As we complete our fortieth year of existence and head into the next forty, it is fitting that this year has seen some of the finest wines yet produced in California. This Issue not only brings the seasonal releases of Cabernet Sauvignon front and center but also reviews and recommends our favorite wines of the year. This is the season for celebration and everything about this Issue joins in the party. Our annual look at the best bubbies from Champagne adds to our coverage of California’s ever-improving sparkling wines, and whether one is looking for an everyday, reasonably priced bottling, which means, in our humble opinion, turning first to California, or wants the best available, you will find plenty of bubbles from both sides of the Atlantic to make you happy with the fizz.

Year In Review this year breaks new ground of sorts. Not only do we commend Sauvignon Blanc, of the 2012 vintage, to you as one of the year’s most exciting tasting surprises, but we have chosen and heartily call your attention to our Winery Of The Year: Daou Vineyards & Winery from Paso Robles. It is too easy to dismiss Paso Robles as the home of wines whose ripeness has gotten ahead of their fruit. Daou is proving otherwise, and it is joined by both established wineries like J. Lohr and Adelaida and newcomers like Proulx, Epoch, Law and Hammersky in writing a new and exciting chapter in the evolution of wines from that area.

**Cabernet Sauvignon**

These are both heady and tricky days for California’s leading variety. The wines from the exceptional 2009 year are mostly delivered by now, yet a few more are finding their ways to market and they continue the march to greatness. Things are little less clear with the new 2010s. To be sure, there is no shortage of interesting wines from this vintage, but it is also clear that some old favorites are either a bit off their best pace or have slipped from greatness. Middling vintages do that to wine regardless of how hard one tries to balance crop loads and hand selects bunches of grapes for the top wines.

**Champagne**

Perhaps it is the party animals in us, but we have never given up our great love of Champagne over the years, and even as the vagaries of currency fluctuation have made French bubbies somewhat too dear, there is no question that there are lots of treats to be had. And at the fancy end of the quality spectrum, the French simply offer so many more choices than we can muster here.

**Year in Review**

Vintages come and vintages go. Producers’ fortunes rise and they fall. And it is in those changing story lines that the fun and excitement of being a wine enthusiast lives most clearly. Some of us are always on the hunt for the next big thing while others are carefully seeking out the newest and the best of the leading varieties. As one wag put it recently, “there is a reason why varieties like Cabernet and Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc are so popular and have remained so. People like them.” Year In Review is never wed to one drummer, and so it is this year in which grapes like Grenache Blanc join the list of exciting things to come our way.
Cabernet Sauvignon

There is a notion that winewriters lead glamorous, laid-back lives that come close to living in Tahiti or somewhere soft, beautiful and lovely like that. It is not true most of the time. This is journalism, and like all forms of journalism, it has its hard work, its low pay and its lack of fame for most of us. Even yours truly, who at least control our own platform, spend most of our days in dark rooms with glasses of unknown liquid in front of us trying to tell plonk from pleasure. It could be worse, of course, but rarely do we get the royal treatment. So, it was our singular joy to be invited to one of the beautiful houses to mingle with the beautiful people the other day. It was a working event, but what an event. As one person at our table noted, we could as easily be in Tuscany as in the Napa Valley. Great food, old wines going back into the 1970s and 1960s, three generations of a most gracious wine family. Yes, if it was not glamorous, it was at least a little decadent.

But, it was a working event. And while we spent a fair bit of time drinking and hearing stories of the industry stretching back almost 100 years, it did require a fair bit of attention. And in due time, the topic turned to wine. We sat at a table with a member of the hosting family. He had just created his own hillside winery complete with expensive choices of fermenters, barrels, hard to work land that sits above the fog line and produces, if our dinner mate and our ratings of the first few vintages are to believed, great wine in most years. Well, “what about the valley floor?” quoth we, knowing that he had lots of experience in an earlier life making valley floor wines.

The valley, he opined, would make good to great wines in good to great years, but it was too given to producing big crops, and even the best of those sites could sacrifice quality for quantity in less than stellar years. He described a vineyard manager of one of those most holy of valley sites who was affectionately known in the biz as something like “Ten-Ton Tony” because he bragged he could get ten tons to the acre, if he wanted to, from places with deep soils and accommodating exposures. Our friend compared the more normal four to six tons an acre to his two to three tons an acre by way of explaining why his site was more consistent than most of the flatter, lower sites. Well, we are not ones to argue with the man who makes great wine. But, we did ask, or perhaps suggest, that even in the weaker vintages, the great sites, when properly managed (meaning not by Ten-Tony Tony) would likely come through because the wineries would make careful picking selections in the vineyard and also in the wineries in grape handling and lot selection for the final blends.

We think we see this pattern in the Cabernets of 2010, for instance. In a great vintage, say 2007 or 2009, there tends to be pretty good quality across the board. Not every vineyard or every winery succeeds even in great years, but more succeed in those years than in lesser years when no amount of care can overcome the lack of quality material coming into the winery. 2010 looks to be one of those years when greatness is possible at the expensive, hand-managed, best vineyards end of the spectrum. It is less successful elsewhere because more sites than not are not great sites. And with wines of varying quality in 2010, more care needs to be taken in what we buy than in those wonderful years.

### Tasting Note Legend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTSTANDING WINES</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS &amp; TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD</th>
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<tr>
<td>THREE STARS: (95-98 points) An exceptional wine. Worth a special search of the market.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Soft and fruity wine. Quaffable by itself or with light foods." /></td>
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<tr>
<td>TWO STARS: (91-94 points) A highly distinctive wine. Likely to be memorable.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Crisp white. Medium acid and dry. Fish or delicate flavored foods." /></td>
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<tr>
<td>ONE STAR: (87-90 points) Fine example of a type or style of wine. Without notable flaws.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Mellow white. Dry to slightly sweet. Enough acid for white meats." /></td>
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**NOTE:** Wines not marked with stars are often delightful wines. Each has unique virtues and any of these wines may be the best wine to serve your needs based on value, availability or for you lunch and taste preferences. **Prices – Approximately California full retail prices.**

Connoisseurs’ Guide tastings are conducted with Riedel Stemware.

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<th>AVAILABILITY</th>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Drinkable now. Unlikely to improve with further aging." /></td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Very limited availability." /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Drinkable now. Further bottle aging can improve this wine." /></td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Good Value" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Cellar for future drinking. Wine will improve with bottle aging." /></td>
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expected. It is, in fact, a bit stiff and rigid on the latter palate, and

ripe, yet slightly wily, delivery calls for a generous bit of time

in the bottle.

A PROPER CLARET California 2012

62% Cabernet Sauvignon; 22% Petit Verdot; 8% Tannat; 7% Syrah; 1% Petite Sirah. By Bonny Doon. This wholly likeable wine
may not satisfy anyone’s cravings for Cabernet, but it is pleasantly
fruity with a bent to ripe cherries and takes on a wee touch of
richness by dint of its gentle oak. It is reasonably well-balanced
with little in the way of tannin that might dissuade drinking now,
and it gets full commendation for real priceworthiness.

GOOD VALUE

This inviting young wine puts a fine first foot forward and leads
with fairly concentrated aromas of ripe cherries, currants, sweet
oak, green olives and pepper, but, if initially following suit in the
mouth, it pulls up and finishes a little too quickly, and its early
richness is not fully sustained. It is only modestly tannic, and it
ends with a slight note of toothpicky dryness that warns against
a lengthy stay in the cellar.

BALDACCI Stags Leap District Napa Valley 2009

Elements of blackcurrants and milk chocolate are overlain by a
good deal of woody, forest-floor spice in the nose here, and
that same woody aspect comes across in the wine’s ripe flavors
as well. The wine is fairly full-bodied and just a touch soft at the
edges with no dearth of tannic grip at the finish, and, while not
one we would count on as ever being especially elegant, it gets
the nod for its richness and depth.

Beaulieu Vineyard

BEAULIEU Rutherford Napa Valley 2010

It was not all that long ago that Beaulieu’s Rutherford bottling
was one of our go-to choices when it came to honest Cabernet

Sauvignon value, and, if its price has crept up, it still hits all the
right varietal marks. It is plump on the palate, and its very well-
scrubbed flavors of black cherries and briar come with no more
than the right measure of firming tannin. It will get better with
time yet does not demand it and should drink well with a simply
grilled steak in the short term.

BERINGER Private Reserve Napa Valley 2010

Here is a big, very ripe, abundantly tannic young wine that may
have high aspirations, but it is far more substantial and potent
than it is tailored, and its rather rough-cut demeanor tags it as
one that needs waiting. Fans of extract and power should find
plenty to like, just as those who are troubled by high ripeness will
not, and, if the rest of us will grudgingly acknowledge that it is
a bit overdone, it does have the substance and sheer fruity
strength to withstand the lengthy cellaring that its formidable,
ten-year tannins prescribe.

BERINGER Knights Valley 2011

Simple, straightforward and cleanly made with a fairly modest
measure of black cherry fruit but less in the way of convincing
Cabernet character other than a bit of grabby back-end tannin,
this is a wine of limited richness and reach that starts slowly and
then fades further at the finish with brushy dryness and a touch
of peppery heat rising late.

BIG GUY Red Wine California 2011

By Bell. 40% Cabernet Sauvignon; 24% Malbec; 20% Syrah;
15% Merlot; 1% Petite Sirah. Despite Cabernet being its larger
contributor, this vaguely candied, mildly berrynish bottling does
little to really show it, and, if clean and fruity and slightly brushy
in character, it is no more than a soft-edged, generic red lacking
in direction and energy.

BLACKSMITH Clone 6 Oak Knoll District 2010

Napa Valley. Suggestions of dried flowers and dusty earth sit
just to the side of nominal black cherry fruit in its aromas, and
the wine conveys a good bit of fairly persistent, nicely defined,
Cabernet fruit on the palate with appropriate tannins that stay
in back where they belong. It is not an overstuffed wine by any
measure but is instead tasty and well-balanced and should get
even better if held for a few years.

BLACKSMITH Oak Knoll District Napa Valley 2010

A little less forthcoming in fruit than it is in dark chocolate and
oak, this substantial wine leads with plenty of richness in the
mouth, yet it fades as it goes and comes up a little dry, a touch
threadbare and more woody than fruity in the latter going. It
certainly has the tannin to keep, but we worry that its heart will
wither with time and wonder that it might go past its best after
three or four years.
low in apparent fruit and a bit muddled in focus with a slight tilt to a softness in balance, this inexpensive wine is far tougher than its everyday-drinking price might suggest, and, while it is ripe and moderately full-bodied, it is less than wholly filled out at its heart.

38 BLACKSMITH Alexander Valley 2009
This wine is beginning to dry out prematurely and its grasp on black cherries is tentative at best. While it starts out with a bit of palatal plumpness, it stiffens, thins and takes on a slight edge of tartness, and whatever fruit it may once have had quietly sinks away at the finish.

37 BLUE ROCK Baby Blue Alexander Valley 2011
61% Cabernet Sauvignon; 14% Merlot; 8% Malbec; 7% Petit Verdot; 5% Cabernet Franc; 5% Syrah. It comes as no surprise that given its this-and-that mix of grapes, this bottling does not speak with an especially keen varietal voice, yet its combination of berries, cherries, sweet oak and subtle olive-like traits makes for an appealing effort all the same. It is slightly rounded in feel with just enough tannin to be noticeable, and it looks good to go for three or four years.

38 BLUE ROCK Alexander Valley 2010
Blue Rock’s 2011 Cabernet is a fairly tentative look at the grape, and its comparatively lean sense of fruit is accented with quiet hints of stalky herbaceousness. It is fairly taut in its balance and somewhat nervy all the way to the end with tea-leaf astringency cramping its modest fruit at the finish. Let it relax for a couple of years, even if an appreciable boost in richness may not be in the offing.

