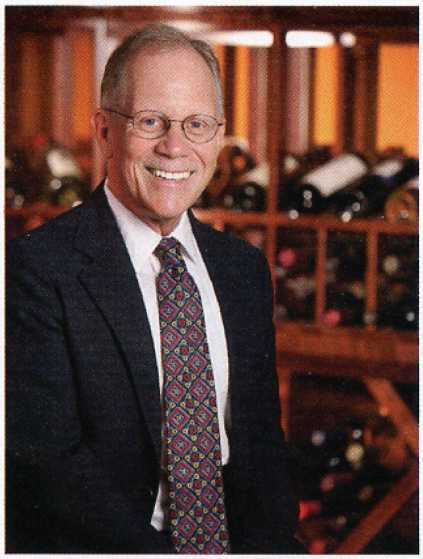


2010 NAPA CABERNETS: EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

It's possible we will see that most rare species of Napa Cab: elegant, low alcohol and approachable—or flip a coin: green, vegetal, thin wines. It's a textbook vintage of "buyer beware."

The 2010 vintage is the weirdest I've ever covered. It was certainly cold in California wine country—the coldest in living memory and some claim, the coldest ever. The question is, how will the wines be, especially the Cabernet Sauvignons of Napa Valley?

As soon as it became apparent how cold the summer was, some pundits began predicting that the wines, particularly Napa Valley Cabs, would be less alcoholic, more "Bordeaux-like" than usual. On November 29, when the long harvest was finally over, the Wine Institute issued a statement headlined: "2010 California Vintage: Challenging Growing Season Promises Elegant Wines."

Similar reassurances were issued in winery press releases. As Stephanie Putnam, winemaker at Raymond, wrote, "2010 will be a more approachable, elegant, softer year—more reminiscent of a Bordeaux vintage than the heavier, fruit-forward Napa Valley wines we've become accustomed to."

The complaint heard from critics over the years has been that California wines are too high in alcohol, too "fat," hot and jammy for balance. Many of these critics—like Eric Asimov in *The New York Times*, merchants like Darrell Corti in Sacramento and restaurateurs like Charles Phan of Slanted Door—have greeted 2010 with relief.

Sounds promising. But others are reading from a different script.

"I'm not making Cabernet this year," a Napa Valley winemaker told me. "This vintage sucks." He does not want to be identified because the severity of his remarks might offend his neighbors. He goes on to say that the Cabernets he's tasted "were thin, watery and flavorless, and didn't even have good acid." He is talking about wines from the flat Coombsville part of the valley.

Yet at Ehlers Estate, which is on the St. Helena flatlands, winemaker Kevin Morrisey is elated. "Beauties at lower alcohol," he describes his young Cabernets, with readings as low as 14%, a fact he attributes to his growing area receiving daylong sunshine.

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That's the valley floor. What about up in the mountains, which are cooler during the daytime: Did they receive the heat Cabernet needs to ripen? Hidden Ridge, whose vineyard (elevation 1,700 feet) straddles the Napa-Sonoma county line on Spring Mountain announced that they're declassifying the entire 2010 vintage "because of this year's inconsistent growing season." The problem? "Green, vegetal flavors and green tannins," says Casidy Ward, the winery's co-owner.

Yet Steve Pride, general manager of Pride Mountain, sources his grapes near Hidden Ridge and describes his wines as being "dark and concentrated," but also lower in alcohol than usual.

On another cool mountain, Atlas Peak, vintner Paul Hobbs told me he couldn't even use some blocks of Cabernet he usually buys, they were so unripe. Still, all is far from lost in 2010, in Hobbs' opinion. "We'll see some great typicity from valley floor vineyards from St. Helena down even to Yountville, and those will be quite ripe," he says.

As I said, it's a weird vintage. And just to confuse things further: the frequent use of the term "green." The word can mean that the tannins never properly ripened, which means the wines will never age well. But some people also use it to mean wines that are hard and earthy in youth, and *will* age well. Tom Ferrell, who used to make wine at Inglenook, Franciscan, Sterling and Spring Mountain Vineyard and who, now retired, directs the Spring Mountain District organization, says that 2010 reminds him of vintages of old when fruit was picked earlier. "The wines always started out a little green," he recalls, "but they aged well."

After all this back and forth, here's what I think we'll find. Cooler areas, such as Carneros and Coombsville, as well as shaded, east-facing slopes of the mountains that lose sunshine by late afternoon, will likely yield unripe wines lacking ripe fruitiness. The valley floor and well-exposed mountain sites should do better, with one big proviso: that the grapes weren't blasted by the notorious late summer heat spikes that hit in between the chilly periods, after desperate growers ripped off the canopies to allow in the sunshine they hoped would dry out and ripen the fruit.

So the 2010 Napa Valley Cabernets are going to be hit or miss. But the hits could indeed turn out to be that rare bird: wines that ripened at lower alcohols. We could actually see delicious Cabs coming in below 14%, and certainly below 15%. That in turn should compel even the most caviling critic to acknowledge that, yes, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon can be elegant and ageworthy.