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*Celtic Cards :  
They will listen  
to you Pisces* **6**

*Park offers  
campers new  
options* **7**

*Three Palms,  
home to famous  
vineyards* **8**

*6th annual  
Wildflower  
Festival* **12**

*Calistoga  
wineries map  
& guide* **22**



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# Welcome to Mud City

## Arts in April

5

Month-long celebration of art, food & wine in your favorite upvalley town

## Celtic Cards tell your future

6

Pisces: They will listen and they will understand. Trust us on this one.

## Expand camping options in a yurt

7

Bothe-Napa Valley State Park offers overnight stays in comfortable yurts

## Three Palms

8

Legendary vineyards sell cabernet, merlot fruit exclusively to Duckhorn Vineyards

## 6th annual Wildflower Festival

10

Nature preserve invites you to explore its 3,000 acres of springtime beauty

## Settlers tapped valley’s potential

15

Early pioneers were George Yount, John Patchett and Hamilton Walker Crabb

## Seasons in the Vineyard

15

Quick notes in what’s happening in the vineyard right now

## Uncorking fun wine facts

21

How many pounds of grapes in a bottle of wine?

## Calistoga Wineries & Map

22

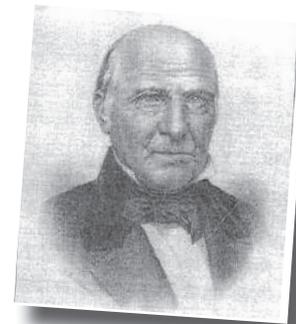
Some of the valley’s best wines are made right here – check it out!



5



8



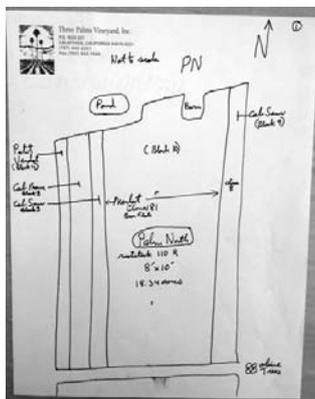
15



22

# Three Palms

## *home to legendary Calistoga vines*



By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

If you're a Calistogan speedling south on the Silverado Trail and late for an appointment in Napa, or even a tourist meandering north along the same stretch searching for a winery address in Yountville, it's hard to miss the Upton brothers' famous vineyard.

Look for the palm trees. There are three of them.

Planted by Sloan Upton and his younger brother, John, in 1967, Three Palms Vineyard is one of Napa Valley's essential wine estates.

The 75-acre property is nestled into a corner of the Trail near Dutch Henry Canyon, a few miles east of Calistoga. Its designation has graced the labels of only two wineries in its 46-year existence.

One of these, St. Helena's equally celebrated Duckhorn Vineyards, debuted as a wine label with their legendary 1978 Three Palms Merlot.

"We put our heart and soul into the '78 vintage," said Alex Ryan, Duckhorn's president and CEO.

"Vineyard-designated varietal Merlot in 1978? Most people would think you're crazy, but we believed in the wine, believed in the vineyard, and believed in the style of the softer Napa Valley red. And '78 was an awesome vintage. So we had a lot of things going for us."

Ryan could also sport the title of "Duckhorn historian," having worked there since he was a high schooler in the early 1980s. Aside from founders Margaret and Dan Duckhorn, he's probably the most qualified person to comment on the winery's successful run of 35 vintages.

Three Palms Vineyard, as Ryan described it during a conversation at the winery, is "intricately related to Duckhorn and Duckhorn's beginnings."



PHOTO BY TONY POER

Planted by Sloan Upton (above) and his younger brother, John, in 1967, Three Palms Vineyard is one of Napa Valley's essential wine estates.

But to really appreciate the history of Duckhorn, you have to understand what the Upton brothers went through to develop Three Palms into a world-class vineyard. And to understand Three Palms, you need to hear about rocks from Sloan Upton, plus maybe a few thoughts on the Stanford-Cal rivalry. The Napa Valley grape grower (and proud Stanford grad) has been at his game for close to 50 years.

