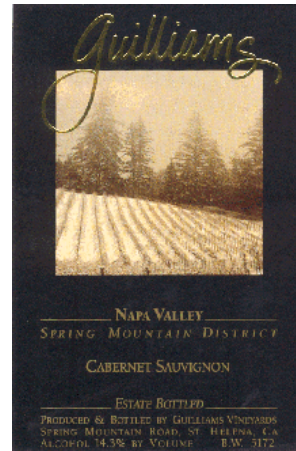




## Notes from visit to Guilliams Winery – Spring Mountain,

CA. April 18<sup>th</sup> 2005



Damien Casten, Candid Wines

From the vineyard's entrance through the tasting of the wines, there is a different feel at Guilliams than other Spring Mountain estates. Spring Mountain is home to the type of luxury homes in which day time television series are filmed, literally. Perched above Napa valley and carved into a gorgeous virgin forest, the land itself feels luxurious. Add the multimillion dollar homes and wineries into the equation and one understands why so many folks on Spring Mountain have made their money in other industries before becoming winemakers. By comparison, the Guilliams look like the farmers they are. The long driveway winds past older equipment and a tool shed that exists for the tools, not the visitors. The house has a commanding view of the vineyards and valley below, but it too looks like a place that was built for its inhabitant's pleasure and not to impress visitors seeking opulence. Tasting the wines, it is easier to believe Shawn's claim that they make wines that reflect the land and climate in which they were grown. Critic's scores, if there are any, are not presented or discussed. If you do not enjoy the taste of the wine, you should not buy it. The wines all share a silky sort of tannin and a

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restrained, elegant fruit. They are not meant to overwhelm you with their size and power, but to seduce with layers and flavors.

The Guilliams purchased the property in 1978. The land is near the top of Spring Mountain road and faces east / southeast towards the northern end of Napa Valley. It was largely forested when they bought the land. In 1979 they cut 7 ½ acres and planted a mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Riesling. The Riesling has since been removed, but lives on in the form of some particularly vigorous vine shoots that have been accidentally grafted onto the red varieties. The odd bunch of Riesling that results amuses Shawn and irks John.

The Guilliams use only their own fruit and will expand only if they can find additional land to purchase on Spring Mountain. Shawn dismisses the idea of expansion through



purchased grapes as being contrary to their fundamental beliefs about what wine should be. Shawn sounded like they have reached a point where they are ready to expand in the next few years, land permitting.

John's place is in the vineyard and he is endlessly curious about the vines, the vineyard and the balance that needs to be struck between his efforts and the local environment.

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Had Shawn not shooed him away an hour into our conversation, he might have continued to answer my questions all day at the expense of his other tasks.

In clearing the forest in 1978, he found a number of healthy vines that dated back to the period before prohibition when Spring Mountain was initially planted. The Contrati Family owned a significant amount of land on the mountain at the turn of the last century, including what is today Keenan and the land Guilliams now occupies. John believes the grape vines he found in the forest in 1979 date back to Contrati plantings. John transplanted some vines from the forest to a trellis on the side of the house. While a few



of them have survived, two have contracted Pierce's disease and are dying. John's comment: "It's amazing that these vines survived for so long in the forest, in nature, but now they are dying. What did the forest provide that we have denied them?"

"We farm sustainably and constantly ask ourselves 'have we done the environment any favors by our actions?'" The grapes

are grown in as close to an organic fashion as John can manage. Varied grasses and clovers grow between the rows to control weeds and return nitrogen to the soil. The vines are irrigated as minimally and directly as possible. That means that areas of the vineyard that need water get it while others are left dry. John acknowledges using round-

up on weeds that grow around the base of the vines. It is the best solution he has found. Hoeing these weeds leads to more erosion than it is worth. In the course of our conversation John comes back a number of times to the question “is there ever a better way to do something that we do in the vineyards”.

The pruning of the vines serves as an example of John’s oversight of all aspects of the vineyard. John leaves the last two shoots on each vine in the spring as these are where the plant will focus most of its energy. During an early spring visit, a look at vines in front of the house showed that one out of four was pruned improperly and John seemed resigned to the fact that he would have to head back out into the vineyard on his own in the coming days.