38 BOUGETZ Spring Mountain District Napa Valley 2010
7% Merlot; 3% Petite Sirah. Ripe and outgoing with accents of root beer overlaying its succulent aromas of fully ripe, cassis and black cherry fruit, this rounded and mouthfilling wine tastes of the same juicy, oak-sweetened fruit and stays the course with little interference from its comparatively soft tannins. It closes with a scant bit of heat peeking through, but it does not let up in richness and will come into its own with no more than four or five years of aging.

37 B.R. COHN Olive Hill Estate Vineyards 2009
Sonoma Valley. Fairly precise, if not all that expansive in the nose and similarly a bit constrained in flavor, this medium-full-bodied offering still manages to hit most of the right varietal marks. While rounded to start, it quickly firms in progression, and its nominally fruity finish is marked by muted tannins and a bare hint of heat.

35 B.R. COHN Silver Label North Coast 2011
Clean, but rather meager and never particularly clear about its varietal heritage, B.R. Cohn’s entry-level Cabernet is sparing in fruit and a touch soft in balance. Its modest manner extends to its gentle tannins as well, and it is a wine that seems meant for drinking with alacrity if not haste.

38 BRIDLEWOOD Paso Robles 2011
17% Merlot; 3% Petite Sirah. Dry and distantly fruity in scent, but brushy and dull with nothing in the way of real Cabernet identity, this poorly defined wine is slightly thick, soft and empty at one and the same time with unbuffered bitterness coming on at the finish.

38 BURIED CANE Roughout Columbia Valley 2010
16% Merlot. Cabernet does not need to be juicy to be counted as a success, but this uneven effort is ripe without the benefit of sustained fruit and sputters as a bit of alum-like tannin closes in on its rapidly drying flavors. It starts out slightly soft and then stiffens as a streak of narrowing acidity comes on and makes its fruity shortcomings more apparent.

38 CADARETTA Columbia Valley 2010
Fruity precision and proportion are the initial messages of this generally well-crafted, slightly light-footed wine right up until the moment when a fair bit of grippy young tannins take hold, yet, even as it tends to back-end toughness, it remains focused on fairly keen Cabernet fruit. It does not demand a prolonged stay in the cellar, but its promise of polish will not be realized until four or five years have passed.

38 CADARETTA Springboard Columbia Valley 2009
63% Cabernet Sauvignon; 26% Petit Verdot; 11% Merlot. Lightly herbal in scent with slightly compact, blackcurrant fruit played against suggestions of green pepper and a counterpoint of sweet oak, this balanced, but somewhat nervy young wine is still a bit tight on the palate and is limited by tannin. It does not, however, abandon its essential fruit, and it has fine potential for several years of growth.

38 CASTLE ROCK Reserve Napa Valley 2011
Mildly herbal in tone with vague hints of green olives off to the side of its muted impressions of dilute, cherrystuff fruit, this wine is so shot through with oak that vanilla is its chief attribute, and its attenuated flavors take on a slight tongue-depressor pucker at the finish.

38 CASTLE ROCK Paso Robles 2011
This wine speaks to Cabernet in tones that are so hushed as to be barely heard and is colored with touches of dried straw and earth from front to back. It has a bit of body, and it is slightly rounded in feel, but it fails all the same at delivering value that is commensurate to its price.

38 CHARLES SMITH Columbia Valley 2011
Finding defined Cabernet character in this small-hearted wine is a bit of a reach. While showing a wispy bit of loosely cherry-like
fruit, it is vaguely woody and fairly dilute, and its late rush of finishing astringency comes as a surprise given its slender build and fruity shortcomings.

**CHATEAU ST. JEAN Alexander Valley 2010**
Solidly basic and wholly likeable for its black cherry and lightly herbal first aromas that smack of Alexander Valley Cabernet, this one disappoints a touch on the palate where its fruit narrows at the back under structure that wants for adequate support. Time in bottle may soften its rather too aggressive tannins, but cellar aging cannot bring it the needed fruit.

**CHESSMAN Lodi 2011**
Elements of earth and dried vegetation merge with off-putting notes of band-aid box first in the nose here, and, if anything, the murky, slightly dank flavors that follow are even less likeable yet. Cabernet at this price is rarely compelling, but this one fails the test of simple drinkability.

**CLAYHOUSE Estate Red Cedar Vyd Paso Robles 2011**
It may not compete with the best of its kin when it comes to layered richness and serious depth, but this rounded and rather flavorful offering exhibits plenty of frontal, fairly likeable, black cherry fruit and shows a nice streak of oaky sweetness in the bargain. Although it takes on a slight chalky edge as it goes and its fruit is met by a bit of finishing dryness, it does not wander off the varietal path and will provide useful drinking with savory meats dishes in the mid-term.

**CLAYHOUSE Red Cedar Vineyard Paso Robles 2012**
20% Petit Verdot; 3% other. No matter how hard one looks, there is nary a glimmer of recognizable Cabernet fruit or feel to this dreary, amorphous red wine, and its combination of late-arriving bitterness and stalky astringency makes it impossible to like regardless of price.

**CLOS DU BOIS Sonoma Reserve Alexander Valley 2010**
This moderately ripe wine’s claims to Cabernet are something less than persuasive, and, if perfectly clean, it borders on being generic. Its half-hearted fruit founders in the face of relatively oversized tannins, and finishing heat washes away what little is left at the end.

**CLOS DU VAL Napa Valley 2010**
7% Cabernet Franc; 5% Merlot; 2% Petit Verdot. Leading with comparatively restrained aromas of red cherries and raspberries along with subtle accents of wet clay, herbs and a bit of vanilla- bean oak, this wine follows with precise, if slightly scaled-down, flavors that fully reflect the nose. Slender, but neither thin nor at lacking in character, it is an insistent, very mannerly, well-tailored take on Cabernet that should come into its own some four or five years hence.

**CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Central Coast 2010**
Intriguing elements of rooty spice, dark soil, and a bare hint of caramelized roasted meats are aligned with a very solid, if not boisterous, complement of ripe-cherry fruit in both the complex aromas and moderately deep flavors of this distinctive effort, and, while the wine is full-bodied, it is fairly supple in feel and stops well short of being brassy or outsized. It is blunted by a bit of obvious tannin but avoids undue toughness, and it calls for five or six years of age.

**CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Meritage Central Coast 2011**
60% Cabernet Sauvignon; 28% Cabernet Franc; 9% Merlot; 3% Petit Verdot. Thin and held back in the nose, and not at all different once in the mouth, this bottling wanders well wide of the Cabernet mark, and its hesitant suggestion of berryish fruit loses out to stalky dryness before a curious bit of citric bitterness clips its finish.

**COLUMBIA CREST H3 Horse Heaven Hills 2011**
It is not about to challenge its high-ticket cousins when it comes to fruity intensity or depth, yet this priceworthy wine smells and tastes of recognizable Cabernet, and it shows a light veneer of sweet oak to its mid-density, dark-cherry fruit. It is supple and agreeably balanced with a trim tannic spine, and it will make a pleasant partner to grilled steak and chops in the near term.

**COLUMBIA CREST Columbia Valley 2011**
Much like it mate from the Horse Heaven Hills, this inexpensive effort surprises with its varietal honesty. Its ongoing themes of well-ripened cherries are enriched by attractive touches of cocoa and vanilla, and, if it does not reach very far, it gets good marks for definition, balance and sheer drinkability. What is more, it is an absolute bargain with precious few peers at the price.

**CORISON Napa Valley 2010**
Although she has found something akin to celebrity status in the eyes of those recently arrived to the dance who somehow think Napa Cabernets of refinement and nuance are new and revolutionary, winemaker Cathy Corison has for some time now been turning out balanced, well-focused wines such as this that steer away from high ripeness and blatant oak. If fairly tight and less than fully forthcoming at present, its flavors are constant and comfortably fruited, and its teasing touches of black olives, toasted herbs, dusty soils and graphite are signals enough that increased complexity and richness are the certain rewards for five or six years of patience.

**DAOU Reserve Paso Robles 2011**
As with all things Dehlinger, this wine is both ripe and relatively maneuverable. Its ripe black cherry fruit hints at berries and dark plums with a subliminal whiff of black olive in the mix and enough oak to bring some added richness to the table. Full in body but not heavy, supple and slightly fleshy in its entry impressions, this one does get a bit gruff in the latter going but no more than a young Cabernet ought.

**DEHLINGER Russian River Valley 2010**
5% Cabernet Franc; 4% Petite Sirah. Herbal, reedy, twiggy and decidedly less than fruity, this wine never stints on ripeness but does stint on central stuffing, and its weighty presence on the palate is similarly left stranded without enough fruit to bring it all into balance. It needs time to soften but seems unlikely to fully unwind given its unconvincing center.

**DELECTUS French Wedding Knights Valley 2010**
60% Cabernet Sauvignon; 28% Cabernet Franc; 9% Merlot; 3% Petit Verdot. Thin and held back in the nose, and not at all different once in the mouth, this bottling wanders well wide of the Cabernet mark, and its hesitant suggestion of berryish fruit loses out to stalky dryness before a curious bit of citric bitterness clips its finish.
**Cabernet Sauvignon**

**DIAMOND CREEK Volcanic Hill 2010**
Diamond Mountain District. Napa Valley. As usual, the triple play from Diamond Creek is both more alike and not than it is relative to most of their peers, and thus, our favorite may or may not be yours. In our tastings, by way of explanation, both this wine and the Gravelly Meadow stood neck and neck in the race for “favorite”, and while we may have marginally preferred the deep, ripe, sinewy nature of the Volcanic Hill, it was not that we did not like the others. Here one gets a nose that bursts from the glass with currancy, briary, concentrated aromas that drift a tad into the roti character that can come with hillside grapes. Tannin is plentiful, and hints of cola and graphite add their complexing notes, and, all in all, this is a wine that is likely to age well for a half decade and more for starters.

**DIAMOND CREEK Gravelly Meadow 2010**
Diamond Mountain District. Napa Valley. Always a favorite in these quarters over the years, the Gravelly Meadow bottling has more of tailored quality than does the Volcanic Hill, and here, in this vintage makes a lighter, less dramatic statement that will be the darling of those who like a more classic approach. To be sure, there is plenty of cassis and black cherry precision to the aromas, and the supple beginnings on the palate are somewhat more finefiness while still carrying the expected tannins for age. Latter palate acidity also tightens things up a touch and adds to the notion that cellartime is needed.

**DIAMOND CREEK Red Rock Terrace 2010**
Diamond Mountain District. Napa Valley. More akin to the Gravelly Meadow bottling stylistically and very successful in its own right, this bottling offers medium volume cassis and cherry notes with a slightly more evident oaky element, possibly owing to the modest drift from concentration evident at its heart. Withal, the wine shares keen focus and underlying structural sturdiness with its mates, and we have no hesitancy in recommending it highly for a place in your cellar.

**DUCKHORN Napa Valley 2010**
Defined fruit has a difficult time in holding its own in the face of the high ripeness and abundant tannins that are the dominant traits of this brawny and somewhat brutish youngster, and yet, while monolithic and wholly charmless at present, the wine is not so much dried out as it is incomplete. Predicting beauty is a notion that cellartime is needed.

**EDGE North Coast 2011**
12% Merlot; 11% Syrah. Give this one credit for momentarily hinting at the currancy qualities of Cabernet Sauvignon, but it wavers in focus and tends to thinness as it works its way to a reedy, slightly sere finish, and its varietal grasp loosens as its early fruit fades away.

