

Why Wine Country Looks So Beautiful: Napa Ag Preserve Turns 50



Jill Barth, CONTRIBUTOR

I cover wine at work, with attention to makers and growers.

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The Napa Agriculture (Ag) Preserve turns 50 years old in 2018 thanks to the farmers, vintners and residents who saw the value of an agrarian future for their valley.



Jill Barth
Gamble Family Vineyard land in Napa County's Oakville District

The 1968 view of Napa County was that of farmland supporting beef, prunes, walnuts and "a few grapes," according to Ginny Sims who served as Napa County Supervisor from 1973-1976. Residents had seen the disappearance of orchards and agriculture in favor of homes and businesses in nearby communities. Many citizens of Napa County traveled to work at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, the area's largest employer at the time. Population projections showed the need for increased housing and infrastructure upgrades for this bedroom community environment.

A group of farmers and vintners had other ideas for Napa County in the form of a proposal for an agricultural preserve, limiting the use of land in the Napa Valley. "Urban development belongs in urban areas," says Jim Hickey, Napa County Planning Director from 1970-1989, "the highest and best use of land in unincorporated Napa County is agriculture."

But not everyone agreed, even within the agricultural community. Some landowners considered the efforts illegal, or at least arbitrary. There were 55 town hall-style public meetings held throughout the county and supporters for the preserve went door to door to gain signatures of corroboration.

"It tore families apart," says Napa vintner Tom Gamble. His mother, Mary Ann McGuire, "drove around with a typewriter in the car to get a farmer to sign a letter on the spot," recalls Gamble. Efforts paid off when the Napa County Ag Preserve was ultimately established by the Napa County Board of Supervisors and the Napa County Planning Commission in February 1968.



Jill Barth
Gamble stands on his land in the Oakville District, site of his family home and certified Napa Green vineyards

This represented a landmark ruling, one that's been upheld for 50 years. Voters have passed measures strengthening the Napa Ag Preserve -- in 1990 giving the electorate (rather than politicians) the say on any future use of agricultural land -- and again in 2008, extending sanctuaries until 2058. An additional measure, the "Watershed and Oak Woodland Protection Initiative" is on the ballot in June 2018. It seeks to establish safeguards for natural areas comprised of streams, wetlands and oak trees.

Today, nearly 90% of Napa County is under protection from development [🐦](#) -- an agricultural space with a hospitality industry that thrives on the vineyard and farming culture. Napa County's wine industry is responsible for the creation of [46,000 jobs in Napa County](#) and [303,000 nationwide](#) and attracts some of the world's best talent in agriculture, food and wine -- such as St. Helena Chef Christopher Kostow, who prizes the "ability to have one's work so closely tied to one's life in a positive way." Kostow sources ingredients locally, a luxury for many chefs and home cooks around the country.



Jill Barth
Cain Vineyards on Spring Mountain in Napa County

Napa Valley is comprised of 225,300 acres, of which 45,000 acres are cultivated vineyards -- all of this is protected under the Napa Ag Preserve. "We appreciate the fact that the property is not developed," says Spring Mountain vintner Christopher Howell of Cain Vineyard and Winery. "Gives more space for wildlife to move."

This environment is an appealing treasure -- in 2016, the Napa Valley attracted a total of 3.5 million visitors [🐦](#) who are welcomed by these acres of vineyards interrupted by large swaths of protected of natural land. Those coming to Napa County this year can enjoy events celebrating the 2018 anniversary of the Napa Ag Preserve at area wineries, hotels and restaurants. A highlight includes an exhibit at The Napa Valley Museum Yountville: "50 Years of the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve" which runs from July 7 through August 19, 2018.

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