

FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

## This vineyard was an insider's secret. Can these winemakers finally make it famous?

By **Esther Mobley**

Feb 20, 2024



Baron Ziegler, left, who also owns Marine Layer Wines and Valkyrie Selections, with Pax Mahle, owner of Pax Wines. They bought the Halcon Vineyard as a fifty-fifty partnership.

Courtesy Leigh-Ann Beverley

The Halcon Vineyard has always been a wine nerd's secret. For years, the Syrahs made from this windy, rocky site in remote Mendocino County were gossiped about in online message boards, where some enthusiasts maintained that Halcon was the finest Syrah vineyard in California.

Yet despite its passionate devotees, Halcon never quite became famous beyond these insider circles. Maybe it was because the wines were priced so low, around \$30 a bottle, far below the coveted French Syrahs that wealthy collectors love. Maybe it was because Halcon is located in such an unknown region, the remote Yorkville Highlands. Maybe it was because the wines would often sell out, thanks to word of mouth, before they ever hit a wine shop shelf.

Now, 22 years after it was planted, the Halcon Vineyard is poised for a second — and much higher-profile — act. In 2021, two powerhouse vintners, [Pax Mahle](#) and [Baron Ziegler](#), bought Halcon from its original owners. They believe that from Halcon they can make one of California’s greatest-ever Syrah wines — one of California’s greatest-ever wines, period. This time, the word is likely to spread much further.

Mahle and Ziegler recently released their inaugural effort, the 2021 Halcon Estate Syrah, and it shows the promise of their endeavor. It’s a deeply savory, layered wine, exuding the aromas of cracked black pepper and violets that are the [hallmarks of Syrah](#) from France’s Northern Rhone Valley. There’s a fresh, salty whiff that recalls the coastal breeze you might feel when standing on the vineyard’s high slope, and a core flavor of luscious, juicy, ripe plum. In your mouth, the wine feels like silk.



The 2021 Halcon Estate Syrah.  
Courtesy Sarah Davis

“The wine tastes like it’s from somewhere other than California, because there’s nowhere else in California like Halcon,” said Mahle.

Mahle is known for his finesse with Syrah, and he makes masterful versions of the grape variety under his Pax Wines label in Sebastopol. But he emphasized that Halcon is something entirely different from the Pax Syrahs, many of which come from vineyards on the Sonoma Coast. “The Pax wines are easier drinking, lower alcohol — the quintessential California Syrah that is softer, more approachable,” he said.

The Halcon Syrah is “in a totally different league,” Mahle said. “There’s just another dimension.” Rather than coax out a light, ethereal Syrah as he does with the Pax wines, here he is letting the Halcon wine show its muscle — for example, by aging some of it in new oak barrels. (The Pax Syrahs see no new oak.)

Ziegler and Mahle, who have a fifty-fifty partnership in Halcon, each bring something distinct to the business. Mahle makes the wines; Ziegler, who owns Healdsburg’s Marine Layer Wines, the importer Valkyrie Selections and other wine businesses, has a strong distribution network.



The Halcon Vineyard sits at 2,500 feet elevation.  
Courtesy Leigh-Ann Beverley

The longtime friends bought Halcon from Paul and Jackie Gordon, for whom Halcon was a passion project: The Gordons worked tech jobs in Silicon Valley during the week, then slept in a trailer at the vineyard on the weekends. They arrived at the 162-acre site in 2005 and were convinced that it was destined for the grapes of France’s Rhone Valley. That meant mostly Syrah, but they also planted small amounts of other Rhone grapes like Mourvedre, Marsanne and Roussanne, totaling 14 acres. They named it after the Spanish word for hawk, because the birds so often circle the property.

Several physical characteristics distinguish the parcel. At around 2,500 feet elevation, Halcon is very high by California vineyard standards, exposing it to strong winds from the ocean. It’s so high that the Coast Guard keeps a beacon there, and so windy that a gust — around 100 miles per hour, Mahle estimates — once blew off the top of the Gordons’ trailer. That makes for harsh conditions for the grapevines, which naturally produce smaller crop loads and berries with thicker skins.

But the real magic of Halcon, Mahle believes, is the soil, which contains blue shale and mica schist, both rare in California. The vines struggle in these jagged rocks, which can lead to deeper flavors in the fruit and accentuate the thick skins, lending the wine structure and heft.

“This is Syrah grown in incredible, depleted soil with very little water, and it just grows this extremely concentrated fruit,” said Mahle.



Baron Ziegler, left, who also owns Marine Layer Wines and Valkyrie Selections, with Pax Mahle, owner of Pax Wines. They bought the Halcon Vineyard as a fifty-fifty partnership.

Courtesy Leigh-Ann Beverley

While the Gordons made wine under the Halcon Vineyards label, they also sold some of their crop to other wineries like Jolie-Laide and [Myriad Cellars](#). That’s how Mahle first became acquainted with the site, buying Halcon fruit for the Wilde Farm label. The fruit was so in demand that winemakers had to compete. “It was hard to get access to these grapes,” said Ziegler.

When the Gordons decided they were ready to retire and move back to Europe to care for aging parents, they started quietly putting out the word to winemakers, including Mahle. At a late-night party at Ziegler’s house, he mentioned it to his friend. They started fantasizing: *What could we do if we bought Halcon?*

“Frankly, there were much more famous people in the wine industry that were interested,” Mahle said. But some of these suitors, he learned, wanted to radically change the vineyard — replant with only white grapes, for instance. Ziegler and Mahle’s proposition was to continue what the Gordons had been doing: focus on Syrah.

“Paul and Jackie were proud of the fact that they thought they’d chosen the right grape for the site,” said Mahle.



The Halcon Vineyard gets strong winds from the Pacific Ocean.  
Courtesy Leigh-Ann Beverley

The transaction, whose sum no one would disclose, concluded shortly before the 2021 harvest began. That first season went well, but the subsequent years have been challenging. Frost killed off almost the entire crop in 2022, and lingering frost effects led to a severely diminished crop in 2023, too. After Mahle and Ziegler sell through the 750 cases of the 2021 vintage, it will be a while before they have any more wine to sell. (They did hold back a small amount of 2021 wine for longer aging, which they’ll release as a reserve cuvee next year.)

Even with a bottle price of \$80, not inexpensive for California Syrah, those unfortunate weather events have gotten the new venture off to a shaky start financially.

But Ziegler and Mahle say they’re in it for the long run. “It’s going to be known as a legendary site,” said Mahle.

Reach Esther Mobley: [emobley@sfchronicle.com](mailto:emobley@sfchronicle.com)