



Sean Scully photos

The lineup for the "aromatic whites" tasting included wines from Swanson, Stag's Leap, Ballentine and Trefethen.

NV wines more than 'King Cab'

STAR/NVV TASTING PANEL REVIEWS TOP WINES OF 2012

By Catherine Seda
and David Stoneberg

FOR THE STAR

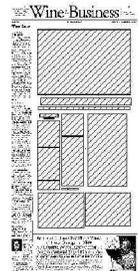
During the last 12 months, the St. Helena Star and Napa Vintners Tasting Panel met each month to review local wines in the Rudd Center at The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. The panelists, mostly Napa Valley winemakers, judge a wide range of wines produced by the Napa Vintners' 430 members. The panel started and ended 2012 by tasting and judging cabernet sauvignons

of different vintages — very fitting, given that cabernet sauvignon is our signature red variety.

In January, panelists found a lot to like from the 2008 vintage of cabernet sauvignon. The wines chosen for this tasting were all single vineyard wines. For those who love to taste the expression of a single vineyard location, names such as To Kalon, Dr. Crane, Stagecoach and Morisoli can conjure up great excitement. One of the first vineyard designated wines in Napa Valley was the

1966 Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, which proved to be so successful, the vineyard owners (Tom and Martha May) and the Heitz family continue their relationship today. (See sidebar for specific wines recommended from each tasting.)

In December, a full crowd tasted and ranked wines that were labeled 100 percent cabernet sauvignon. Most of the panelists decided the designation "100 percent" cabernet sauvignon was not as important as singling out sin-



gle-vineyard wines.

The assessments on the wines 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."

In November the panel also gathered to taste and rank cabernet sauvignons, this time made from grapes grown on the hillsides.

It was not just "King Cab," wines that were selected for review in 2012. Panelists also tasted through current releases of varietals including chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir. There was a tasting of rosé wines made from numerous different varietals.

The panelists also chose their favorite "artisan" wines, aromatic whites and, in October, for the panel's fifth anniversary, affordable reds.

Chardonnay

Styles change like the seasons, and while the creamy, buttery-style chardonnays have their devotees, other winemakers style their wines to be cleaner, crisper and lighter on the palate. And a key component for these wine-stylists is MLF, or malolactic fermentation. A tasting of 16 Napa Valley chardonnays made with low levels of MLF proved that these wines have high levels of complexity and flavor.

Sauvignon blanc

In Napa Valley, we take our sauvignon blanc seriously. It remains the second-most-popular white wine here, and that's no surprise.

It is easy to list the positive attributes of sauvignon blanc: It's aromatic, certainly more so than our other favorite white, chardonnay; the grape is naturally high in acidity, so the wines are crisp and refreshing; we can ripen the grape in Napa Valley to give it lots of fruity flavors or grow it in a cooler spot and bring out the herbaceous zing the grape so eagerly provides; we can leave sauvignon blanc unoaked and let the fruit shine, or round out the mouth feel with the use of neutral oak and lees stirring. We can introduce oak flavors to add complexity to the final wine, and more.

Rosé

Now that people are generally more comfortable with rosé, they are starting to play favorites. Some prefer pale-colored versions that remind them of their sunny vacations in southern France. Others want more substance: darker-colored or fuller-bodied rosés that are closer in style to the red wines they are used to drinking. Still others want their rosés to be refreshing and fruity, nothing more, nothing less.

Luckily, an incredible number of different rosé styles are produced in the Napa Valley, to please almost every wine drinker.

Pinot noir

Pinot noir was the focus of the panel's September tasting. Twenty-four Napa Valley wines from the cur-

rent 2009 and 2010 vintages were tasted, and a defining style emerged. The majority of pinot noirs had rich, ripe red fruits, concentrated flavors, and medium to heavy oak influence.

In a discussion following the blind tasting, panelists discussed pinot noir styles and noted a preference for elegant versions with fresh acidity and balanced oak flavors. Several panelists found many of the Napa Valley wines too concentrated, and the sweet oak flavors a bit in excess. Others found three or four favorites that they would willingly take home and enjoy with dinner.

Artisan wines

A tasting and discussion of artisan wines from Napa Valley set off an explosion of conversation between the panelists, who met in May.

At the outset of discussions, the very definition of "artisan" was challenged. Brett DeLeuze of ZD Wines associates artisan winemaking more with home winemaking. DeLeuze does not see artisan as a positive term and said the goal of ZD from its onset is to produce world-class, not artisan, wines.

As the definition of artisan was explored, the majority of panelists agreed that artisan winemaking could be synonymous to labor-intensive, or hand-crafted wines. It also could be used by a winery making 100 or 30,000 cases; size was not relevant in and of itself.

Regardless of the term used, Kristin Belair of Honig Winery likened the

pursuit of artisan, or fine winemaking, to a connection with a place — people having a connection to the product and understanding the source of the ingredients. Winemaking buzz words such as wild yeast and whole cluster fermentation are used by wineries as a way to tell their story, to show their connection and attention to detail in making their product.

Aromatic whites

As a nation, we are drinking almost as much white as red wine these days. Nielsen, the global leader in consumer purchasing trends, reports red sales just shy of 45 percent in the last year, with whites just a fraction behind.

Chardonnay outsells any other varietal, whether it is red or white, across the nation, but for the country as a whole, Moscato/Muscat and Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris have been outselling sauvignon blanc. In July panelists were eager to taste Napa Valley's versions of Moscato and Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris as well as a collection of other varietals: viogniers, albarinos, rieslings, gewürztraminer, marsanne, roussanne, grenache blanc, semillon, chenin blanc and blends.

