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MAYACAMAS

A DECADE INTO NEW OWNERSHIP, THIS HISTORIC PROPERTY IS PRIMED TO REACH NEW HEIGHTS

ESTEEMED PAST, BRIGHT FUTURE

BY JAMES MOLESWORTH

Most vineyards are easy to get a handle on. You can stand in the middle of them and turn around in a 360-degree circle and it all splays out before you. You see slope and aspect. You see the viticultural approach. You kick the dirt. You feel the prevailing breeze. You quickly get a feel for the place.

Great vineyard sites don't give up their secrets that easily. Mayacamas sits like a crown atop Napa Valley's Mount Veeder. As you start to move through the 485-acre property, you stand in the middle of a parcel and turn around only to find that nothing splays out easily. Your view might be obscured by scrub brush or forest. You might not even be able to see the boundaries of the parcel itself as the terrain rises and falls. The estate is a patchwork of 50 acres of vines in jagged parcels clinging to hillsides that range from 1,850 to 2,200 feet in elevation. With varying exposures and soil types, all sitting above the fog line, the site enjoys warmer mornings but cooler afternoons than those in the valley below.

The property is among Napa's most historic wineries, dating to 1889, when it was purchased by John Fisher. Fisher built the stone winery that still stands, while also planting Zinfandel vines (there was a distillery as well). Wine-filled casks would be taken by horse-drawn carriage down the mountain's steep, winding road to be put on barges headed to San Francisco. By the 1940s, Jack and Mary Taylor had purchased the property, given it the Mayacamas name and designed the label that is still in use. It was during their ownership that the vineyard shifted to Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1968, 30-year-old Bob Travers, along with his wife, Eleanor, purchased Mayacamas. The 1971 Cabernet was part of the Judgement of Paris tasting and Travers went on to vinify 45 vintages, crafting a style that remains intact today. The style was headlined by the Cabernet bottlings. Rigidly structured in their youth, they often required a minimum of two decades of cellaring to coax out the charms hidden behind walls of strident tannins woven with ravier acidity.

Another change in ownership came in 2013, when the Schottenstein family purchased the estate. They hired Braiden Albrecht, 26 at the time, as winemaker. To help him with what was clearly going to be a major endeavor, they also brought on winemaker Andy Erickson and his viticulturist wife, Annie Favia, to consult.

It was a difficult start for the new team. The property had been run without deep financial pockets and was in need of more than fixing up. The 2017 wildfires threw an extra curveball into the mix, scorching some vineyards and costing the estate one of its original



Current winemaker Braiden Albrecht represents a new era for Mayacamas.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: LEIGH-ANN BEVERLEY/BONAFIDE PRODUCTIONS; ALINA TYULIU; EMMA K. MORRIS; MELISSA BARNES





The estate's stone winery dates to the late 19th century.



Mayacamas' vineyards on Mount Veeder sit above the fog line.



Former owner Bob Travers oversaw 45 vintages, from 1968 to 2013.

stone structures near the winery. But Albrecht quickly learned to take speedbumps in stride.

“When it comes to growing mountain Cabernet, it’s never easy,” Albrecht says calmly as we walk the rows in a parcel marked by poor, volcanic soils littered with chunks of fist-sized stones.

Despite his youth, Albrecht comes across as sanguine and not easily, if ever, ruffled. This attitude requires an embrace of the mountain and everything it throws at the grapegrowing and wine-making process, resulting in a much-needed replant of the vineyards. This was initiated with an understanding that the labor of love involved in this work would need to be combined with sound business. The goal of the team was to bring the estate’s infrastructure and farming up to modern-day levels while at the same time maintaining the site’s heritage.

“I ALWAYS DREAMED ABOUT WORKING MAYACAMAS. IT’S ALWAYS BEEN THE PLACE ON MOUNT VEEDER.”

—Phil Coturri

Among the first things Erickson and Favia did was to ask viticulturist Phil Coturri, whose Enterprise Vineyards farms 600 acres of vines in Napa and Sonoma, to handle the replant. Coturri, who is close friends with Albrecht’s parents (their children went to school together) had long aspired to farm the site and had also recommended Albrecht as winemaker.

“I had farmed the Mount Veeder Winery vineyards next door for the Bernsteins for years,” Coturri says, alluding to the original owners of that property. “I always dreamed about working Mayacamas. Both Jeff Baker, who founded Carmenet, and Bob Sessions, who went on to Hanzell, got their start at Mayacamas. It’s always been *the place* on Mount Veeder.”

What Coturri wasn’t prepared for was how much work had to be done on his dream site. “Looking at the vineyard and seeing how horrible it was, all the virus, wow,” he says. “The farming didn’t have the degree of attention to detail that we have now. When it was originally developed, they didn’t have the tools we have now. And they didn’t have water. Historically the old timers who were on a shoestring budget, they put their money into the cellar and winemaking, not the vineyard. Especially in a place as hard to work as that. They couldn’t see the return from investing in the vineyard. But today we have the technology to make a better vineyard. Better rootstock and virus-free vine selections. We have the horsepower to manipulate the soil, move dirt around, build better terraces and create better drainage.”

