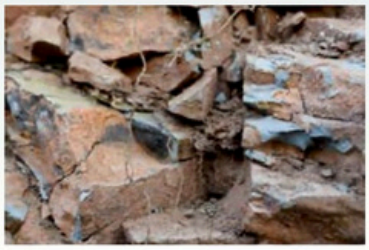
electricity IN A BOTTLE

by RANDY CAPAROSO

EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF MINERALITY AT **HAMEL**



Fractured basalt soils at Nuns Canyon contribute to the minerality of Hamel's wines.

IN THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS, we teach our staffs and share with our guests the differences between New World and Old World wines, contrasting the former's softer fruitiness with the more minerally, terroir-driven character of the latter.

But that's a generalization John Hamel doesn't accept. In 2017, when he took over as director of winegrowing and winemaking for Hamel—established in the Sonoma Valley in 2014 by his parents, Pamela and George Hamel—he began making a conscious transition to Old World–inspired wines that more clearly reflect the family's three properties, where a total of 91 planted acres harbor mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Grenache, and Sauvignon Blanc.

"We grew into what we are doing today a little at a time, starting out with an acre of Cabernet Sauvignon planted on our estate in 2006," he says. "My dad made the first wine from our own grapes in 2006, and I joined the family business [prior to its official founding] in 2010. . . . At that time, I'd describe our wines as very Californian. But I was conscious of the fact that the wines I loved to drink most were European. I began to ask, why? What's missing in California wines? One of the most interesting things about European wines is that . . . they are wines of place, often with minerality unique to each place. My question was, how can we achieve a stronger connection to place, and a distinctive minerality, in our own wines?"

PHOTOS: JIMMY HAYES/JBH PHOTO

The Hamel family's largest property, Nuns Canyon Vineyard, is located in Sonoma's Moon Mountain District AVA.

John Hamel is director of winegrowing at Hamel in the Sonoma Valley.

back to 1857, thus representing one of Northern California's first mountain vineyards. Walking me through three neighboring soil pits, John and his viticulturist, Saskia Tingey, pointed out the varying layers of rock, sand, silt, and clay going down 6 feet. Explained John and Tingey: "Although our generalized description of the Nuns Canyon soil is 'fractured basalt' [i.e., volcanic], the sub-blocks vary, in most cases quite dramatically, all having an impact on the character of our wines. Basalt itself is solidified magma, rich in iron and magnesium. Iron oxidizes from volcanic soil, which can . . . contribute directly to a minerality sensed by the palate. Our most mineral wines, for instance, come from our rockier sites, requiring more vigorous rootstocks. Our more accessible wines come from the sites with higher clay content. Knowing the clay/rock content made it possible for us to farm and plant with more precision. Based on that, we have divided our sub-blocks into what we call 'polygons'. . . . In the winery, the lots from each polygon are fermented in 3- to 4-ton fermenters, stainless steel as well as oak and concrete. . . . We [have] found that the shape or geometry of our tanks is an important factor, impacting the dynamic of the fermentations. Lower surface area at the top minimizes cap size, forcing caps to submerge during fermentation. The objective, however, is not to extract more intensity but rather the terroir-related sensory qualities unique to each individual polygon, reflecting their soil content."

Associate winemaker Maura Kinsella.

Viticulturist Saskia Tingey.

The biggest step taken by the Hamel family toward answering those questions began in 2016 with the retention of internationally renowned consultant Pedro Parra. The Chilean-born expert's first order of business was to utilize an electroconductivity scanner to gauge the depths of clay in their soils, as clay content is a key marker of soil changes; it is interesting to note that he often substitutes the word "electricity" for "minerality" in describing wines while emphasizing the importance of mouthfeel as well as phenolic content and acidity to that minerality, with which the best vineyards in the world are associated.

This approach was exactly what appealed to John, who acknowledges, "I think, at first, Pedro was a little skeptical of California, particularly because of our warm Mediterranean climate. But when he first visited our Nuns Canyon Vineyard, he immediately recognized how [its] volcanic soils, on mostly steep 1,198- to 1,578-foot slopes, change from pure rock to pure clay and everything in between . . . usually within a few feet of each other—a shifting of soil content not unlike what you find in Burgundy, which he had a great deal of experience with."

The largest of the Hamel family's properties at 58.7 planted acres, Nuns Canyon in the Moon Mountain District AVA dates

In the winery, John and I were joined by associate winemaker Maura Kinsella, who holds a master's in winemaking and viticulture from the University of Bordeaux and has worked at Château Palmer and Jean-Pierre Moueix. Interestingly, though, her team takes fewer cues from Bordeaux than from Southern France because, explained John, "We have not only adapted our winemaking methods to our volcanic terroir but also to our Mediterranean climate, which is different from what you find in Bordeaux. When you look at winemaking in Mediterranean regions such as the Rhône and Southern France, you see more usage of larger casks and concrete vats, which are generally less oxidative." Accordingly, they increasingly employ casks ranging from 800 to 1,500 liters.

