A Hot Year For Napa Cabernet

THE 2002S ARE DAZZLING BUT EXPENSIVE

BY JAMES LAUBE

With the cooler, red wine days of fall upon us, and winter just around the corner, the California Cabernet market is heating up. The tremendous wines of 2002 are arriving now and, as usual, the center of action is Napa Valley, which delivers a host of monumental, ageworthy reds.

Beyond Napa, it's far less compelling, and you'll have to pick and choose more carefully. Luckily there are enough great wines from Napa to go around. Based on my tastings of more than 350 2002 Cabernets so far, this vintage is certainly on a par with the excellent 2001. Since my last report ("California's Cabernet Conundrum," Nov. 15, 2004), I've reviewed more than 550 California Cabernets and blends overall, including more than 150 from 2001.

The best 2002s are so good that you will want to secure a few cases of these rich, opulent young wines to drink over the next 10 to 15 years. Just be prepared to spend from $50 to more than $150 a bottle for many of the prestige bottlings of the vintage (although if you sifl carefully through my recommendations, you'll find plenty of wines that sell for far less). Ideally, you'll reach a happy medium between solid values you can purchase by the case and a few trophy wines to cellar or drink on special occasions.

My two favorites of 2002 so far are the Harlan Estate (99 points, $245) from Oakville, and Sloan Rutherford (99, $NA), both of which flirt with perfection on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. Both also offer a dazzling array of rich, dense flavors and firm yet plush, mouthcoating tannins. They are the products of winemaking teams that set lofty goals and pay exacting attention to every stage of production, from the vineyards to the final cuvée selections.

While Harlan Estate has been making excellent Cabernets for more than a decade and has emerged as one of Napa's most sought-after wines, Sloan is only in its third vintage. But owner Stuart Sloan is determined to make great wines, and all three vintages to date have been outstanding, with the '02 the best so far (see "In Pursuit of Perfection," page 75).

Several single-vineyard Napa Cabernets from Bill Harlan's new winery, Bond, also hit the bull's-eye, including Melbury (97, $210), St. Eden (96, $210) and Vecina (95, $210). They put Harlan's winemaking team, headed by Bob Levy, in rare company when you consider the incredible, uniformly high quality of these wines. Even Harlan's second label, The Maiden (96, $95), is a winner; it's one of the sleepers of the vintage.

Other 2002 wines that show uncommon depth, richness and character include Delectus Cuvee Julia Napa Valley (96, $95), Robert Foley Napa Valley Claret (96, $100),
Merus Napa Valley (96, $100) and Schrader Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard (96, $75). And it’s worth paying attention to the ubiquitous Paul Hobbs, another supertalent. His 2002 Cabernet Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard (94) is priced at a hefty $265 a bottle, though it is outpaced by Screaming Eagle (95), which fetches $300 a bottle.

Then there are the likes of Joseph Phelps Insignia (96, $150), Araujo Eisele Vineyard (95, $195), Shafer Hillside Select (95, $NA) and three super bottlings from Colgin, including its first estate-grown release, called IX Estate (97, $165). Each of these wines is sensational, impeccably balanced and a sheer delight to drink. A great buy in the classic range (95 or more points) is Lewis Napa Valley (96, $65), which I preferred over the more expensive Lewis Reserve (93, $100). Owner Randy Lewis’ summation, “It was a terrific year for us,” captures the sentiments of many.

If these prices are daunting, check out Turnbull. This Oakville winery, under the direction of John Engleskirger, has made a remarkable turnaround in recent vintages, and the 2002 Oakville Fortuna Vineyard (94, $50) is one of the best examples of the excellence he is achieving. Also look for Sebastiani, a venerable Sonoma winery that has recently stepped up quality across the board. Its excellent Alexander Valley Appellation Selection 2002 (91, $28) and the Sonoma County 2002 (90, $17) should be by-the-case purchase considerations. Both are rich and polished, with excellent fruit complexity.

Upstarts abound as well, including Jericho Canyon (92, $75), a new brand made by one of the state’s top winemakers, David Ramey, from a vineyard near Calistoga. Ramey is tapping the same vineyard for a single-vineyard Cabernet (91, $90) under his own label. (For a look at some of the new brands on the market, see “Napa’s Impressive Newcomers,” page 79.)

You should also be on the lookout for late-release 2001s. From Napa, I especially like the Oakford (93, $85), Cobblestone (92, $49), Deflection Stanton Vineyard (91, $50), Ladera Lone Canyon Vineyard (91, $65) and Cuaison (90, $38). From Sonoma, the Simi Alexander Valley Landslide (92, $33) and Chateau Souverain Winemaker’s Reserve (91, $40) are sumptuous. I also found a few excellent early-release 2003s, including Covenant Napa Valley (92, $85), a kosher wine; Corté Riva Napa Valley (91, $60), made by Lawrence Cortez and Romel Rivera (Corté Riva is a derivation of their names); and O’Brien Napa Valley Seduction (89, $28).

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to Robert Mondavi Winery and Opus One for use in their prestige cuvées. The family began making wine at home in the 1970s with unsold grapes and, in the 1990s, Detert’s three grandsons, Tom Garrett, John Garrett and Bill Cover took over the hobby. They decided to go pro in 1999. Tom, a former tasting coordinator at Wine Spectator, is winemaker; Bill handles the finances; and John is in charge of the marketing. The Cabernet Franc Oakville 2002 (91, $35, 150 cases) is dark, dense and potent, and the Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2002 (87, $45, 350 cases) is dense and concentrated, with wild berry fruit.

