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The best Napa Valley wines from 2016

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Tim Carl photo

Panelist Scott Sublet is seen through glasses of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon in the Ecolab Theater at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone.

For the past nine years, the St. Helena Star, Napa Valley Vintners and the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone have teamed up to create a tasting panel to judge Napa Valley wines.

The panel is made up of winemakers, assistant winemakers and those in the trade, all of whom taste the wines blind and judge and rank them. The panel is held monthly and the results are published in the St. Helena Star.

In the past year, we have gathered and tasted a large group of wines, different varietals each month, in flights of the same vintage. Each 2014 sauvignon blanc, for example, was tasted against another 2014 sauvignon blanc, regardless of producer or price.

At the end of the tasting, panelists discuss the wines and that becomes the basis for the article in the St. Helena Star. The writer is Catherine Bugue, who loves writing about and drinking wine. She is co-owner of the Napa Valley Wine Academy with Christian Oggenfuss.

2014-2015 Rosé

In March, the panelists gathered for a tasting of 21 rosé wines from the 2014 and 2015 vintages. Bugue writes, "Given the ease with which a glass of rosé is consumed on a warm, sunny day, it would stand to reason that its winemaking is just as simple and carefree, don't you think?" Her answer, in a word, no. From Doug Boesch, "Managing the alcohol and fruit is a lot of work; you have to really manage the phenolics so you can make a fresh, fruity wine."

Bugue adds, "Warmth and sunlight translate to ripe grapes full of sugar at harvest and the higher the sugars, the higher the resulting alcohol when the wine is fermented to a dry style."

2014 sauvignon blancs

The following month, Napa Valley sauvignon blancs were served, all from the 2014 vintage. Bugue notes that the sauvignon blancs weren't as oaky as they had been in the past, and the wines showed a noticeable richness on the palate, giving the wines some gravitas. Bugue notes the sauvignon blanc grape has been planted in the Napa Valley for more than a century and Beaulieu won gold awards for their sauvignon blanc in 1915 at the International Expo in San Francisco.

2015 sauvignon blancs

In early May, the panelists tasted the 2015 sauvignon blancs, which impressed them. Long-time panelist Kristin Belair, winemaker at Honig Vineyard & Winery, has been making sauvignon blanc for almost two decades in the Napa Valley. She has seen vast improvements over the years and called the 2015 vintage "really well balanced; a lovely expression of sauvignon blanc with different styles from floral to riper fruits."

Another longtime panelist, John Skupny, co-owner of Lang & Reed, said, "There is a real diversity of fruit flavors and the aromatics are fresh."

2014-2015 Aromatic whites

In late June, panelists enjoyed a variety of aromatic whites that weren't chardonnay, the largest portion of white grapes planted in the Napa Valley, or sauvignon blanc, the second-most-planted white grape.

Bugue writes, "With small plantings and price tags ranging from \$12.50 to \$36, Napa Valley's aromatic whites provide two things that almost never go together: rare and affordable." She added that wineries make small amounts of various aromatic whites for numerous reasons, including existing plantings, love of a variety, something fun for club members or for sale exclusively at the winery.

Following the blind tasting, panelists expressed a preference for the 2015 wines, finding them "more varietal, fresher, brighter and balanced" in the words of CIA instructor Christie Dufault.

2013-2014 chardonnay



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In mid-July as temperatures soared, the panel convened in the Rudd Center at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone and sampled three vintages (2013, 2014 and 2015) of Napa Valley chardonnay. Bugue said it was clear that winemakers were going the extra mile, crafting wines with great complexity and texture.

Brett deLeuze, president of family-owned ZD Wines, said "The wines display really good winemaking. Across the board they are really well made, well balanced. Stylistic choices were made (regarding oak use, malolactic fermentation, etc.) but they were all good." Others noted the wines were food-friendly, balanced and restrained with the fruit shining through.

2012-2014 pinot noirs

Next up were three flights of 2012, 2013 and 2014 pinot noirs. Bryter Estates winemaker Kari Auringer and Hugh Davies both noticed a change in pinot noirs from the past when they were deep colored, dark berried, full bodied, concentrated with generous oak flavors, tannins and alcohol.

Auringer said, "I used to think of Napa pinots as cabernet-lovers' pinots. Now, they are pinot-lovers' pinots."

Davies, of both Schramsberg and Davies Vineyards, said the wine variety continues to evolve and added there are many young or new plantings of pinot noir vines in the cool Carneros region. He added there are new opportunities with a diversity of clones bringing a broader range of flavors, generally lower yields and more money spent in the vineyards, which is reflected in the wines.

2011 cabernet sauvignons

In mid-October as the grape harvest was nearing an end, panelists enjoyed a retrospective tasting of 5-year-old cabernet sauvignons from 2011, a cool year with a cool summer followed by fall rains. The weather was less than ideal for vineyard crews and winemakers, but they are trained to make great wine, with premier education and top equipment, no matter what. Alan Viader of Viader Vineyards & Winery said he prefers wines that respect the vintage. "Some of the wines embraced a floral or spicy component or a freshness, green brightness," he said. "Others, picked after the rains, were pushed beyond balance, past the threshold."

