

Wine Stories Behind PNV 2016

CATHERINE BUGUE | Feb 23, 2016
Photos by David Stoneberg/Star

Marisa Finetti writes up her notes for the St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting panel at midday Saturday after tasting 18 of the 226 auction lots that were part of Premiere Napa Valley.

Winemaker Elias Fernandez, left, was showing off Shafer Vineyards' 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon from its hillside Sunspot Vineyard during the barrel tasting that is part of Premiere Napa Valley. With him is Doug Shafer, who was chairman of the event for the Napa Valley Vintners.

Sharing a lighter moment on Saturday morning are Linda Reiff, president and CEO of the Napa Valley Vintners, David Duncan of Silver Oak Cellars, center, and Richard Ward, co-founder of Saintsbury. The Premiere Napa Valley lot for the winery was its 2015 Pinot Noir.

Jimmy Kawalek was pouring Ancien's 2013 Pinot Noir during the barrel tasting on Saturday morning at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. Taking notes on the wine is Marisa Finetti.

The bidders' paddles have been stored away; the Hall of Famers are once again the centerpiece of The Culinary Institute of America's historic barrel room; and we trust the region's winemakers have caught up on all of the emails that were left unread while their special guests were in town.

The Napa Valley Vintners' weeklong trade event, Premiere Napa Valley 2016, has officially ended.



While the special Premiere wines will be sent off into the marketplace after further aging, what remains here in Napa Valley is even more powerful: the vineyards, the people, and the stories behind the rare Premiere lots created especially for this event.

Premiere wines tell a hundred stories: of something personal, such as a vintner's favorite vineyard spot; of a signature flavor profile; or of an occurrence that has had an impact on the vintner, the winery, or perhaps something even larger. When vintners choose the wine they will craft for Premiere, that wine itself becomes the storyteller.



The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel gathered at Saturday's barrel tasting event and its members spread throughout the CIA barrel room, each reviewing a portion of all 226 Premiere wines. Members tasted, and listened, and then chose a wine that best spoke to them of the wines behind Premiere Napa Valley 2016. Which wines were the best storytellers? Tasting Panel Members chose the following:

This author, Catherine Bugue, chose Grgich Hills Estate 40th anniversary Judgment of Paris Chardonnay in a nod to the 1976 Paris tasting's profound effect on the Napa Valley wine industry. Through this competitive old-vs.-new world tasting, the world finally caught on to the fact that Napa Valley was producing premium wines that could compete – and win — against some of the best wines in the world.

Meadowood Wine Writer Symposium Fellow Marisa Finetti chose Ancien's "Cendres à l'Océan" (ashes and ocean) 2015 Pinot Noir by proprietor and winemaker Ken Bernards, explaining that the wine "elegantly fuses the mystery of the ocean seabed soils of Carneros with the rugged and powerful volcanic ash of Coombsville. Both vineyards are planted with heirloom cuttings, and like the power of life-long friendship based on love and respect for each other's unique characteristics, the wine blends power and complexity with ethereal and bright fruit flavors."

Rosemary Cakebread's Gallica Cabernet Sauvignon from her certified organic estate vineyard in St. Helena is the choice of 750 Wines boutique retailer David Stevens. Rosemary has "hit this one out of the park," said David, adding that the wine's aromatics are complex, ranging from bright red fruit to hints of vanilla and caramel with a firm yet viscous texture and a long, lingering finish.

Wine writer Jonathan Cristaldi's favorite was the Alpha Omega 2014 "Dr. To Kalon." The "dazzling fruit profile" from the combination of two Andy Beckstoffer vineyards – Dr. Crane and To Kalon — "and the seamless integration of winemaker Jean Hoefliger's oak regime" struck Jonathan most. Jonathan, who writes for numerous wine publications, including Tasting Panel and SOMM Journal, is also editor in chief at the Napa Valley Wine Academy. He summed up a long list of enticing aromas and flavors by saying "Alpha Omega shines, with its components in perfect harmony."

