

# Wine Spectator

Home > Blogs > Exploring Wine with Tim Fish

## exploring wine with tim fish

### Between a Rockpile and a Zin Place

Sonoma's young AVA is a distinctive place that makes distinctive wines

Posted: Jun 13, 2012 10:00am ET

Like

0

Tweet

7

How can you not like a wine region called Rockpile? The name alone brings up all sorts of images, of prehistoric-style rugged countrysides or chain gangs busting stones in the godforsaken sun. The reality of the place is not all that different from that.

Rockpile is a rustic landscape and a distinctive place that makes equally distinctive red wines, particularly Zinfandel and Syrah. Some of the wineries that make wine from the region's fruit include Carol Shelton, JC Cellars, Seghesio, St. Francis and Valdez Family.

My favorite Rockpile wines have a unique combination of intense structure, fresh acidity and jammy ripeness, something that's not easy to find in California. Just consider the Robert Biale Zinfandel Rockpile Rocky Ridge Vineyards 2009 (90 points, \$50), which is ripe but tightly wound, with wild berry and pepper aromas that lead to layered flavors of plum, licorice and spicy oak.

Even if you believe the idea of "*terroir*" is overused and abused in California, it's hard to argue that Rockpile has it in spades. Carved out of the mountainous northwest corner of Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA), Rockpile is one of the smallest and most recent AVAs in the country, approved in 2002.

It includes only 15,000 acres in all and just less than 200 of those are planted to vineyards. Vineyards begin at an elevation of 800 feet and go up to nearly 2,100 feet, and even though the Pacific is only a dozen miles away, the vines almost never see fog and receive full sunlight throughout the summer growing season. The ocean does provide a near-constant flow of wind and, as a result, the temperatures run 10 to 15 degrees cooler than in the heart of Dry Creek. The soils are extremely shallow and are a mix of loam, clay and—unsurprisingly—rocks. Water is scarce.

The Pomo tribe called the region "Kabe-chana," which translates roughly as "place with many rocks." In the mid-1800s, colorful character and local sheriff Tennessee Carter Bishop founded Rockpile Ranch and reportedly used prisoners from the county jail to clear a passable road. Grapes have been planted there since the late 1800s—one of the earlier pioneers was a man named S.P. Hallengren—but the region was used mostly for sheep grazing and hunting wild boar until the first modern vineyards were planted in the early 1990s.

Today, Hallengren's great-great-grandson Clay Mauritson makes wine in Dry Creek Valley from grapes his family farms. The Mauritson Zinfandel Rockpile Rockpile Ridge Vineyard 2010 (91, \$37) is just a baby, intense and a bit rough around the edges, it has spicy raspberry aromas and structured flavors of baked cherry, toasty anise and cinnamon. Stylistically, it's



#### Tim Fish

About Me

[My Main Blog Page](#)

[Archive](#)

#### Most Recent Posts:

Jun 6, 2012

[Buddy, Can You Spare Some Pink?](#)

May 30, 2012

[Buy These Value Zins While You Can](#)

May 23, 2012

[An Insider's Guide to Sonoma](#)

#### See Also:

[Featured Blogs](#)

[Complete Blog Index](#)

classic Rockpile.

Since Rockpile is such a small region, the wines can be hard to find, but they are always interesting and worth seeking out. Do you have a favorite Rockpile wine or vineyard?

### Member comments 1 comment(s)

---

**Brian Burkhard** — Cleveland, OH — June 13, 2012 11:38am ET

Rockpile rules!...great call Tim. I've been a fan of Seghesio Rockpile for a while (much to my chagrin, I'm down to my last bottle of the '07...but the '09 is fantastic too!). Also love the Haley Syrah from JC...a classic "big" and great wine from Jeff!

### Would you like to comment?

---

Want to join or start a discussion? Become a WineSpectator.com member and you can!

To protect the quality of our conversations, only members may submit comments. To learn more about member benefits, take our site tour.