

Diner's Journal

The New York Times Blog on Dining Out

Cabernets Like Cabernets Should Be

By Eric Asimov August 19, 2008



(PHOTO: THOR SWIFT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

I know I said I was taking a vacation, and I will. But I feel compelled to offer a few more thoughts before I disappear through Labor Day.

Frankly, I've barely been able to contain myself since I returned from my Napa Valley trip in July thoroughly excited about Napa cabernet. This is not my usual position. The prevailing Napa style of plush, oak-laden overwhelmingly fruity and powerful cabernets is simply not for me, no matter how high these wines are rated or how much acclaim they receive.

But on my trip I explored another world of Napa cabernet that you rarely hear about these days, a world with a direct connection to the historical underpinning of cabernet sauvignon as a table wine of balance, grace and unexpected subtlety. These include great wines redolent of violets, irises and lavender that are frequently derided these days as old-fashioned, rustic or somehow under ripe or ungenerous. Nothing could be farther from the truth. My column is on what I found in Napa and why I think these wines are so good.

As is so often the case with a piece like this, the physical newspaper offers just enough space to scratch the surface, so I want to offer a few more thoughts and some background on the column.

I've long felt that Napa cabernet today is a style that has been pushed too far, with flavors so overwhelming and alcohol often so high that the wines no longer have a place on the table with food. I've likened it to California chardonnay in the 1990s, which became so extravagant, oaky

and buttery that it became a turnoff for a lot of people. The pendulum had swung so far in one direction that it was time for a reversal.

Today, many California chardonnay producers are making wines in a leaner, crisper style. The extravagant California chardonnays are still available to people who like that style, but the choices are more diverse and the historical producers who excel in more structured chardonnays, like Mount Eden Vineyards, Hanzell Vineyards, and Stony Hill Vineyard are receiving more recognition for what they had always done so well.

I expect that such a reversal will happen in Napa cabernet, and in California pinot noir, for that matter. I spoke to a lot of Napa cabernet producers who, in fact, spoke hopefully of the pendulum already swinging. But when it came to specifics, there were few if any. And why should there be? These cabernets that I find so overwhelming still get very high ratings and sell out at high prices. What's the incentive to change? I haven't heard about an Anything But Cabernet crowd, though to be honest, the wine hipsters who hate Bordeaux don't even talk about Napa cabernet, so far is it outside the realm of what they would actually consider drinking.

Even if I didn't find people who were changing their style, I found plenty of Napa producers who were making balanced, restrained cabernets all along. Some were once acclaimed, like Mayacamas, but are today looked on condescendingly. Others are famous in their own right, like Dominus Estate, but nonetheless may not readily come to mind when thinking of Napa's best cabernets (though to be fair, Robert M. Parker Jr., for one, has certainly given Dominus the respect I think it's due). But most nowadays largely operate under the radar, popular with their clients but not always recognized for the quality of their wines. I'm thinking of producers like Frog's Leap, Corison, Smith-Madrone, Forman, and Clos du Val, just to name a few. I'm sure far more of these producers than I've mentioned in my column are around.

While I'm grouping these wineries together, it should be recognized that they are all different sizes, with different budgets, different philosophies and different business plans. Clos du Val, for example, is a commercial operation that makes a style of cabernet that I like. I think the quality of the wines is very good, but if Clos du Val had the sort of uncompromising commitment to quality of many boutique operations, the wines could be so much better. But then the prices would be higher, and there would be less wine to go around.

By contrast, John Kongsgaard, is kind of the ultimate boutique producer, making small amounts of wine with great care and spare-no-expense effort. With the 2005 vintage, he's begun to make small quantities of cabernet sauvignon that I think is exquisite. It's not a little wine – the alcohol is probably 14.5 percent to 15 percent – but it has all the wonderful qualities of a balanced, elegant cabernet, with aromas of violets and a touch of the herbal. Above all, it is dry, with none of the heavy, syrupy sweetness or pruniness that makes so many Napa cabs today so clunky.

Kongsgaard's history is really interesting. Even though the '05 is the first cabernet he's made under his own label, he's been making cabernet for years. He was the winemaker at Newton from 1983 to 1995 and, he says, he and Zelma Long, who was the winemaker at Simi, were the first in Napa Valley to hire Michel Rolland as a consultant.

Rolland, of course, has been vilified as the wine consultant behind many of these ultra-fruity cabernets, but Kongsgaard defends him as someone who simply helps his clients achieve their goals.

“He’s generous, and he’s more restrained than most of his clients,” Kongsgaard told me. “He’s completely not a dictator. He helps people realize what they want – this fashion is what people want.”

One of Rolland’s crucial points was advising clients to look at seed and tannin ripeness as opposed to sugar levels in deciding when to pick. Back in the 1980s it was common to harvest cabernet sauvignon when it reached 23 or 24 on the brix scale of sweetness. With Rolland’s help, Kongsgaard said, he began to harvest at 25 or 26 brix. Now, as the amount of sugar increases in grapes, the level of acidity declines, and consequently the pH rises. In the 1980s it was not uncommon for cabernet sauvignon wines to have a pH of around 3.3 or 3.4. Harvesting the grapes riper boosted the pH to levels of 3.6 to 3.8, Kongsgaard said. (Incidentally, those older pH values were not always natural. More than a few winemakers back then acidified their wines, even though they were picking at lower levels of ripeness, believing the wines needed to have more acidity and a lower pH to age properly.)

But Kongsgaard says that the prevailing style of Napa cabernet has pushed this thinking too far. Many of these wines are made from grapes harvested at 30 brix or above, and have a pH of more than 4.0.

“It’s an old story – the students of the people in the vanguard have to be farther out than the leaders,” he said. “A lot are over 4.0 – they don’t have the energy. They’re broader and more syrupy, which is very attractive to the 30 brix guys.”

Almost all the cabernet producers I really like feel that the potential to age is a crucial quality in the wines they make, but few of them, apart from Bob Travers of Mayacamas, are willing to assert that their wines need a few years of aging before they can be enjoyed. Most people believe that consumers and, especially, restaurants, where they do much of their business, are not willing to age wines before they sell them or open them. Anybody who’s been to a steakhouse recently with a wine list full of California cabernets from the 2003 and 2004 vintage knows this to be a fact.

“The reality is, they have to be able to be enjoyed right away,” said Dawnine Dyer, who, with her husband Bill, makes small quantities of balanced, delicious cabernet from the Diamond Mountain District under the Dyer label. “If you knew how quickly people drink wine, and how quickly restaurants sell it....”

One thing that has always bothered me about the California wine industry is how disparaging it is of its past. Oh, of course there are exceptions. Everybody today will talk about how great and influential Robert Mondavi was, and deservedly so. But these same people will dismiss Mayacamas or Chateau Montelena as “Old School.” They know all about who got 100 points in Wine Spectator, though they don’t know anything about Mount Eden or Stony Hill. They may never have heard of André Tchelistcheff. What’s new and trendy seems always more interesting than what’s proven over time.

I think many of the wines that I love have a clear connection to the history of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, literally and figuratively. Some are classics, and some are making classic-style wines. Either way, they are worthy of more respect.