Upton, 77, grew up in San Francisco but has lived in the Valley since 1971. He still goes to work every day at Three Palms Vineyard, Inc., headquartered in a 1940s barn on the property. His office is adorned with family photographs and those of other interesting people, alongside

snapshots of some of the cars and motorcycles Upton and his brother have raced over the years. A collection of World War Two memorabilia adds to the "gentleman's cave" aesthetic. Sitting behind the handsome, polished wood desk that his grandmother made for his father, an English surgeon during the war, Upton described the history of Three Palms' grape-growing operation.

"I happen to be president of this little corporation," he said, self-effacingly. "But we're not big on titles. We don't have ego problems like so many others do."

"That's my grandfather on my mother's side," he said, pointing behind him to the formal portrait of his maternal grandfather over



the desk. "I wish I had known him. He was one of the early pioneers in the San Joaquin [Valley]. I think that's where I get my love of being outside with my hands in the dirt."

"I'm always out in the field," he emphasized. "That's what I do best."

The Upton brothers and their parents purchased the rocky, unplanted property from neighboring dairy farmers in 1967. They were aided by an English cousin by marriage, the late Calistoga vintner Peter Newton.

"We bought the vineyard in '67 and started planting that year," he said. "We found this vineyard with enormous help from our first cousin by marriage, who was married to my cousin, Anne. [Peter] was very instrumental in acquiring it."

Upton pored over an aerial photograph of Three Palms on his

*See 3 PALMS on page 10*

### 3 PALMS

Continued from page 9

desk, altitude helping to show that the vineyard is divided into four large blocks. The photo recalls the layout of the Four Corners in the western U.S., with a grove of tall, mature olive trees that Upton planted years ago at the center where the blocks meet (a geography buff would probably protest this comparison, pointing out that “Colorado” is the shape of Idaho). As for the famous palm trees, they lie in what would be “northern Arizona,” in this case in the block appropriately called Palm South.

Commenting on the trees’ location and the layout of the other blocks, Palm North and Selby North and South, as they’re called, Upton described the early and very difficult days he and John spent transforming the

landscape.

“It was pretty rough in those days because of the stones. It still is, but we’ve worked around them. It’s like waves in the ocean: you don’t swim against them, you go with them. We’ve learned that over the years.”

“Selby is the rockier side, particularly on this side.” He indicated a stretch along the vineyard’s border adjacent to Selby Creek that was simply too rough to plant. “In days past, the creek has busted out of its banks and it’s come right through here” to deposit stones across the Selby blocks.

As younger men during travels with their parents to Europe, particularly to vineyards in France and Italy, the Upton brothers took note of how vines were planted in a variety of soils and terrains. The rockier ones inspired them, or at least didn’t scare them away.



*Whether it died from frost or a Cal-Stanford rivalry prank, one of the three original palms was replaced in 1990. They can be seen just outside Calistoga off the Silverado Trail.*

“We knew what was going on. Rocks didn’t seem to be too much of a problem in Europe. The vineyards were very high in quality, and we thought perhaps we might be able to do that.”

“We saw, John and I, what people were doing with rocks, and that made us interested. With Peter’s help, great help, we found this place.”

“Those things play into why the site is special,” said P.J. Alviso, who joined the conversation with Alex Ryan the CEO. Alviso is the director of estate viticulture at Duckhorn, a Cal Poly viticulture graduate who grew up in a grape-farming family in the rugged terrain of the Sierra Foothills. Only 28, he’s already worked eight harvests at Duckhorn and is extremely knowledgeable on the subjects of soil, vines, and rocks. He seems to have a special affinity for the Uptons’ property.

“There is some soil,” he explained, echoing Upton, “but it’s really, really light, with a lot of rock content through the entire vineyard.”

