing trees. Now I'm growing bonsai plants," he says, then, in true biodynamic fashion, he gets to the philosophical root: "Ezra Pound always talked about *condensare*: Reduce the words. Get it as exact as possible. That's what we're able to do. There's more meticulous manipulation of the plant, of the crop level and of the canopy."

The bonsai comparison is apt. With the painstaking care Cotutti and Bradley—who walks the rows daily—put into these plants, each cluster hangs perfect and distinct from the others, like a Zen interpretation of what a grapevine should be. Ezra Pound would be proud.

Carmenet had a very good run, producing some of the region's premier cabernet and cab franc, but eventually Baker moved on, the wines began to be diluted with grapes from other vineyards,



and along with them the reputation of the label. In 2001 Chalone split the label in three, producing Carmenet, Moon Mountain and Dynamite (so-named for the block closest to the mouth of the wine cave, which had been dynamited). And in 2002 Carmenet left Moon Mountain altogether when Chalone sold the label and its inventory to Australia-based Beringer Blass (a subsidiary of Fosters). Diageo acquired Chalone in 2004 and Moon Mountain with it.

Things didn't change mightily in the vineyard. Diageo had no reason to mess with the 65 certified organic acres, and Coturri continued to do things his way. He says, simply, "They didn't know I was here."

Momtazee closed on the purchase of the property with Diageo in 2011, though Bradley got his hands on Moon Mountain

Vineyard fruit a vintage earlier so that the winery could open with vineyard designate wines already in barrel. The wines will only be available through the winery, and the trio says that is likely the way it will always be. They intend to keep production small, not more than 10,000 cases. The 2011 vintage is now in barrel and "futures"—sales based on barrel tastings—are going at a brisk pace.

Borcher rarely visits the city and has capped his VC business to concentrate on Repris. He's busy with sketches and renderings for what the completed buildings will look like with a new entrance and, most notably, a rooftop deck and "bridge" that extends from the base of the turret of the main building to back near the wine cave. He says work should start on the restoration and refinishing of the main building by this spring, and he op-

timistically hopes to have the grand new entranceway complete by the end of 2013.

The fermentation barn—where Bradley had a sense of near déjà vu when he saw what Baker had built 30 years earlier—won't be touched beyond a cosmetic completion of the wraparound redwood board that has already been completed.

Baker is actually a neighbor. He can just about see the winery coming back into bloom from his house. "They're in there trying to really be with the vines and running the winery the way it really ought to be done," he says. "I'm just delighted at what they're doing there."

As Carmenet had once done under Baker, Repris is specializing in Bordeaux varietals, and setting out to offer some of the best on the market, with Bradley focusing on a wide range of lighter bodied but intense cabs and cab francs, aged in myriad types of oak sourced from various forests in France. Baker for one, thinks they can get there. "It's right at the perfect cabernet altitude," says Baker, "1,100 to 1,600 feet—just above the typical inversion fog." There is now even very serious consideration of a Moon Mountain AVA, including the vineyard along with about 40 others.

In 2009, "Two-Buck Chuck" producer Bronco acquired the name and label Carmenet, basically completing its descent into oblivion. Though Borcher did have one very brief telephone with monosyllabic Bronco chief Fred Franzia when he and Momtazee had thoughts of bringing the label back to the vineyard, that flirtation was fleeting. "Certainly," says Momtazee, "we didn't want to take the Moon Mountain name," which the trio had, in fact, purchased from Diageo along with the vineyard. "Carmenet was too complicated. So we started over." In the end, the wines were christened Repris, a name that indicates rebirth and a link with the past but is something completely new. **S**



*Winemaker Erich Bradley offers a barrel sample in the 18,000-square-foot cave.*