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Sauvignon blanc's continuing evolution

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There's a variety of wine and food events in the upper Napa Valley in the next few weeks, including a Kentucky Derby party at St. Helena's Duckhorn Vineyards on Lodi Lane.

Sauvignon blanc has been in the Napa Valley for well over a century. Gustave Niebaum planted it at Inglenook in the 1880s; Georges de LaTour chose the grape when he entered into the production side of the business in 1902; and Beaulieu won gold awards for theirs in 1915 at the International Expo in San Francisco.

It would be a long time before varietal labeling would become a mainstay, and many of the earlier sauvignon blancs were labeled "Sauterne" after the well-known sweet sauvignon blanc blends from Bordeaux's Sauternes region. According to Charles Sullivan in "Napa Wine: A History," H.W. Crabb, Eshcol (now Trefethen) and Larkmead each made a Sauterne wine (dropping the final "s" of the French region's name).

After Repeal, plantings of sauvignon blanc beat those of chardonnay in the state, although much of it was used for the jug wines that were popular at the time.

While chardonnay would win out in the end as the most planted white grape in Napa Valley, sauvignon blanc holds steady as second in demand. The wine's popularity sprung from the oft-told story of Robert Mondavi's Fume Blanc.

Picking up on the fact that France's Pouilly-Fumé was popular with wine consumers, Mondavi created a dry sauvignon blanc and incorporated "fume" into its name to communicate the varietal and style connection between the two wines.

With its long history in the Napa Valley, there comes a broad evolution of sauvignon blanc styles: from sweet to jug wine blends to crisply dry. Not only were the wines sweeter historically, but heavily oaked as well. Oak and sugar were used to combat the unripe and overly green flavors that would often appear in the varietal wines in the late 1970s and 1980s. Once growers started to pay more attention to the vines – such as opening up vine canopies to let the fruit ripen past the greener stage, consumers started to pay more attention to the variety.

Generous oak influence continued nonetheless, often dominating or equaling the riper stone and tropical fruit flavors in the wines. In the last two years, however, members of the St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel have noted a change in that general style.

In their monthly review of the region's wines at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, panelists tasted 23 sauvignon blanc wines from the 2014 vintage. The clear majority of the wines did not have oak-influenced flavors of toast, fennel, vanilla or other baking spices. Those

that did, for the most part, showed a more seamless integration of the oak flavors in the overall flavor profile.

David Stevens of boutique retailer 750 Wines in St. Helena called the sauvignon blancs “really restrained, just a few dominated by oak; they showed really well.”

Morgan Maureze with Arietta and Marciano wines agreed, seeing a trend: The vintage “wasn’t as oaky as has been.”

Still, as Bill Dyer of Dyer Vineyard and Meteor Vineyard pointed out, “a range of styles was seen from Marlborough to Sancerre to Graves. In this valley, we can do pretty much anything.”

What varied most for panelists were the sweetness perception of the wines, the acidity levels, and their varying fruit flavors. One common thread across the wines was the texture — a noticeable richness on the palate gave the wines some gravitas.

Prices ranged from \$18 to \$66 a bottle, and the panelists’ favorites include:

Alpha Omega, 1155 Sauvignon blanc, Napa Valley (\$66). Rich pear fruit, lemon zest and an undertone of white floral mingle in this richly bodied sauvignon blanc.

B Cellars, Juliana Vineyard Sauvignon blanc, Napa Valley (\$38). A sip of rich, ripe pear fruit with notes of lemon citrus.

Broman Cellars Sauvignon blanc, Napa Valley (\$22). A full-bodied, refreshing wine combining vibrant lemon citrus, and peach and pear stone fruit with a hint of dried herb complexity.

Coquerel Family Wine Estates, Le Petit Coquerel, Napa Valley (\$22). A French winemaker coaxes zesty orange citrus and fresh spring grass aromas from this zesty sauvignon blanc.

Duckhorn Vineyards Sauvignon blanc, Napa Valley (\$29). White blossom and orange citrus flavors dominate on this rich bodied sauvignon blanc.

Honig Vineyard & Winery, Reserve Rutherford Sauvignon blanc (\$28). Juicy lemon citrus, pear, white blossom and a hint of fresh grass combine forces in this refreshing summer wine.

Juslyn Vineyards Sauvignon blanc, Napa Valley (\$30). A richer, denser mouth feel comes with ripe stone fruits and white blossom flavors.

(Catherine Bugue, the Star's tasting panel columnist, loves writing about — and drinking — wine. You can contact Catherine at catbugue@gmail.com. Only wines from Napa Valley Vintner member wineries are accepted and tasted. 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.)

Top 2014 Napa Valley 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 Rutherford, \$28

Juslyn Vineyards, \$30

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