



Old School Cab and Super Sauvignon

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I was in Napa and Sonoma last week on a business trip. Although Napa Valley has been likened to a wine Disneyland, at times I found myself in the wilderness - as “wilderness” is currently defined by spotty cell coverage and only sporadic connection to email and the internet. Why, I even walked through some actual mud. I was there waving the Spec’s flag, getting some updates on current suppliers, and looking at some prospective suppliers (more on the potential new guys at a later date). As to current suppliers, I visited Janzen, Snowden, Araujo, Quintessa, Opus One, Kenefick Ranch, Storybook Mountain, Tudal, Summers, Paradise Ridge, Pezzi King, Rutherford Ranch, and Hanzell. And while I did not actually visit Ca Momi, I did eat at their Pizzeria/Enoteca at Oxbow Market in Napa. The pizza was EXCELLENT and the wines were both good and cheap; I highly recommend eating there.

Visiting all these wineries and talking with the owners and winemakers brought a few things to mind: how much I like old school Cabernet and the almost shockingly high quality of some of the best California Sauvignon Blancs.

OLD SCHOOL CABERNET

People (customers, friends, suppliers, co-workers, students, etc.) regularly ask me “What are your favorite Cabernets?” I usually answer with a mix of my favorite Cabernets and Cab-dominant blends. Year in and year out, I particularly like Araujo, Quintessa, Opus, Dunn (especially with age), Neal, the Fourteen, both Alexander Valley Vineyards Cabernet and their Cyrus, Snowden, Janzen’s Bacio Divino, Kenefick, Paradise Ridge (especially their Monte Rosso), Summers Villa Adrianna, and Louis Martini (especially the Sonoma County). What do all of these have in common? Actually, other than the fact that they are old school, not much. What makes them old school? They go more for flavor than for extreme ripeness. They all express the essential flavor of Cabernet Sauvignon as well as the character of their terroir. They respect the vintage even as they adhere to their winemaking philosophy.

The producers whose Cabs I favor are not shrinking violets and are not making “food wines” (in the negative, late ‘80s sense of the term). Rather, they get their grapes ripe but are picking based on brown seeds and flavor rather than on some goal sugar brix number. Most of these producers are picking between 23.5° and 25.5°Bx. (“Bx” or Brix is specific gravity-based measure of sugar-by-weight in the “must” so juice with 23.5°Bx is about 23.5% sugar by weight.) They are constantly tasting grapes and looking at seeds. When the seeds turn from green to brown (indicating fully ripe phenols) and the flavors have developed, they pick. If their wines edge above 15% alcohol, it is only in the ripest years and never by much.

Other Cabernet producers (including many of the biggest names) are “sugar-hunters” or “ripeness chasers”. They go for ripeness levels that several years ago were considered unattainable. Many of these wineries are harvesting at 28-30°Bx which causes them to produce wines with natural alcohol levels in the 15.5 to 17.5% range. Many of these wines are sent out to have a certain amount of alcohol removed (often by utilizing a spinning cone) but the final alcohol content is still 15% or more. Too often they sacrifice both varietal character and terroir (site specificity) and move toward flavors reminiscent of canned chocolate syrup. Remember, with California Cabernets labeled above 14% alcohol, the alcohol content specified on the label can be either under- or over-stated by 1% so a wine listed as 15.5% alcohol can be as low as 14.5 (so the alcohol is overstated on the label) or as high as 16.5 (so the alcohol is understated on the label). In my experience, most of these producers tend to understate their alcohols. As ripeness and potential alcohols are going up, acid levels are dropping, so these very ripe wines tend to be lower in acidity (and sufficient acidity is essential both for real balance and for age-worthiness). While I generally don’t like these low acid, overly-high alcohol, black fruit wines, they do have their fans and proponents, especially James Laube (Wine Spectator) and Robert Parker (Wine Advocate). To me, these wines lack the typicity of grape variety and terroir. Too often, these wines are also over extracted. Charmless, pondering, and chalky, lacking in elegance and grace, they remind me of a Molly Dooker or Chris Ringland Shiraz from Australia rather than of California Cabernet.

