

WINE ENTHUSIAST

The Sonoma Mountaintop where Volcanic Soils Create Marquee Wines

By Virginie Boone



Nun's Canyon Vineyard/Photo courtesy of Hamel Family Wines

Nun's Canyon Vineyard

The Hamel Family ranch is on the valley floor along Highway 12 in Glen Ellen. Six miles away, up a steep, bumpy road on the northernmost edge of the appellation, Nun's Canyon Vineyard sits between 1,300 and 1,700 feet in elevation. The Hamels bought it from St. Francis Winery in 2013.

The site is steep and brimming in red clay loam soils, its underbelly a mixture of fractured basalt and gravel. The Hamels made their first Cabernet Sauvignon from here in 2013. They began to use biodynamic techniques and dry-farm the site in 2018.

Most of its 125 acres are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, but other grapes cultivated include Cabernet Franc, Merlot and newer plantings of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre.





Pedro Parra in Nun's Canyon Vineyard/Photo courtesy of Hamel Family Wines

John Hamel oversees winegrowing and winemaking here. With Chilean-born soil specialist Pedro Parra, who holds a Ph.D. in terroir from the Paris Center of Agriculture, Hamel is analyzing Nun's Canyon's **microterroirs**. They've identified eight variations, from shallow silty basalt to stony basalt. Their results are used to influence replanting decisions and blending in the cellar.

"The soils are all volcanic, but volatile," says Hamel. "They can change on a dime. You can't see the differences from the top and that makes it super difficult to farm. You can have six different soil types in one block."

This gives him versatility, but logistical challenges. He conducts 50 different picks of the vineyard during harvest and vinifies those by soil type. The fractured basalt is broken, weathered and quite porous. In another corner of the vineyard are the oldest vines, planted in 1994. They sit in silty, sandy soils. Hamel finds their fruit much more intense and possessed of depth.

"The wines are stony and mineral, they have an elegance and are more complex than just concentrated in fruit," he says. "You get delicate, fine wines."