

Written by Julia Harding MW 2 Dec 2013

California Cabernet - a mixed pleasure

See *California Wine Summit – a guide* (</articles/a201310181.html>) .

This was the penultimate tasting of the Summit, kindly hosted by Silver Oak (left) in their commodious tasting room in the Napa Valley (pictured below by George Rose, the Summit's official photographer). The wines were selected from the 'best of' lists compiled by those who had led the various tastings throughout the week, including Purple Pages contributor Alder Yarrow (</articles/a201110151.html>) and Linda Murphy, co-author with Jancis of *American Wine*. Apparently, Cathy Corison's Kronos Vineyard was on everyone's list, and I can see why. It would have been on mine. The wines were then presented by Master Sommeliers Geoff Kruth and Matt Stamp, respectively COO and educator at the Guild of Sommeliers, who had done such an amazing job throughout the week in preparing the wines.

The first flight was designed to showcase different AVAs within the Napa Valley (Ridge Monte Bello being the only non-Napa wine in the line-up), although the influence of 'valley floor v elevated site' probably cuts across AVA boundaries, some of which are likely to have been more political than geographical/climatic.

The wines in the second flight were described as 'luxury cuvées', 'more indicative of style than of place'. With the exception of the Shafer Hillside Select, the second flight struck me as overdone - perhaps without the desire to make a wine transparent enough to show its origin, you can go overboard on the hang time and the winemaking. I can see how these wines might be designed to impress, and even succeed in doing so, but they are not wines I would choose to drink.

The wines are listed in the order tasted.

FLIGHT 1

- **Ridge, Monte Bello 2009 Santa Cruz Mountains**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546767>)

72% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot. This wine and Silver Oak are the only ones in this line up that use US oak. Here it has been air dried for 2-3 years and most of the barrels are 200 litres. Vines at 1500 ft at least. Greenstone mixed with clay over fractured limestone. Cabernet planted at different times, from 1949 to 1993.

Inky black. Dark and coaly on the nose. Mouthwatering, dark, savoury, tarry cassis but there's also a pine/cedary and garrigue note from the site. Smoky, complex and concentrated. Even though it is so dark and intense, it is juicy on the finish. Some spice but not overly oaky even now. Incredibly firmly structured but no hardness and still has a freshness. Finishes with great fruit purity. Going back, lovely,

lively peppery note. Hint of mocha on the very end. (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2019-2039

\$160 18+ (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546767>)

- **Corison, Kronos Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Napa Valley**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546768>)

Kronos vineyard planted 1972. On St George rootstock. This wine was on the list of all seven tasting moderators who came up with their top 15 Cabs as the basis for the selection in this California Summit tasting.

Inky with dark cherry rim. Dusty overlay. Spice and dark fruit on the nose but does not smell especially ripe because not particularly sweet on the nose but on the palate there is remarkable dark elegance and even a touch of red fruit character in its freshness. Finest dry tannins. Ripeness combined with ripe acid from a very hot part of the valley. 'One hardworking woman in a barn', is how Karen MacNeil described Cathy Corison. With time in the glass, a fragrance of red fruit starts to emerge. So elegant. (JH)

13.1%

Drink 2017-2035

\$125 19 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546768>)

- **Spottswoode Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 St Helena**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546773>)

Sits right below the Mayacamas Mountains. Dynasty of women. Almost every winemaker a woman until 2011, when Aron Weinkauff took over. The estate was abandoned in the late 1960s when the Novak family bought it. Organic since 1985. 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot. 18 months in French oak, 60% new.

Black core. Lovely dusty earthy nose but just a little spicity. Rich with chocolate cherry. Thicker, sweeter tannins than the Corison Kronos. Riper tasting but still has a dark, dry texture. Concentrated and somehow darkly chewy. 'The epitome of wines around St Helena', says Alder Yarrow.

14.5%

Drink 2020-2035

\$145 17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546773>)

- **Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, SLV Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Napa Valley**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546774>)

Founded early 1970s and the SLV vineyard planted in 1970, though much of the block has been replanted gradually. Warren Winiarski trained in the Mondavi stable but became mentor to so many winemakers. His 'progeny', some say, are responsible for a good deal of the reputation of the Napa Valley. 20 months in French oak, 84% new.

Black core, purplish rim. More intensely cassis than the Monte Bello, Corison's Kronos or

Spottswode. Coffee aroma. Very oaky nose. Toast and char. Too much. Sweet, rich cassis on the nose, hint of something floral as it opens up. Soft and velvety. Concentrated but surprisingly gentle in its structure, or at least it seems so, though there is massive structure underneath. Overwhelmed by oak sweetness on the finish but having tasted some older vintages, I would expect it to improve with a few more years in bottle. (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2016-2030

\$125 17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546774>)

- **Spring Mountain, Elivette Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 Spring Mountain District** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546784>)

100 years of Cabernet production. Highly parcelled large vineyard. Many underground springs. Owned by a Swiss industrialist. Much topaz in the ground. Old mountain. Always taken a middle ground in their style. On volcanic and sedimentary soils and virtually biodynamic. 64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Cabernet Franc, 22 months in new French oak.

Highly aromatic: pure cassis and blueberry together with a note of violets and a touch of something like incense but this may be the oak. Blueberry sweetness on the palate, relatively gentle on the palate but it has a tight freshness with a touch of mineral stoniness at the very end together with a meat sweetness. With time: much more fragrant and some ripe red fruit. Opened and improved in the glass. (JH)

13.9%

Drink 2018-2030

\$150 17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546784>)

- **Continuum 2010 Napa Valley** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546789>)

First vintage was 2005 from valley floor. This is 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Cabernet Franc, 11% Petit Verdot, 4% Merlot, mostly estate fruit. Red, rocky soils. Iron-rich and volcanic soils. Relatively new project by Tim Mondavi. 92% of fruit is from Pritchard Hill on the western hills above Oakville. Fermented in French oak barrels and vats or cement tanks. Long maceration 26-42 days. Malo and 22 months' ageing in French oak, 80% new.