“That topsoil doesn’t hold much water. There’s no reason for roots to be there, really. They’ll go hang out where the water is.”

Alviso’s comments on Three Palms’ terrain go to the heart of what make the wines so unique and collectible. The vines have to dig deep to find sources of water in the rocky ground and are thus stressed. Above ground, the leaf canopy must be managed very carefully so that the stressed vines get enough energy via sunlight, but not too much. This would cause them to overproduce fruit and dilute what should

be extraordinarily concentrated flavors come harvest, a positive result of vine stress. Balancing the vines’ necessities above and below ground is one of the greatest challenges for both Upton and Alviso.

Upton concurred. “There’s no holding the water; it goes straight down. And we know that because I’ve dug down with a backhoe 18 feet, and I’ve seen the roots. So they go and explore.”

He’s a big fan of Alviso’s, noting that, among the many viticulturists he’s worked with at Duckhorn, “P.J. is by far the best, no question about it. He’s completely trustworthy, and he’s a very nice young man.”

“We work very closely. I used to work with his grandfather the first time I was kicked out of Stanford.”

The first time? “The first time,” he bragged. “There’ve been other times.”

If Alex Ryan is a great resource for information about the Duckhorn story and its overall place in California’s contemporary wine history, Kellie Duckhorn, the daughter and eldest child of Margaret and Dan Duckhorn, is probably the best person to ask how the Stanford-Cal rivalry played out one time at Three Palms in the early 80s.

“It was the giant Cal banner,” she recalled over the phone. “I believe it might even be the same banner that flies over Berkeley Memorial stadium. It was quite a coup to have even borrowed it in the first place.”

“I remember how we got that thing up. It was hilarious. I’m pretty sure it was my dad’s idea. We had keys to the property. We

put that banner up at night, and so they didn’t even know until the next day.”

“We took our flatbed truck that we used to haul fruit with a forklift loaded on the back of it, because we wanted the banner to be strung way up. It was [former Duckhorn winemaker] Tom Rinaldi. I know my dad was there, and Alex [Ryan], myself, and maybe our assistant winemaker at the time. You know the white picking bins? Well, in the old days they were wood. So I stood inside of one with the banner, and then Alex lifted it on the forklift up to its highest level. So I was about 70 feet above the ground by the time I was over the flatbed.”

The fearless, Berkeley-bound high schooler then strung the banner between two of the Stanford alumni-owned palms for all to see the following morning.

“And I’m sure Sloan mentioned this: we nailed the rope into the tree. And he says we killed the tree.”

Upton had a different take on what killed one of his iconic *Washingtonia robusta* palm trees: it was a combination of severe frost in 1990 and a pesky bird. Either way, the banner incident, which according to Kellie was unofficially sanctioned by the now-retired UC Berkeley chancellor who loaned it to them, took place during the height of the cold war between the two universities, around the same time that the Cal football team beat Stanford (and their band) in the 1982 Big Game with “The Play.”

A battle in this war was soon under way in St. Helena. John and Sloan showed up at Duckhorn the next day with a water cannon on their truck.

“They rolled into the winery and we got blasted,” Kellie laughed. “People were calling. They’d seen the banner and were dying. Everybody knew that Sloan was a big Stanford guy, so he’d already been receiving some phone calls razzing him. So, anyway, that’s the banner story.”

Pranks aside, the Uptons were very sad to see one of their historic palms die off in 1990. In addition to being the name of the vineyard, the three palm trees were the last indication that the property had been the site where their fellow San Franciscan Lillie Coit’s home stood over a century

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See 3 PALMS page 13

**3 Palms**

*Continued from page 10*

ago. They were determined to replace the one that came down, but the brothers did so with characteristic good humor.

