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The winery co-founded by Gavin Newsom just bought a major Napa vineyard for \$14.5 million

The PlumpJack Group has acquired the Oso Vineyard, in Napa's remote Pope Valley area, from the Mondavi family

[Esther Mobley](#)

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Wildfires came through the hills above Oso Vineyard in 2020. One hillside of grapevines burned.
Courtesy Jak Wonderly

The wine company co-founded by Gov. Gavin Newsom and San Francisco billionaire Gordon Getty just acquired a major Napa vineyard for \$14.5 million.

Oso Vineyard, located in a fast-changing area called Pope Valley, is the newest property in the PlumpJack Collection of Wineries, a group that includes the Napa wineries PlumpJack Estate, Odette Estate and Cade Estate. The group has purchased Oso from Michael Mondavi Family Estate, which had owned the 129-acre vineyard since 2006.

PlumpJack's latest investment is sure to raise the profile of Pope Valley, a region in the northeastern outskirts of the county that's always been less visible — with a reputation for less impressive wines — than areas like Oakville, the Stags Leap District and Howell Mountain, where PlumpJack's other holdings are located.

But PlumpJack hopes to prove that Pope Valley is capable of producing better wines than it's gotten credit for. "Pope Valley is the unheralded Napa Valley," said managing partner John Conover. (Newsom, who put his ownership interest in PlumpJack into a blind trust when he became governor, is not currently active in management of the company.)



Cade winemaker Danielle Cyrot (left), with PlumpJack managing partner John Conover (center) and Odette winemaker Jeff Owens.

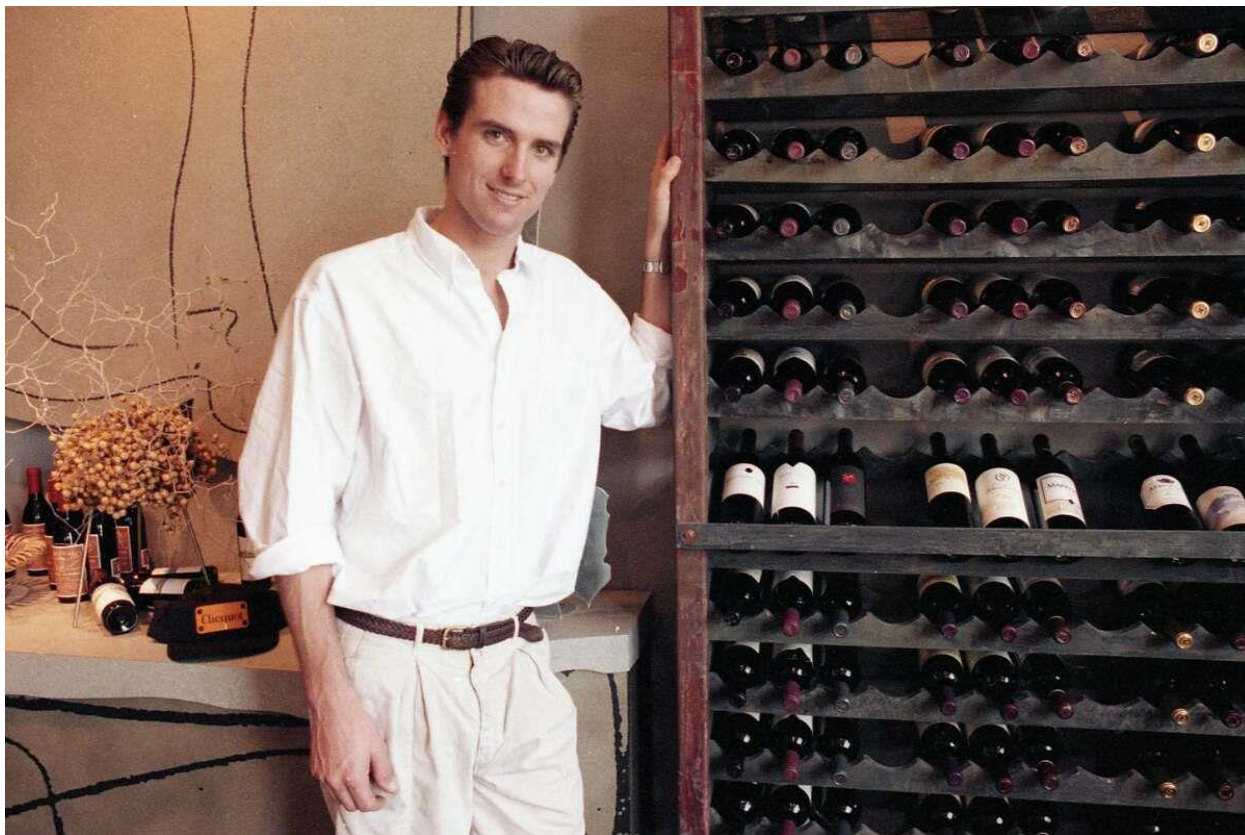
Courtesy Jak Wonderly

It's also one of the last affordable places to buy land in Napa — though in Napa, of course, "affordable" is relative. PlumpJack paid roughly \$110,000 per acre for Oso, which Conover called "a bargain." (On top of the acreage, it paid additional fees for the entitlements and structures.) Compare that to Odette Estate, in the prestigious Stags Leap District, which it bought for around \$400,000 per acre in 2012.

