

Napa Valley in retrospect

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Do the wines of Napa share the characteristic of so many of the world's greatest wines, namely the ability to improve over the decades? And if they do, is this equally true for contemporary releases as it is for historical bottlings?

Over the course of two days last week, in the company of Anthony Dias Blue, Karen MacNeil, and Sotheby's wine specialist Nicholas Jackson, I had the good fortune and great pleasure to guide 35 interested wine lovers through a truly historic tasting of wines from California's Napa Valley. The premise was as simple as it was literal: assemble 80 examples of Napa's most legendary wines from past and present for a comparative and retrospective tasting.

While the truly definitive list of the legends of Napa could easily fuel hours worth of debate between even the most knowledgeable California wine experts, there is little doubt that the 80 wines assembled for our tasting, as part of the 2012 Flavor! Napa Valley food and wine celebration, were definitively representative of Napa's most glorious past and present.

A **1957 Louis M Martini Mountain Pinot Noir** marked the beginning of the timeline we would follow, bottle by bottle, for a total of seven hours over two days. This first commercial bottling of Pinot Noir from the region that would, in 25 years, be known as the Carneros AVA (American Viticultural Area) was made in an era when the Napa Valley contained merely a dozen wineries and was known more for prunes than for grapes.

A progression of other historic bottlings included the **1966 Charles Krug Vintage Selection Cabernet Sauvignon**, **1967 Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignon**, **1976 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay** (right), and **1968 Beaulieu Vineyard, Georges de Latour Cabernet Sauvignon**. The **1977 Beringer Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**, **1979 Opus One Cabernet Sauvignon** and **1983 Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon** each represented the respective inaugural vintages of these historic wines that have been made every year since.

Sixteen wines in total represented the period between 1957 and 1990, and they did so remarkably. Perhaps none so well as the **1979 Stag's Leap Vineyard SLV Cabernet Sauvignon**, which was phenomenal in its purity, with still-ripe fruit and the layered flavours that 30 years can bring to an impeccably made Cabernet Sauvignon.

The song that these wines sang was hard to resist, and the glimpse they provided into the accomplishments of those who pioneered Napa's modern evolution as a wine region was breathtaking. The revelation that the [1976 Judgment of Paris](#) tasting offered the world was the result of just three decades of work by a relatively small group of individuals, who brought Napa wines from the near extinction of Prohibition to the point of competing with the best the world had to offer. The fact that the efforts of these pioneers hold their own in a tasting today remains a testament to their accomplishment.

The progression of wines that we sampled through the 1990s told an equally important story representing the confluence of two key forces in the more modern history of Napa. As a majority of the vineyards in the valley were phylloxera-ridden, during this decade most were ripped out and replanted with new rootstocks, clones and tighter spacing. Even as these new, more efficient vines came into production, the critic Robert M Parker, Jr was bestowing ever greater praise on Napa's wines.

This tasting perhaps over-emphasised the rapidity of transition between the old Napa and the modern Napa that persists today. The contrast between my favourite wine of the tasting, a phenomenally exquisite, 13.5% alcohol **1992 Araujo Cabernet** from the famed Eisele vineyard (whose old-vine Cabernet had not yet been replanted), and the 15.5% monster of a **1997 Bryant Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon** was stark, and somewhat unnerving.

The only wine separating these two in the historical progression was the elegant and refined **1992 Caymus Special Selection Cabernet**. Chuck Wagner, the son of founder and winemaker Charlie Wagner, was on hand to say a few words about the wine. In the course of introducing it to the room, he admitted that it represented 'a style of winemaking that we have deliberately evolved away from' towards what he described as more ripeness and earlier accessibility. In a remarkable moment of candour, Wagner clearly stated that this evolution was predicated upon the awareness of what style of wine was garnering critical acclaim.

The rise of the blockbuster Napa Cabernet may have been chronicled, and in some ways encouraged, by Parker, but it was accomplished through the talents of two kinds of people: winemakers and growers, both of whom featured strongly in the progression of wines that chronicled the transition from the 1990s to the first decade of the 2000s.

Perhaps no single farmer is more connected with the success of modern Napa wines than Andy Beckstoffer, whose collection of vineyards includes some of the most storied in the history of the Valley, and whose grapes regularly fetch the highest prices in the industry. Beckstoffer, who was there to discuss the 11 wines made from his fruit, described the creation of his remarkable collection of vineyards:

'We saw these tremendous vineyards that bigger wineries were just blending into their best wines. So when they came onto the market, we bought them.... We were focused on making the vineyard matter. If we found one winemaker and gave them all the fruit from one of these vineyards, and they made a great wine from it, people might say it was the winemaker's fault. But we thought if we divided up the fruit among 20 winemakers, and they all made great wines, then we could probably say it was the vineyard.'