Rather than low acidity, high alcohol, grainy extraction, all sweet black fruit, and chocolate syrup, I prefer balance (in both acidity and alcohol), Cabernet varietal character (including tobacco leaf and tea leaf notes, black pepper, cedar, and even pencil shavings), and more of a mix of red and black fruits. Notes of cherry and blackberry are both appropriate and the wines can be perfumed with the distinctive aromatics of kirsch and mure. Even in the Cabernet dominated blended wines (especially the Meritage category), Cabernet’s varietal character should be on display. For me - and a lot of others who are the backlash against the over-ripe, over-extracted wines - the old school is the way to go. Are these wines throwbacks? I don’t think so. Rather, I think they are the way - or at least one of the ways - of the future. The pendulum has swung through ripeness to over ripeness and it is due to swing back. It may be getting a little help even as I write this. California is looking at a very late Cabernet harvest for 2011. Much of the Cabernet crop is still hanging (I write this on 10/19/11). If the current dry weather continues, quality will be high, even as yields are looking low. The seeds either have turned or are now turning from green to brown and the grapes have nicely developed flavors. What they do not have is hi brix levels. In order to ensure a crop, even the most ardent ripeness chasers will have to pick grapes at 24.5 to 26°Bx. If they respect the grapes and terroirs, they will make balanced, elegant wines that can be kept. If the ripeness chasers try to make the monster wines they made in 2007 (and that some made even in 2008 and 2009), they will mess it up. The 2011 vintage will dictate lower alcohol, more food friendly wines with at least some red fruit. I am thinking that, like 2008, 2011 will be my kind of vintage. Classic. Elegant and Age-Worthy. Balanced and Delicious. You know - Old School.

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SUPER SAUVIGNON

I have been drinking and tasting wine since 1976. Currently, I taste between 9,000 and 11,000 wines a year. (I've said it before and I'll say it again: I have the world's best job.) I am rarely surprised by much in the world of wine so perhaps I shouldn't say that I am surprised by a recent wave of Sauvignon Blancs I have been tasting from California in general and Napa in particular.

Coming out of France, there are two main models of wines made from Sauvignon Blanc: the Loire Valley model and the Bordeaux model. The Loire model is pure (100%) Sauvignon Blanc expressed at its best by the terroirs of Sancerre and Pouilly Fume. These stony soils (whether Kimmeridgean (chalk stone) or Silex (flint stone – I have one in my office named Fred) produce a minerally pure, focused, citrusy Sauvignon that the local producers usually make with cold fermentation in temperature controlled tanks, avoiding malo-lactic fermentation and, at least for the most part, wooden barrels. Sancerre has long been a café wine in Paris and was the model for New Zealand's Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc – which in turn has been the model for most of the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc industry. While there are a number of California "Sancerre-wannabes", in general, California is too warm, even with aggressive canopy management, to get those crisp citrus (grapefruit, lemon, and lime), gooseberry-kiwi, and mineral flavors on a consistent basis.

