

WINE News

Napa Valley.



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We're Strong on Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

By Trey Beffa

When October arrives at K&L, we can be certain of two things: the holidays are fast approaching and Cabernet season is already here! Many recent releases from the big names are just now hitting the shelves, most of them hailing from the 2014 vintage. Speaking specifically of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, 2014 has become the third highly successful vintage in a row. In general, these wines are loaded with a dense core of ripe fruit and have lots of structure and backbone, which should allow them to age well. In this issue, we're highlighting some of our favorite producers of classic Napa Cab, plus a few of their refreshing

whites to enjoy before the main course. But first, three 2014s that will not only make a statement on the dinner table, but are also delicious to drink.

As I am writing this newsletter, and as you no doubt have heard, wildfires are ravaging Northern California's wine country. By the time you read this, we should have a better understanding of which wineries were affected by the fires, but initial reports are not good for many properties in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Our thoughts are with everyone who lives and works up in wine country at this time.

2014 Opus One Napa Valley Bordeaux Blend (\$309.99) For many years now, Opus One has been considered a so-called "First Growth" of Napa Valley, and I believe the last few vintages have been some of the strongest. The 2014 is a tremendous followup to the 2013, and possibly the best Opus ever. The 2014 is a bit tighter but shows terrific focus and purity. **97 JS, 95 VN** And don't forget the multi-vintage **"Overture" Napa Valley Bordeaux Blend (\$119.99)** this year, as it is bound to have a fair amount of 2013 in the blend!



2014 Dominus Napa Valley Bordeaux Blend (\$Inquire) The Napanook vineyard is a 124-acre site just west of the town of Yountville, which is considered down valley, and gets a cooling effect from San Pablo Bay. This allows the fruit's acidity and freshness to shine. Antonio Galloni says: "The 2014 possesses tons of concentration and mid-palate depth. Like so many wines in this vintage, the 2014 comes across as a hybrid of 2013 and 2012. I very much like the energy and focus in this wine." **98 JS, 97 RP, 96 VN**



2014 Joseph Phelps "Insignia" Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$199.00) Joe Phelps wanted to make one wine each year that he felt was the best the winery could make. Since 1974, Insignia has been that wine, and since 2004, it has been 100% estate grown. James Suckling says: "The blackberry, dark-chocolate and walnut aromas are persuasive. Full body, a dense and fruity center palate and beautiful depth and intensity. The tannin texture is exceptional. Great wine!" **97 JS, 96 RP**



Above: Vineyards of Spottswode Estate in St. Helena, already picked for the 2017 vintage. (Photo by Yianni Stoner, Spottswode Estate)



The Spirit of Spottswode

By Mari Keilman

Sadly, as I'm writing this, Napa and Sonoma Counties are engulfed in flames. My heart aches for the individuals, wineries and vineyards that are directly impacted, yet I am also reflecting on how these devastating fires will broadly affect this community for years down the road. Not only have the fires burned down buildings and vineyards and destroyed homes, but the lasting damage from these fires will ripple through the community: economically, with the exorbitant costs to rebuild; socially, with homes and jobs lost; and psychologically, with the daunting task of having the emotional strength to continue to build on the heritage of wine country.

One Napa Valley winery that embodies the resilient spirit of wine country, carrying on from tragedy to ultimately garner wide acclaim and success, is St. Helena's Spottswode Estate.

Although the estate, founded in 1882, features a grand Victorian mansion built during an earlier heyday, Napa Valley was a much sleepier place when a young doctor and his family purchased this property 100 years later. But just as Jack Novak began to revitalize the old vineyards, he suddenly passed away in 1977, leaving his wife, Mary, and five children. Yet Mary pressed on with the plans herself, first selling the grapes and then hiring noted winemaker Tony Soter to make the winery's first vintage in 1982.

Today, the estate is run by Mary's daughters, with winemaker Aron Weinkauff, who bookends an otherwise unbroken roll call of Napa's pioneering women winemakers that Mary hired, including the likes of Rosemary Cakebread and Pam Starr.

At the suggestion of Soter, Spottswode became one of California's first certified organic vineyards back in the early 1990s, a commitment to the land—and to their neighbors in this semi-rural area on the outskirts of town—that they continue to this day (although it does not say so on the labels).

