

Often overlooked, Sonoma's Cabernets offer a good-value alternative to the big guns from Napa, says **STEPHEN BROOK**



SONOMA'S BEST CABERNETS



When the Napa Wine Train made its maiden chug down the valley in 1990, packed with wine writers, a bunch of horse-riding Sonoma growers, clad in chaps and Stetsons, held up the train, then stormed through the carriages pouring Sonoma wines for the perplexed passengers.

It's fair to say that Sonoma growers' noses are sometimes put out of joint by the fact that their rivals in Napa, just on the other side of the Mayacamas Mountains, get most of the attention – and by far the highest prices. Sonoma is a large county, after all, so its sub-regions are varied enough to grow just about any grape variety. In recent years the cooler, coastal zones have attracted justified attention for Burgundian varieties, so it's easy to forget that the warmer, more easterly sectors of Sonoma – the Dry Creek, Sonoma, and Alexander Valleys – are perfect Cabernet Sauvignon territory.

Gina Gallo, whose family owns 1,110ha (hectares) in various parts of the county, points to the diversity of their

Cabernet vineyards. 'Barrelli Creek in Alexander Valley gives rich, savoury wines that are quite different from the more acid-driven, ageworthy Cabernets from Monte Rosso in the Mayacamas Mountains. And the rich wines from Dry Creek differ from both. There are so many

'It puts Sonoma growers' noses out of joint that their Napa rivals get most of the attention'

variations in soil and elevation within Sonoma, and even within each region.'

Sonoma certainly produces many excellent Cabernets, but Napa does seem to have a near-perfect terroir and climate for the variety. Napa has more textural variety to offer, from lush, opulent valley-floor fruit to the more ruggedly

tannic 'mountain' wines from Howell and Spring Mountains. Andy Beckstoffer, who farms thousands of hectares in the North Coast, knows these areas well, and notes that the pricing of Napa wines is not necessarily related to quality. 'The word Napa on the label offers consumers security, based on the knowledge that the valley has produced outstanding wines for many decades. Marketing the region requires a certain price level that's higher than that of other California regions. Of course, producers need to demonstrate in the bottle that the premium for the Napa label is justified.'

Sonoma's best probably never quite matches, let alone surpasses, Napa's imperious best, but that is no reason to dismiss its Cabs. Sonoma has its 'mountain' too, with its own Sonoma Mountain appellation, but its elevation, at up to 500m, is modest compared to Napa's vineyards at more than 600m. Nonetheless, it is home to the celebrated Monte Rosso vineyard, on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains, and some of the Alexander Valley ranches exceed 600m in

Far left: Chateau St Jean is a fine source of elegant Cabernet. Left: Cabernet grapes at Laurel Glen in Sonoma Mountain, also home to Benziger's Tribute (below). Right: Sonoma County is home to 250 wineries