Two wells were drilled and a 100,000-gallon tank was installed, giving the vineyard access to water when needed. While much of the site is dry farmed, water is still a necessity, both to establish young vines and handle spots where dry farming isn’t sustainable. “You’re filling in holes to get to uniformity,” Coturri explains.



Viticulturist Phil Coturri was brought on to modernize the estate’s vineyard.

“And it’s not the kind of uniformity that makes it boring. It’s a uniformity that makes it viable.”

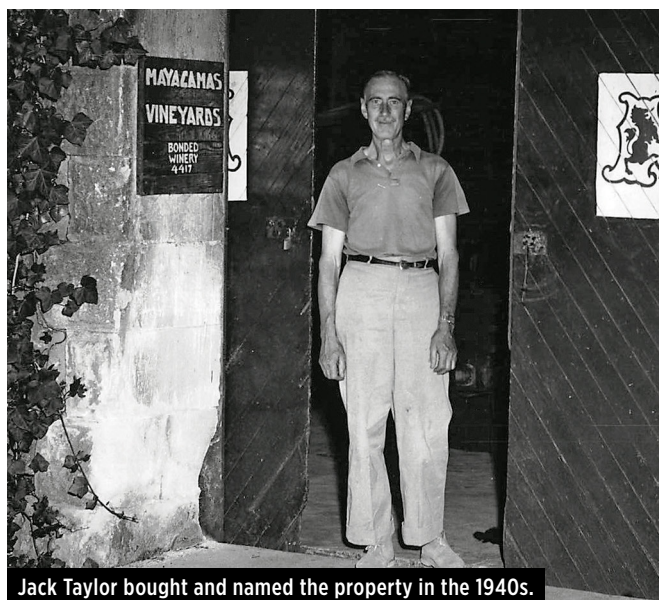
Now, in 2023, the property is back in full production for the first time during the Schottensteins’ ownership. There have been changes. Pinot Noir is gone, while Sauvignon Blanc has been brought back. In 2013, Chardonnay dominated the vineyard plantings; now Cabernet Sauvignon makes up nearly 60% of the plantings. The Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc have been moved to parcels with less sun exposure, giving them a cooler aspect to retain their acidity, while the Cabernets (there’s also Cabernet Franc) and Merlot are now in the warmer areas better suited for red grapes.

“The replant was 100% rootstock planted, then field grafted, so we had a lot of options,” says Albrecht. “Plant material-wise, we were able to keep some of the original vine selections. We got back our first cleaned-up Mayacamas material for Cabernet. We brought in new material as well. When we arrived, the original mix of root-

stock had a lot of AXR-1, obviously a big driver in the need to replant and why several of those blocks were left fallow for a time,” since that rootstock is susceptible to phylloxera. “The new mix was done primarily to be a better match for the soil vigor variations we find on property.”

“Old-time vineyard farming here used to grow trees. Now we’re growing bonsai,” Coturri says. “I’m really happy with the way it turned out.”

Coturri and Albrecht farm organically, adding an extra layer of difficulty to the already tricky mountain-side farming, as organic practices require more labor and more time.



Jack Taylor bought and named the property in the 1940s.

“On its own, organic is not necessarily better than conventional farming. Plus there’s more room for mistakes,” says Albrecht. “But what that means is, you have to be that much more attentive to detail.”

While the replant was under way, Mayacamas had to source a significant amount of fruit from elsewhere to maintain production levels. In 2016, 80% of Mayacamas’ production came from purchased fruit.

“During the replant, we sourced from neighboring vineyards that had similar soil types, plantings and farming philosophy as we have at the estate,” Albrecht says. “Bob [Travers, the former owner] had already been purchasing fruit from many of these vineyards over the years, so we continued those relationships in large part. As fruit from the estate started coming back on line, the purchased fruit has been scaled back. It’s exciting, because with each new vintage we’re becoming more and more estate.”

As the vineyard reboots, Albrecht is finding elements to highlight separately, bottling small lots on their own. These one-off bottlings, based on parcel, vine selection or other factors, change from year to year. “You never want to change the core blend. But sometimes there’s an expression of a piece of the core that is interesting on its own,” Albrecht says. “And that helps inform you down the road as well.”

The Mayacamas cellar, a warren of dark, narrow spaces filled with large wooden casks (some dating back a century), says “old-school Rhône” more than Napa Valley. Albrecht thinks it has as much to do with the wine as any other part of the estate. “I do think if you took our grapes and made the wine in the same way in another cellar, the wine would be different,” he says. “No doubt.”