**EDNA VALLEY VINEYARD Central Coast 2011**
Although there are scattered notes of loosely cherry-like fruit to be found here and there, there is a singular lack of seriousness and varietal confidence to this blunt and basic red wine. It may be clean and without technical fault, but it very much tastes like the cheap wine that it is.

**EDUCATED GUESS Napa Valley 2011**
6% Merlot; 3% Cabernet Franc; 1% Petit Verdot. If a little low-keyed and suggestive of dark chocolate, this wine shows a hint of cassis in the nose and follows with quiet echoes of the same on the palate, yet, in the end, there is simply too little fruit at its heart to successfully stand up to drying tannins and heat that take charge at the end.

**ELYSE Morisoli Vineyard Rutherford Napa Valley 2008**
Rather limited in basic fruit at most every point and offering but inconsistent glimpses of dark cherries here and there, this wine manages to find a measure of richness by way of its caramel oak, but it runs too soon from fleshy ripeness to acidy stiffness and comes up less than complete.

**EUCLID Napa Valley 2010**
There is plenty to like about this wine’s sweet aromas of black cherry, plum and creamy oak, and it makes good on its promise with rich, moderately deep, well-fruited flavors of a very similar mind. It is not, however, a Cabernet to tag for drinking soon, for it picks up a fair bit of tannin as it crosses the palate and is a bit dry and gruff at the finish. Still, its fruit stays the course now and will not disappear as the wine slowly softens over the next six to eight years.

**FEATHER Columbia Valley 2010**
By Long Shadows. Keen and very lively currant-like fruit runs the length of this nicely composed offering, and, while holding high ripeness in check, the wine still musters a fair bit of richness as a counterpoint to its brighter aspects. Its modest, integral tannins will not dissuade early drinking, yet its youthful energy is a sure guarantor that it is some three to five years away from starting to show its best.

**FLORA SPRINGS Napa Valley 2011**
Clean and concise with a nicely proportioned mix of sweet oak and briary spice in support of its compact core of currancy fruit, this supple, well-balanced bottling follows the 2011 norm and backs away from flash and flamboyance. Its trim tannins firm without toughening, yet it shows room for improvement and will find a welcome touch of finishing polish with a few further years of age.

**FRANCIS COPPOLA Claret California 2011**
15% Petit Verdot; 3% Merlot; 3% Cabernet Franc. If hardly a Cabernet of real strength and conviction, this affordable wine does a good job at keeping varietal character in its sights, and its defined, black cherry fruit stays central throughout. It shows a touch of oaky sweetness that is a bonus at the price, and it earns honorable mention for its sheer friendliness.

**GOOD VALUE**

**FRANCIS COPPOLA Diamond Red Blend California 2011**
34% Cabernet Sauvignon; 19% Petit Verdot; 16% Petite Sirah; 12% Merlot; 11% Syrah; 8% Zinfandel. Made from a bit of this and a bit of that, this well-scrubbed middleweight offers easy drinking without clear reference to any of its components. It is comfortably fruity and plays to black cherries with no more than a bare bit of tannin for grip.

**FREI BROTHERS Reserve Alexander Valley 2011**
Geared to ripeness more than anything else and a bit lax with respect to keen Cabernet fruit, this awkward offering is fairly...
thick and oddly empty at one and the same time. Its flavors of dried grapes want for brightness and life, and its hard acid edge serves to accentuate the mouth-drying astringency that its all-too-intrusive tannins provide.

**FUSE Napa Valley 2011**
Not long ago the Fuse Cabernets earned a well-deserved place on our roster of good values, but, while sporting a new, higher price, this one simply fails to deliver. Its diminished fruit fights to find a voice, but it fades away without much of a struggle, and dry, slightly puckery, wholly unbuffered tannins rise up to fill the void that it leaves.  

**GHOST PINES Winemaker’s Blend 2011**
49% Lake County; 30% Sonoma Co.; 21% Napa Co. Once past its simple aromas of red cherries and vanilla, this one drifts steadily away from overt fruit, and its underfilled flavors stiffen as acidity and obvious tannin become its most lasting traits. A bit of age should help with some tactile softening, but it will not remedy the wine’s fruity shortfall.

**GIRARD Napa County 2010**
Dense, ripe, forward and noticeably herbal in cast, this Cabernet is a bit showy at first and its chocolaty richness only extends that impression. After a supple, slightly fleshy entry, the wine clearly favors the ripe, herbal end of the spectrum with central fruit left in the background. By the finish, it has become puckery and sour with too little excitement.

**GIRASOLE Mendocino 2010**
A bit sparing in fruit and hinting at celery seed, a quiet touch of wet earth and muted notes of oak here and there, this modestly scaled offering may not be the most intense or compelling look at Cabernet to be had, and it runs to dusty dryness in the latter going, but it speaks to the grape more than to dreary ripeness, and, at the price, that is saying a lot.

GOOD VALUE

**GRGICH HILLS**

**GRGICH HILLS Yountville Selection 2009 Napa Valley.** This year’s Yountville Selection from Grgich Hills shades a little more to ripeness than has been the winery norm, but it is brimming with very deep, highly concentrated fruit and is keenly focused on Cabernet from beginning to end. It exhibits fine continuity and length, and its nominal finishing toughness is entirely appropriate for a wine of its age. A half-dozen years of keeping will see it start to unfold, yet this is one very much meant for a lengthy stay the cellar, and will age effortlessly for a decade and more.

**GRGICH HILLS Napa Valley 2010**
5% Petit Verdot; 3% Cabernet Franc. Drifting to the riper side of the varietal spectrum without losing its way, this wine mixes hints of forest floor and green olive with ripe black cherry and cassis notes that are concentrated while falling somewhat short of full and complete fruitiness. Full in body and lifted by buoyant acids that have long been the hallmark of Grgich wines, this one may not reach the heights of some past efforts but is flavorful and focused. Its gruff tannins will need five years or more to resolve, and the wait will be worth it.

**HAYWOOD Los Chamizal Sonoma Valley 2010**
11% Cabernet Franc; 8% Malbec; 2% Petit Verdot. Sweet oak and a bit of woody spice push ahead of ripe, yet slightly sparse fruit in the nose here, and, while full and fairly hefty once in the mouth, the wine lacks for any clear fruity direction and runs far too quickly to coarseness, dried-grape desiccation and palpable finishing heat.

**HESTAN Napa Valley 2010**
Deep, very articulate fruit is met by careful and very sympathetic winemaking here, for, while it is optimally ripened and sweetly oaked, the wine is first and last fixed on the incisively curranty themes of top-shelf Cabernet. It enters with a fine supple feel and gathers nominal varietal tannins on the way to a very long finish, and nowhere once does its focus waver in the least. We like it now, but we like its prospects over five to ten years even more and look forward to watching it deepen and gain in the complexity that only age can bring.

**HYPOTHESIS Napa Valley 2011**
7% Cabernet Franc; 3% Petit Verdot. Very ripe, but not all that fruity, and burdened by excessive heat and far more tannin than it needs, this rough-cut offering is wholly without as much as a glimmer of finesse. It is too tough to invite early drinking, yet it lacks the fruit to encourage extended keeping it needs, and it seems to be a Cabernet that is destined to dry out and grow ever more sere over time.

**JC CELLARS Stagecoach Vineyards Napa Valley 2011**
Subtlety and restraint are not words that come quickly to mind when speaking of this vintner or vineyard, but the marriage of the two in 2011 has made for a solid Cabernet of real muscle and sinew. Ripe but not in the least overripe with strong sense that have long been the hallmark of Grgich wines, this one may not reach the heights of some past efforts but is flavorful and focused. Its gruff tannins will need five years or more to resolve, and the wait will be worth it.

**HARTWELL Estate Reserve Stags Leap District 2009 Napa Valley.** Intense, impressively concentrated and a wine of great richness and depth, this brooding young Cabernet marries abundant blackcurrant fruit with an ample measure of very rich oak and shows compelling accents of loamy soils and a bit of briary spice throughout. It is full and slightly fleshy in feel with very broad, constantly evolving flavors with a raft of appropriate varietal tannins presently roughening its remarkably long finish, but it has the structure and drive to develop famously for eight to ten years at the least and its stands among the best wines of the vintage.
Kadiem's 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon hits all the right varietal notes for its intensity, concentration and sturdy, but well-balanced, structure. Its ample, but decidedly fine tannins and its firm acid provide a wonderful layering and patently sophisticated wine of real polish. As always with Kadiem, its vibrancy, and, while never wanting for ripeness, it is a wine of raw strength rather than one of nuance, and its early impressions of polish lessen a bit as a touch of back-end toughness arrives, but its minor sins are entirely those of youth. It is no tannic beast that demands a decade of age, and it should begin to round into fine shape in three or four years.

Joseph Phelps

Insignia Napa Valley 2010
84% Cabernet Sauvignon; 10% Petit Verdot; 6% Merlot; 2% Malbec. It is a very rare outing in which Insignia does not rank among the best and nothing has changed in 2010. Right from the start, this latest effort impresses with its depth, its obvious polish and its vibrancy, and, while never wanting for ripeness, it is a wonderfully layered and patently sophisticated wine of real pedigree. Its ample, but decidedly fine tannins and its firm acid balance mark it as one that will evolve handsomely for a decade or two despite the fact that its refinement is sure to tempt early drinking, and it deserves to be set aside and patiently saved for special occasions.

Justin Paso Robles 2011
Oddly sweet and green smelling at one and the same and given over to vegetation in flavor, this limp and plodding wine pays little homage to Cabernet Sauvignon in any positive way, but it has all of the tannins that the grape can contribute and is both bitter and very dry at the end.

Kadiem Napa Valley 2010
As notable for its layered complexity and varietal precision as it is for its intensity, concentration and sturdy, but well-balanced, architecture, Kadiem's 2010 Cabernet hits all the right varietal marks and is thoroughly compelling wine. It is full, fleshy and optimally ripened, but it is wonderfully well-controlled and hints at the first signs of polish in a way the sparks high confidence in its future, and, while a little unruly just now as any really good young Cabernet can be, it has our attention and is bound to earn more as it deepens and become even more expressive over the next eight to ten years.

J. Davies Diamond Mountain District 2010
Napa Valley. 9% Malbec. Concentrated, quite keenly defined with a bent to cassis, dark cherries and nicely fit adjuncts of oak and dried herbs, Davies is a slightly fleshy, very well-structured Cabernet that impresses more for its fine sense of proportion than for out and out heft. Its early impressions of polish lessen a bit as a touch of back-end toughness arrives, but its minor sins are entirely those of youth. It is no tannic beast that demands a decade of age, and it should begin to round into fine shape in three or four years.

J. Lohr Cuvée Pau Paso Robles 2009
73% Cabernet Sauvignon; 15% Malbec; 10% Petit Verdot; 2% Cabernet Franc. J. Lohr's nod to the sturdy clarets of Pauillac is, in 2009, a moderately rich working with good density and fruity definition. It starts out as if it will be a bit soft on the palate but firms and fleshes out as it goes, and its nominal tannins lend a bit of back-end grip without occluding its message of currants, olives and well-measured oak. It is not particularly rugged, but it will grow into better, and it is should be tagged for drinking in three to five years.

J. Lohr Hilltop Paso Robles 2010
Generously fruited and on the clear varietal track with elements of olive-tinged currants backed up by a complementary dollop of sweet oak, this supple, tannin-firmed offering conveys plenty of substance and depth without a great deal of the toughness that can attend young Cabernet. It is nonetheless balanced in a way that suggests good mid-term potential, and we would opt for a few years of age before drinking.

