

Winegrowing on the Edge

Carved from the Mendocino County wilderness, Alder Springs Vineyard is producing some of California's most distinctive wines

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Issue: July 31, 2010

Civilization is downhill from Alder Springs Vineyard. Way downhill. The closest town of any real size is 50 miles away and anyone driving up the mountain to get there needs plenty of fortitude. In this remote part of Northern California, the cash crops are timber, cattle and marijuana. How a vineyard came to be planted in such an untested fringe of wine country is an improbable tale of one man's obsession.

"There is no way it should really be a vineyard. From a viticultural standpoint, it's out on a limb," says winemaker James Hall, of Patz & Hall. "It's only because Stu has the force of personality and the will and the money to make it happen."

The "Stu" in question is Stuart Bewley, 56, and while it may sound as if he's the Don Quixote of this story, Bewley is clearly onto something. In the past 10 years, 21 releases made from Alder Springs grapes have rated outstanding (90 points and higher on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale).

- ***Patz & Hall Alder Springs Chardonnay***
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All of these factors add up to distinctive wines. "The wines have a personality," Hall says. "The level of concentration is really the hallmark. The reds are big and intense and there's a level of density in the Chardonnays that most Chardonnays don't get."

The wines also age well, Hall believes, and to prove his point he offers two wines as examples: the 1999 Patz & Hall Chardonnay and 1999 Pinot Noir. The Chardonnay is elegant, with a supple, oily texture. The fruit is still vibrant, but a decade in bottle has opened up new layers of nutmeg, apricot and loam flavors. The Pinot, supple and delicate, offers aromas of rose petal, cherry and pebbly loam, layers of lingering raspberry and cinnamon flavors, and a touch of mushroom.