With large-volume and thick-stave casks, temperature is more constant and oxygen transfer is markedly reduced. The result is wines that unwind very slowly during their *élevage*, which can last up to three years before bottling. That slow development in the cellar translates to slow development in bottle as well. Combined with the vineyard’s penchant for producing very structured, acid-driven Cabernets, Mayacamas’ lead bottling has a track record as one of the longest-lived wines in Napa Valley. A tasting of 21 vintages at the estate provided dramatic evidence of its staying power, while also showing a clear divide between the wines from the new team and the previous one.

The 2018s reflect the path Mayacamas is on now. They are brick houses, as are the pair of 2014s I tasted, brimming with black and red fruits allied to racy acidity. They show the hallmarks of Mount



Consultant Andy Erickson (left) works with Albrecht to refine Mayacamas’ wines while preserving the site’s DNA.

“I DO THINK IF YOU TOOK OUR GRAPES AND MADE THE WINE IN THE SAME WAY IN ANOTHER CELLAR, THE WINE WOULD BE DIFFERENT. NO DOUBT.”

—Braiden Albrecht

Veeder fruit as well as the Mayacamas style with their prominent mineral spines and waves of menthol, bay leaf and sassafras.

The older wines are also compelling, with several bottlings from the 2000s now hitting their stride, including the 2002, ’01 and ’00, the latter perhaps most impressive as the 2000 vintage is widely considered a down year qualitatively for the valley. Going further back, the wines from the 1990s and ’80s show their savory characteristics in greater relief, with touches of cellar funk and rusticity that were likely a function of the rudimentary cellar at the time as well as less-than-ideal bottling conditions (the wine was often bottled by hand from individual tanks over several weeks). Both living up to their legendary status, the 1971 and ’68 bottlings are classic old-school Napa mountain Cabernets.

While the more modern vintages from Albrecht show greater precision and detail, due to what he refers to as the “refreshing of the vineyard,” the DNA of the vineyard is a clear through line running from the 2018 all the way back to the 1968.

The uniqueness of Mayacamas’ DNA is what makes the wine so treasured by consumers and professionals alike. When Erickson, considered among the elite winemakers in Napa Valley, announced he would be pulling back on his consulting efforts to focus his time on developing the new Favia estate in Oakville, he still kept two clients: Dalla Valle and Mayacamas.

California doesn’t have a vineyard classification system; the U.S. is too democratic to codify a ranking à la Bordeaux. But if one were to speculate about potential *grands crus* sites in Napa Valley, Mayacamas would undoubtedly be one. It has a history that dates to the 19th century. It gave birth to a signature *terroir*-driven style, unearthed during the decades of the Travers regime and now being updated by the current ownership. And yet with all that change, the character of the wine still blazes through. To get there, Albrecht and the all-star team hired by the Schottensteins has performed a rare feat at Mayacamas—they’ve curated and updated at the same time. That requires respect for the past and patience for the future. The results should be in the bottle for years to come.

Tasting Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon

The 21 wines on this chart were reviewed by senior editor James Molesworth in a non-blind tasting this past September. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE SCORE

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2018 97

Offering a fuller, juicier feel, with a darker profile, this is still a youthful brick house. Shows a backdrop of sweet bay leaf and savory notes, while an iron girder drives through the finish. This hasn't budged at all since its release. Best from 2025 through 2045.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder Sunset 2018 95

A supersleek, tightly coiled wine, with an almost bristling iron note piercing a core of damson plum and cherry fruit, this races along with the vibrant hum of a tuning fork to a precise finish. Patience required. Best from 2028 through 2045.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2014 96

Starting to open, slightly, with the vintage's telltale savory-driven aromatics leading the way. Sage, bay leaf and pine forest accents pull the wine along, with the core of red and black currant fruit showing a lightly mulled edge. The long, racy, well-defined finish pulls both the fruit and savory sides together beautifully. Tempting, but lots of positive development to come. Drink now through 2044.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder Golden Hill 2014 93

Very juicy and vibrant, with bright damson plum, bitter cherry and red currant notes. Showing less of the typical savory and chaparral backdrop, this is still primal as it features its fruit from start to finish. There's a high-pitched iris note at the very end, along with a long iron underpinning. Best from 2024 through 2042.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2011 94

This has settled in nicely, offering a gently mulled damson plum and black cherry fruit core buttressed by taut, chalky structure that's inlaid nicely. This comes across as reserved in style, but don't be fooled: With its ample depth and cut, this will easily keep pace in terms of aging. Best from 2026 through 2040.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2010 93

This shows a pleasantly dusty edge from start to finish, giving it a decidedly old-school feel. The core offers dark cherry and plum notes, with a latent juicy feel that allows this to linger prettily while hints of charcoal, cedar and bay leaf chime in the background. Best from 2025 through 2038.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2009 94