Capitalising on the ups and downs of the economy over several decades, as well as his sharp understanding of the history and performance of most pieces of land in Napa, Beckstoffer gradually came to own vineyards such as To Kalon, Dr Crane, and George III, which had been responsible for some of the greatest wines in Napa, even back to the Valley's earliest history in the 19th century. Much to the frustration of some, Beckstoffer has always been notoriously selective about whom he 'allows' to purchase fruit from these vineyards, but ultimately such selectivity is the privilege of those who own scarce resources.

Stunning wines such as Mike Smith's **2010 Myriad Cellars, Beckstoffer Dr Crane Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**, Luc Morlet's **2009 Coeur de Vallée Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**, and the **2009 Schrader Cellars GIII Cabernet Sauvignon** clearly demonstrated the shrewdness of Beckstoffer's approach.

Moving from celebrity growers to celebrity winemakers, a progression of wines highlighted the role of Heidi Peterson Barrett, whose three decades of making wine in Napa resulted in some of the Valley's most prestigious and most expensive wines, including Dalla Valle, Lamborn and Screaming Eagle. Also featured was winemaker Philippe Melka, whose work with Vineyard 29, Dana Estate and Gemstone also featured in the tasting line up.

Then there were the celebrity wines, whose names, price tags, three-digit scores and notorious scarcity required their presence on any list of so-called Napa legends: the **2009 Screaming Eagle**, of course, as well as the **1991 Harlan Estate Red Wine**, **2009 Colgin Cellars IX Estate Red Wine** and **2009 Hundred Acre Cabernet Sauvignon**, among others. Most spectacular of this group was the **2001 BOND St Eden Red Wine**, which showed very little of its age, and carried its fruit and angular minerality with a regal grace that has made it one of my favourite wines in the Valley.

Predictably, this list of 80 wines was dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux-style blends in which Cabernet played the primary role. Occasional Merlots surfaced, such as the remarkable **2008 Kapcsandy Roberta's Reserve**, whose broad-shouldered earthy personality was, as usual, quite compelling.

One of the most remarkable wines in the tasting, however, was about as far from Cabernet Sauvignon as you can get. The **2001 late-disgorged Blanc de Blancs Sparkling Wine from Schramsberg Vineyards** clearly demonstrated, as it has on several previous occasions for me, that world-class sparkling wine may be scarce in Napa, but it is far from impossible. Indeed, Schramsberg's normal cuvées are excellent, as is their top bottling J Schramm. This late-disgorged example had all the richness one might expect of any superior vintage champagne. We also tasted an impressive recently disgorged **1988 Domaine Chandon Blanc de Noirs**, though it lacked the Schramsberg's combination of power and refinement.

Moving past the parade of names, many of which I am sure are quite unfamiliar to most European readers, despite their fame with US collectors, this tasting provided an opportunity to examine some of the conventional wisdom about Napa wines and its basis in truth or myth.

Undeniably, Cabernet Sauvignon winemaking and winegrowing in Napa has taken a turn towards ripeness in the last 30 years, beginning in the early 1990s. The wines before this time were much closer to a traditional Bordeaux ideal of ripeness, both in their flavour profile and corresponding alcohol level. As occasionally confirmed by the repeated re-tastings in commemoration of the 1976 Paris event, the wines produced before the nineties are ageing beautifully, and

with all the grace you'd expect of world-class Cabernet Sauvignon. Many of the wines from the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s felt as if they easily had decades of life left in them.

The wines representing the last 15 years of Napa's history defied many of the traditional stereotypes of Napa's more modern existence. They presented a great variety of interpretations of Cabernet Sauvignon, from higher acid and brighter fruit to the massive, brawny wines that push into the upper reaches of 15% alcohol. A few of these wines had a distinct sweetness to them, whether from higher glycerol levels associated with their elevated alcohol, or true residual sugars. But such wines were the exception rather than the rule. Balance was a salient feature of most wines, and so was deliciousness.

It may be too early to make definitive pronouncements about the ageworthiness of modern Napa Cabernet, but some of the wines of that style produced in the late 1990s provide encouragement. Wines such as the **2001 Corison Kronos Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**, the **2002 Chappellet Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**, and the **2002 Silverado Vineyards SOLO Cabernet Sauvignon** had not only survived their first decade with grace but showed themselves better for it. Not surprisingly, these wines were balanced and possessed excellent acidity.

Both in the moment, and on much reflection, the group of 80 wines as a whole made a compelling claim to grandeur. Stylistic trends, farming histories, and cultural trajectories aside, as a representative sample of the highest quality products that an individual appellation could produce over six decades, they were nothing short of fantastic.

As a perennially curious wine lover, my affections wander farther afield more often than they focus at home. But neglectful as I may have been, I am again in love with Napa.