Vintner Michael Beaulac of Pine Ridge chose the blend of Howell Mountain and Mount Veeder fruit in the O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery's 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon. Michael found great depth and structure to the dark-fruited mountain wine crafted by winemaker and President Sean Capioux.

Monica Stevens, founder of Jameson Animal Rescue and co-owner of St. Helena retailer 750 Wines, cheered Jill and Steve Matthiasson's first foray into Premiere Napa Valley, saying the **Matthiasson "Three Sisters" 2014 Red Wine** is "a terrific wine to premier Premiere with." Monica appreciated the blend of not only three AVAs, but three varieties, and the resulting elegance and balance of this Three Sisters wine. The lot, she explained, "embodies the true spirit of Napa Valley: great people; innovative thinking – and beautiful wine." Beginners' luck, she reflects? Not likely.

Napa Valley Register Editor Sean Scully picked the **Spoto Family Wines 2014 "Intentionally Unintentional" Red Wine**, crafted by Stuart Spoto, saying "it takes courage to bring a non-cabernet sauvignon wine to Premiere." The cabernet franc and malbec blend is a "fun, playful, fruity and drinkable wine that can age — and a welcome diversion from the usual Napa County wine."

The **Quixote Winery 2014 Petite Sirah** from the Stags Leap District won over Peju's winemaker Sara Fowler as the "most interesting" of her lots to review. "For a 100 percent petite sirah (also 100 percent organic and 100 percent new oak), it was very approachable, elegant and balanced with nice fruit," Sara said. Winemaker is Aaron Pott.

Saying if she was going to bid, this would be her choice, vintner Kari Auringer chose **Corison Winery's 2014 Premiere Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** for its "elegant and restrained pure cabernet sauvignon characteristics." Expecting the wine to age gracefully, Kari continued, "If I had a crystal ball, this is going to be stunning." The wine blends all four of Cathy Corison's cabernet sauvignon plots, including the famed Kronos vineyard – only and especially for the Premiere lot wine.

For Meadowood Wine Writer Symposium Fellow Bill Ward, it was the **Galerie 2015 Riesling** "amidst a sea of seriously impressive cabernets (Chateau Boswell, Herb Lamb) and pinot noirs (Acacia, Ca Momi), that stood out. The riesling "was not only a brilliant expression of a grape that thrives on Spring Mountain," but Bill explained, "It is a bold wine that evoked (yes) mountain flowers and an almost Alpine purity."

Vintner Doug Boeschen of Boeschen Vineyards chose the **Hiatus Cellars 2014 "Foundation" Cabernet Sauvignon**. Winemaker Steve Reynolds blended cabernet sauvignon from the winery's three vineyard sources —adding in merlot and cabernet franc for seasoning — while also fermenting the wine in three different ways: tank, bin and barrel. Doug calls the resulting wine "soft and structured; well-crafted."

Chimney Rock vintner Elizabeth Vianna's top wine was the Oakville East Exposure 2014 "Majek" Cabernet Franc, saying, "Not only was it beautifully made: floral, rich and balanced, but it was also refreshing to taste a hillside cabernet franc." The wine, Elizabeth continued, "stood out as graceful and pretty." The cabernet franc comes from what the winery calls "magic mountain" and is made by Head Winemaker Marie-Laure Ammons.

Meadowood Wine Writer Symposium Fellow Xania Woodman provided this quip: "This is what happens when you begin with pristine, premier fruit and treat it well, allowing it to be the star of the show," when choosing the BRYTER Estates 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemaker Kari Auringer and team chose from its favorite barrels of Andy Beckstoffer's famed Georges III Vineyard in Rutherford to make this wine.

The wines of Premiere Napa Valley are not reserved solely for Premiere attendees. These rare and highly collectible Premiere wines, both from 2016 and from years past, are just a click away. For more details, visit PremiereNapaWines.com.