

Easy-on-the-wallet red picnic wines

[Catherine Seda](#) Napa Valley Register | Posted: Thursday, September 8, 2011 12:00 am |



The Raymond 2007 Reserve Merlot, \$23, was named one of the top six picnic reds in a recent tasting. It has juicy, sweet cherry fruit, balancing acidity and a very long finish. Photo courtesy of Alan's Studio off Main, St. Helena

Top 3 wines

The following wines were judged the best at the recent St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting, held at the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone in St. Helena:

- Ballentine Vineyards, 2008 old vine zinfandel, \$21.
- Raymond Vineyards, 2007 reserve merlot, \$23.
- Summer Estate Wines, 2008 estate charbono, \$24.

Star/NVV panelists

The following were the panelists at the recent St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting of “Picnic Reds,” \$25 and under.

Brett DeLeuze, ZD Wines

Eric Carpenter, Dean & DeLuca

Vanessa Conlin, St. Helena Wine Center

Sean Scully, The Weekly Calistogan

Kyrsta Scully, Solage

Kristin Belair, Honig Vineyard & Winery

Ted Henry, Jarvis

Catherine Seda, Balzac Communications

Bob Bath, CIA educator

Rudy Zuidema, Sea Fog/The Grade

Wayne Donaldson, Donaldson Wine, LLC

John Skupny, Lang & Reed Wine Co.

Christie Dufault, CIA educator

Michel Champsiex, Swanson Vineyards

Rudy von Strasser, von Strasser Vineyards

Doug Ernst, St. Helena Star

Brandy Leonards, NVV

Napa Valley’s Mediterranean climate and lush environment draw us outdoors through most of the year. That same climate lets our winemakers create rich, powerful wines. When you think of Napa Valley’s sunshine-generous red wines, it is not always easy to choose a wine that won’t overpower many of the foods we tend to bring to our favorite outdoor eating spots — parks, lakes, winery picnic tables and outside musical events.

Not that we aren't thankful for the beauty of Napa Valley's terroir — the diverse soils, proximity to the ocean, valley and peaks, hours of sunshine, and so much more — that let us make the wines we do here. Only in Napa Valley can you make Napa Valley wines. It is just that so many of our reds go well with barbecued foods, red meat and other heartier fare, which are not easily transported for outside dining.

However, there are wine fans that still want a red, no matter the foods before them; and there are Napa Valley wines out there that can pair easily with al fresco dining. The trick is finding the best options.

The Napa Valley Vintners and St. Helena Star Tasting Panel set out to do just this recently, tasting red wines that were \$25 and under — making them as easy on the wallet as they are with easy, outdoor dining.

While there were favorites in each of the flights the panelists tasted (noted below), as a whole they recommend being picky when it comes to choosing a wine for under \$25 that will work well with outdoor dining. Panelists found a number of the wines too high in alcohol or too sweet (too much residual sugar) to enjoy sipping with simple foods.

However, there were some good finds for all kinds of al fresco dining. The top three wines are followed below by the next set of favorites:

• **Raymond Vineyards 2007 Reserve Merlot, \$23**

The Raymond family has been in Napa Valley since 1933. Walt Raymond Sr. married Martha Jane Beringer and worked at the winery for 35 years before putting the Raymond family name on bottles in the 1970s. The winery is now owned by the Boisset Family Estates, who realize the special, historic place the Raymonds established in the Valley. The wine has juicy, sweet cherry fruit, balancing acidity and a very long finish.

• **Summer Estate Wines 2008 Estate Charbono, \$24**

Charbono was one of the early grapes planted in the Napa Valley. Prized for being full-bodied with rich fruit, Charbono can still be found in Napa Valley today, as with this one from Summer Estate. Panelists liked this wine's smooth body, rich blackberry fruit, and black pepper spice. This wine would work well with heartier foods, especially barbecued ribs.

- **Ballentine Vineyards 2008 Old Vine Zinfandel Napa Valley, \$21**

If only so much old vine zinfandel was not uprooted in California to make room for the new king, cabernet sauvignon. Old vine zinfandel can be incredibly deep, complex and delicious, which is how panelists described this wine from Ballentine. A rich, red-berried wine, this would also go well with barbecued ribs or steaks cooked on an open grill.

- **Waterstone 2008 Merlot Napa Valley, \$18**

Waterstone is free of the costs of high maintenance. They purchase grapes through long and dedicated relationships they've built with growers over decades (including Truchard Vineyards), and there is no expensive winery to maintain. This allows them to offer Napa Valley wines at very affordable prices. Their merlot is rich with evident tannins, so heartier foods would go well with this wine.

- **Bennett Lane non-vintage Timeless Red Napa Valley, \$23**

“Non-vintage” means some of the wine blended in was from an earlier year, which is fun for tasters — you get secondary, developed flavors blended in with the new vintage's fruit. Timeless Red is a perfect name, and panelists found this one perfect for a timeless, leisurely lunch. The rich, delicious fruit will go well with charcuterie, sandwiches or heartier fare.

- **Tres Sabores 2008 Red Blend, \$25**

A blend of zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon, petite sirah and petite verdot, the tasting panel appreciated this wine's mouthful of red fruit with balancing acidity. This is another good wine for a wide range of outdoor foods, from sandwiches to barbecue. Tres Sabores' website is one of those rare places that offer you a good combination of history, facts, educational terms and more — all from a small, family-owned winery. Who were the first proponents of the Rutherford appellation? Is Rutherford the size of New York's Central Park? Find out on their website.

If you're looking to pair these wines with heartier fare and take them on the road, you can always sear, then broil a beef tenderloin and serve it cold, thinly sliced with salads, or wrap barbecued ribs in tinfoil for your next outdoor eating adventure. And there is always the most simple of al fresco dining: your very own backyard.

(Catherine Seda is the St. Helena Star's tasting panel writer and works for Balzac Communications & Marketing in Napa. She holds a diploma in wine and spirits from the Wine

& Spirits Education Trust, and enjoys all things wine. Contact her at catseda@gmail.com. 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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