Keating Montecillo Vineyard Sonoma Valley 2010
Starting out with a big burst of dark cherries set before woody spice and suggestions of caramelly oak in the nose, the 2010 Encomium is a very solid, somewhat sinewy wine on the palate that follows with defined, well-ripened varietal flavors that firm after a momentary sensation of suppleness. It is not immensely tannic, yet it shows its structural bones quite clearly just now, and it can be relegated to the cellar with confidence for another five or six years.

Keating Encomium California 2010
Ever so slightly pulled back in ripeness and more redolent of red cherries and raspberries than of classic Cabernet cassis, this one is a fairly compact take on the grape that sports an obvious acid edge to its narrowed flavors. That it is tight and taut in its youth in no way ensures that it will broaden with age, yet four or five years in the bottle should go a long ways in smoothing off its remaining angles and edges.

Keating Blueprint Napa Valley 2011
What starts out as a wine that leans a bit to chocolate takes a turn to tightness and more structure once in the mouth, and its flavors tend to narrow and are less obviously influenced by the overt ripeness that was forecast in the nose. There is an ample sense of essential cassis at work here as well as accents of loam, olives and green peppercorns, yet the wine is a little lean at the finish, and, if a solid and well-defined Cabernet, it remains to be seen how much it will fill out with age.

Keating J. Daniel Cuvée Napa Valley 2010
An altogether bigger and brawny wine that runs headlong to ripeness while giving less attention to keen Cabernet fruit, this bottling gets by on richness more than on precision and fights with imposing astringency that precludes near-term enjoyment. Its early impressions of polish lessen a bit as a touch of back-end toughness arrives, and it deserves to be set aside and patiently saved for special occasions.

Kenwood Artist Series Sonoma County 2009
Ever so slightly pulled back in ripeness and more redolent of red cherries and raspberries than of classic Cabernet cassis, this one is a fairly compact take on the grape that sports an obvious acid edge to its narrowed flavors. That it is tight and taut in its youth in no way ensures that it will broaden with age, yet four or five years in the bottle should go a long ways in smoothing off its remaining angles and edges.

Lewis Mason's Napa Valley 2011
There is little question but that the 2011 vintage is one in which careful selection will go a long way, but, as in every year, there will still be good Cabernets to be had, and this one from Lewis proves that point. It musters far more richness and sheer fruity muscle than the admittedly less-pricey 2010s that are debuted in...
emerges unscathed. It is not long on manners just now, but will
afford a few more years of age.

LONG MEADOW RANCH Napa Valley 2010
20% Merlot; 3% Cabernet Franc. Vaguely earthy to start and
then smelling far more of dried weeds than of fruit, this difficult
wine manages to find a bare hint of cassis in its flavors, but it is
undone by astringency and the same distancing qualities that
define its aromas. Its only fans will be those who abhor ripeness
in all its forms.

LOUIS M. MARTINI Lot No. 1 Napa Valley 2010
There is nothing at all shy or retiring about this fully ripened and
outgoing wine, and there may be those who find its generosity
to be a little too much of a good thing, but we doubt that there
will be any complaints that it is in any way stinky or underfilled.
It is big, it is fleshy, and its considerable fruit is in a neck-and-neck
race with coarsening tannin and sweet oak all the way to the
end, yet, for all of its blister, it never loses its way and will grow
on the strength of its substance and stuffing for a good six to ten
years.

LOUIS M. MARTINI Sonoma County 2011
Complexity may not be counted among its achievements, but
this straightforward youngster gets good marks for its very clear
Cabernet Sauvignon focus. It is medium-full-bodied and shows
a bit of early palatal roundness before drying tannins close in at
the end, but it is not impossibly astringent, and it should come
into its best in but a couple of years.

MAGNESS Napa Valley 2011
This wine begs the question of just how much structure counts
when it is lacks central support, and, being fairly bereft of fruity
extract such as it is, it becomes stiff and sere with a finish that is
as chalky as it is absent of fruit. Its stark astringency recalls that
of green persimmons, and, if sure to last, it has more holes than
aging can fill.

MARIO BAZÁN Napa Valley 2008
There is nothing at all flashy or dramatic about very calm and
collected wine, yet its keen sense of focus and concise Cabernet
character lend it a nice sense of quiet confidence all the same. It
teams plenty of clean, cassis fruit with well-measured oak and
touches of graphite and a distant suggestion of herbs, and, if not
a hefty wine of great muscle and weight, it is continuous, quite
nicely balanced and should show increased sophistication if
afforded a few more years of age.

MINER The Oracle Napa Valley 2009
50% Cabernet Sauvignon; 25% Cabernet Franc; 15% Merlot;
5% Malbec; 5% Petit Verdot. There is a good deal of character
to this ample, fairly full-bodied effort not the least of which is a
full measure of curranty fruit, a bit of briary spice and plenty of
crunchy, vanilla-bean oak. There is more than a bit of youthful
tannin at work too, yet even though a touch rough and ragged
at the finish, the wine ends on a positive note as its basic fruit
emerges unscathed. It is not long on manners just now, but will
find some much needed smoothing with age, and it is best left
alone for six to eight years.

MINER Oakville Napa Valley 2010
We expect a certain degree of toughness from ambitious young
Cabernets, and this one certainly complies, but do not be put off
by its unruly ways for there is a very good measure of deep and
defined, ripe-currant fruit at its core and plenty of peppery,
toasted-herb accents along with a not-so-small dose of sweet
oak. Its structural bones stick out at the finish even as its fruit
stays the course, and, if five years of waiting will make a good
wine better, ten might do even more.

MINER Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley 2010
7% Cabernet Franc; 2% Merlot. If starting out with plenty of
promise and offering up concentrated aromas of cassis, dark
berries, black olives and hints of chocolate, this wine proves to
be a bit of brute on the palate where its less-than-generous fruit
is outdistanced by high tannins and pushy acidity. Even allowing
for the fact that this is a very young wine, it fails to convey the
kind of fruity substance to convince us that it will ever outgrow
its considerable coarseness.

MOONE-TSAI Cor Leonis Napa Valley 2010
Very rich, very ripe and infused with lots of hard-to-miss oak in
the nose, this fleshy, full-flavored, big-bodied youngster is not
much on sophistication and nuance at this point, but its depth is
beyond any debate. It is a wine that satisfies most for its sheer
fruity muscle, and the wait for far-reaching complexity could be
prolonged. That said, it takes no irrational optimism to believe in
its future, and we are comfortable in predicting that its tenth
birthday will be cause for celebration.

MOONE-TSAI Hillside Blend Howell Mountain 2010
Napa Valley. 50% Cabernet Sauvignon; 50% Merlot. Long on
the black cherry imperatives of fully ripe Merlot, and showing a
more temperate measure of tannin than its mountain Cabernet
quotient might predict, this ripe and liberally oaked working is
fleshy, full-bodied and fairly forthright in flavor. It tends ever so
going in its few years down the line.

MOUNT VEEDER Napa Valley 2011
A big waft of spicy oak in the nose is followed by a mix of herbs
and green olives with a modest note of cherryish fruit arriving
thereafter, and the wine’s flavors are similarly a bit hesitant in
fruit and pull up slightly short at the finish. While it is reasonably
balanced and in all ways clean and well-crafted, this one wants
for increased depth and slightly more forceful fruity expression to
make the cut.

OLEMA Sonoma County 2010
By Amici. 7% Merlot. Here is a supple, rather direct Cabernet
that steers away from the tannic austerity that comes with its
more-structured, age-worthy cousins and instead offers up lots
straight-ahead fruit in a rounded, very approachable style. Its
bias to ripeness is clear, and it runs into a slight spot of heat at
the finish, but its affable fruitiness survives unscathed. It is not
one for lengthy keeping and should be enjoyed while buoyed by
its youth.
Cabernet Sauvignon

**PARADUXX C Blend Napa Valley 2010**
60% Cabernet Sauvignon; 40% Zinfandel. Paraduxx has carved out a special niche as a producer of interesting Zinfandel-based blends, but Cabernet takes the lead here with Zin in support, and the results are a solid, if slightly ragged wine whose dark fruit and sturdy tannic frame are very much owing to its larger proportion. Although it teases with plenty of juicy young fruit early on, it runs into enough drying astringency to prescribe a few years of forbearance. **$30.00**

**PARDUCCI True Grit Reserve Mendocino County 2010**
3% Petit Verdot; 3% Cabernet Franc; 2% Syrah. If borrowing the title of Parducci’s noteworthy Petite Sirahs, this Cabernet is wanting in the “true grit” that it claims. It is a bit narrow and lacks concentration, and it runs to dryness while being under-filled in defined fruit. **$14.00**

**PARDUCCI Small Lot Blend Mendocino County 2010**
It may be clean, but it does convey a grudging suggestion of varietal character, but this wine is decidedly sparing, devoid of real consequence and is overtaken by coarseness in the absence of any positive fruit. A few years of aging may smooth it, but it will remain scrawny forever. **$30.00**

**PAT PAULSEN Parthenogenesis 2009 Reserve Red Blend.** California. 60% Cabernet Sauvignon; 30% Merlot; 10% Zinfandel. If a little low-keyed in the nose, this wine still manages to show a bit of woody complexity along with a reasonable sense of fruit, and, while it does much the same on the palate, its flavors tend to dry and fade in the face of what are no more than modest tannins. **$28.00**

**PAT PAULSEN Heritage Selection 2009 Alexander Valley.** So ripe and raisiny as to have lost anything remotely recognizable as varietal character, this confused and patently unpleasant wine tastes of molasses married to tannin with a underlying sourness and an oxidized aspect marking it as patently unpleasant wine tastes of molasses married to tannin. Allow for at least five years of patience, and, given its pedigree, we would not be surprised if it continues to improve for a decade or more. **$75.00**

**RODNEY STRONG Alexander’s Crown 2010 Alexander Valley.** As a lot, the trio of Rodney strong single-site Cabernets make no apologies for ripeness, yet while very rich and outgoing and admittedly a touch hot in the bargain, they are amazingly deep and never seem heavy or sluggish in the least. They are big wines that achieve fine balance and even an inkling of polish in the case of this Brothers Ridge bottling, and there is no doubt in our minds whatsoever that it has the fruity stamina that ageworthy Cabernet wants. Do not be in too big of a hurry here. **$75.00**

**RODNEY STRONG Rockaway Alexander Valley 2010**
A little less outgoing than either of its two mates, and a wine that is ripe and a bit narrow at one and the same time, Strong’s 2010 Rockaway is built along fairly sturdy lines, and its tannins start to build by mid-palate. More than just firm, the wine gets a bit rigid as it goes and ends with astringency chasing its fruit. If sure to reward time in the cellar, and, in fact, a wine that very much needs it, it requires a little more fruity heart if it wants to move up in the ranks. **$75.00**

**PIROUETTE Columbia Valley 2010**
59% Cabernet Sauvignon; 31% Merlot; 10% Petit Verdot. By Long Shadows. On the narrow side in the nose with intimations of berries, a touch of plum and distant hints of fresh herbs, this one lacks for keen focus and, in spite of being firmly structured and solidly built, it is comparatively sparing in fruit throughout with a coarsening bit of unbuffered heat making its presence felt at the finish. **$55.00**

**PRIDE Reserve 83% Sonoma County 2010**
17% Napa County. Expressive aromas of very ripe cherries, milk chocolate, suggestions of smoke and sweet oak to spare are echoed in kind by this very rich and outgoing wine’s ample flavors. If arguably inviting criticism for being just a bit over the top in terms of its obvious ripeness, its youthfully gruff tannins and its evident back-palate heat, it nonetheless conveys a fine sense of fruity continuity and depth. We like its chances to age into better and see good things ahead if afforded a half-dozen years of cellar time. **$135.00**

