

# Two wine superstars just bought 162 acres of what some consider California's best Syrah vines

Winemaker Pax Mahle and entrepreneur Baron Ziegler have purchased the celebrated Halcon Vineyard



Esther Mobley

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Winemaker Paul Gordon (right) walks through his hilly, high-elevation Halcon Vineyard in Mendocino County's Yorkville Highlands. Gordon has just sold the property to Pax Mahle and Baron Ziegler. In this photo, he's talking to winemakers Evan Lewandowski (left) and Ryan Glaab.

Esther Mobley / The Chronicle 2018

Some wine insiders consider the Halcon Vineyard, in Mendocino County, to be the finest Syrah vineyard in California. Now, two wine-industry superstars have purchased the 162-acre property and plan to create a new brand from it.

The new owners are winemaker Pax Mahle, the well known owner of Pax Wines, and serial entrepreneur Baron Ziegler, who owns Healdsburg's Marine Layer Wines and the importer Valkyrie Selections among other businesses. They will retain the original name, Halcon — "hawk" in Spanish — for both the vineyard and the label they plan to create.

"The idea is to make the Pierre Gonon of Northern California," said Ziegler. Gonon is a wine producer in France's northern Rhone Valley with a fervent, cult-like following for its Syrahs. "One epic wine. Boom. All Syrah."

Mahle has developed a reputation as one of the most skilled Syrah makers in the state under his Pax Wines label. He has never owned a vineyard before, instead buying fruit from other growers. But this is not Mahle's first time working with these raw materials: He has purchased grapes from the Halcon Vineyard several times over the years, initially in 2014 when he was making wine for the Wilde Farm brand. He and Ziegler have a fifty-fifty partnership in the new venture.

Terms of the deal were not disclosed. Former owners Paul and Jackie Gordon, who bought the property in 2003 and planted it in 2005, said they had been looking for a buyer for a year or so. "We're from the U.K., with aging parents," said Paul Gordon. "We just want to go back and be close. It's a retirement."

The Halcon Vineyard is very much a wine insider's secret. Now that it has two high-profile owners, it is certain to become less of a secret; Mahle's following for his Syrahs and Ziegler's business acumen may help grow the vineyard's renown with a wider audience. Longtime fans of the Halcon wines should find some reassurance in the fact that its new stewards appear interested in maintaining the same style of Syrah that it was known for under the Gordons' ownership, which Mahle describes as "savory, mineral and muscular."



— Halcon's 2018 Las Alturas Syrah. The red wines from this Mendocino County vineyard gained a feverish following among wine insiders.  
Esther Mobley / The Chronicle

Halcon is located in an area that many laypeople have likely never heard of: the Yorkville Highlands AVA, a sparsely developed stretch of southern Mendocino County between Healdsburg and Boonville. Buying 162 acres of open land there was "high risk, high reward," Gordon said, since it wouldn't carry the cachet of a vineyard in Napa, Sonoma or even the nearby Anderson Valley.

The purchase was also a risky proposition because of its physical extremity. Gordon had bought land at 2,500 feet elevation — very high for a California vineyard — with rolling, uneven slopes, fast, whipping winds and cool temperatures. The site even got snow in some years. The soils are made of chunky blue schist, a tough rock that's difficult to work. Yields are scant.

But as aficionados of Syrah know well, this red grape thrives in exactly such extreme conditions. Altitude, slopes, wind and cold can make farming difficult, but often result in wines that emphasize the variety's deeply savory attributes. The schist soils, a rarity in this part of the world, add a pronounced mineral quality to the wines. Halcon Syrahs often show umami-rich flavors like olive, pungent black pepper and bacon.

Winemaker Wells Guthrie, then the owner of Copain Wines, helped the Gordons figure out how to plant the site. The Gordons made their own wine from the vineyard under the Halcon Vineyards label, and also sold fruit to a roster of reputable winemakers, including Guthrie and Scott Schultz (Jolie-Laide).

Going forward, however, Mahle and Ziegler will stop selling fruit to other wineries, keeping all of the grapes for themselves. In addition to Syrah, the vineyard also has small amounts of other Rhone varieties planted, like Marsanne, Roussanne, Grenache and Mourvedre; the vintners aren't yet sure what they'll do with those, though Ziegler said they may release a limited-production white blend.



— Pax Mahle, seen in his Sebastopol winery in 2019, has gained a reputation as a skilled Syrah winemaker. Now he's entered into a new partnership in the Halcon Vineyard, famous for its Syrah.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle 2019

he transition has already gotten under way. Mahle harvested all of the Halcon fruit from this year's harvest, fermenting the Syrah in concrete tanks in his winery. Those Syrahs are now in barrel, slated for release in early 2023.

Anyone who wants to get their hands on some of the final Halcon wines from Gordon's tenure will need to act fast. He still has some wines in stock from the 2019 vintage, which are available to members of his mailing list. Although he made some wine in 2020, he's not sure he will sell it, since it may have been impacted by wildfire smoke. This year, he didn't vinify any of the vineyard's fruit.

The Gordons, who always retained jobs in the Silicon Valley tech world while running their vineyard, believe that the vines are just now hitting their real stride, 16 years after they first planted them. "It is hard to leave it at this point, because in the last two vintages you can see that the vines are really getting established," Gordon said. "The wines improved as the vines got into young adulthood."

But, Gordon said, he was confident he was leaving the vineyard in very capable hands. And he's proud of what he accomplished in the Yorkville Highlands.

"In an unknown appellation, to have found a place so well suited to Syrah," he said, "I'm very proud of taking that risk."

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