Rob Mondavi Jr., winemaker at Michael Mondavi Family Estate, said he wanted to sell Oso so that he could look into buying vineyards in those higher-prestige areas of the valley. “I really want to get back to Oakville and Stags Leap,” he said.

PlumpJack had been looking for land to buy. It wants to produce more wine than what its existing 310 vineyard acres can yield, Conover said, and the cost of grapes purchased from other growers is soaring. “PlumpJack in Oakville is maxed out. Odette is maxed out,” he said. Owning one’s own land “is the best way to ensure consistent availability of fruit.”

Mainly, Oso grapes will be used for Adaptation, a more affordable label under the Odette Estate umbrella. The group also wants to grow its production of Cade Sauvignon Blanc, which consistently sells out, but grapes for which are getting harder to find. “People are pulling out Sauvignon Blanc and planting Cabernet (Sauvignon),” said Cade winemaker Danielle Cyrot. “That’s a reality.” A farmer can charge a winery around \$8,000 per ton of Napa Valley Cabernet grapes, she estimated, whereas Sauvignon Blanc grapes may command only \$2,500 per ton.



Gavin Newsom at the original PlumpJack wine store in San Francisco in 1992.
Fred Larson/The Chronicle 1992

Now Cyrot will be able to supplement her existing fruit sources with the 15 acres of Sauvignon Blanc planted at Oso. She plans to plant 10 more acres of the variety there next year. Cyrot believes Sauvignon Blanc is especially well suited to Pope Valley, where it tends to take on flavors like peach and mango, she said. She already buys Sauvignon Blanc grapes from the nearby Juliana Vineyard. One section of Sauvignon Blanc at Oso is especially

notable: a block planted with cuttings from Robert Mondavi Winery's famed To Kalon Vineyard, trellised in the style that was popular in the 19th century.

Pope Valley bears little resemblance to the well-traveled arteries of Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail that most visitors see when they come to Napa Valley. To get here from St. Helena, one has to drive over the Vaca Mountains, the range that flanks Napa Valley's eastern side, toward Middletown and Lake Berryessa. Unlike Napa's valley floor, which is crammed with vineyards almost entirely, here there are large swaths of open land, either fallow or used for cattle grazing. Only a couple of wineries, like Pope Valley Vineyards and Calla Lily Estate, advertise tasting rooms. There are no restaurants or hotels.

"It's still Napa, but it's the second cousin to the high-end Napa Valley," Cyrot described. Wineries in other parts of the county wrote it off as being too hot, without enough water, to produce great wines. Yet, Pope Valley vineyards have long been a popular, if somewhat secret, component in many wines. Grapes from here historically cost much less than areas like Calistoga or Rutherford, but the resulting wines can still be labeled "Napa Valley."



Danielle Cyrot, winemaker at Cade Estate, will use grapes from Oso Vineyard for her Sauvignon Blanc.
Courtesy Jak Wonderly

As the rest of Napa grows more expensive — and getting a piece of land grows ever more competitive — more high-profile vintners are looking to Pope Valley. Mexican entrepreneur Xavier Cervantes planted an ambitious estate here with help of Andy Erickson, one of Napa's most famous winemakers. In 2015, the Terlato Group bought the Juliana Vineyard; that same year the Hess Collection bought a 420-acre vineyard in Pope Valley.

PlumpJack was already buying about one-third of the Oso Vineyard’s output before this acquisition, using the Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah grapes for Adaptation. Much of the vineyard’s output was going into Michael Mondavi’s Emblem and Animo brands. The Animo Sauvignon Blanc — made from the To Kalon-derived block — received high critical praise.

Although Pope Valley has a reputation for being “hot, flat and dry, without any water,” as Conover put it, the Oso Vineyard refutes the stereotype. The vineyard is hilly, extending from 900 feet to 1,300 feet at its highest point, essentially in the Howell Mountain foothills. Unlike many nearby properties, it has abundant water, with three rainwater ponds that are currently full and a 60-gallon-per-minute well. That was one of the selling points for Conover: “Water is the new gold,” he said.

Conover pointed out what he called “a little notch” in the Vaca Mountains just west of the vineyard — a dip in the range that allowed weather from the coast, like cool breezes and rain, to reach Oso. More moderate temperatures, varying elevations and secure water availability are all features that point to good wine quality. Oso’s akin and tufa soils bear more resemblance to the ground on Howell Mountain than the rest of Pope Valley.



Pope Valley has a reputation for being hot, dry and flat, said John Conover, but Oso Vineyard refutes that stereotype. Courtesy Jak Wonderly

Now that it controls the vineyard, PlumpJack plans to implement some changes. It will begin converting all the farming to organic practices (it already farms organically at Cade and Odette). It will replant some sections, including a hillside whose vines burned entirely during the 2020 wildfires, and plant new vines on some fallow stretches.

The PlumpJack empire began in 1992, when Newsom opened a wine shop on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. The business eventually expanded to hotels in Carmel-by-the-Sea and Tahoe, and cocktail bars and restaurants, like San Francisco's Wildhawk and Balboa Café. The group founded its first winery, PlumpJack Estate, in 1995, followed by Cade in 2005, Odette in 2012 and 13th Vineyard (formerly Ladera) in 2016. In total, the wineries produce between 50,000 and 75,000 cases of wine annually.

Ideally, that number will grow even higher, Conover said. The PlumpJack wineries are making money, and he wants to make sure they stay that way, even as the cost of doing business in Napa explodes. "There's more development pressure in Napa Valley all the time," he said, "and we won't be sustainable as an industry if we're not profitable."

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