**QUANTUM Napa Valley 2009**
Ripeness trumps fruit at most every stop here, and the wine is at once both thick and a bit heavy footed. It starts to dry out by mid-palate and heats up from there with scattered suggestions of graphite, coffee and walnut shell emerging in its moderately tannic, low-in-fruit flavors. **$40.00**

**RIDGE Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains 2010**
74% Cabernet Sauvignon; 20% Merlot; 4% Petit Verdot; 2% Cabernet Franc. This year’s version of what has become one of California’s iconic Cabernets is introduced in the nose by a fine combination of juicy young fruit, black olives and undisguised oaky sweetness, and its mannerly, multi-layered flavors follow suit. It is surprisingly supple for a wine of its age, and its gentle tannins firm without being intrusive, but a distracting, vaguely toothpicky pucker emerges at the end and warns against hasty drinking. Allow for at least five years of patience, and, given its pedigree, we would not be surprised if it continues to improve for a decade or more. **$160.00**

**RODNEY STRONG Wirth Ranch Green Valley 2008 Solano County.** 10% Zinfandel. With a nose that reminds as much of a pickle barrel as it does anything vinous, this decidedly spoiled effort is ruled by volatile sharpness every step of its way and is spoiled beyond redemption. **$26.00**

**PEJU Napa Valley 2011**
Fairly slender and at times impressing as being out-and-out thin, this underplayed middleweight has an all too tentative hold on defined varietal fruit to start, and then loosens it even more in a finish that turns out to be slightly threadbare and dry. It lacks the stuff needed to grow into better, and its future is not one that shines especially bright. **$50.00**

**ROSATI Mendocino County 2006**
If on the one hand showing a bit of developed complexity and suggestive of dry cocoa and loam, this wine is all too sparing in active fruit at this point in its life and seems headed down the road to early senescence. It feigns early richness before drying out under the weight of its tannins, and, while not quite dead yet, it has seen better days. **$32.00**
**This year's Padrone is to improve for years ahead.**

The wine is solid with every space nicely filled and is sure by the entirely acceptable varietal coarseness that comes with.

Deep, slightly supple, fairly full on the palate and held back only defines the best wines, and this one get high marks for all four.

Not antithetical qualities. Their very co-existence, in fact, is what proves that richness, balance, complexity and fruity precision are.

Here's a big, lusty look at drinking.

it is a wine whose careful crafting nonetheless invites early drinking.

**RUTHERFORD RANCH Reserve Napa Valley 2010**

As much as we like its year-younger sibling that goes without a reserve moniker, this tough-minded working is overly extracted and so bound up in sere astringency that it affords little in the way of a clear look at fruit. It is dry now and likely to be drier yet down the line, and we would be surprised if its intransigent tannins ever fully abate.

**SEPS ESTATE Reserve Napa Valley 2008**

By Storybook Mountain. Deep, defined and impressively layered in the nose with a fine fix on essential Cabernet fruit, this solid offering is big without being brawny and exhibits a nice sense of polish for the substantial wine that it is. It is fairly supple in feel with a trim bit of underlying tannin for structure, and, if certain to improve with five years in the cellar and keep nicely thereafter, it is a wine whose careful crafting nonetheless invites early drinking.

**SEQUOIA GROVE Cambium Napa Valley 2009**

Here's a big, lusty look at Napa Valley Cabernet that once again proves that richness, balance, complexity and fruity precision are not antithetical qualities. Their very co-existence, in fact, is what defines the best wines, and this one get high marks for all four. Deep, slightly supple, fairly full on the palate and held back only by the entirely acceptable varietal coarseness that comes with youth, the wine is sold with every space nicely filled and is sure to improve for years ahead.

**SIGNORELLO Padrone Napa Valley 2010**

This year’s Padrone is comprised of 100% Cabernet Sauvignon

**STAGLIN Rutherford Napa Valley 2010**

What starts out as a dense, ripe and somewhat brooding young wine on first sniff slowly unfolds and reveals itself to be a deep, well-composed Cabernet of more breed than bombast, and, if not at all stinting in extracted fruit and creamy oak, it exhibits exceptional balance for the very ample offering that it is. While it is underpinned by no small degree of fine-grained tannin, it is never austere or unduly astringent, and it shows striking length and fruity starchina that makes for risk-free predictions of eight to ten years of certain improvement.

**SPOTTSWOODE St. Helena Napa Valley 2010**

What starts out as a dense, ripe and somewhat brooding young wine on first sniff slowly unfolds and reveals itself to be a deep, well-composed Cabernet of more breed than bombast, and, if not at all stinting in extracted fruit and creamy oak, it exhibits exceptional balance for the very ample offering that it is. While it is underpinned by no small degree of fine-grained tannin, it is never austere or unduly astringent, and it shows striking length and fruity starchina that makes for risk-free predictions of eight to ten years of certain improvement.

**STAGLIN Rutherford Napa Valley 2010**

We reviewed this bottling at the start of the year and found it to be lesser stuff than we are used to from Staglin, but we later found persuasive evidence that our samples may well have been damaged in shipping and thus decided to take a second look. Given a reprieve, the wine performs up to expectations and is built along classic Staglin lines with impressively extracted and wonderfully deep fruit played again a wealth of very rich oak. It is big, fully ripe, moderately tannic and just a touch hot, and it hangs on and on at the finish. It has the strength and solidity to age for a very long time, and, even if its hard-to-resist richness is sure to tempt hasty drinking, it deserves no less than six to ten years of age.

**SHAFER Hillside Select Stags Leap District 2009**

Napa Valley. As always a decidedly extravagant wine and one that marches right to the very brink of being too much of good thing, the latest Hillside Select will be frowned upon by those who find unabashed richness and size to be faults and joyously celebrated by those of us who do not. It is powerful stuff that is marvelously deep in near-juicy fruit, and it is lavishly appointed with lovely oak, but for all of its largesse, it is solidly built with the structure to age for years. We have seen how its fully ripe predecessors have flourished with time, and we have no doubt that this one will do the same.
Cabernet Sauvignon

**STAG’S LEAP WINE CELLARS Fay Napa Valley 2010**
Although all of this producer’s current Cabernet offerings are mannerly, moderately complex wines that steer a polished path without abandoning themselves to structural softness, this one shows a little more depth and is a bit more explicit in its keen, curranty fruit. It, too, smacks of tobacco and black tea with a mild whisper of cappuccino off to the side, and it comes across as both friendly and firmly structured with a fine sense of latter-palate varietal grip. It is easy to taste, hangs on quite well at the finish and does not demand lengthy keeping but will gain with a few years of age.

**STAG’S LEAP WINE CELLARS S.L.V. Napa Valley 2010**
Suggesting both black cherries and plums and marked by the same toasted-herb accents that appear in its mates, the S.L.V. bottling takes on singular touches of coffee all its own. It, too, is supple and rounded with a fleshy palatal feel, and, its tannins, while present, are far from aggressive. It is not a powerful wine or one that is defined by big muscles, but it gets good marks for complexity, polish and balance. Look for a few years of growth and a useful decade of life after that.

**STAG’S LEAP WINE CELLARS Cask 23 2010 Napa Valley**
It may sport the most ambitious price tag of the clan, but this year’s Cask 23 comes up as the least of the Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars lot in terms of fruity focus and depth. It steers to tobacco, tea leaf and olives and shows a slightly soft, open structure before drying and pulling up a touch short at the end. If fairly complex, it wants a bit more fruity drive and looks to be in peak form fairly soon.

**STAR LANE Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara 2009**
15% Cabernet Franc; 8% Petit Verdot. There is no question but this wine’s provenance is capable of producing red wines that are high in ripeness and heft, and, while not one for elegance, this one does not stint on substance. While it sports big fruity muscles, it is sturdy without being unduly severe, and it should grow past its youthful toughness. Given the choice, we would wait for a good half-dozen years before pouring it as a flavorful foil to hearty meat dishes.

**STELTZNER Martini Clone Stags Leap District 2009 Napa Valley**
Although its showy, sweetly oaked aromas are so outgoing in fruit that they suggest that this will be a Cabernet concerned most with immediate gratification, and its flavors are admittedly fairly expressive right now, the solid young wine is balanced with an eye to the future, and its best lies some years ahead. Its fine combination of structural firmness, fruity depth, trim tannin and unfettered vitality is the right recipe for up to a decade of guaranteed growth.

**STEVEN KENT Lineage Livermore Valley 2010**
65% Cabernet Sauvignon; 16% Cabernet Franc; 15% Merlot; 3% Petit Verdot; 1% Malbec. We cannot recall better Livermore Valley Cabernets and red-Bordeaux blends than those we have seen from Steven Kent, and this striking new effort keeps the winery’s winning string intact. From its fascinating, wonderfully complex and perfectly nuanced aromas of dusty berries, cassis and soft, oaky spice to its very deep and sustained flavors, it is a wine that is defined by refinement and keen composition rather than big muscles and bombast. While its structure is such that we would opt to bury it deep in the cellar for another decade or so, it is so nicely crafted and balanced that it is certain to please with far shorter keeping.

**STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Napa Valley 2009**
Sweet oak plays a fairly prominent role in this working’s ripe-cherry nose and does the same in its open, ripe-leaning flavors, and, while the wine could do with a keener sense of Cabernet fruit, it is a plump and easy-to-taste effort with an inviting touch of mildly chocolaty richness. It is not so tannic as to demand an extended stay in the cellar, but it will not grow into its best for another three to six years.

**SWANSON Alexis Napa Valley 2010**
10% Merlot. Deep and confidently fruitier right from the start with solid Cabernet flavors that are laced with notes of graphite and vanilla and crème caramel, Swanson’s flagship effort is a fairly serious and ageworthy working whose moderately tannic frame commends an extra bit of keeping. It will need five or six years in the cellar before fully knitting together and looks sure to evolve for at least that many more.

**SWANSON Instant Napa Valley 2010**
12% Merlot; 5% Petit Verdot. Although it struggles at first to find clear fruity focus and starts out a bit muddled with woody spice a step ahead of lesser themes of cassis and dark cherries and shows a few edges and angles en route to a moderately tannic finish, this fleshy, full-bodied youngster never dries out, and its fruit stays the course. It is still a bit awkward, but it will round out with time and should show better integration after three to five years.

**TREFETHEN HaLo Oak Knoll District 2008 Napa Valley**
12% Petit Verdot; 8% Merlot. Starting out with a wonderfully well-composed mix of currants, cocoa, sweet soils and twist of woodiness in the nose and following up fully on its tantalizing promise with well-ripened flavors that match, this latest bottling of Trefethen’s flagship Cabernet is, even at five years of age, a solid, straight-spined youngster that has not yet begun to grow into its own. It is bound up in tannin but never loses its keen fruity bearings, and its high endorsement comes with the sole caveat that it be cellared away for no fewer than another five to eight years with the complete confidence that it has the makings to last a lot longer.
THE VINEYARD HOUSE Napa Valley 2009
4% Cabernet Franc; 4% Merlot; 4% Petit Verdot. We like this wine’s well-defined Cabernet fruit, and we like its sweetening accents of crème brûlée as well as its glints of olives and herbs. We like its impressions of palatal polish and its nicely tempered sense of ripeness, yet it veers ever so slightly to finishing dryness and comes up just short in showing the kind of concentration and depth to rank with those at the head of its high-ticket class. Make no mistake, it is a very good wine, but noteworthy value is not one of its strengths.

TRUCHARD Carneros Napa Valley 2010
9% Cabernet Franc; 2% other. Leaning a little in the direction of Merlot insofar as it recalls somewhat sweeter, red-cherry fruit and is fairly low in expected Cabernet tannins, this one takes on more sweetness still by way of its plentiful oak, and while very approachable and friendly enough stuff, it wanders a bit wide of any conventional varietal mark.