The wines of Spottswode Estate display structure, acidity and concentration—throw in refinement, elegance and balance, and you have a wine that will gloriously age for many years in the cellar.

Historically made with estate-grown grapes from younger vines, as well as purchased fruit from Oak Knoll, Oakville and Knights Valley, the **2014 Spottswode "Lyndenhurst" Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$79.99)** is a softer version of the winery's already approachable style. **94 JS**

The **2014 Spottswode "Estate" Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (375ml \$89.99; 750ml \$179.99; 1.5L \$399.00)** is a Napa Valley Cab that will stand the test of time. This Cabernet is powerful and concentrated, full of blackcurrant and plum flavors, with baking spice and graphite highlights. The silky tannins, alongside a bright, youthful freshness, tell me that this wine will age beautifully. The firm acid structure is also an indicator of how long-lived this wine will be. **96 JS, 96 RP, 96 VN**

When it comes to Sauvignon Blanc, there has to be crisp, refreshing acidity, and the **2016 Spottswode Napa-Sonoma Counties Sauvignon Blanc (375ml \$17.99; 750ml \$34.99)** is loaded with it. This Sauvignon Blanc has it all: high-toned aromatics of white flowers, guava and lemon with an elegant glycerol palate, and it's full of waxy resinous notes and caramelized fruit on the finish. It's no wonder that this wine was, famously, a favorite afternoon refresher for the late Mary Novak! And the intensity, focus and precision make this a Sauvignon Blanc that's also a serious contender for cellaring.



Spottswode wines rest safely in the historic stone cellar.

Robert Craig: Old Man of the Mountain Cab

By David Driscoll

I don't think I've had one conversation about Napa Valley Cabernet in the last five years that didn't include the term "mountain fruit."

Ever since I first learned the difference between the aforementioned term and the grapes sourced from the Napa Valley floor, I've made sure every single customer that's asked for my advice has understood the concept. I like to think of it like a stew.

When you're making a soup or chili, you want to simmer it on low heat for as long as possible. Cabernet is no different. When you're looking to make top-quality Napa wine, you want those grapes to ripen as slowly as possible and hang on the vine until all of the flavors have had time to develop. Cabernet grown on the Napa Valley floor gets exposed to the California sun from morning to sunset, roasting all day long under the heat; thus, it ripens quickly. Cabernet grown on the side of a slope gets much less exposure, so it tends to ripen more slowly, developing more complexity in the process.

It's for that reason that wines from Howell Mountain, Spring Mountain, Diamond Mountain, and Mount Veeder tend to carry higher price tags. Mountain fruit is generally on another level from valley floor fruit—literally and qualitatively.

One of my favorite Napa producers that specializes in mountain fruit is Robert Craig Winery. Using site-specific parcels, the winery not only makes wines with character and terroir, but also gusto and supreme concentration.

The **2014 Robert Craig Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$94.99)** is a spectacular example of not only the structure and power that the region is known for, but also just how rich the flavors can get high on the mountain. It's jam-packed with cassis and blackcurrant notes. Craig's vineyard is at 2,300 feet along the summit, and the temperatures there are about 10 degrees cooler than on the valley floor, which allows the grapes to ripen much more slowly while maintaining acidity and tannic structure. With all of those elements in full display, it's not a wine I would open tonight, but rather 10 to 20 years from now—mountain fruit can take a while to unwind and show its real potential. **95 RP, 94 JS**

The **2014 Robert Craig Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$89.99)** is a bit lower at 2,000 feet, but it gets a nice, cool breeze that comes over the mountaintop from the coast—again, allowing the grapes to cool off and maintain acidity after a warm day of development. The Spring Mountain has incredible purity and grace, and while less meaty and chewy than the Howell, it's still capable of going the distance in your cellar. **94 RP**

If you're looking for serious Napa Valley Cabernet, you've got to look to the mountains. As a mountain fruit specialist, Robert Craig is a great place to start.



K&L's Kalinda Cab Leaves High Prices in the Rutherford Dust

While we love to bring you name-brand Napa Valley wines at a great price, it's hard to top the value offered by our Kalinda label.

For one reason or another, not having to do with lesser quality (we certainly see to that before putting our name on the label), some producers, like this storied Rutherford-area winery that was founded in the early 1880s, provide us with wine at an incredible price with the stipulation that the source remain anonymous.

