

Napa's '89 & '90 Cabs

Rumors of their demise are greatly exaggerated

by Ann & Larry Walker

IN THE LONG RUN, the reputation of Napa lives or dies on Cabernet Sauvignon. Not that there aren't some good Chardonnays, Pinots and this, that and the other, but it is Cabernet that is the Napa benchmark. So how are they doing? Looking at the wine in the bottle for the two releases now on the market, the 1989 and the 1990, Napa is doing just fine, thank you.

The 1989 vintage was difficult. It was a cool year with rain during harvest and there were some disasters, but there are also some perfectly brilliant wines from that vintage. Cabernet Sauvignon is one tough grape and can survive a little rain—even quite a bit of rain—and still make good wines. As Jack Stuart, the winemaker at Silverado Vineyards, put it, "The 1989s have been trashed, but just look at the wine and judge it for what it is, not what you've read or heard about it." Stuart freely admits to having a touch of noble rot in his 1989 Cabernet, but no great harm done, it would seem, beyond a slight loss of color. During a recent tasting of ten years of Silverado's Cabs from 1981 to 1990, the 1989 showed very well.

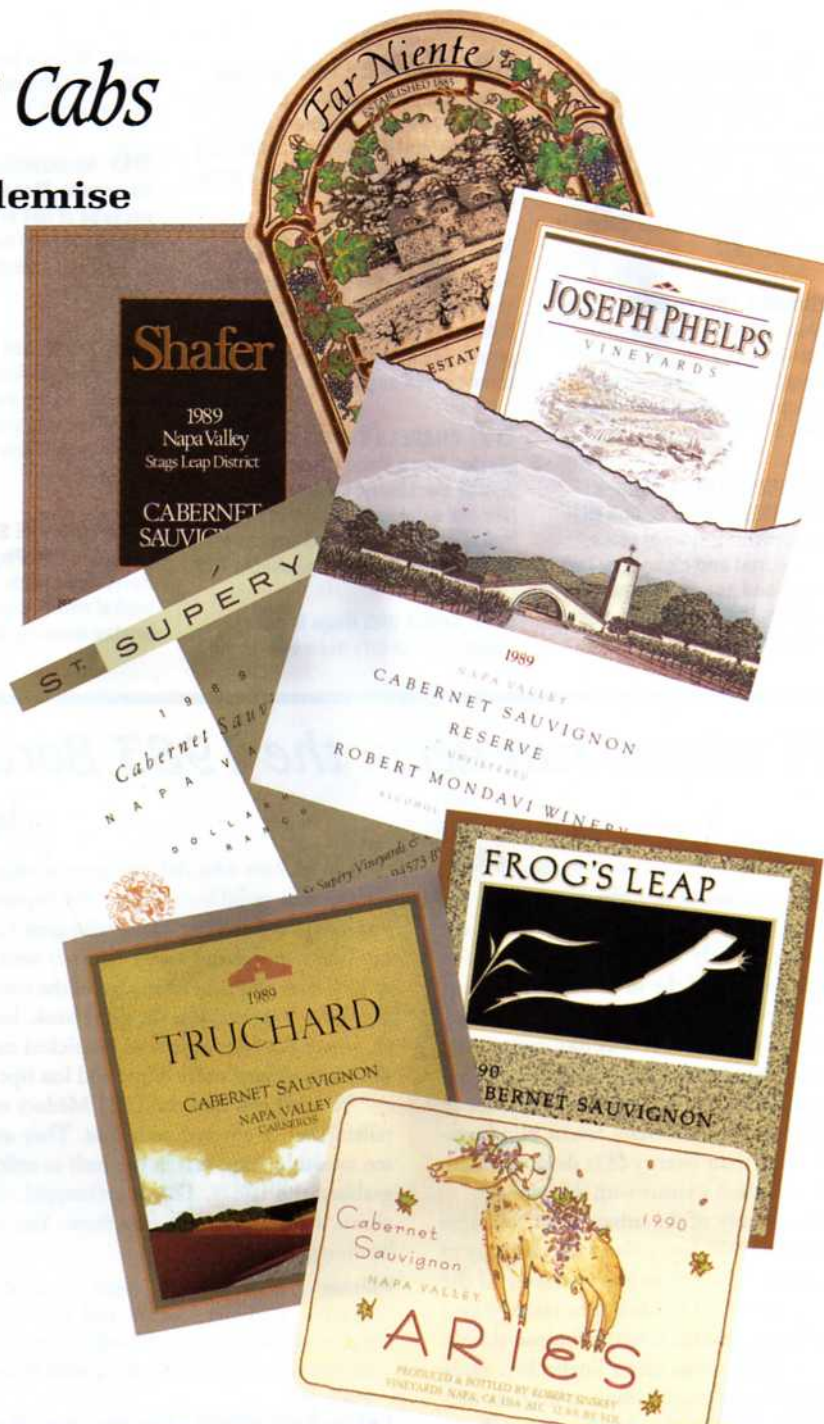
It doesn't stand alone among the '89s, as a look at our tasting notes will show. Overall, the 1989 vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon deserves more respect. At their best (the Silverado '89 is a good example) the wines are developing a lean and elegant roundness while maintaining a youthful brambly fruit.

