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Napa Valley in prime time: Let the good times roll before Premiere Napa

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BLOG | MARCH 15, 2013 | BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

Forget harvest for Napa Valley excitement. To uncover who and what makes the place tick, consider the trade event called Première Napa.

During the four-day event in February, you can sample the finest Napa Valley wines and buy unique wine to resell later.

The tourism folks call the Napa Valley space 'legendary.' But you'll need your GPS and a designated driver to navigate the back roads and mountain summits of the 35-mile long valley in the days leading to the Saturday auction. To attend Première, which benefits the marketing programs of the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), you need to hold an alcohol reseller's permit and pay a bidder's fee of \$250.

With a media pass in hand and 211 Première auction lots to sample, I needed digital reminders to track the plethora of winery open houses, appellation tastings and seminars that were as unique as the wines up for auction.

Soon after arriving, I bumped into young winemaker Nicholas Bleecher of Jericho Canyon Vineyard. Bleecher had recently toured me through the steep hillside vineyards in his ATV and urged me to attend the Calistoga appellation tasting in a few days. But alas, I was already double-booked for that time slot.

Befitting the nearly 20 percent of Première lots from women vintners or winemakers, an all-women dinner at Cindy's Wood Grill was a fitting way to launch the week. Winemaker Anne Vawter poured her Red Mare Cabernet Sauvignon and the Cabernet Franc she makes for Ziata proprietor Karen Cakebread. Paula Kornell, a former president of the NVV, also shared wine and Napa stories.

At the "First Taste" event hosted by the Yountville Appellation Association, the buzz centered on the Gemstone "Reflections" Première lot made by Philippe Melka, a most prolific winemaker, crafting nine of the 211 Première lots.

I elbowed on to the busy tasting barrel of Kascandy Family Winery to taste their delicious Cabernet Sauvignon lot. Carmen Policy's wines at Casa Piena were as smooth and rich as ever. Peter Mondavi Jr. described with pride his Charles Krug "Family Reserve Generations" Bordeaux blend. Ah, a change of pace—a spicy Syrah from Rocca Family Vineyards.

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Then, off to Ma(i)sonry, a contemporary art gallery and wine collective, for a tasting their partners' offerings made by celebrity winemakers such as Heidi Barrett, Philippe Melka and Aaron Pott. I had my own "thunderbolt" tasting 2009 Coup de Foudre (of the same meaning)—a most inky and exuberant wine from proprietor John Schwartz.

Rebecca Griffin, president of the Coombsville Vintners and Growers, welcomed me to the area's tasting at Porter Family Vineyards. The newest of Napa Valley appellations is tucked into the hilly terrain separating south Napa from Solano County; the steep, narrow drive to Porter was a bit too exciting for someone with roots in the flat, Mid-Atlantic plains. The lively Porter Première lot, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, revived me as did lots from Ackerman and Arrow&Branch. Massimo di Costanzo poured for Farella Park Vineyards and shared tastes of his new Di Costanzo Wine.

Friday began with brunch at the barrel room of ZD Wines on the Silverado Trail. ZD president Brett de Leuze steered me to their solera-style, non-vintage Petit Abacus Première lot which was delicious to drink now or to cellar.

As I drove up Silverado Trail to a seminar at Hourglass Blueline Vineyard in Calistoga, I noticed hordes of cars and heavy traffic on the normally quiet Trail by Chateau Boswell. I made a mental note to taste their lot on auction day.

A veritable "Who's Who" of Napa Valley gathered in the Hourglass cave to discuss the evolution of the Napa Valley appellation from Tim Mondavi of Continuum to David Ramey of Ramey Wine Cellars, Beth Novak Milliken of Spottswoode, Aaron Pott of Pott Wines and Jeff Smith of Hourglass. Their wines were memorable, and the discussion refreshing free of b.s.

As Tim Mondavi described it, the 80's saw a "land rush of appellations" which were based mainly on the political "crossroads" dividing the small towns such as Rutherford and Oakville rather than deep differences in terroir and geography.

A tasting of Heidi Barrett's winemaking oeuvre followed at Bottega restaurant. Barrett poured her brands, La Sirena, Pirate TreasuRed and Barrett and Barrett. The Amuse Bouche table hosted by Barrett's partner John Schwarz caught my attention with their classically restrained 2011 Merlot Première lot. The room filled with powerhouse players in the trade and fellow East Bay contacts such as John Rittmaster, partner of Walnut Creek's Prima Ristorante and Prima Vini.

The last stop on Friday was the infamous Napa Gras party thrown at Raymond Vineyard by Jean-Charles Boisset of the Burgundian wine family and proprietor of Napa and Sonoma wineries. A connoisseur of Mardi Gras, a masked Boisset warmly welcomed guests and escorted them to the Crystal Cellar for a glass of 2011 Raymond Reserve Chardonnay.

During the auction, Philippe Melka often led the winemaker pack as the value of his lots rose during the three-hour auction. The newer appellation of Calistoga topped the chart with Chateau Boswell and Bevins Cellars drawing the top bid of \$75,000.

Several of my picks—Kaps candy, Hourglass and ZD—were among the top lots confirming my palate was in line with auction trends.

Driving home, I daydreamed about Amuse Bouche "ready to drink" Prêt à Boire Rosé with a light salad after the legendary bounty and good times known as Première Napa.



Nick Bleecher and Tara Katrina Hole of Jericho Canyon Vineyard during Napa Gras wine tasting at Raymond Vineyard



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