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WINE

A taste for cabernet sauvignon

STAR/VINTNERS PANELISTS RANK 6 NAPA VALLEY WINES TOPS

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Catherine Seda from Balzac Communications. Sean Scully photos

December 20, 2012 12:00 am • Catherine Seda (1) Comments

Last week at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, the St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel met to review current vintages of 100 percent cabernet sauvignon wines.

When panelists were asked whether 100 percent varietal cabernet sauvignon held any

Top Napa Valley cabs
• Raymond Vineyards, 2008, \$100
• Rios Wine Company, 2008, Rutherford, \$75
• B Cellars, 2009, \$65

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cachet in the market place today, the responses were quick and divided.

Chris Phelps, winemaker at Swanson Vineyards, answered that he gets asked if a wine is 100 percent varietal every time he steps out into the market for consumer wine dinners.

Renee Kuo of Soutirage responded from the retail side of the business, "I have never once been asked for a 100 percent cabernet sauvignon wine. I may have recommended a single-vineyard wine if that vineyard has proven itself over time, but not 100 percent cabernet sauvignon."

John Skupny, owner of Lang & Reed, brought up the historical aspect of varietal wines. In the 1970s, "varietal" was the buzzword among consumers and producers. The desire for "pure" wines, as they were called, resulted from a backlash against the generic wines that were prevalent at the time.

Hugh Davies, owner of Schramsberg, said he believes that the notion of 100 percent cabernet sauvignon wines is irrelevant today. "People buy brands, they buy Napa Valley," he said. "If the Napa Valley wine is 100 percent cabernet sauvignon, it does not add value."

As to the taste of these

100 percent cabernet sauvignon wines, the assessments were varied, with panelists commenting on the lower alcohol levels in the 2008s, the ripeness of the 2009 wines, and appreciation for how the 2010s are developing. The most colorful response came from Jac Cole, winemaker at Spring Mountain Vineyard, when he spoke of the varietal wines overall: "They may be a little Disney in how Technicolor they are, but they are absolutely delightful."

For the blind tasting, the room was divided in half with each group tasting through 18 different wines for a grand total of 36 cabernet sauvignons. One group received flights of 2008 and 2009 vintages, and the second group received 2009 and 2010 wines. Each group tasted their 18 wines in three flights of six wines and came up with a top favorite for each of the flights.

With all of the panelists tasting 2009 wines, the two groups then concluded with a taste-off of the top six 2009 wines, resulting in the best 100 percent cabernet sauvignons from 2009.

The following wines were the favorites of their flights:

Raymond Vineyard, 2008, \$100. This is quintessential Napa Valley: aromas of black currant, cedar and vanilla with a fine structure and beautiful balance. If you have not been to Raymond lately, go. Owner Jean-Charles Boisset mixes fine wine with an entertainer's flair. The winery's speakeasy-inspired Red Room and mirrored cellar are one-of-a-kind experiences.

Rios Wine Company, Solovino Reserve, 2008, Rutherford, \$75. The Rios family has a fabulous story. Manuel Rios created the Rios Farming Company after he and his brothers worked in the vineyards since their teens. Rios Wine Company sprung from that successful business and led to award-winning wines like this 100 percent cabernet sauvignon. The wine has black plum and black currant fruit with cocoa and spice.

- Keever Vineyards, 2009, Yountville, \$95
- Swanson Vineyards, 2009, \$140
- Oakville Ranch Vineyards, 2010, Oakville, \$82



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B Cellars Syn3rgy, 2009, \$65. This is not the first time that B Cellars has won top honors at the panel tastings. The winemaker is Kirk Venge, and the winery has on staff Chef Christina Machamer, one of the winners of the “Hell’s Kitchen” TV show. B Cellars is a great place to take visiting family over the holidays so they can taste great wines like this 100 percent cabernet sauvignon.

Keever Vineyards, 2009, Yountville, \$95. Bill Keever is a Napa native, graduating from Napa High School in the 1960s, but he and his wife Olga caught the wine bug while living in Germany. Respected vintner Celia Welch makes the wines. As the Keevers tell it on their website, she did not agree to do so until she not only walked the vineyards but crumbled the soil in her hands. Keever offers wine and cheese pairings in a gorgeous setting at their winery.

Swanson Vineyards, 2009, \$140. Illustrious winemaking began at Swanson with André Tchelistcheff and is now in the deft hands of Chris Phelps, who crafts wonderfully balanced wines like this 100 percent cabernet sauvignon. The wine has a rich palate of black currant, spice, and pencil lead, making this a wonderfully complex and delicious wine.

Oakville Ranch Vineyards, 2010, Oakville, \$82. With Anne Vawter as winemaker and Phil Coturri as vineyard manager, the vines and wines at Oakville Ranch are getting intimate care. Each draws parallels to other passions in their lives: Anne to horse training and the thousands of decisions that lead to a unique outcome, and Phil to music and his friends in the Grateful Dead band, which has him coaxing notes from each of the vineyard plot’s unique underground chords.

The top 2009 cabernet sauvignon wine from the taste-off was the B Cellars Syn3rgy. At \$65, it beat out wines with suggested retail prices of \$85, \$95 and \$140.

(Catherine Seda is the Star’s tasting panel writer and works for Balzac Communications & Marketing in Napa. Only wines from Napa Valley Vintner member wineries are accepted and tasted. Not all wines submitted are chosen to be tasted, as often there are more wines submitted than tasted. The wines are chosen at random. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program; visit napavintners.com/programs and click on “Napa Neighbor” to learn more.)

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