WELLINGTON VINEYARDS

WELLINGTON Reserve Sonoma County 2008
Just beginning to show hints of the complexity that comes with bottle age in its notes of cassis, black olives, dusty soils and toast merging in its nicely composed aromas, this wine follows up on its appealing start with continuous, moderately complex flavors to match. It is supple and slightly fleshy and firms up where it should with the richness and weight to carry its nominal tannin with ease. It will grow for a few years and easily last for a few more, but if the evening’s menu is right, say simple tournedos of beef, it can be enjoyed early on.

GOOD VALUE

WHITEHALL LANE Napa Valley 2010
Clean and correct medium-density aromas of black cherry buoyed by notes of caramelly oak make an inviting first impression, and the wine continues in good form into a somewhat glyceriny entry and a full-bodied passage across the palate. The tannins here are clearly in evidence but do little to discourage early enjoyment for those who drink their Cabernets young. Two to four years of age will smooth out the finish, and the wine is poised to last longer than that under good cellaring.

GOOD VALUE

WILLIAM HILL Napa Valley 2010
Mildly juicy, black cherry fruit is teamed with vanillin oak first in the nose and then again in the like-minded flavors of this fairly direct and uncomplicated wine, but if a fairly simple rendition, it does taste of Cabernet and its nominal tannins help to assuage its slight drift to softness. Do not count on complexity gradually emerging over time, but a few years in the cellar will allow for a little integration and smoothing.

GOOD VALUE

WILLIAM HILL Bench Blend Napa Valley 2010
This is not a cheap wine, but it is hard to like all the same for it is hard and rigid in feel with little in the way of apparent fruit at its heart. It early feint at sweet oak and cassis is interrupted by sour-plum tartness, and it is defined by its acidy stiffness more than anything else.

GOOD VALUE
Champagne

Fortunately, the reincarnation of Schramsberg in the hands of the Davies family and the arrival of several French and Spanish makers of the bubbly began a change that has lifted California wine to a reasonably high level of achievement such that we can begin to look at Champagnes and decide which we might choose and which we would not since the California products are now so very interesting. That is the most important message coming out of this review.

Champagnes come in a variety of forms and levels, the least of which is what is dubbed "non-vintage". Those wines are the least attractive generally of what comes across the pond to us, but the best of them and the best of the California equivalents are about equal in quality. The big difference is one of money. Non-vintage Champagne typically is priced at the $40-50 level while non-vintage California sparkling wines cost more like $20-25. Not everyone will agree with our assessment that the price/quality comparisons favor California by a wide margin, but as lovers of bubbles of all kinds, that is our recommendation to you. If you are looking for a wholly reliable bubbly that will not stretch your pocketbook, you cannot do better for the money than with California.

Where the discussion gets a little less clear is as one goes up the price ladder. It is true that the best Schramsbergs and Mumm DVXs and Domaine Carneros Le Reve are serious, high quality quaffs, but it is also true that California offers a mere handful of such luxuries while Champagne has many, many more from which to choose. This year's review looks across the board at a few of the choices. The bottom line is that great wine is great wine and the price advantage that California enjoys at the non-vintage level disappears as the wines move up the "seriousity" scale.

88 CAMILLE SAVÈS Carte Blanche
75% Pinot Noir; 25% Chardonnay. One of our favorites in an earlier review, this edition is short on energy in aromas that smell of tingly, dry wine and have very little of the rich champenization of its genre. Things do revert back towards normal in the mouth where a frothy, creamy mousse and a bit of citrusy fruit and a bit of yeasty autolysis do lift the wine into reasonable drinkability despite a slight coarse finish.

89 CHARLES HEIDSIECK Rosé Réserve
Showing plenty of fruity volume and combining lots of autolysis with a strong sense of vinosity, this is a real Rosé in every sense of the word. It is firmly balanced and charged by a fine, lasting mousse, and its modest trim of back-palate astingency never interferes with is message of very vital, faintly cherry-like fruit. While it can be enjoyed with lighter foods, it will serve just as well on its own, and its commendable vitality trumps the need for hasty drinking.

87 CHARLES HEIDSIECK Brut Réserve
Recommended with caveats relating to its excessive toasty, burnt wheat bread character that precedes the tight, citrusy nose and flavors that well up underneath, this wine gets a big boost from a near perfect mousse of creamy, mid-sized bubbles that carry it nicely across the palate. Its finish is long, appropriately austere in its delivery of mineraly fruit and loaded with all but dominant old yeast qualities. It is not for stand-alone sipping but will make a willing mate to savory finger foods.

88 DELAMOTTE Blanc de Blancs
If sufficiently light and lively to timidly claim the Blanc de Blancs name, this crisp and moderately frothy offering goes no further than that, and it is characterized more by stinting simplicity than anything else. It is mildly candied and shows minimal evidence of champenization beyond its bubbles, and, if an easy quaff, it is very limited in reach.

88 DELAMOTTE Brut Rosé
Comparatively coarse and a bit flattened out and lacking in life when measured against its pink cousins, Delamotte’s is a Rosé of size without beauty and seems a bit small at its heart even if fairly full on the palate. It pulls up short and ends with bitter-edged finish that plays more to tannic dryness than to any more positive Champenoise traits.

81 GOSSET Grand Rosé
It has seemed to us the Rosé Champagnes have been getting both fruitier and darker in color over the past several years, but here is one that recalls a more classic style. It distantly hints at cherries but fixes its focus on minerals and yeast in its aromas, and it follows with a full slate of toasty, champenized traits on the palate. It is explosively foamy but very creamy in feel with a fine lift of brightening acidity lending great length to its finish, and its impressive depth is never dependent on bulk. It is a wine for drinking with meals rather than being quaffed all alone, and it is sure to age effortlessly.

81 GOSSET Brut Grande Réserve
The same wine reviewed in earlier editions and liked somewhat more than what is shown here, this wine is rich and interesting if now straddling the line between aged and energetic. Its bubbles remain intact with plenty of foamy, insistent character, and while it retains its admirable range and length, its finish has gained a mineraly, citrusy aspect. It is, nonetheless, an accomplished wine worthy of its high rating here.

81 GOSSET Brut Excellence
True to the house style that embraces a lighter and somewhat exotic fruit presence, this basic Brut combines lightly toasty notes of autolysis with hints of pears and green apples. Its mid-strength carbonation is well fit to its quietly rich, sweet lemon peel initial
flavors with their intimations of aged yeast for a glimpse of added interest and complexity.

**84 GOSSET Grand Blanc de Blancs**

Its nicely yeasty aromas deliver a quiet bit of richness and are entirely keeping with Blanc de Blancs brightness, but this one too quickly becomes brittle and runs off the tracks as abiding sourness comes on to undermine its otherwise toasty and fully autolyzed flavors.

**85 HENRI ABELÉ Brut Rosé**

Sporting a nicely matched pairing of yeast and pert, very lively young fruit, this inviting Rosé impresses right from the start, and its forthright appeals persist from beginning to end. It earns a nod for its fine and insistent bubbles as well as its deft balance, and, while ever so slightly astringent, it is less so than the norm for its genre and remains ever light on its feet. It has the fruity presence to succeed with salmon in rich sauce, but it is equally easy to like on its own.

**86 HENRIOT Rosé**

Smelling faintly of yeast and wheat crackers with but a hint of vestigial fruit to its slightly austere nose, this wine surprises in the mouth with fuller, rounder, more generous flavors that find fruit at the fore. Its Rosé credentials are affirmed by its slightly phenolic finish, but it has the basic richness to succeed, and it should prove a most useful foil for dishes ranging from salmon to poultry to milder pork.

**87 HENRIOT Brut Souverain**

Mixing a bit of aged yeast, baked bread character with notes of fruit and freshness, this wine is of two minds in its aromatics but is perhaps helped along a bit by it. It is frothy and a touch coarse on the palate with suggestions of chalk and brioche and a mild hint of sweetness at the front before turning appropriately tight and somewhat austere towards the back. We enjoyed this one alongside fresh-shucked oysters.

**88 HENRIOT Blanc de Blancs**

Our sample of Henriot’s Blanc de Blancs shows an odd, almost papery element and a nagging suggestion of earth in lieu of any autolyzed richness, and the wine never comes into clear focus. It is a touch sweet at the margins with chalky bitterness poking through at the finish, and it in no way shows the refinement we look for in fine Champagne.

**89 JOSÉ DHONDT Brut Blanc de Blancs**

A biscuity, water cracker overlay to crisp, citrusy, green apple, chalky, richly yeasted aromas bring range and interest to this wine from the outset, and its suggestions of polish and even a hint of delicacy raise its level further. It is brisk, foamy and yet delivers a smaller bead to its carbonation, and the flavors that follow echo the nose is its mix of chalk, fresh and autolyzed yeast and zest, lemony notes leading into a clean, lively finish. The wine would be a fine partner to a shellfish platter.

**88 JOSÉ DHONDT Blanc de Blancs Millésimé 2008**

**Mes Vieilles Vignes.** Admittedly a touch more complex than its mate above in its toasty, aged yeast notes, this wine is just enough less filled up at its heart that it runs to austerity and minerality in both nose and flavor. Its mousse is strong, finely bubbled and suitably frothy, and its yeasty first flavors do give it an inviting stamp of champenization. However, things turn a bit sour at the finish, and while there is much to like here, we would opt for the non-vintaged bottling.

**87 LAURENT-PERRIER Millésimé 2004**

Slightly older in character yet showing glimmers of lemon-curd sweetness and very well-scrubbed with its yeastiness writ small, this foamy, pleasurably balanced bottling is a bit reserved in its temperament and relies on good manners more than richness. It is easy to taste now and is not so understated that it cannot succeed at the table, but it wants drinking with lighter fare or, better yet, on its own.

**87 LAURENT-PERRIER Brut**

Steering a little more toward yeast than it does to fruitiness, but never giving up to dryness, this straightforward Brut shows a bit of brioche sweetness set atop a slightly citrusy note and more subtle suggestions of minerals. It is continuous without being all that effusive, and only a minor touch of late-arriving coarseness holds it back from higher marks.

**86 LAURENT-PERRIER Brut Cuvée Rosé**

Elegant and fruity at the same time with a quick invitation from bright, pure cherryish notes and then filled out handsomely by whiffs of chalky soils and well-integrated, rich and uplifting yeasty-driven scents, this wine manages to be both vigorous and layered at one and the same time. Its bubbles are insistent, finely carved and add to the early sensations of lightness and energy yet also carry the wine long into a balanced, refined finish. And its latter palate grip is exactly what one should expect from the genre. While service with lighter foods would be our first choice, this one has the beauty to stand alone.
Champagne

**MOËT ET CHANDON Rosé Imperial**
Straight down the road for type, this wine sports the expected blending of table wine vinosity and mild but evident fruit with a slightly yeasty overlay in its mid-volume aromas, and while it will not earn points for complexity, it does gain them for a foamy and long-lasting mousse and for flavors that make a bow to the table wine side of the genre while not allowing more than a tad of grippy tannins into play. Use it with light finger foods or even a parchment poached salmon fillet.  

**MOËT ET CHANDON Grand Vintage Rosé 2004**
Aged or not, this wine lives up neither to its name nor to what one would expect of an older bubbly. Rather than strong toasty notes, the aromas are papery and slightly leesy with brushy and slightly stale impressions in the background. One might want to say something nice about the appropriately small bubbles in its mousse, but there are not enough of them, and, all in all, this one is surpassed by its non-vintaged and marginally less expensive mate above.

