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LIFESTYLE

Thirsty work

7:00am Saturday 23rd July 2011

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Fancy a drink? Our drinks columnist Sam Wylie-Harris uncorks some Napa Valley beauties from across the pond By Sam Wylie-Harris.

From Napa with love.

The bling-bling of the grapevine, California's idyllic Napa Valley is home to North America's most expensive wines.

An hour's drive north of San Francisco, the city is an open cellar door to one of the world's smallest, glamorous and most toured wine regions.

With its sunny Mediterranean climate, cooling pacific breezes and some of the most diverse soils, this wine lovers paradise is one eighth of the size of Bordeaux, and accounts for just 4% of California's wine harvest.

Most of the Napa wineries are small, family-owned ventures, which may have something to do with the ocean deep prices and, of course, the outstanding quality of these cult labels, which produce such opulent cabernet sauvignon and rich chardonnay to keep the tills ringing.

From one of the region's oldest wineries, Beringer has an easy-drinking entry level sister red and white to grace the table. Try Beringer Cabernet Sauvignon, Knights Valley (£17.25, www.bbr.com), from its vineyards north of Napa. Elegant and faintly reminiscent of a good claret, it's dense with blackberry and plummy fruit, firm tannins and a dusty, long finish.

And for chardonnay fans who like a wine that's

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Thirsty work

fresh and fruity, try Beringer Chardonnay, Napa Valley 2007 (£15.75, www.bbr.com) from the Los Carneros area at the southern end of the valley, where the grapes are blessed by the cooling ocean fog. Fragrant with tropical fruit flavours, delicate peach aromas, honeysuckle notes and bright acidity.

A little more showy, Raymond Vineyards (now part of the Boisset Family Estates) produces richer, more powerful chardonnay from its vines in Jameson Canyon, not far from Carneros. Try Raymond Chardonnay Napa Valley 2009 (£11.99 www.laithwaites.co.uk). It's creamy with honey and beeswax on the nose, apple and lemony flavours and a slight touch of vanilla on the finish.

A couple of notches up the scale, Shafer produces textbook Californian chardonnay from

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its Red Shoulder Ranch in Carneros. Low yields and distinctive flavours shape Shafer Red Shoulder Ranch Chardonnay, Los Carneros 2009 (£35, www.thormanhunt.co.uk) into a dazzling glass of the golden stuff. It's utterly seductive (15% abv), with lush layers of melon, pineapple and apricot, exotic aromas, great acidity, structure and length.

Another Carneros champion white for a special occasion, try Hyde de Villaine Chardonnay, Napa Valley 2007 (£47.99, www.corneyandbarrow.com, Harvey Nichols nationwide). Flamboyant and intense with heady stone fruit flavours, a ripple of lemon curd, mineral purity and a toasty, long finish - it's a French Meursault with an American accent!

All our favourite grape varieties thrive in Napa's near perfect conditions, but cabernet sauvignon is the region's trophy grape, ahead of chardonnay.

For an extremely pleasant (and not too pricey) dinner wine, try Textbook 'Fin de Journee' Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2008 (£17.99, www.laithwaites.co.uk). A silky, upfront red that will reward drinkers with its exuberant, black fruit flavours varnished with kirsch, and a smack of spice on the lingering finish.

The next three suggestions are for the hedonist in the cellar who thirsts after a blockbuster-style red, but less brooding than, say, an Argentinian cab sav. Most Napa Valley vintners support sustainable farming practices, and the following wineries are extremely well respected for their cabernet grape which excels in the gentle climate and warm Californian sun.

For a beautifully structured example, try Frog's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2007 (£32.50, www.fortnumandmason.com). Full-bodied and elegant, it's a forest floor of plum and blackberries. The tightly balanced fruit gives a rich mouthfeel with lively tannins and a rewarding, long finish - it's extremely pleasant and will age well.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars is one of the most recognisable and famous cab sav labels - it blew away top Bordeaux at the famous Judgment of Paris tasting three decades ago.

Quite spectacular, try Stag's Leap Artemis Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2007 (£40, Majestic). Vibrant and complex, the lip-smacking cherry fruit and medley of cedar wood, spice and violet dances in the mouth. I recommend decanting this wine an hour before drinking to

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prevail the fruit flavours and extend the exuberant finish of this sumptuous red.

Cakebread Cellars (don't you just love the names?) produces ripe, generously charged cabernet sauvignon. Try Cakebread Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2006 (£49.99, www.corneyandbarrow.com). It's absolutely delicious, with buckets of blackberry, cassis, fig, a hint of dark chocolate and spice. Firm tannins and great structure place this red in a league of its own.

Best buy Wine buffs take note... The International Wine Challenge (IWC) has announced the results of the 2011 Great Value Wine and Trophy Awards. Recognised as the world's most prestigious independent wine competition, it offers vino lovers the chance to find a place on their wine rack for labels that may have passed them by. With 15 Great Value and 107 Trophy Wines, there are plenty of affordable medal winners to start collecting. For more information, visit www.internationalwinechallenge.com Liquid news Moet's foaming nectar... Moet & Chandon has launched the world's first champagne, specifically designed to be poured over ice. Moet Ice Imperial is best served with three large ice cubes, in a large Chianti-style wine glass. A demi-sec (sweet) champagne that's dressed in a white lacquered bottle with a black tie, it looks set to be the summer blockbuster at sunny coastal hot spots. Available at the new Madison One New Change (London's biggest public roof terrace overlooking St Paul's Cathedral), and visitors to the Bournemouth Airshow from August 18 to 21.

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EDITOR'S CHOICE



Underpass art set to draw up interest

Some of the best urban artists from all over Europe will be in Kidderminster for Subway Deluxe 3: 'An upgrade of an underpass'. The live street painting in the subway between Comberton Hill and Worcester Street takes place as part of KAF on Saturday, August 20, starting at 11am.

Economists predict slower growth

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Business as usual in summer for jobs charity in Kidderminster

IT will be business as usual during the summer for a jobs charity helping people get back into work.

Wyre Forest parks among the country's best

BRINTON Park in Kidderminster and the QEII Jubilee Gardens in Bewdley are officially among the best in the country.

A456 work adds to rat-running

THIS is an open letter of apology to villages adjacent to the A456 Birmingham road from one of the many road users who choose to drive through these villages since the modifications to single carriageway status of that road.

Party in the Park in Bewdley and Stourport

PARTY in the park events will be staged in Bewdley and Stourport to showcase the range of sports and activities on offer for young people.

View from Westminster - July 21, 2011

MURDOCH-GATE dominates the news again this week with the Culture Select Committee grilling James and Rupert Murdoch as well as the on-bail Rebekah Brooks.

Joy for juniors

A QUARTET of under-8s from Wharton Park Golf

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and Country Club have been selected to play in the National Skills Golf Challenge regional finals on Thursday, August 11 at Warwickshire Golf Club.

Derrick and Mansell steer KVCC to winning draw

DRAW specialists Kidderminster Victoria CC took the lion's share of the points as they edged out Birmingham and District League Premier Division stalwarts Knowle and Dorridge.

Swifts to dip into Poole

SWIFTS start the Southern League Division One South and West with a lengthy 286 mile round trip to newly-promoted Poole Town.

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