Affordable reds

While first time visitors and new residents in Napa Valley may find the area to be expensive at first look, once you get to know the back streets and local favorites for dining and shopping, you start to find top-quality places for less.

Some of the hidden gems include Pacifico Restaurant in Calistoga,

Azteca Market in St. Helena and La Luna Market in Rutherford, each offering tasty Mexican dishes at reasonable prices.

The same goes for local wine finds. When you start to dig in, you will find dozens of wines priced \$25 and less — whites for sure, but also red wines. Merlot to cabernet sauvignon to zinfandel and syrah are all represented, showing that Napa Valley is making a variety of wines in this price category.

Special guests at the Oct. 18 tasting — the fifth anniversary of the panel — were Congressman Mike Thompson, a Blue Dog Democrat who grew up in and calls St. Helena home, and Linda Reiff, executive director of the Napa Valley Vintners.

(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. David Stoneberg is the editor of the St. Helena Star and one of the founders of the tasting panel.)

2008 Tierra Roja Vineyard, Oakville, \$125
2008 Trinchero Napa Valley, Mario's Vineyard, St. Helena, \$60
2009 B Cellars, Synergy, \$65
2009 Cornerstone Cellars, Howell Mountain, \$80

2009 Hunnicutt, Spring Mountain, \$85
2009 Keever Vineyards, Yountville, \$95
2009 Swanson Vineyards, 2009, \$140
2009 V. Sattui, Mt. Veeder, \$49
2010 Oakville Ranch Vineyards, Oakville, \$82

Chardonnays

2009 Caldwell Vineyards, \$40
2009 Ceja Vineyards, \$34
2010 Castello di Amorosa, \$28
2010 Pine Ridge Vineyards, Dijon clones, \$34

Pinot noirs

2009 Artesa Vineyards & Winery, Carneros, \$40
2009 Domaine Chandon, Carneros, \$35
2010 Robert Mondavi Winery, reserve, \$60
2010 Trefethen Family Vineyards, Oak Knoll, \$48

Pine Ridge Vineyards, \$22
Silverado Vineyards, \$25

2011 rosé wines

Caldwell Winery, \$30
Franciscan Estate, \$24
Juslyn Vineyards, \$28
Merryvale Vineyards, \$24

2011 sauvignon blancs

Blackbird Vineyards/Ma(i)sonry, Hudson Vineyard, \$38
Cade Estate Winery, \$26
Crosby Roamann, St. Helena, \$32
Merryvale Vineyards, Juliana Vineyards, \$26
Round Pond Estate, Rutherford, \$24
The Grade Cellars, Sea Fog, Calistoga, \$25
Tyler Florence Wines, \$19.99

Recommendations from the St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting panel

Affordable reds

2008 V. Sattui Winery, cabernet, \$25
2009 Markham Vineyards, merlot blend, \$23
2009 Summers Estate Wines, Charbono, Calistoga, \$24.99
2010 Ca Momi, Rosso di Napa, \$12.95

Aromatic whites

2010 Somerston Wine Company, Grenache blanc, \$20
2010 Swanson Vineyards, Pinot Grigio, Oakville, \$21
2011 Ballentine Vineyards, Chenin Blanc, Pocaí Vineyard, \$17
2011 Hill Family Estate, Albarino, Carneros, \$28
2011 Stags Leap Winery, Viognier, \$20
2011 Trefethen Family Vineyards, Riesling, Oak Knoll District, \$22

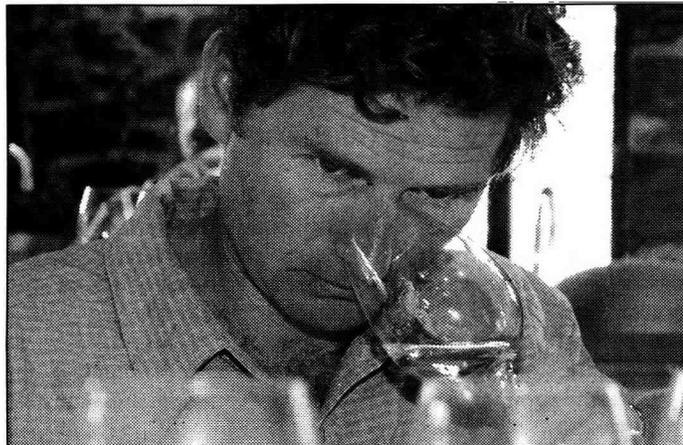
Artisan wines

2007 Elyse Winery, Grenache, Carneros, \$37
2008 Jarvis Will's Science Project, \$105
2009 La Jota Winery Cabernet Franc, \$75
2009 Alpha Omega Winery, ERA, Red Blend, \$195
2010 Franciscan Estate, Chardonnay, Carneros, \$40
2010 Oakville Ranch Vineyards, Field Blend, \$38

Cabernet sauvignons

2008 B Cellars, Dr. Crane Vineyard, St. Helena, \$125
2008 B Cellars, To Kalon Vineyards, Oakville, \$145
2008 Bennett Lane Winery, Calistoga, \$125
2008 Bialla Vineyards, Atlas Peak, \$125
2008 Ceja Vineyards, \$50
2008 Hess Collection, Mt. Veeder, \$48
2008 Raymond Vineyards, Generations, \$100
2008 Rios Wine Company, Rutherford, \$75
2008 Silverado Vineyards, Stags Leap District, \$90

See **RECOMMEND**, Page A6



Nile Zacharie from David Arthur Vineyards helped the St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners panel rate a number of local sauvignon blancs.



Allison Crary from Sterling Vineyards evaluates a hillside cabernet sauvignon during a November tasting.



Sean Scully photo

In July, panelists tasted a number of rosés, which ranged in color from light pink to dark red.