**MOËT & CHANDON Impérial Brut**
Rather sparing in autolysis even if infused with a vague touch of years and a minimalist in most every regard, this briefly bubbled, softly balanced look at Champagne fails in its attempt to find either convincing richness or focus and pretty much misses the champenoise point.

**MOËT & CHANDON Grand Vintage 2004**
More leesy than toasty and a bit pungent as it greets the nose, this aggressively yeasted wine has not found much in the way of real beauty during its time en tirage. It may find favor with those who loves autolysis in all of its forms, but it is muddled and murky and very stiff at the edges, and it misses the right Champenoise marks for us.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Brut Millésimé 2005**
Sporting all the right pieces of fine Champagne and combining them in a near-seamless fashion, this very sensibly priced effort leads with an attractive nose of toast and citrus with quiet hints of chalky soils and stays true to promise with like-minded, well-composed flavors. Frothy and bright with lots of energy and a long, lasting finish, it may not claim Blanc de Blancs origins, but it fits the form nonetheless and will make lovely drinking with lighter, early evening fare.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Palmes d’Or Brut 2002**
Long on the toasty imperatives of lengthy time en tirage and a wine that is, at this point, wholly unconcerned with fruit, this deep and very complex sparkler counts a wonderfully creamy mousse among its considerable virtues. It is, however, a touch stiff in balance, and, if never stinging in richness, it wants for a little more refinement and finesse to win inclusion with those at the very head of the class.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Cuvée 225 Millésimé 2005**
Freshening suggestions of lemons mingle with a certain, slightly toasty, biscuity influence in both the aromas and flavors of this aged, but still lively, effort, and, given its age, its obvious energy comes as a bit of a surprise. Its very fine mousse imparts a slight sense of initial creaminess on the palate, yet it is hard-charging acidity that stands out the most and leaves it a bit tensile and taut. It is not a Champagne to pour without thought and will shine at its best with dishes such as a platter of oysters that will welcome its tartness.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Brut Réserve**
If never as far reaching and complex as those bottlings allowed extra time on the years, Feuillatte's basic Brut is a complete and carefully crafted Champagne of fine balance and brightness. Its lightly yeasty elements are nicely matched by a trim bit of citrusy fruit, and both its energetic mousse and its keen sense of focus are sustained to the end. And, its very reasonable price earns it an extra tip of the hat.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Brut Rosé**
More overt in its fruit than the typical French bottling and a bit closer to the California model, Feuillatte's Rosé tilts top cherries and plums with a suggestion of juiciness beneath its very proper fruit, and both its energetic mousse and its keen sense of focus are sustained to the end. And, its very reasonable price earns it an extra tip of the hat.

**NICOLAS FEUILLATTE Cuvée Spéciale Millésimé 2005**
This very dry offering edges to austerity and very much wears its age on its sleeve, yet for all of its evident yeast and its minerally underlayment, it is a touch coarse and lacking the elegance that we seek in older Champagnes. It has the complexity to hold our attention, but it is as good as it is likely to get, and we would tag it for drinking before it fades.

**PIPER-HEIDSIECK Rosé Sauvage Brut**
The darkest of the Rosés under review this month and one that goes to limits in terms of its near red-wine vinosity, this one may be bubbled, but in all other ways it recalls light Pinot Noir, and
its autolyzed influences are modest. Although its ample acidity boosts the drying effects of its back-palate tannins, it buffers its astringency with plenty of fruit and needs only the right setting to shine. Tag it as one to avoid for solo sipping and save it for the dinner table.

88 PIPER-HEIDSIECK Vintage Brut 2006
Moderately yeasty and geared to the toastiness of real autolysis throughout, this bottling shows the effects of extra aging, but it has gained in richness and roundness while still retaining a crisp bit of fruit. It is both complex and fairly lively with lots of long-lasting bubbles, and it meets the expectations for added interest and range that vintage versions of Champagne should, but do not always, possess.

88 PIPER-HEIDSIECK Brut
Nominally yeasty and lightly lemony in a pleasing if not exactly inspiring way, this wine gets its points and more positives than negatives for its generous mousse of finely formed bubbles and its austere, yeasty, chalky flavors and finish. It is one that wants to be paired with light foods or even a platter of bivalves in order to balance its edgy finish.

88 TAITTINGER Comtes de Champagne Rosé 2005
Inviting from first sniff to lasting finish, and hitting the expected marks at every stop along the way, this lovely effort is both light and lively with a surprising burst of cherryish fruit and complex in its toasty, yeasty, chalky, somewhat creamy aromas. Perfectly formed small, suitably insistent bubbles frame a bright, vital wine whose fine balance and energy carry its elegant flavors into a long, persistent finish. It may be dear in price, but it is a wine to choose for the best occasions.

88 TAITTINGER Brut Millésimé 2006
A successful expression of carefully managed champenization that is at once both rich and nuanced, this nicely made effort overlies elements of minerals and lemon cream with a good bit of yeast albeit with a lighter hand. Its tiny, pin-pointy bubbles lend it a fine, creamy feel, and it conveys an ongoing sense of proportion and balance from beginning to end. Despite being a bit older, it has lost nothing in energy, and, in this case, age has resulted in real polish.

88 TAITTINGER Prestige Rosé
A bit darker in color than many Rosés and a wine that is made in a richer style, this generous sparkler mimics fruity California versions to a certain extent even while showing a complexing trim of autolyzed yeast. It is full and foamy and fairly long on the palate with a good bit of phenolic grip at the finish, and, if perhaps slightly too much of a good thing for unaccompanied sipping, it affords pleasure aplenty and will make dandy drinking with relatively flavorful foods.

88 TAITTINGER Comtes de Champagne 2005 Blanc de Blancs. It may be seen by some as blasphemy that we did not rate this iconic bottling any higher, but the truth of the matter is that, while a very nice wine and showing the delicacy of a true Blanc de Blancs, it lacks for the kind of complexity and subtle range that are found in its finest versions. It is crisp, it is refreshing and it is persistently bubbled, to be sure, but it is also arguably lean to a fault.

88 TAITTINGER Brut La Francaise
So precise and refined that it approaches the delicate end of the sparkling wine spectrum, this non-vintage bottling delivers creamy yeast notes with hints of chalk and vanilla and an appropriate bit of citrus, slightly angular fruit in its light-medium depth aromas. Finely bubbled and fairly insistently with a glimpse of inner richness that reminds a tad of California-born bubbles, it can be enjoyed by itself or with light foods.

88 TAITTINGER Brut Réserve
Never other than clean and quite pleasant, but a sparkler that is always fairly reserved, this one plays to subtle yeast and chalky austerity and stays within rather limited lines from front to back. That said, it is the kind of wine whose lack of bombast affords it comfortable paring with a host of lighter foods, and the usual, oft-overused recommendations of simply prepared shellfish are entirely appropriate here.

Additions

Please also note these two very fine California sparkling wines that arrived just too late for our coverage last month.

81 J Brut Rosé Russian River Valley
66% Pinot Noir; 33% Chardonnay; 1% Pinot Meunier. Much in the manner of its similarly affable Cuvée 20 cellarmate, this very vital version of sparkling Rosé is led first by buoyant young fruit with a bit of quiet, but very persistent, creamy yeast in support. It impresses as being fairly rich at one moment and light on its feet at the next, and, like its mate, it finishes with a fine acid lift. It will make lovely drinking with any number of moderately rich salmon, chicken or duck dishes, yet its lack of any late-arriving astringency means that it is a Rosé that can be joyfully quaffed all by itself.

81 J Cuvée 20 Sonoma County
54% Chardonnay; 44% Pinot Noir; 2% Pinot Meunier. J’s new Cuvée 20 is an inviting, very-easy-to-sip bubbly, the star player in which is lively, lightly candied, lemon-like fruit, yet there is a nice trim of subtle yeasiness at work as well, and the wine is clear about its champenized origins. It is fresh, clean tasting and frothy, and, while it finishes with plenty of bright, palate-cleansing acidity, it is never so tart or austere that it cannot also be enjoyed on its own as stand-alone sipper.
The Year in Review 2013

When all the bottles are cleared away and the last words are writ, it is time for your trusty editors to sit back and take stock of the year that has just unfolded before us. The journey this year, not unlike most years, has seen us pull the corks on upwards of 5,000 bottles total. We report on most of them, but a good number of those corks come from second bottles of wines we are reviewing and an equally large number come from wines that we taste in pre-release form or in categories that do not fit our reporting schedule. And many are imports that folks send our way perhaps not recognizing the name of our journal or hoping that we are going to someday taste Argentinian Torrontes or Northern Italian Sauvignon Blancs.

The wines that occupy more of our time than any other are local Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for very good reason. There are more of them than other varieties, and they tend to be quality leaders, which, of course, accounts for their popularity in the first place. Regardless of the fascination that new varieties and new approaches have for us as wine geeks, we seem never to tire of good quality wines. And judging both by the mail we get and the larger response in the marketplace, neither do you or the enthusiastic end of the quality-wine consuming community.

Here then, some impressions from the year now concluding together with our awards for the best wines and winery of 2013.

The Status of Cabernet Sauvignon
It is easy to make great wine in great years. The 2007 and 2009 vintages for Cabernet Sauvignon have been just that: great years with success at most stations along the Cabernet spectrum. But, in this year, especially towards the end of the year, we are seeing a fair number of 2010s, and they are more of a mixed bag. To be sure, 2010 is a year in which wineries with superlative sites and exemplary vineyard control could also make many very fine wines. It was a cool year with a heat spike that destroyed some grapes, but Cabernet was less affected than Zinfandel, for example, and the leading producers have not let us down. On the other hand, Cabernet prices are up and quality at the accessibly priced end of the market is a mixed bag.

The Status of Pinot Noir
Whereas 2010 was a cool year with good success, especially in the North Coast, it was more challenging further south. We have seen those wines for the last couple of years, and now, with the 2011s coming to market, it is a very different kind of challenge. Even more than with Cabernet, Pinot is a mixed bag and for every grand wine there seems to be a clunker. But perhaps more importantly, 2011 Pinot Noir from the North Coast in particular is often a bit lower rated even when it succeeds.

The Status of Chardonnay
Cool years favor Chardonnay so long as the grapes can ripen with reasonable acidity. Both 2010 and 2011 favor Chardonnays with brightness, and 2012 may as well although so far, we are not convinced.

The Status of Sauvignon Blanc
If there is a tasting surprise this year, it has come in the 2012 Sauvignon Blancs that have taken so well to the lively style that Mother Nature has provided to the wines we have seen to date. It is too early to judge Chardonnay across the board, but we have liked what we have seen from Sauvignon Blanc and expect that the longer-aged wines that will come our way next year from the 2012 harvest will continue the great success story that has begun to be written.

Winery Of The Year: Daou Vineyards & Winery
“What’s new?”, “What’s new?” is a question whose answer has seemed an obsession of food and wine lovers for as long as we can recall; sometimes, we think, to the point of overshadowing the far more important question of “what’s really good?” Our “Winery of the Year” honoree for 2013, Daou Vineyards & Winery, is, however, both new and extraordinarily good. In only a few years, Daou has established itself as not only one of the most significant producers in Paso Robles, but a winery whose astonishing breadth of successes has justifiably earned it a place among the very best in the state.

Founded by brothers Georges and Daniel Daou who last year purchased the historic Hoffman Mountain Ranch in the Adelaida Hills of Paso Robles, the winery earned enthusiastic CGCW recommendation for each and every one of the fifteen wines we tasted over 2013, and, even more remarkably, awards of ** and higher for nine of those offerings.