The 1990 Napa Cabernets show tremendous promise for the future and are already tasting quite good, given their youth. Heavy rains in May shattered Cabernet blossoms and cut the size of the '90 crop dramatically, to about one half the size of the 1989 harvest. After the May rains the growing season was mild with warm sunshine right through the harvest. The wines are, generally speaking, intense with concentrated fruit and fairly high acid levels, a good indicator of long life for wines. (However, don't fill your cellar just yet—the 1991 vintage is looking outstanding in sneak previews.)

They are also a little slow in coming together. With some exceptions, the 1990s lack

the easy grace and charm of the 1985s, a vintage that some have compared to 1990. Give them a chance to settle in the bottle a bit, for it is our belief that 1990 is a great year, equal to 1987, 1985 and 1984.

The 1989 and 1990 vintages could hardly be more different, yet outstanding wines have come from both years, enhancing Napa's standing as Cabernet territory. The following wines were tasted over several days, with the majority tasted at The Wine Club, a San Francisco retail shop. This guide makes no claim to being exhaustive, but simply offers some highlights of wine currently or soon to be available. Prices are suggested California retail.



The 1989s

Clos du Val. A little tight and closed during the most recent tasting, but with good structure and an underlying pinning of tannin, the wine shows great promise. \$20

Franciscan. The opening fruit tones are intense with a well-developed mid-palate roundness that is quite engaging. \$17

Groth Estate. Rich blackberry, black cherry fruitiness with a lively, focused finish. \$15

Markham. Rather soft, approachable fruit on the opening which develops a firm peppery/blackberry center leading to a lean but nicely layered finish. It's a wine that grows on you. \$15

Robert Mondavi. Lively, forward blackberry/raspberry fruit; the finish is rock solid

and long with echoes of the fruit doubling back at the end. \$18

Robert Mondavi Reserve. The fruit is denser and darker in this bottling but still abundant; there is a charming spicy finish with touches of cinnamon and cloves. \$45

Mount Veeder. Concentrated Cabernet fruit matched with a lively spiciness, touches of black pepper and blackberries. A very attractive wine, capable of fairly extended aging. \$15

St. Supery. Bright and lively upfront fruit with good structure and balance. \$13.50

Shafer. There is a real clarity of style and balance in this wine, with abundant Cabernet fruit. It finishes somewhat light but with a lively thread of graceful fruit carrying through to the end. \$19

Truchard. This young winery has got it pretty much right with its first Cabernet release; the fruit is generous and rounded with an intense center and lively finish. \$18

The 1990s

Aries. A second label for Robert Sinskey and a very good bargain. The wine is lively and rich on the palate with good concentration of fruit on the finish. \$9.50

Cakebread Cellars. An intense opening, followed by very deep fruit with a delicious spicy, minty finish. An outstanding bottle, one of Cakebread's best yet. \$20

Christophe. Inviting minty/black cherry nose, followed by warm briary fruit. An attractive wine for early drinking. \$9.50

Far Niente. Quite likely the best bottle of wine to come from Far Niente. Intense fruit on the opening with layers and layers of Cabernet fruit in the lively brambly mode in the center; the finish is rich and intense. \$36

Frog's Leap. Wonderful, juicy fruit on the opening, developing into a classic Cabernet finish. It looks as if John Williams is simply incapable of making a bad bottle of wine. Get this by the case before it's all gone. \$15

Robert Mondavi Reserve. A rich, dense wine, much more concentrated than the '89. This has the structure and balance for extended bottle aging. (This wine won't be in general release until September of this year. It was released in March as part of the Mondavi futures program. The regular bottling was unavailable for tasting at this time.) \$50

Joseph Phelps. Bright black cherry fruit, minty and delicious. \$15

Silverado. A rich opulent nose with masses of fruit; blackberry jam laid on a toasty/minty/spicy base. This wine has a bit of an awkward feel about it, but when it comes together, it will be dynamite. Get it by the case. \$15