Ripe, juicy and very expressive, this has a still-youthful core of damson plum, cherry and mulberry fruit that shows lovely perfume and focus, with potpourri and hibiscus accents. The long finish has nice refinement while keeping an ever-so-slight edgy minerality. This is sneaky long too. Drink now through 2043.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2008 92

Bingo—this is in a sweet spot right now, with expressive notes of potpourri and dried hibiscus followed by a pretty mix of damson plum, cherry and raspberry notes laced with a hint of red tea. A sweet bay leaf thread weaves throughout as the filigreed finish shows a light mineral echo. Not as dense or driven as most of the wines in the vertical, but a delight now. Drink now through 2032.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2005 91

Shows the old, dusty Mayacamas style, with worn cedar, dried cherry and incense flavors mixed with chalky structure and sweet bay leaf and dried hibiscus notes. A touch shy on depth and without the clear pixelation of the modern vintages. A throwback for the hardcore Mayacamas lovers. Drink now through 2030.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2004 93

Sticks out for its freshness and purity, though it has the character of a warm year, with darker cherry and plum fruit and more flesh around the edges, plus a great tug of warm earth. Showing much less of the typical savory backdrop, this is a more straightforward and hedonistic-style vintage. Drink now through 2036.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2003 93

This is delicious, with juicy, nicely packed black currant and black cherry fruit laced with singed alder, licorice root, warm earth and dark tobacco notes. Keeping its juicy edge through the finish, this shows a similarly hedonistic feel as the 2004, but a tug of warm cast iron keeps it honest. Drink now through 2038.

WINE SCORE

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2002 94

A very pretty wine, with a slightly high-pitched set of rooibos tea and iris aromas backed by red currant and mulberry fruit laced with a subtle thread of mulling spices. There's a touch of smoldering bay leaf and an underlying cast iron note that lends a twinge of textural nuance through the otherwise fairly silky finish. This is in a good spot right now. Drink now through 2036.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2001 95

This one is singing, with pitch-perfect black currant and black cherry fruit lined with warm earth and cast iron threads to feel present but not overwhelming, while dried bay leaf, alder and black tea fill in throughout. There's also a sneaky latent juicy edge that helps give the fruit a finishing kick. This is delicious now, but there's plenty of life ahead. Drink now through 2038.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2000 95

This is on point, with superfresh, racy acidity taking the lead over the austere tannic side, lending vibrant energy to the gently mulled blackberry and black currant fruit, with cast iron, sweet bay leaf and menthol notes. Then just when it seems as if this is showing its age, there's a gorgeous hibiscus accent on the finish to add range, lift and an encore of freshness. Drink now through 2038.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1999 93

This shows the fully mature sweet spot for the wine as its flavors of red and black cherry fruit smolder gently but with intensity, while notes of pine forest, sweet tobacco and baking spices dance around. There's still structure, but this is an elegant handshake now instead of a tight-fisted clench. Drink now through 2030.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1996 93

This shows a touch of cellar funk along the edges, with dusty cedar and wet earth hints around the core of fully mature red currant and cherry flavors. Sweet cedar, red tea and sandalwood notes slide in and take over on the finish, though they rule with a very light hand. An old and pretty wine. Drink now.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1994 94

This has some still-succulent fruit, with a core of tar-laced dark plum and black currant that while mature has ample guts and depth. Sweet bay leaf, charcoal and roasted cedar notes form the backdrop on the finish, along with a long, filigreed spine that's built on acidity, lending this just the right amount of tension to keep it going without intruding. Drink now through 2035.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1991 94

This is an example of how well this vintage has performed over time, though 1991 was soon eclipsed in terms of reputation by the more monstrous years of the mid-'90s. This still has tension, offering a range of red and black currant fruit laced with sanguine, incense and red tea notes. Fine-grained and very focused, this is modest in scale yet remarkably persistent. Drink now through 2034.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1986 93

Fully mature, with a silky, graceful feel, leading off with rooibos tea, cedar, potpourri and worn leather notes followed by dried blood orange and damson plum fruit flavors. Picks up a tautness that stays deftly inlaid through the finish, where a late note of dried savory flickers prettily. Drink now. 2,210 cases made.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Mountain 1971 95

This is really singing. Superfine and very silky in feel, with high-toned sandalwood, green tea, dried currant and sanguine notes that glide through in lockstep, while the mineral aspect runs through underneath, emerging steadily through the finish. Everything lingers prettily, with the minerality providing an inner tension that keeps this from drifting into ephemeral territory. Drink now.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa 1968 97

This is special, with notes of menthol, dried plum, green tea, sweet bay leaf, singed balsam wood, date, toasted sesame, toffee and cardamom all in play and all carried by a gorgeously silky structure, showing a hint of warmed kirsch. So refined and elegant, with all its elements in harmony, it feels as if this will stay here for a while. Drink now.