Mildew is more of a problem on Spring Mountain than elsewhere in Napa. The higher elevation leads to a microclimate in which day time temperatures are cooler and the nights warmer than the valley floor, due to inversion. Mildew thrives at the 65 to 90 degrees that Spring Mountain maintains. The advantage of the microclimate is a longer growing season than neighbors on the valley floor. In April, the vines on the mountain appeared to be two to three weeks behind the valley floor in terms of new growth. Harvesting can come as much as four to five weeks later than the valley, but this is not consistently true and seems to depend on local temperature variations.

Sunlight on Spring Mountain is an issue that the Guilliams have studied carefully.

Shawn feels that their canopy management has allowed them to produce more consistent wines than ever before, and particularly in the 2004 vintage that was generally deemed to be “difficult”. The Guilliams do not strip the vines of their leaves as clusters form.

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Because of the elevation, this would lead only to a cooking of the fruit. “Filtered sunlight” is one goal of their canopy management. They also look to open the vines to airflow in order to reduce pockets of humidity, which can lead to rot. In May and June 2005, lots of rain led to excessive leaf growth and the Guilliams made multiple trips through the vineyard to remove leaves and shoots. Early in the growing season, exposure to the sun is key to the development of buds. John has found that buds receiving direct sun will produce two and even three clusters of grapes whereas shaded buds will produce only one.

The sunlight on Spring Mountain is more intense than on the valley floor due to the elevation. If you have ever burned on a walk in the mountains on a cool day, you have felt this effect firsthand. John cites this intensity and wonders what the direct effect on



grapes is. “I know of no material in published science explaining a difference between grapes grown at varied elevations. When you see the thicker skins and smaller berries that grow on the mountain, you think and wonder”. In an informal experiment, grapes from the valley floor had 25% less skin by weight than those grown on Spring Mountain. What exactly the higher ratio of skin to juice means is speculation from a scientific point of view. Tasting valley wines next to Spring Mountain wines, there is a marked

difference in the nature of the fruit. Spring Mountain wines are often characterized by a restrained, elegant fruit and elegant but firm tannins. These are not “fruit bombs”.

Winemaking happens in the cellar / basement of the Guilliams’ home. Grapes are crushed in one ton batches. John finds that this quantity of grapes will naturally reach and maintain the ideal temperature for fermentation without need for heating or cooling tanks. They have also found that it is an ideal method as working with smaller batches allows them to isolate different patches of the vineyard and better taste what is being harvested. Each parcel is tasted for “characteristics and qualities” and noted from year to year. The main thrust of the Guilliams’ production is the Cabernet Sauvignon. They

make an estate cab and a reserve bottling when justified. The Cabernet is always blended as they prefer the complexity a blend brings. Generally, Cabernet Franc and Merlot make up no more than a combined 20% of the final wine. Separate



Merlot and Cab Franc bottlings are usually sold from the property and blended with 10 to 20% of the other varieties as well.

Wines are aged in barrels 24 months. Barrels are 40% new French oak, 40% 2 year old and 20% four year old. John was a cooper in the valley before he began to make wine.

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He is particular about the type of wood he uses and the impact it has on his wine. He orders barrels with an extra long toast that is “complete and goes deep into the wood”. Toasting caramelizes the sugars in the wood and removes a pine tar like astringency that can seep into the wine. The extra toast is particularly important as the barrels age. John often shaves his barrels after a wine, but never re-toasts used barrels as it can lead to a “peanut butter like character in the wine”. Says John, “its not a bad flavor on its own, but its not a flavor that comes from our vineyard, so we do not want it”.

After 24 months in barrel, the Guilliams’ wines are then held in bottle until they are “ready to drink” according to Shawn. The 2001’s were being released in 2005. The extra year in the cellar mellows the wine and produces a product that meets John and Shawn’s standards. This means an extra year of inventory, but they are ok with that, preferring to sell wines they believe are ready than rushing to market. This can be an issue when a year like 2000 is released at the same time as the 2001’s of other Napa producers. The market was waiting for the 01’s making the 2000 a tougher sell.

The 2001 Merlot has nearly 10% Cabernet Sauvignon in the mix, but the amount of Merlot in the Cabernet Sauvignon has decreased over time. The Cabernet Franc is blended as well, but stood out in a tasting thanks to its smooth tannins and ripe flavors. It tastes like a halfway house between the austerity of some Loire Valley examples and the super ripe flavors of most other Cab Francs I’ve had from Napa.