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. No Pinnochio, the nose comes up a little short, but there is a rich black cherry fruit with a velvety, rounded texture. \$18

ZD. Lean and graceful Cabernet fruit; delicious blackberry tones in the mid-palate and nicely layered fruit on the finish. \$20

Help yourself!

a guide to foolproof wine shopping

by Josh Farrell



HOW MANY TIMES have you asked a wine merchant to recommend a good bottle, and then you got home and discovered that his idea of a good wine is definitely not yours? Probably not more than once at a given retailer, because a disappointment like this is enough to keep you from going back. Unfortunately, I hear this story frequently from fledgling wine lovers, and the offending merchant or restaurant wine steward is blamed for unloading something on them.

Having been both a retail wine salesman and a sommelier, I can say that it's not always our fault. Sure, there are wines that the establishment wants to move, but nine times out of ten it's the person who hasn't made it clear what he or she is looking for that ends up with the dog of the day. As the customer, you have the ultimate power not to end up with a bottle you don't want. The following suggestions will help you get a bottle that *you* think is good every time.

1. Know your basic grape varieties

You probably already do: Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc for whites; Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinot Noir for reds. Know which grapes produce the style of wines you like and ask for them by name. Your salesperson will immediately take notice, and the odds of getting the bottle you want will increase dramatically.

2. Know your countries

Cabernets from California and Australia will almost always taste fruitier and less dry than those from Bordeaux where the climate is cooler. If you are aware of these international variations you'll never get stuck with a tart, austere wine when you wanted a lush, fruity one.

3. Know some producer names

You can remove almost all of the guesswork if you can tell your merchant, "I recently had the Sanford Pinot Noir and enjoyed it very

much. Can you recommend something similar?" Go ahead and soak those labels off if you have to, but have a core of names that you can bring up when you're shopping or dining.

4. Get familiar with vintages

I realize this is a lot to ask, so I've supplied you with a vintage chart. I also have to offer two warnings here. First, no vintage chart is absolute—there are as many exceptions as there are châteaux in France. Good wineries will make good wine in an off vintage but the style will differ. Second, nothing turns off a merchant or sommelier faster than a customer who pulls out a vintage chart, so use it discretely if you want to stay on good terms. In spite of these disclaimers, a vintage chart is an invaluable tool to determine what relative price range a wine should be in. For example, should a '79 Barolo cost more than a '77 even though it's two years younger? Check your vintage chart for the answer.

5. Remember what you're eating.

Wine and food pairing has been so emphasized in recent years that it has become almost a cliché. However, it's *absolutely true* that pairing the wine properly with your meal can make or break your wine drinking pleasure. If you're wondering why the great bottle of Cabernet that was recommended so highly doesn't taste good to you, maybe it's your swordfish.

I'm willing to bet that if you follow these suggestions you'll find suddenly that your merchants and sommeliers are doing a much better job. And you'll never put them through what I experienced when I brought out a bottle of 1978 Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet to a customer. Upon reading the label he nodded approval. I opened and decanted the wine, and when I offered him his taste he looked at me and said, "Oh...I thought it was white." ^W_e

Wine		The Wine Enthusiast Vintage Chart																					
		'91	'90	'89	'88	'87	'86	'85	'84	'83	'82	'81	'80	'79	'78	'77	'76	'75	'74	'73	'72	'71	'70
B	Bordeaux	70	90	95	85	80	90	90	75	85	90	85	75	85	85	70	80	85	70	75	70	85	90
	Burgundy	85	95	85	90	85	80	90	75	85	80	75	80	80	90	65	85	60	70	65	85	90	85
	California	90	85	85	80	90	90	95	90	75	85	80	85	80	90	80	85	85	95	85	80	80	90
	Rhone	80	95	95	90	80	85	90	75	90	85	85	80	90	95	75	80	70	75	75	85	85	90
C	Barolo	75	90	95	90	80	80	95	65	75	90	80	70	85	95	65	65	65	85	75	50	90	80
	Brunello	85	90	90	90	80	85	95	65	80	85	75	80	80	85	70	65	85	80	70	50	85	80
W	Burgundy	70	85	95	85	80	90	90	75	85	85	80	75	90	90	75	85	70	75	85	80	85	80
	California	85	95	80	90	80	90	90	85	80	80	90	85	80	85	75	80	85	85	85	80	80	85
	Sauternes	70	90	95	95	70	90	85	75	90	85	85	85	80	75	60	90	90	60	65	60	85	85
	Alsace	80	95	95	90	80	85	90	75	90	80	90	80	85	80	70	90	80	75	75	60	90	80