The dry white Bordeaux model is Sauvignon Blanc usually blended with (officially) Semillon, Muscadelle de Bordelaise (aka Sauvignon Vert), and/or Sauvignon Gris and (unofficially) the odd bit of Riesling (which is no longer legal to plant in Bordeaux but may be lingering in a few spots) and who really knows what else. Sometimes only Sauvignon is used with no blending. These dry white Bordeaux Sauvignons and blends diverge into two primary styles: 1) Un-wooded, no malo-lactic (ML), tank-aged, early bottled, fresh, refreshing fruit-oriented (most all Entre Deux Mers and Bordeaux Blancs and a fair amount of simple Graves fit this style) – and 2) Barrel-fermented, full-ML, barrel-aged, fruit-mineral-wood Sauvignons and blends as made by the top producers in Pessac Leognan (the best part of Graves) and the few white wine producers in the Medoc (Pavillon Blanc, Blanc de Lynch Bages, etc.) all of which are labeled "Bordeaux Blanc" as the wine grapes are not specified for the Medoc appellations. These top Bordeaux wines range from the fresh and balanced such as Ch. Carbonieux and Ch. Malartic La Gravieres to the very rich such as Chx. Haut Brion Blanc and La Mission Haut Brion Blanc (formerly "Laville Haut Brion"). Wines such as Ch. Fieuzal Blanc and Ch. Smith Haut Lafitte Blanc occupy the middle ground with Domaine de Chevalier a bit closer to the top.

US Sauvignon Blanc producers seem more likely to follow one of the dry white Bordeaux models, as Bordeaux is a warmer growing area than the Loire. For "model one", my favorites include Dry Creek Vineyards' Fume Blanc and Tudal's Honker Blanc. For "model two", two of my Napa Valley reference standards are and have been Groth Sauvignon Blanc and Turnbull Sauvignon Blanc. From Sonoma, I like Pezzi King and from Santa Ynez, Stolpman. All three fit the niche occupied in Bordeaux (we're talking style here, not price) by Ch. Carbonieux. Several years ago I tasted the Iron Horse T-bar-T Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (barrel-fermented and aged with full ML and a bit of Viognier blended in with the Sauvignon Blanc). This was a richer and even exotic but welcome departure which Dr. Richard Becker of Becker Vineyards in Stonewall, Texas used as a model for his Sauvignon Blanc.

This newest wave (which approximates, at least from a style viewpoint, the range from Smith Haut Lafitte to Ch. Haut Brion Blanc) incorporates barrel fermentation and aging with a percentage (usually 20% to 50%) in new barrels and usually at least partial to full ML. While Sauvignon is the dominant variety, it is frequently blended with (most often) Semillon or Viognier or maybe something else. These wines are richer than the other sorts of Sauvignon Blanc and they are better integrated. The fruit, oak, and earth (terroir) all fit together in a harmonious whole that nevertheless offers a touch of the exotic, both in fruit and spice. There is little-to-none of the grassiness or herbal notes found in the next range down. The fruit ranges through ripe citrus into pear and even peach notes. It sounds sweet but the wines are dry and clean. These are ripe, textured wines but not at all over-ripe and they have the acidity to develop for at least a few years. Unlike most other Sauvignon outside of the top whites from Bordeaux, these are wines that repay some aging by offering layers of complexity. What do I like in this range? All from the north end of Napa Valley (specifically the Calistoga Palisades area), I really like Araujo, Snowden, Vermiel, Kenefick, and Venge Spetiro (the Snowden, Vermiel, and Venge wines will be coming soon), all at different price points although none are cheap. When I mentioned to Bart Araujo that I liked the Snowden wine almost as much as his, he positively beamed while telling me that Diana Snowden Seysses - who now makes the wine at Snowden and Dominae Dujac in Burgundy - had been an intern at Araujo. The Kenefick ranch is next door to Araujo and Venge is within a stone's throw. Vermiel gets his grapes from the Frediani Vineyard which borders Kenefick.

The first time I tasted the Araujo, I thought it was an ultra high quality aberration made by a couple who are utterly obsessive about quality. Then I discovered these others and tasted through multiple vintages. The style is there. Like Haut Brion Blanc, Araujo is the clear leader but the others are made in the same style and there is great quality up and down the range.

After drinking these five, I am now on a mission to find other super quality Napa Sauvignon Blancs. I'm sure there are more out there but in the meantime, I will enjoy sipping on these complex, layered, subtly exotic, balanced and elegant whites. I noted above that little surprises me in the world of wine but these stunningly good Sauvignon Blancs come close. If you enjoy great white wines, give 'em a try. ✱