Added Kinsella, "Unlike Bordeaux, there is less need for techniques such as micro-oxygenation in our climate. By moving away from aging in [225-liter] barriques and employing more large casks and concrete, we not only achieve less of the sweet

taste of oak—the last thing you want when you want to emphasize balance and minerality—we also get more verticality in our wine. In terms of phenolic content, we're trying to avoid rustic or astringent tannin. The key is developing a restraint in technique—picking grapes earlier, more gentle extraction, minimal racking, all the things you can do to achieve a stronger sense of place on a sensory level."

Renowned consultant Pedro Parra began working with Hamel in 2016.

To demonstrate their meticulous approach to farming and winemaking, John and Kinsella pulled out three reds, starting with the Hamel 2021 Stratum from Sonoma Valley ($60), a blend of 53% Cabernet Sauvignon with 32% Merlot, 14% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Zinfandel. Notably fleshy, earthy, savory, and long, the wine was mildly herby and tinged by pencil wood nuance. John noted that "the high percentage of Merlot and Cabernet Franc makes it more accessible, but the more telling factor is that it is largely sourced from polygons with more clay content, which adds to that generosity of feel in the mouth. While it still can't help expressing the mineral character of our vineyards, it is a milder minerality than in our wines coming off our rockier sites."

Indeed, the Hamel 2021 Nuns Canyon Cabernet Sauvignon ($160) was a dramatic contrast. Blended with 21% Cabernet Franc and 4% Grenache, it was denser in phenolic content, its faintly earthy, chaparral-tinged aromas of cassis and berry preceding the svelte, velvety palate's strong sense of minerality. Kinsella commented, "The seven or so micro-polygons going into this wine were selected precisely for their Nuns Canyon typicity. . . . I'd say these polygons were about 80% stone and just 20% soil. In these conditions, we have found that even our Cabernet Sauvignon–dominant wines express themselves best [when] almost exclusively aged in large, mostly neutral French and Austrian casks. "There is the deep color and tannin that you expect, yet it is very fine grained. I think it is the restrained use of wood that allows the wine's mineral character to show up, front and center."

The third bottling—the Hamel 2019 Isthmus from Sonoma Valley ($90)—contained 53% Cabernet Sauvignon, 28% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Petit Verdot, which aged primarily in neutral oak casks. Its distinguishing character was an iron-like note merged with herbs and cedar, its minerality emerging toward the finish on the long, slender, velvety palate. "You can see why we have been moving away from barrique since 2019," said John. "It just isn't necessary to achieve the deep yet balanced, terroir-focused qualities intrinsic to the vineyard, which we can now be delineated through our micro-polygon selections in the winery."

What *is* key, however, is dry farming, a technique the estate began adopting in 2017. "One thing we learned from Parra," explained John, "is that heavily irrigated vineyards with shallow root systems . . . have a more superficial connection to place. To achieve true terroir expression you need deeper root zones, and to get that you need to go to dry farming. . . . We have found a correlation of length of wine on the palate to root depth. Deeper roots also correlate with higher phenolic content . . . [and] more minerality."

All of Hamel's properties are certified Biodynamic by Demeter and organic by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). "If the soul of the wine comes from the soil, then we need to do everything possible to enhance the health of the soil and vines," John said. "As a holistic approach, it's biodynamic farming that gives us the best chance of achieving our goals, which is wines with not just depth, elegance and structure but also a mineral character unique to Hamel." SJ

Tasting Notes

Hamel 2023 Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma County ($60) Fermented in 56% stainless steel and 44% neutral oak casks, this elegant Sauvignon Blanc (with 14% Sémillon) is steely, stony, and linear as it engages with notes of chervil, thyme, lime zest, and Meyer lemon. White tea flowers are speckled with salinity, urging on that next sip. **95** —*Meridith May*

Hamel 2021 Stratum Red Wine, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County ($60) This blend of 53% Cabernet, 32% Merlot, 14% Cabernet Franc and 1% Zinfandel is fleshy and great-hearted, with a sinewy, muscular quality providing structure and a strong backbone. Well-developed, chalky tannins are coated by a tidal wave of ripe plum, blackberry, and candied violets. **95** —*M.M.*

Hamel 2023 Estate Grenache, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County ($80) You can taste the energy of the rocky volcanic soil in which this Grenache (with 8% Mourvèdre and 8% Zinfandel) grows. Its perfume of florals, including hyacinth, reverberates with garrigue and iron. Showing plenty of verve, this is a bright star with sleek notes of cranberry and wild strawberry. **95** —*M.M.*

Hamel 2021 Isthmus, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County ($90) This soulful Bordeaux-style blend is sensational with sweet soil, sage, iron, and red beet. Top notes of violets, black cherry, and purple plum wash over a foundation of graphite-dusted roses and dried tea leaves, making way for plush tannins within an exquisite mouthfeel. **96** —*M.M.*

Hamel 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon, Nuns Canyon Vineyard, Moon Mountain District, Sonoma County ($160) A constant cooling breeze wafts over this dry-farmed vineyard at elevations of 1,200–1,600 feet. The wine it yields is plush and round with no edge, and along with that textural allure, its concentrated berries and mineral complexity add credence to the prestige its site enjoys; violets, salty dark chocolate, and blueberries flow like lava. With 22% Cabernet Franc, it aged 12 months in (32% new) French oak, followed by six months in concrete tanks. **98** —*M.M.*