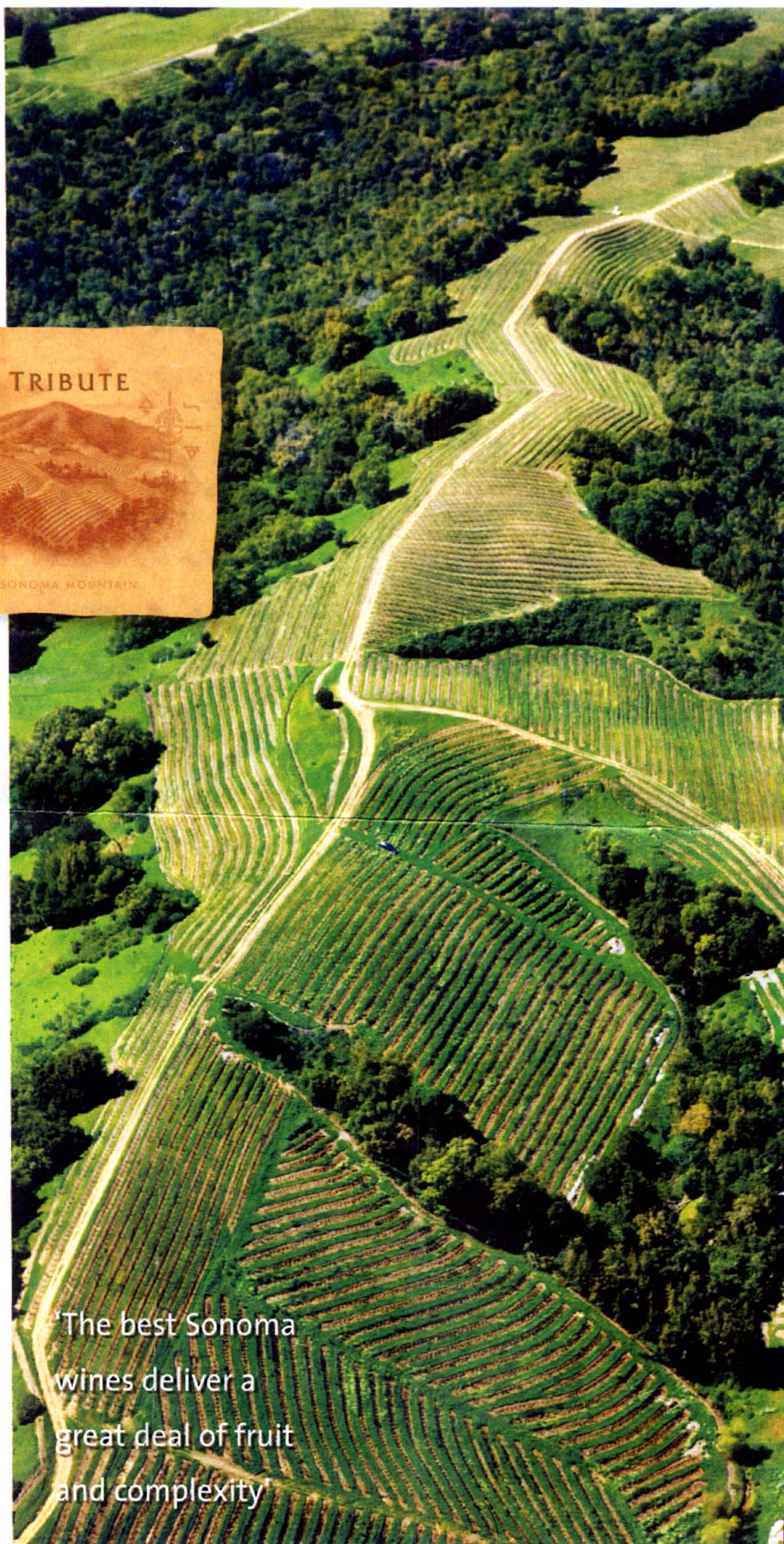
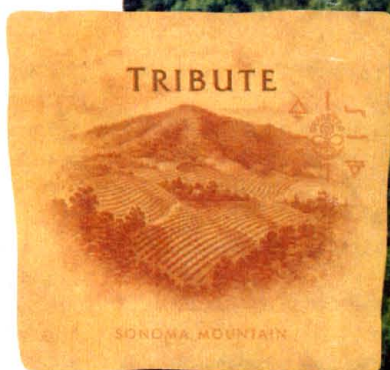
elevation. Nonetheless, Sonoma has a less-developed sense of terroir than Napa, and other than climatic variations, few could differentiate the soil and drainage characteristics of the different sub-regions.

The Sonoma Valley hugs the Mayacamas Mountains, and some of California's earliest Cabernet was planted here in the 19th century. The mid-section is the warmest, and Cabernet has always done well here, although some of the hillside grapes can accumulate a good deal of tannin. The wines usually show more heft than finesse, but are none the worse for that. Much the same is true of Dry Creek Valley, which is home to some of California's finest Zinfandel. Cabernets from here have a remarkable density and chewiness combined with a sweetness of ripe fruit.

Rich talent

Because so many variables come into play – elevation, exposure, age of vines, clonal differences – it is difficult to argue too strenuously for sub-regional differences. The hand of the winemaker plays an equally large part, and Sonoma is fortunate in having local winemakers of great experience and skill. Richard Arrowood, who ruled over Chateau St Jean in the 1970s and 1980s, and has had his own eponymous Sonoma Valley winery for many years, produces truly sumptuous Cabernets that show complexity and vigour. By contrast, Margo van Staaveren at his former home St Jean a few miles up the road, makes Cabernet with a lighter touch, especially the elegant Cinq Cépages, a Bordeaux blend. Equally stylish is the magnificent Tribute, a Bordeaux blend from the biodynamic Benziger estate. Nearby, on Sonoma Mountain, Laurel Glen produces small quantities of renowned, long-lived, and expensive, Cab.

Sonoma Valley is home to some very large growers that have turned their hand to winemaking in recent decades, and while their basic Cabernets can lack individuality, their top wines are fruit-forward yet intense and complex. Names to look out for include Kenwood's Jack London Ranch, Kunde's Reserve Cabernet, St Francis's Wild Oak Cabernet (a section of its best barrels), and BR Cohn's Olive Hill.



The best Sonoma wines deliver a great deal of fruit and complexity