

THE TASTING PANEL

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Super Star Rum

*Kenny Chesney's Blue Chair Bay
Is a Guaranteed Hit*

A Visit to Napa Valley



PHOTO: DECANTER

Actually, this is a letter from California, where I attended the last day of the Wine Writers' Symposium based at Meadowood, took part in the 17th annual Premiere Napa Valley tasting of 211 wines, almost all from the 2011 vintage, mostly in lots as small as 60 bottles, attended dinners at Meadowood, Silverado Vineyards and a "Masquerade" hosted by Jean-Charles Boisset at Raymond Vineyards, spent a morning with Marimar Torres tasting Pinot Noirs in Sonoma and finally travelled to the Peter Michael estate in Sonoma's Knights Valley as a guest at their bi-annual Entourage tastings. Some of these wines are described below and after an absence of six years, I found the community spirit alive with the usual buzz of excitement totally justified by the quality of the wines.

Meadowood banquet chef Alejandro Ayala prepared the two Napa dinners, the first accompanied by 15 wines, of which my favourites were Peju Rutherford Reserve Cabernet Franc 2004 and (unsurprisingly) Stag's Leap Wine Cellars SLV Cabernet Sauvignon 2009. At Silverado Vineyards the theme was old vintages and we kicked off with a beautifully mature J. Schram 1996, to follow with Cliff Lede Vineyards Elevage Blanc 2007, Cliff Lede's Cabernet Sauvignon 2003, Waterstone Cabernet Sauvignon 2002, Signorello Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Padrone 1997 (their first vintage, from a five-litre bottle, still tight and firm), Beringer Private Reserve 1995 (my star of the evening), Silverado Merlot 1989 and Silverado Cabernet Sauvignon 1984, both from magnums, the latter being very Pauillac in style, to end on a Schramsberg Crémant Demi-Sec 1999. All the wines were superb, all with life ahead of them.

Marimar Torres put on a tasting of 12 Pinot Noirs from the 2009 vintage, all showing robust ripeness and good Pinot character. Here is my ranking in descending order: Hartford Far Coast Vineyard, Sonoma;; Acacia Roberts Road Vineyard, Sonoma; Merry Edwards Olivet Lane Vineyard, Russian River; Williams Selyem Ferrington Vineyard, Anderson Valley; Flowers Camp Meeting Ridge, Sonoma; Dehlinger High Plains, Russian River; Marimar Estate

Christina, Russian River; Marimar Estate La Masia; Lynmar Estate Quail Hill Vineyard Block 10, Russian River; Marimar Estate Mas Cavalls; Marimar Estate Chico's Run; and finally Papapietro Perry Leras Family Vineyard, Russian River. Although the other wines were more expensive, Marimar Torres was disappointed and I was surprised by her lowish ranking, but the quality was overall high and I gave none of her wines less than 16/20. They all tasted very well with her Catalan-inspired lunch.

There were two full days of tasting at Peter Michael, with ten of us around the table, four of the home team, five "Entourage Ambassadors" and myself. Once again, the 2009 vintage was chosen for nine Pinot Noirs all from Sonoma. Here is the group ranking, followed by mine: Peter Michael Clos de Ciel 1/7; Peter Michael Ma Danseuse 2/1; Kistler Cuvée Nathalie 3/4; Kistler Cuvée Catherine 4/5; William Selyem Allen 5/3; Hirsch San Andreas Fault 6/2; Paul Hobbs Lindsay Estate 7/9; Aubert Ritchie 8/6; and Rivers-Marie Occidental Ridge 9/8. Prices ranged from \$125 for Peter Michael's Clos du Ciel down to \$60 for the Hirsch, which I found briary and Burgundian.

The second tasting covered ten Cabernet Sauvignon blends from the 2007 vintage, the only non-Napa wine being that from Peter Michael. Here is the group ranking followed by my own. Shafer Hillside Select 1/2; Peter Michael Les Pavots 2/3; Scarecrow 3/5; Harlan Estate 4/9; Joseph Phelps Backus 5=8; Sloan 5=10; Vineyard 29 Estate 7/7; Colgin IX Estate 8/4; Araujo Eisele 9/1; Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer To Kalon 10/6. Prices ranged from \$500 for Harlan down to \$175 for Peter Michael Les Pavots. Araujo, my top wine, was a mere 14 abv on the label, while the overall winner Shafer was 15.5. Nicolas Morlet, the Peter Michael winemaker, said that most of them were higher than labelled and the analysis showed that Araujo was 14.36, Shafter 16.28 and Vineyard 29, labelled 15.5 was a cracking 16.59. Only the 15.2 on Peter Michael's label corresponded to the analysis. I was told that California law allows an understatement of one full degree of alcohol. In my view, this deceives the public. ■■