So while even K&L co-founder Clyde Beffa Jr. can't say where the **2015 Kalinda Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon (\$27.99)** comes from, he will say this: "Coming from the very warm 2015 Napa harvest, this wine is quite elegant and refined already. Just the right amount of oak here and plenty of red currant aromas



and flavors. We can't tell you who made this wine, but I think if you really think about it, you may pick the right property. Please decant this wine, as it is a baby, and enjoy it with a rack of lamb. Very similar to the fine 2003 Bordeaux wines in structure and richness."

K&L wine club director Alex Pross concurs: "This is an outstanding rendition of Kalinda Cabernet Sauvignon! I am really glad Clyde and I waited and tasted, because our patience has truly been rewarded upon tasting this wine once again from bottle. Beautiful aromas of spice, baker's chocolate and crème de cassis spring from the glass, while on the palate the wine feels electric with intense red and black cherry flavors as well as milk chocolate and mocha notes. Velvety tannins and a long, supple finish only add to the enjoyment this plush Cabernet Sauvignon provides. If there's a better Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon for under \$30, I haven't tasted it yet."

Jax Cabernet: A Masterpiece of Modern Napa Winemaking

By David Driscoll

I could start this article off by telling you how famed critic Robert Parker recently gushed about the latest installment in the Jax Cabernet saga. But this is my turn to gush, not Robert Parker's, as this is my article and not his. I've known Kimberly Jackson-Wickam for years now and I've been sending people to her family's downtown San Francisco tasting bar on Brannan Street since it opened. Jax makes fairly priced, tasty, approachable, true-to-form California wines in a variety of styles, and just about everyone I talk to thinks they're charming as hell. Vintage after vintage, year after year, the Jacksons churn out value after value for the same reasonable prices, while slowly building their base of enthused local customers and critics alike.

I thought the 2014 Jax "Estate" Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$49.99) was incredible, as did pretty much everyone else I know who tasted it. In a sea of sweet-fruited and heavy Cabernets in the \$40 to \$60 range, the 2014 Jax stood out as honest and authentic. It wasn't just loaded with gloppy texture and toasty oak; it had grit and character, showing restraint and balance in the face of all that weight.

But when I got my first sample bottle of the 2015 vintage last week, I had yet another Jax epiphany. Not only did the wine exceed the quality of the 2014 edition, it was without a doubt the best wine of any kind I'd tasted



The team at Jax includes: Dan Parrott (CEO/Partner), Kimberly Jackson (Founder/Partner), Trent Jackson (Founder/Partner) and vineyard dogs, Reef and Boomer.

from the Jackson family's portfolio. Never cloying or bloated with sweetness, but rather expansive and mouthcoating with just a bit of chewiness on the finish, the 2015 Jax Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$49.99) is a masterpiece of modern California winemaking—it's the best mid-range Napa Cab I've tasted this year.

I say "modern" because of how delicious the 2015 Jax tastes right now. Most of the folks I deal with on a daily basis in the domestic department are drinking bottle to bottle. They're in search of something fun for that evening's dinner, not their twentieth wedding anniversary. While I'm certain that the 2015 Jax will hold up beautifully over time, the freshness of the fruit, coupled with the supreme balance of the acidity and tannin levels, make it an easy pop-and-pour candidate for this weekend's barbecue.

The man behind that precision is Jax winemaker Kirk Venge, whose successes with Hunnicutt, B Cellars, and Bacio Divino have also been met with huge scores from likes of Parker and *Wine Spectator*. With each vintage of Jax he continues to fine-tune the Napa Valley Cabernet expression toward perfection, understanding the fruit a little more each time around and making small adjustments like any master technician. The 2015 is his masterwork thus far. "They have a great property," Venge told me last time I spoke with him. "The sun doesn't hit the vines until around 11 a.m. so it's a slow-ripening site. It allows the flavors to develop gradually." 2015 was another great year for Napa and the evidence of Venge's words are here in the 2015 Jax Napa Cabernet, now finally on our shelf.

I've tasted it on five separate occasions now and the wine is simply spectacular from front to back. It's the perfect mid-range bottle for those of you who enjoy your Napa Cab on the younger and richer side, and—despite the improvements—it's still the same price it always has been: fifty bucks.



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