



ROBERT YOUNG VINEYARDS  
Growing a Balanced Vine

Robert Young Vineyards is a pioneer in the planting of premium varietal grapes in California. In 1963, they were the first to plant cabernet sauvignon in the Alexander Valley. They later became one of the first grape growers in California to introduce canopy management practices, and one of the first grape growers in America to be honored with a vineyard-designated wine.

Today the Robert Young Vineyards are among the most honored winegrowing properties in the world. The vineyards are founded on land blessed by nature with rich soil and a moderate climate. At its heart is the Young family, who has farmed the land for five generations.

Dedicated to growing wine from balanced vines, Robert Young Vineyards cultivates 12 premium varieties on more than 300 acres of benchland and hillside vineyards at the base of the Mayacamas Mountains.

### **Grape Varieties**

In addition to 300 acres planted to wine grapes, the Robert Young Vineyards encompass another 150 acres preserved to open space and pasture land. Valley soils comprise two-thirds of the farm, while hillside vineyards account for the remaining land, located just outside Healdsburg, California.

The three main grape varieties of Robert Young Vineyards are chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon. Nine other varieties thrive on the property, including sauvignon blanc, pinot blanc, viognier, melon, white riesling, cabernet franc, zinfandel, malbec and petit verdot. White grapes predominate on the valley soils, while red grapes prevail on the hillsides.

### **Geologic History**

The geologic history of this area began about 150 million years ago. Over the years, sandstone, shale, oceanic crust and sediment have blended together to form a highly diversified soil. Compressed ash or volcanic tuffs—remnants from the fiery eruptions of Mt. St. Helena—can be found in the vineyard.

Nine soil composites or soil series have been mapped on the ranch, with many overlapping mixtures. Well-drained gravelly loams, underlain by sandstone and shale, produce vigorous vines able to sink roots and explore the root zone. These soils are interspersed with clay loam subsoil, which is more difficult for roots to penetrate, resulting in less vigorous vines.

Soil depths vary throughout the estate. The depths determine the ability of the soil to absorb and maintain water. Shallow, rocky soils hold less water than deeper soils. Drip irrigation is used to promote uniform growth and maintain the vines at levels just above stress.

Primary soil types at Robert Young Vineyards consist of:

- Alluvial. This rare soil type represents 50% of Robert Young benchland soil. In Sonoma County, it is found on 0.1% of county land or 1,136 acres.
- Zamora Silty Clay Loam. This soil constitutes 30% of Robert Young benchland soil. In Sonoma County, it is found on 1.2% of county land or 12,409 acres.
- Clear Lake Clay Soil. Also rare, this soil type represents 20% of Robert Young benchland soil. In Sonoma County, it is found on 0.6% of county land or 6,082 acres.
- Suther-Laughlin Loams. 50% of Robert Young hillside soil is Suther-Laughlin loams. In Sonoma County, this soil is found on 1.7% of county land or approximately 17,000 acres.
- Spreckles Loam. This soil is found on only 12 acres of the estate hillsides and produces our most prized red grapes. It is only found in 1.4% of the land in Sonoma County.
- Other soils found on the Robert Young Estate include Toomes Rocky Loam and Cartina Very Gravelly Loam on the hillsides.

## **Climate**

The climate on the estate generally mirrors other areas in the Alexander Valley, with warm afternoons and cool evenings. Microclimates with subtle variations occur in different blocks throughout the estate. “The area is a bit of an anomaly,” says former Consulting Winemaker Richard Arrowood with regard to the estate’s microclimatic variables. “It grows highly sought-after cabernet sauvignon in one location and absolutely gorgeous chardonnay in another.”

One of the estate’s unique climatic features, according to Jim Young, “is the vineyard’s tendency to pick up more heat than neighboring properties because it’s tucked against the hills and protected from moderating influences.”

## **Growing a Balanced Wine**

Robert Young Vineyards follows the growing philosophy that the best wine is made from a balanced vine—one in which the amount of shoot and leaf growth is balanced against the amount of fruit or crop load.

A variety of trellising and pruning techniques are used to manage the grapevine canopy for reduced vine growth and greater exposure to sunlight. “The theory is that you are converting sunlight into wine—that’s what canopy management is all about,” asserts Jim Young. Exposing fruit to sunlight reduces incidence of disease and increases flavor levels in wine.

In the mid-1980s, Robert Young became one of the first growers in California to introduce the canopy management practice of leaf removal. The Young vineyards had been planted in the standard 12 x 8 feet bilateral California sprawl system popularized in the 1960s. When replanting began due to phylloxera, he seized the opportunity to experiment with new techniques that used vertical trellising and narrow-row spacing.

In 1993, the Youngs began experimenting with the Scott Henry pruning and trellising system. This system opens the canopy and increases the number of shoots per vine by dividing the canopy vertically. The Youngs were happy with this vertically divided canopy, but not totally happy with some aspects of the cane pruning involved, so starting in 2004 they began converting to the Smart Dyson trellising technique. The Smart Dyson system divides the canopy vertically, but uses a cordon instead of multiple canes. They get the same benefit as the Scott Henry system, but with a more uniform shoot length and evenly distributed crop. This system produces more leaf surface area and leaf growth from the ground to the top of the trellis. It also results in more sunlight into the fruit zone, reducing disease and increasing flavor in the grapes. Today, most of the vineyard uses Smart Dyson trellising.

Rigorous thinning is another way Robert Young Vineyards influences grape quality. At a strategic moment in the maturation of the grapes, when the berries possess all of the cells they will produce, crews thin the crop by one-third to one-half. Thinning cuts yields to six to ten pounds per vine which can be as low as one bunch per shoot. This allows the vine to concentrate growth in the remaining grapes, producing more flavorful, complex fruit and wines of exceptionally high quality.

“Wines aren’t made in the winery; they’re made in the vineyard,” notes Arrowood. “There is an enological consistency to grapes coming from specific blocks of Robert Young Vineyards,” he observes. “It derives from the Young’s dedication to consistent and high quality viticultural practices on a per vine basis. “

### **Additional Viticultural Practices**

**Rootstock Diversity.** The Robert Young Vineyards are farmed with seven different rootstocks, and trials with new rootstocks are ongoing. This diversity avoids large-scale crop loss due to disease. Rootstocks are matched to specific soil types and depths to achieve balanced growth and control vine vigor.

**Hillside Vineyards.** The shallow soils, various exposures and ample sunlight are ideal for the hillside cultivation of red grapes. These growing conditions gently stress the grapes, producing smaller, darker berries and more intense flavors.

**Cover Crops.** Two different cover crops are planted on either side of the vines. In the fall, a nitrogen-fixing or green manure crop, such as Austrian peas and barley or bell beans, is planted on one side of the vines. In the winter, prunings are thrown on this side of vines. In the spring, the prunings are tilled along with the cover crop to further feed the soil. On the other side of the vines, annual grasses are planted to prevent erosion during wet winters, and to allow equipment access with less soil compaction.