

Newton's Revival

I never had the opportunity to meet Peter Newton, but I certainly know of his influence in Napa. And having met the new team in place at Newton Vineyard, I'm encouraged his legacy will continue.

Newton was an England-born, Oxford-trained lawyer, journalist and paper magnate when he founded Sterling Vineyards in 1964 and became the first to plant Merlot in Napa. There were only 24 Napa wineries back then, but the pioneering Newton had the vision to build the brilliant white stucco winery in the hills near Calistoga, modeled after Greek architecture and reached by a gondola-like tram.

In 1977, Newton sold Sterling to Coca-Cola (the winery is now part of Treasury Wine Estates) and started another venture with his then-wife, Su Hua: the boutique Newton Vineyard near St. Helena, hidden in the base of Spring Mountain.

As I drove to Newton to take part in a 40th anniversary celebration, I was thinking about the contrast to Sterling—instead of driving toward a winery I could see from the highway, I was certain I was lost several times on my way despite following well-marked signs. The red telephone booth—a nod to Newton's English background—signaled that I had arrived.

The property is stunning. The entire estate is 560 acres, but only one-fifth is planted to vineyards, leaving much of the prop-

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from 500 to 1,600 feet. It's primarily Cabernet, in a patchwork of different soil types and exposures. (There are also estate vineyards in Mt. Veeder, Yountville and Carneros.)

When I was introduced to the Newton Unfiltered Chardonnay in the 1990s, it had become an icon. Distinctively rich and bold, barrel-aged and fermented with native yeasts, the wine was a benchmark for the potential of Chardonnay in California.

But it's been a while since Newton was at the top of its game. French luxury goods company LVMH acquired a majority stake



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in 2001, adding to a wine portfolio that includes everything from Dom Pérignon to Cloudy Bay. (Peter Newton died in 2008 at 81, but his family still owns 10 percent of the brand.)

Newton's influence, and his wines, slipped to the middle of the pack. Other brands became more fashionable, while unfiltered Chardonnays became more commonplace. A spin-off line of more affordable wines was created, and as is often the case, the value-centric bottlings clouded the focus of this once estate-only brand.

In 2017, Jean-Baptiste Rivail, a former business developer for Cognac brand Hennessy, was hired as estate director. Rivail is inspired by the property, the history and the challenge of how to bring Newton into the future. "This place is very true to itself," Rivail says describing the diversity of the vineyard, which he has been carefully studying. His face lights up when discussing the brand's legacy.

This includes a winemaking history that reads like a who's who. John Kongsgaard is credited with developing the famed Chardonnay program. Michel Rolland, Ric Forman, Aaron Pott, Andy Erickson and Jean Hoefliger, Blair Walter of New Zealand's Felton Road, Australia's Rob Mann and Bordeaux specialist Stephen Carrier all had stints in the cellar.

Today, winemaking is in the hands of Italian Alberto Bianchi, who has worked at wineries all over the world, with the help of

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called Skyside. There's a focus on converting the vineyards to organic certification. Recent wines show crispness and precision.

It's Rivail's passion at the heart of the changes. We tasted the inaugural 1979 Unfiltered Cabernet Sauvignon, and it was one of the most delightful Napa Cabs at 40 I've ever tried—fresh and distinctive. "The '79 is an example of what we want to become," explains Rivail. "Opening it up helps us understand our DNA." Now it's Rivail's turn to become part of Newton's DNA.

Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec has been with Wine Spectator since 1997.