“We took it down in stages, and I called and called and finally found another palm tree of the same species over in Healdsburg. It was 40 feet. They had longer

ones, but 40 feet is max for driving on the highway. We got it over here, backed it down, and had what we called the ‘Grand Erection’ and got that sucker up in the air! We were in constant contact with a ‘professor of palm trees,’ if you will, down at UCLA or USC, one of those. We gave it phosphorous and everything we could do to make it fine. After a year, down went the [wire] guys. It’s been here ever since.”

In February of this year, Duckhorn Vineyards promoted its associate winemaker, Renée Ary, to the position of head winemaker. The 38 year-old New Jersey native is the fourth person to hold the title and had worked closely with two of her predecessors, Bill Nancarrow and Mark Beringer. Initially brought on to manage quality control programs for Duckhorn’s various wine brands, Ary has a very sharp

palate and has ascended with enthusiasm to the position. She’s especially attuned to the unique flavor characteristics of the Three Palms Merlot.

“They’re a classic example of Merlot,” she said while sniffing and tasting her way through a trio of vintages from the last nine years, which she and P.J. Alviso opened for this article (see sidebar). “They’re red fruit-driven, they’re supple, and they have a

lushness about them, a nice plum-spice character. That’s something that we always look for in the Three Palms Vineyard. It’s that kind of underlying, earthy, wet rock character that’s really typical of the soil profile out there.”

“There are definitely similarities to the early vintages. That underlying Three Palms

*See 3 PALMS on page 20*

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### 3 PALMS

Continued from page 10

characteristic is there in all the wines from '78 through today. We actually popped the '78 at our 35th anniversary celebration, and it was spectacular."

The vertical tasting included a first-ever bottling of Three Palms Cabernet Sauvignon. Ary generously provided this reporter with a bottle of 2011 Merlot for later consideration with a pork chop. The '11 vintage, released on April first of this year, is unique in Duckhorn history: going back to the '78 vintage, the Uptons had always divided the contract between Duckhorn and Sterling Vineyards, the Calistoga winery founded by Upton's cousin, Peter Newton. In 2011, Duckhorn assumed complete control of the contract.

For Alex Ryan, who has seen it all at Duckhorn, the new fruit contract is simply another step in the co-evolution of the winery and Three Palms. "We've been great buyers from the Upton brothers really since the 1978 vintage and have purchased fruit for the last 37 years from them."

Another witness to the evolution of Three Palms is the longtime San Jose wine merchant, Bert George. George, who also farms a vineyard in Yountville, is a loyal supporter of many Napa Valley wineries, but Duckhorn and Three Palms are especially important to him and his staff.

"Unless it has some really good character, [Merlot] can be an uninteresting wine," he said over the phone. "Three Palms has always had that extra everything, meaning layers of flavor, and that full mouth-feel."

"I don't want to use the term 'old standard,' but this is the old higher and highest standard in Merlot. In the hierarchy of Merlot, this would be the name at the top, absolutely the top."

In the world of collectors, Three Palms Vineyard has, for most of its existence, produced wine comparable to some of the great Chateaux of Bordeaux, and to the wines of Pomerol and St. Emilion in particular, where Merlot is a dominant grape variety. Hiram Simon, an Englishman in Berkeley who is a respected French wine importer, has been drinking and collecting Bordeaux wines for many years. But starting in 2000, he also began to

acquire Three Palms at wine auctions, where it occasionally shows up in the catalogues. Leaning towards well-stored wines with extended bottle and cellar age, he's become a collector of several great Three Palms vintages from the 1980s, including the extraordinary '86, which he opened at home and tasted recently.

"Often in Bordeaux," Simon said, asked to compare Three Palms to the French region, "it's hard to tell Cabernet and Merlot apart. It's as if the terroir transcends the grape variety. Merlot tends to like heavier soils. Cabernet likes well-drained soils, which is why the rule of thumb is that Cabernet is grown on the gravel soils of the Left Bank and Merlot is grown on the clay and limestone soils of the Right Bank."

Sipping the aromatic, earthy '86 Three Palms, he observed that "it's not at all difficult to confuse Right Bank and Left Bank Bordeaux. But I don't think you'd confuse this wine for a Cabernet in a month of Sundays. It has an utterly distinctive varietal profile in Napa."