Fragrantly floral along with sweet blueberry and cassis. A touch of leafiness and blackcurrant biscuits and blackcurrant leaf. Some baking spice. On the palate, more red fruit and some graphite. Just a little savoury on the finish. Lively and spicy on the tongue on the finish. Warm and full bodied. Less new oak, please. (JH)

14.7%

Drink 2018-2030

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546789>)

- **Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Napa Valley**
(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546793>)

84% Cabernet, 8% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petit Verdot. The lots were blended early 2010

and moved to 100% new US oak, where it spent 24 months.

Smoky cassis with a note of menthol. Prunes too. Almost sickly sweet. Velvety texture very noticeable. On the palate, lots of US oak sweetness relieved by the high acid, though they are not really integrated now. Apparently, older vintages of Silver Oak still smell strongly of US oak, unlike old Ridge Montebello, and this was certainly true of the only older vintage I tried, 2003. (Ridge buy mostly 200-litre barrels made from oak that has been air dried for 2-3 years and this makes a huge difference.) Impressive in its concentration but for me too sweet overall, especially with food. (JH)

13.9%

Drink 2016-2025

\$110 16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546793>)

- **Quintessa 2010 Rutherford** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546794>)

August and Valeria Huneus was among the early foreign interlopers in Napa, establishing Quintessa in 1990. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Carmenère from many different vineyard blocks on the estate. 20 months in French oak, 85% new.

Smells focused, if that is possible. Refined and fresh with some red fruit character. Dark oak spice but the texture is ultra-refined and fine grained. Finely textured rather than velvety. Tight and yet lively. (JH)

14.5%

Drink 2015-2030

\$145 17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546794>)

- **Dunn Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 Napa Valley**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546795>)

Fruit mostly from Howell Mountain, more than 50% from Dunn's Lake Vineyard. Reverse osmosis used to reduce the alcohol.

Floral at first. A little herbal. More herbaceous on the palate. Very juicy and tastes surprisingly light on the palate, somehow de-fleshed in the middle. High acid, not quite in balance. I'm not categorically against the use of RO but it does seem to have taken more than the alcohol away from this wine. (JH)

13.9%

Drink 2015-2020

\$90 16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546795>)

- **Diamond Creek, Red Rock Terrace Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Diamond Mountain District** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546797>)

Established 1968. 508 c/s produced. Soils full of oxidised iron - hence red rock. North-facing slopes. In the mid 80s, Diamond Creek was one of the first to charge \$100 for a bottle.

Highly distinctive nose. Extremely mineral. Gorgeously dry texture with great freshness. A note of perfumed tea - like blackcurrant-infused black tea. Blackcurrant comes out with air. Tarry savoury mineral palate. And more earthy and tarry as it opens up. (JH)

Drink 2018-2035

\$200 18+ (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546797>)

FLIGHT 2

- **Bond, Pluribus Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Spring Mountain District**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546800>)

Vines at 1,100-1,300 ft and the last to be harvested. Many of the lots were barrel fermented.

Very very sweet cassis intensity. Over-concentrated and over-extracted. Impressive but no pleasure now. A hint of marmite on the finish. Tough. Alder Yarrow says it ages well, hence the plus plus, but this seems more of a trophy wine than something I would want to drink. Not **GV**. (JH)

Drink 2019-2029

\$250 16++ (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546800>)

- **Dalla Valle, Maya Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Oakville**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546804>)

Andy Erickson with consultant Michel Rolland. 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Cabernet Franc.

Dark chocolate cherry. Thick and chewy and lacking elegance. All show and power. Though there's some saving in the dry texture on the finish. (JH)

Drink 2019-2030

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546804>)

- **Harlan 2009 Napa Valley** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546805>)

Since the technical sheet provides nothing more than tasting notes, I have no technical background on this wine.

Intense dark fruit. Very tight and concentrated. Overripe and slightly stewed tasting. Going over into meat and marmite. Not quite porty but it is going that way. Then pretty tough on the palate. Highly extracted and oaked. I really would not want to drink this with dinner, even if I could afford to. Maybe it just needs a long time in bottle. (JH)

Drink 2019-2030

\$770 16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546805>)

- **Shafer, Hillside Select 2009 Stags Leap District**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546806>)

Similar geography and geology to those of SLV. 32 months in 100% new, 60-gallon French oak barrels.

Very sweet blueberry and cassis with a lot of oak spice. Much finer on the palate, with finer tannins, drier and better balanced overall than the majority of these massive Cabs. Much more elegant in its

freshness. (JH)

15.5%

Drink 2019-2035

\$275 18 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546806>)

- **Scarecrow 2007 Rutherford** (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546807>)

Winemaker Celia Welsh. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from 8 vineyard blocks. Fruit from the oldest vines fermented in open-top tank and punched down. The other lots had pumpovers and cap irrigation. Aged separately in 100% new French oak for a year before blending, then a further 11 months in barrel.

Oak is keeping it closed down at the moment. Thick and rich and dense. Lacks energy. Dry and pretty tough and so dense that the flavour is overridden by the texture. Where's the pleasure? (JH)

15.5%

Drink 2017-2025

\$275 16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/546807>)