We spent a long afternoon tasting with winemaker, Daniel, last Spring atop the mountain that Daou now calls home, and we found him to be a man driven by undisguised passion and whose enthusiasm and sheer love of fine wine is downright infectious. We were extremely impressed by those samples we tasted, but, as we do not review wines based on winery visits, we were eager to see how they fared when put to the CGCW test of being blind-tasted with their peers once we were home. Not only did they not disappoint, they proved to be a most remarkable bunch, especially considering how many different varieties were represented.

Daniel’s first love and principal pursuit is the crafting of world-class Cabernet Sauvignon, and he has already made his mark with his outstanding “Soul of a Lion” bottlings, yet Daou’s several Syrah, Petite Sirah and Merlot blends also rank with the best of their class. As a group, Daniel’s red wines would more than justify the winery’s top honors, but we were at least as impressed with the sensational series of sophisticated whites running from Viognier to Chardonnay and Grenache Blanc, the last of which, in 2012, is far and away the finest Californian version that we have encountered.

These are exciting times in Paso Robles with more than a few rising stars worthy of note. Daniel and Georges have offered a tantalizing and eminently delicious glimpse of what the future holds for the region, and for that they earn a tip of the CGCW cap and a very deep bow as our 2013 Winery of the Year. We cannot wait to see what is next!
**White Wines Of The Year**

It may not be a 2012, but the 2011 Grgich Hill Sauvignon Blanc Essence is a wine of impeccable credentials and raises the bar for all of its variety. Here’s hoping for more of the same in the new vintage. In a similar vein, the 2010 David Ramey Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay is a repeat performer also in the 2009 vintage) whose brilliance and consistency sets an enviable mark for its variety.

**Red Wine Of The Year**

From a superb vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon, the Hartwell Estate Reserve 2009 is about as delicious as this noble variety gets. It has all the California hallmarks of depth and richness and come hither character yet it is a wine that will grow more complex over time and is our choice for the outstanding Cabernet of this past year. Our top-rated Pinot Noir, Williams Selyem Estate Vineyard 2010 shares the honors for our red wine of the year.

**CHARLES OLKEN’S**

**Best of the Wines**

- DAOU Viognier Paso Robles 2011
- Grgich Hills Sauvignon Blanc Essence 2011
- Hartwell Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Reserve 2009
- Mumm DVX Rosé Sparkling Wine 2007
- Ojai Vineyard Syrah Roll Ranch 2008
- Ramey Hyde Vineyard Carneros 2010
- Saintsbury Pinot Noir Carneros 2010
- Seghesio Zinfandel Cortina Dry Creek Valley 2010
- Trefethen Cabernet Sauvignon Halo 2008
- Williams Selyem Pinot Noir Estate Vineyard 2010

**STEPHEN ELIOT’S**

**Best of the Wines**

- Alysian Chardonnay Westside Farms Clone 4 2010
- Corison Cabernet Sauvignon Kronos Vyd 2010
- DAOU Grenache Bambino Robles 2012
- Grgich Hills Sauvignon Blanc Essence 2011
- Hartwell Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Reserve 2009
- Qupe Syrah Bien Nacido Block 2008
- Ramey Hyde Vineyard Carneros 2010
- Ravenswood Zinfandel Teldeschi Dry Creek 2010
- Williams Selyem Pinot Noir Estate Vineyard 2010
- Shafer Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select 2010

**Best of the Wines**

- Alpha Omega Cabernet Sauvignon To Kalon North 2010
- Jc Cellars Syrah Buffalo Hill Rockpile 2011
- Kosta Browne Pinot Noir Cap’s Crown 2011
- Moone-Tsai Merlot Hillside Blend 2009
- Morgan Chardonnay Double L Vineyard 2011
- Ramey Chardonnay Hudson Vineyard 2010
- Schramsberg Sparkling Wine Reserve 2005
- Sequoia Grove Cabernet Sauvignon Cambium 2009
- Storybook MTN Zinfandel Eastern Exposure 2010
- Venge Sauvignon Blanc Juliana Vineyard 2012

**Connoisseurs’ Series**

Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs’ Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS’ SERIES wine-of-the-month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month is one of the finest groups of wines ever assembled for Connoisseurs’ Series, or any other wine of the month offering. Look at this bonanza: Ramey Chardonnay Hyde Vineyard Carneros 2009, Ravenswood Zinfandel Teldeschi Vineyard Dry Creek Valley 2010 and Von Strasser Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve Agira Vineyard Napa Valley 2010.

For more information about CONNOISSEURS’ SERIES, please call the California Wine Club at 1-800-777-4443 or visit www.cawineclub.com/connseries
**December 2013 Index**

**CABERNET SAUVIGNON**
- 1331 Bugay Vineyard Sonoma Valley 2010
- ALPHA OMEGA Proprietary Red Wine 2010
- A PROPER CLARET California 2012
- BACIO DIVINO Reserve Napa Valley 2010
- BALDACCI Stags Leap District 2009
- BEAULIEU Rutherford Napa Valley 2010
- BERINGER Private Reserve Napa Valley 2010
- BERINGER Knights Valley 2011
- BIG GUY Red Wine California 2011
- BLACKSMITH Clone 6 Oak Knoll 2010
- BLACKSMITH Oak Knoll District 2010
- BLACKSMITH C.L.R.T. Oakville 2011
- BLACKSMITH Alexander Valley 2009
- BLUE ROCK Baby Blue Alex Valley 2011
- BLUE ROCK Alexander Valley 2010
- BOUGETZ Spring Mountain District 2010
- B.R. COHN Olive Hill Estate Vineyards 2009
- B.R. COHN Silver Label North Coast 2011
- BRIDEWOOD Paso Robles 2011
- BURIED CANE Roughout 2010
- CADARETTA Columbia Valley 2010
- CADARETTA Springboard 2009
- CASTLE ROCK Reserve Napa Valley 2011
- CASTLE ROCK Paso Robles 2011
- CHARLES SMITH Columbia Valley 2011
- CHATEAU ST. JEAN Alexander Valley 2010
- CHESSMAN Lodi 2011
- CLAYHOUSE Estate Red Cedar 2011
- CLAYHOUSE Red Cedar 2012
- CLOS DU BOIS Reserve Alex Valley 2010
- CLOS DU VAL Napa Valley 2010
- CLOS LA CHANCE Res Central Coast 2010
- CLOS LA CHANCE Whitneyston Yst 2010
- CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Meritage 2011
- COLUMBIA CREST H3 Horse Heaven Valley 2011
- CORISON Napa Valley 2010
- DAOU Reserve Paso Robles 2011
- DEHLINGER Russian River Valley 2010
- DELECTUS French Wedding 2010
- DIAMOND CREEK Volcanic Hill 2010
- DIAMOND CREEK Gravelly Meadow 2010
- DIAMOND CREEK Red Rock Terrace 2010
- DUCKHORN Napa Valley 2010
- EDGE North Coast 2011
- EDNA VALLEY VYD Central Coast 2011
- EDUCATED GUESS Napa Valley 2011
- ELYSE Morisoli Vineyard Rutherford 2008
- EUCLID Napa Valley 2010
- FEATHER Columbia Valley 2010
- FLORA SPRINGS Napa Valley 2011
- FRANCIS COPPOLA Claret California 2011
- FRANCIS COPPOLA Diamond Red 2011
- FREI BROTHERS Reserve Alex Valley 2011
- FUSE Napa Valley 2010
- GHOST PINES Winemaker's Blend 2011
- GIRARD Napa County 2010
- GIRARD Napa Valley 2010
- GRIGIO HILLS Yountville Selection 2009
- GRIGIO HILLS Napa Valley 2010
- HAYWOOD Los Chilamizal 2010
- HESTAN Napa Valley 2010
- HYPOTHEIS Napa Valley 2011
- J. DAVIES Diamond Mountain District 2010
- J. LOHR Cuvee Pau Pao Robles 2009
- J. LOHR Hilttop Paso Robles 2010
- JOSEPH PHILPS Insignia Napa Valley 2010
- JUSTIN Paso Robles 2011
- KADIEM Napa Valley 2010
- KEATING Montezago Vineyard 2010
- KEATING Encomium California 2010
- KENWOOD Artist Series Sonoma 2009
- LAIL J. Daniel Cuvee Napa Valley 2010
- LAIL Blueprint Napa Valley 2011
- LEWIS Mason's Napa Valley 2011
- LONG MEADOW RANCH Napa Valley 2010
- LOUIS M. MARTINI Lot No. 1 Napa 2010
- LOUIS M. MARTINI Sonoma County 2011
- MAGNESS Napa Valley 2011
- MARIO BAZAN Napa Valley 2008
- MINTER The Oracle Napa Valley 2009
- MINER Oakville Napa Valley 2010
- MINER Stagecoach Vineyard 2010
- MOONE-TSAI Hillside Blend Howell 2010
- MOUNT VEEDER Napa Valley 2011
- OLEMA Sonoma County 2010
- PARADUXX C Blend Napa Valley 2010
- PARADUXX True Grit Reserve 2010
- PARADUXC Small Lot Blend 2010
- PAT PAULSEN Parthenogenes 2009
- PAT PAULSEN Heritage Selection 2009
- PAT PAULSEN Wirth Ranch 2008
- PEJU Napa Valley 2011
- PIROUETTE Columbia Valley 2010
- PRIDE Reserve 83% Sonoma County 2010
- QUANTUM Napa Valley 2009
- RIDGE Monte Bello Santa Cruz 2010
- RODNEY STRONG Brothers Ridge 2010
- RODNEY STRONG Alexander's Crown 2010
- RODNEY STRONG Rockaway 2010
- ROSATI Mendocino County 2006
- ROSATI Mendocino County 2005
- RUTHERFORD RANCH Napa Valley 2011
- RUTHERFORD RANCH Reserve Napa 2010
- SEPS ESTATE Reserve Napa Valley 2008
- SEQUOIA GROVE Cambia Napa Valley 2010
- SHAFER Hillside Select Stags Leap 2009
- SIGNORELLO Padron Napa Valley 2010
- SPOTSWOOD St. Helena 2010
- STAGLIN Rutherford Napa Valley 2010
- STAG'S LEAP Wn CLRS Fay 2010
- STAG'S LEAP Wn CLRS S.L.V. 2010
- STAG'S LEAP Wn CLRS Cask 23 2010
- STAR LANE Happy Canyon 2009
- STELZTNER Martinis Clone Stags Leap 2009
- STEVEN KENT Lineage Livermore 2010
- STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Napa Valley 2009
- SWANSON Alexis Napa Valley 2010
- SWANSON Instant Napa Valley 2010
- TESTAROSSA Red Wine Meritage 2010
- THE VINEYARD HOUSE Napa Valley 2009
- TREFFETHEN Hal Oak Knoll District 2008
- TRUCHARD Carriers Napa Valley 2010
- TURNBULL Napa Valley 2010
- VIADER Napa Valley 2010
- VINA ROBLES Estate Paso Robles 2010
- VOLKER ESSELE Terzetto Napa Valley 2009
- VOLKER ESSELE Napa Valley 2009
- WELLINGTON Victory Reserve 2008
- WELLINGTON Sonoma County 2009
- WHITEHALL LANE Napa Valley 2010
- WILLIAM HILL Napa Valley 2010
- WILLIAM HILL Bench Blend 2010
- NICHOLAS FEUILLETATTE Brut Rosé —
- NICHOLAS FEUILLETATTE Cuvée Spéciale 2005
- PIPER-HEDISSECK Rosé Sauvage Brut —
- PIPER-HEDISSECK Vintage Brut 2006
- TAITTINGER Comtes/Champagne Rosé 2005
- TAITTINGER Brut Millésime 2006
- TAITTINGER Prestige Rosé —
- TAITTINGER Comtes de Champagne 2005
- TAITTINGER Brut La Francaise —
- TAITTINGER Brut Réserve —

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