Harris Estate

Michael Harris is a former pediatric dentist who, along with his wife, Treva, owns a 48-acre property in Calistoga with three small vineyard blocks totaling 7 planted acres. Starting in 2004, there will be three separate bottlings from the three different sites. “The site is unbelievable,” winemaker Mark Herold says of the property. “Three completely different sites, three completely different soils and three completely different wines.” So different, Herold says, that they are harvested as many as four weeks apart. The debut Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Treva’s Vineyard VSR Very Special Reserve (90, $95, 225 cases) is made from a hillside site with red, rocky soil that yields tiny grapes. It’s an elegant and delicate wine with red plum and black cherry fruit.

Hestan Vineyards

Hong Kong–born Stanley Cheng is chairman of Meyer Corp., a manufacturer of cookware brands such as Farberware, Circulon and KitchenAid. Cheng and his wife, Helen, also own a 127-acre ranch in eastern Napa, which they purchased in 1996. “From being wine lovers [came] the motivation to develop some vineyards. We didn’t know we could make [such] great wines from them,” Stanley says. In 2001, Helen was introduced to Merus wines while dining at the French Laundry in Yountville and later called the winery to get on the mailing list. Soon afterward, the couple hired Merus winemaker Mark Herold to start with their 2002 vintage, the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2002 (91, $75, 280 cases), a rich and focused wine. Their second label, Meyer, turned out a Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2002 (90, $49, 575 cases) that is concentrated and fleshy.

Jericho Canyon

In the 1980s, Dale Bleecher wanted a respite from his life as a stockbroker, so he and his wife purchased a 140-acre ranch at the northeast end of the Napa Valley in the Mount St. Helena foothills. From the start, they wanted to grow grapes, and eventually planted 45 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. They then sold their grapes to Chateau Montelena, Sterling and Clos Du Val. Bleecher says it was a natural progression to become a producer. “I wanted to see the grapes all the way through,” he explains. “Handing them off to other people became less satisfying.” In 1998, winemaker David Ramey was working for Rudd Estate and started bottling a Jericho Canyon vineyard-designated wine. This encouraged the Bleechers to make their own wine and they hired Ramey to begin in 2001. These days, Ramey continues to craft two Jericho Canyon bottlings—one for the Bleechers under the Jericho Canyon label and another under his own label. The Bleechers’ Jericho Canyon Napa Valley 2002 scored 92 points ($75, 461 cases).
Kobalt

Kevin Carriker had his first sip of wine in 1974, and it sparked a passion that has led him to jobs ranging from harvest help to working in a tasting room to selling wine in a wine shop. Home winemaking was just a hobby, until he met Merus winemaker Mark Herold, who encouraged him to start his own label. The Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 (95, $80, 221 cases) is a ripe, rich and fleshy wine. Carriker credits Herold’s talent for deciding when to pick the grapes he purchases from the Coombsville region of eastern Napa. “That’s a unique palate,” he says of Herold’s. “To be able to go out into a vineyard and taste grapes and say, ‘Three days from now we’ll pick.’ And 99.9 percent of the time he’s 100 percent right.” Kobalt is a German word for a mischievous underground spirit.

O’Shaughnessy

Betty O’Shaughnessy admits the transition from enthusiastic wine consumer to vintner has involved a steep learning curve, but so far she’s on the right track. The Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 2002 (90, $65, 1,200 cases) is the second outstanding vintage in a row, a fun-to-drink wine with pure fruit flavors, harmony and finesse. The Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2002 (87, $65, 145 cases) has more substantial tannins, with typical Mount Veeder austerity. Both wines are made from O’Shaughnessy-owned vineyards (she also has a site in Oakville where she grows grapes she sells to Groth and Markham). Winemaker Sean Capiaux (who makes Pinot Noir under his own eponymous label) shows a deft hand in taming mountain-grown tannins.

Realm

What do a nurse, an investment-portfolio manager and a winemaker on a hot streak have in common? The answer is Realm, a new label that debuted two terrific wines this year: the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2002 (94, $85, 202 cases) and The Tempest 2002 (92, $65, 145 cases), a Merlot-based Bordeaux-style blend. Owners Juan Mercado, a Napa nurse specializing in open-heart surgery recovery and Wendell Laidley, a San Francisco–based investment manager, went from talking about establishing a label to actually doing it in three short years. They were smart to get Michael Hirby, former assistant winemaker at Behrens & Hitchcock, who also makes elegant Syrah and Pinot Noir under his own label, Relic.

Versant

In 1991, Los Angeles–based architect Richard Martin, encouraged by friend and vintner Gustav Dalla Valle (whose home Martin had designed years earlier), purchased a 90-acre property on Pritchard Hill. Martin planted 31 acres to Cabernet, Syrah and Merlot, selling grapes to Lewis and Chappellet. But as often happens, he soon had visions of bottling his own wine and, with the help of Randy and Debbie Lewis (borrowing both winemaking space and their winemaker, Robbie Meyer), debuted with an outstanding 2001. The current release, the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2002 (92, $85, 250 cases), is a smooth, rich and creamy wine that’s full of complexity. Versant is French for “gentle slope of a mountain.”

Xtant

The brainchild of two wine-industry veterans, Xtant debuted this year with the Napa Valley 2001 (92, $75, 392 cases), a Cabernet-based blend. Former Golden State Vintners head Jeff O’Neill and Larry Vosti, a real estate developer, former restaurateur and wine retailer, have been friends for 20 years. This is their first collaboration on a project, and the results are impressive. Winemaker Jeff Gaffner, who also owns his own label, Saxon Brown, worked for O’Neill as a consulting winemaker for Golden State Vintners’ Edgewood label. The grapes are purchased from five different Napa Valley vineyards. The name is a play on the word “extant” and a nod to Vosti and O’Neill’s longevity in the wine business.