2011-2014 merlot

Panelists judged "the quiet powerhouse," merlots in mid-November and picked nine out of 25 wines either in first or second place. Bugue reports that merlot is the second-most important, and planted, red grape in the Napa Valley with 4,749 acres in 2015. It brings in an average of \$3,135 per ton for a total value of just shy of \$44 million.

Additionally, she writes, "It is one tough grape. It tolerates and even thrives in soils too poor or too moist or too cold for cabernet sauvignon. It can achieve sugar levels that give its wines up to a full 1 percent more alcohol than cabernet sauvignon. It has a fuller mid-palate and fleshiness, which makes it a great companion for cab blends."

The winners in the flights, 2011 through 2014, ranged in price from \$19.99 to \$75.

2012-2014 cabernet sauvignons

For the longest time, cabernet sauvignon has been the "king of the hill" in the Napa Valley. The Star/NVV panelists had the opportunity to taste the most expensive cabernets, ranging from \$85 to \$325, in early December.

After two cool and wet growing seasons, winemakers welcomed the ideal seasons of 2012 and 2013. Longtime Napa Valley vintner Tom Rinaldi said the 2013 vintage was "going along beautifully, like music, when all of a sudden it turned magic." He added it was not hurried and crop levels were balanced by moderate temperatures.

Calistoga vintner Bill Dyer of both Dyer Vineyard and Meteor Wines called the 2013s the best vintage since 1985. That vintage is being called "epic."

Stacy Vogel, winemaker at Miner Wines, said overall the wines were still very youthful and adds she sees the 2012s peaking and aging faster than the 2013s.

Star/NVV panelists' favorite wines of 2016

The top rosés

- Ideology Cellars 2014, \$25
- Stags' Leap Winery 2014 Amparo, \$27
- Blackbird Vineyards 2015 Arriviste, \$25
- Fortunati Vineyards 2015 Pranzo Rosé of Syrah, Oak Knoll District, \$24
- Luna Vineyards 2015 Minuet, \$32
- Paradigm Winery 2015 Rosé, \$28

2014 sauvignon blancs

- Alpha Omega, 1155, \$66
- B Cellars, Juliana Vineyard, \$38
- Broman Cellars, \$22
- Coquerel Family Wine Estates, Le Petit Coquerel, \$22
- Duckhorn Vineyards, \$29
- Honig Vineyard & Winery, Reserve, \$28
- Juslyn Vineyards, \$30

2015 sauvignon blancs

- Honig Vineyard & Winery, \$18
- Rombauer Vineyards, \$24
- St. Supery Estate Vineyards & Winery, \$22
- Three Clicks Wines, \$24
- Varozza Vineyards, St. Helena, \$25
- Yao Family Wines, \$32

2014-2015 Aromatic whites

- Fortunati Vineyards 2014 Estate Viognier, \$32
- Hill Family Estate 2014 Albarino, \$28
- Artesa 2015 Albariono, \$28
- Benessere 2015 Pinot Grigio, \$22
- Galerie 2015 Riesling Terracea, \$30
- Hagafen 2015 White Riesling, \$24

2013-2014 chardonnay

- Anderson's Conn Valley Vineyards, 2013, \$50
- Grgich Hills Estate 2013 Paris Tasting Commemorative, \$93
- Baldacci Family Vineyards, 2014 Sorelle, \$38
- Close Pegase 2014 Mitsuko's Vineyard, \$30
- Frank Family Vineyards, 2014, \$35
- JAX Vineyards 2014 JAX Y3, \$20
- O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery, 2014, \$50
- Pine Ridge Vineyard 2014 Dijon Clones, \$38

2012-2014 pinot noirs

- Schermeister Cellars 2012 Paladini Vineyard, \$47
- Trefethen Family Vineyards 2013, \$45
- Anicen 2014 Mink Vineyard, \$48
- Davies Vineyards 2014 Hyde, \$55
- Renteria Family Wines 2014 Brown Ranch, \$105
- Saintsbury 2014 Lee Vineyard, \$54
- ZD Wines 2014, \$50

2011 cabernet sauvignons

- Bougetz Cellars Eminence, \$60
- Burgess Cellars, \$44
- ERBA, \$90
- Gallica, \$150
- JAX Vineyards, \$50
- Pellet Estate, \$85
- Uproot Wines, \$78
- V Sattui Winery Paradiso Red Blend, \$125

2011-2014 merlot

- Jericho Canyon Vineyard 2011 Block 16, \$75
- Coho Wines 2012 Michael Black Vineyard, \$55
- Judd's Hill 2012 Swin Vineyard, \$42
- Cornerstone Cellars 2013, \$75

- Keenan Winery 2013 Mailbox Vineyard, \$40
- PEJU 2013, \$35
- Rombauer Vineyards 2013, \$35
- Ballentine Vineyards 2014 Estate, \$32
- Ca'Momi 2014, \$19.99
- 2012-2014 cabernet sauvignons**
- Bryter Estates 2012 Inspired, \$125
- Davis Estates 2012 Zephyr, \$85
- Anderson's Conn Valley Vineyards 2013, \$85
- Nellcote 2013 Rallye 76, \$325
- Patland Estate Vineyards 2013, \$110
- Yao Family Wines 2013 Family Reserve, \$225
- B Cellars 2014 Star Vineyard, \$115
- Charthia Cellars 2014, \$85

Currents



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