The best grape-growing region in Napa Valley you’ve probably never heard of is Pritchard Hill. It’s not even an official appellation yet—and may never be one. But this high part of the Vaca Mountains, off the beaten path and remote, is producing among the most profound wines in Napa Valley. The grape and wine of choice is Cabernet Sauvignon, sometimes blended with other Bordeaux varieties (a few vintners add Syrah). These wines are spectacular. They are Cabs of great richness, depth and length. They also are tannic, but none is so tight that it can’t be enjoyed after a few hours in the decanter.

Where is Pritchard Hill?
It’s hard to define its boundaries, since, not being a legal appellation, it doesn’t have any. Jon-Mark Chappellet, whose father, Donn, pioneered the area, describes it as “a hole” between Oakville, Howell Mountain, the Stags Leap District, Rutherford and Chiles Valley. Most of the vineyards are higher than 800 feet above sea level, and some rise to nearly 2,000 feet. If you stand at the intersection of the Silverado Trail and the Oakville Cross Road, looking east, you’d see Dalla Valle straight ahead, up the hill. Pritchard Hill’s vineyards are even higher. Wines grown there qualify only for a Napa Valley appellation. Blakesley Chappellet, Donn’s daughter-in-law, calls the region “a lieu-dit,” the French term for a distinctive geographic area.

Pritchard Hill’s grape-growing heritage
The hill is named for homesteader Charles Pritchard. In the 1890 vintage, he declared a crop of Zinfandel and Riesling. There was scattered grape-growing over the next century, but from a viticultural point of view, much of the action was down on the valley floor. Pritchard Hill’s modern era began in 1967, when the Chappellets bought their property. Searching for the best site available, Donn sought the advice of André Tchelistcheff, then at Beaulieu Vineyard. “André replied, ‘All the grapes I get come from the valley floor. If I could get grapes from a hillside, I would,’ ” says Donn. Later, an agent showed Chappellet the Pritchard Hill property, and the rest is history.

The following decade saw the arrival of two families, both named Long, but unrelated: Bob Long and his wife, Zelma (then the chief enologist for Robert Mondavi; their Long Vineyards is no longer operating), and David Arthur Long and his father, Donald, who planted their vineyard in 1978. Today, David Arthur Vineyards is owned by David, his brother, Bob, and Bob’s wife, Joye. Bob Long also has his own brand, Montagna. The current number of wineries, brands and vineyards on the hill is about 16. The precise number depends on how you define a winery, and not all the vineyards produce a wine.

Oakville, on a mountain
Most winemakers on Pritchard Hill cite soil and elevation as keys to their wines’ quality. The dirt is red, of a series known as Sobrante, described by David Arthur’s and Montagna’s winemaker, Nile Zacherle, as “volcanic clay loam.” The dirt is littered with huge boulders. Some wineries, like Colgin and Brand, had to dynamite their land and haul the rubble away before planting, an expensive process that can require importing soils to make up the difference. “The thing about these soils,” says Jon-Mark Chappellet, “is that we have to poke around for areas where there’s enough [soil] to actually farm.” The soils are well drained, making for small, intensely flavored grapes with
thick skins. Yields average from less than a ton per acre to a few tons, depending on the vintage. Water is scarce, and its availability, in addition to the paucity of plantable soils, limits how many additional vineyards can be developed. The current total is only about 340 acres.

Pritchard Hill sits above the fog line. Greg Melanson, whose Melanson Vineyard and home are at 1,200 feet above sea level, describes waking up in the summer to bright sunshine, while the valley below is blanketed in white. That extra sunshine “allows us to have a photosynthetic capacity that’s enviable,” says Tim Mondavi. The result, says consultant Philippe Melka, who makes the wines at Gandona and Brand (and who was Bryant Family’s winemaker until 2006), is what he calls “the best of both worlds: Oakville sophistication with the extra intensity of a hillside.” An immediate effect of all this sunny ripeness, of course, is that alcohol levels tend to run high—often over 15% by volume. But I have yet to taste a Pritchard Hill wine that was hot. That warmth gives the wines a soft, round, almost Cognac-like mellowness that adds to their allure.

Will Pritchard Hill ever be an American Viticultural Area (AVA)? The man who owns the 1971 trademark—Donn Chappellet — firmly declares, “It will not.” The inclusion of adjoining properties in any Pritchard Hill appellation causes Chappellet great concern. “If that happened, then dozens of wineries could put Pritchard Hill on the label, and destroy the valuable name,” he says.

Pritchard Hill’s character
When tasting through a dozen wines, I can’t say I detected a character that was particularly “Pritchard Hilly.” But here are some of the terms I used repeatedly in my reviews: dark, incredible aromatics, delicious, powerful, classic, fantastically rich and flashy. For all these common tones of California-ness, there were distinctions: in approachability, in ripeness, in the precise quality of the tannins, in ageability, in how the alcohol felt and, in some cases, the role of volatile acidity. As Jon-Mark Chappellet points out, a Pritchard Hill character “is tough to pin down, almost impossible.”

To sum it up, Ovid’s winemaker, Austin Peterson, says, “Pritchard Hill is a unique, incredible spot for wine.”

**BRAND (FOUNDED 2005)**
This yet-to-be released wine is made by Philippe Melka. ...Melka says the brand name will be BRAND when the 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon debuts this fall. The estate had been owned by Miner Family Winery and was purchased by businessman Ed Fitts.