Alex Ryan and his crew at Duckhorn are upbeat about the new release of Three Palms, and they're a high-energy group of people in general. However, like Sloan Upton, they're mired in a terrible drought, and they have statewide company. Coming off of two large, healthy harvests, 2012 and '13, prospects for the immediate future are good in terms of the winery's inventory, but Alviso and Upton are gearing up for increased demands on their expertise, especially for managing water and heat, two distinct challenges in the sunny, rocky neighborhood of Three Palms.

"You've got to be an optimist here in this game," Upton reflected. "I think the goodness that will come out of this wretched weather situation is that if we manage the vines properly so we don't get a large crop, and we really get a small crop, I think the quality is going to be absolutely super. I mean, it usually is."

Whatever the harvest of 2014 brings, after almost half a century of them, his and his brother's achievements at Three Palms are storied. "We've had a marvelous life here in the vineyard."



## Tony Poer's Tasting Notes

# Duckhorn Vineyards

### 2011 Three Palms Merlot, Napa Valley

Deep red to black; herbs, cedar, stones, cinnamon, spicy, hint of aniseed. Lightness on palate, some forward oak, very bright acid,

rich but very high-toned, lush, juicy red cherry, raspberry, some wild berry fruit, firm minerality, needs lots of air. Structured and balanced. Excellent 2011 for the cellar.

### 2011 Three Palms Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

Red-black, very extracted; aromatic, a bit brooding, very complex cherry-berry notes, tobacco, cigar box, mineral, Bordeaux-like, classic cassis aromas, touch of gaminess and leather; angular tannins, somewhat chunky, good mid-palate cassis, black berry, plum, touch of raspberry juiciness though long finish, very balanced. Tannins are big and firm. Buy and forget, needs a decade!

### 2009 Three Palms Merlot, Napa Valley

Deep red to black; stony-mineral nose, tobacco, earth, spiced plums, black cherry. Rich and very focused fruit, dried cherry, black cherry, blackberry, still angular/chewy, very bright acidity. Balanced overall, very cellar-worthy, needs time, minimum 10-year cellar wine.

### 2007 Three Palms Merlot, Napa Valley

Deep red to black; spicy-earthy nose, black fruits, Bordeaux-like mineral notes; forward oak, very big texture, chewy tannins, rich and zingy fruit, plums, black cherry, a touch of jam with aeration, savory-meaty, balanced and bright acidity through finish. Super-complex and impressive, cellar-worthy, massive Merlot.

### 2005 Three Palms Merlot, Napa Valley

Deep red to black; lush fruit, very aromatic, summer berries, red cherry, plummy, earthy notes; juicy cassis and black cherry fruit, very rich, supple, integrated tannins, a little blackberry, sweet fruit notes through long finish, perfectly balanced and still youthful. In a league with the '86. Amazing Merlot. Will go another decade.

### 1986 Three Palms Merlot, Napa Valley

Pale red to ruby; rich and complex nose, floral-mineral, dried red fruit, leather, savory, touch of meatiness, very focused; Pomerol-like, very rich, still weighty and fat, very lively, cassis, dried cherry, round and integrated tannins, amazing fruit-earth complexity, pronounced minerals through long-long finish. Developed but still has a lot of life. A++ Napa Valley red wine.

*"We made a vineyard-designated, varietal Merlot in 1978, released in 1980, for \$12.50 a bottle, when most Merlots went for seven bucks. So this was already kind of setting the new pace. The wine was wildly successful due to a number of things: the '78 vintage was remarkable; the wine industry's momentum since the Judgment of Paris and new investment and new excitement in Napa Valley were roaring; and people just wanted to drink something different. They wanted to get away from the old boring stuff. So a lot of roads were perfectly aligned here for success."*

—Alex Ryan, president, Duckhorn Vineyards



