

WINE NEWS

feature story

California's best wine of the year *By Steve Pitcher*



Photo: Mitchell Shenker

California reds from the 1998 vintage took center stage in 2001, lining the shelves where the popular, highly regarded 1997 wines had been. Consumers approached these wines warily in response to commentators' pronouncements of a poor or lesser vintage. Would this be a repeat of the much-maligned 1988 and 1989 vintages? Would 1998 be the sole loser in a decade of successful vintages? Over the course of the year, it became apparent that the answer was no, or at least, not exactly.

The last three vintages in California - 1998, 1999 and 2000 - were cooler than normal, and 2001 looks (in early November) to continue that pattern. Such weather conditions, particularly when combined with more rain than normal, as in 1998, result in uneven crop set and erratic ripening. This has more of an impact on thick-skinned varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot, which are harvested late in the growing season, than on thin-skinned grapes, such as chardonnay, syrah, pinot noir and zinfandel, which are picked earlier.

All of which is prelude to properly appreciating the 1998 California reds, most of which were released during 2001. They are an inconsistent bunch, to be sure, especially the Cabernets and cabernet-based blends. And consumers had a right to be suspicious.

Yet some spectacular Cabs were made from 1998 fruit. And where the results were not absolutely superb, the worst that can be said for most of them is that they are lighter in body and extract than their 1997 predecessors, and higher in acidity. Traits such as these make them, much like Bordeaux reds, eminently suited to pairing with food.

The vineyard tactic that separated the great 1998 Cabs from the rest of the pack was the willingness of growers to severely thin the crop - up to 50 percent for some - during the summer, and then wait as the rainy season approached, letting the grapes hang on the vine well into October to achieve optimum maturity.

Etude's Tony Soter, who succeeded spectacularly with his 1998 Cabernet, subscribed to practices such as these. "We were able to mitigate a difficult vintage by implementing an exacting selection process," he says. "We significantly thinned crop levels, allowing only the most mature fruit to remain on the vine. Although crop levels were much smaller, quality was exceptionally high."

Chuck Wagner pursued a similar approach at Caymus. "A viticultural choice we made years ago - to deliberately reduce our crop yields in order to increase concentration and intensity of flavors - put us well ahead of the curve going in to the 1998 growing season," he says. Like many vintners, Wagner coped aggressively with the vintage's cool weather

Syrah (& Petites)

1. Truchard, 1998 Carneros - \$32 (Syrah of the Year): Forward, intensely fragrant nose of freshly crushed blackberry and black cherry, sweet oak and savory white pepper, accented with pleasant earthy, leathery and smoky nuances. On the palate, this classy, richly textured Syrah is brimming with jammy black fruits plus a hint of blueberry. Freshly cracked black pepper notes emerge in the extended finish. Superb. (1,248 cases)

2. Geysler Peak, 1998 Reserve Shiraz, Sonoma County - \$40: An exuberant Syrah with fragrant scents of ripe boysenberry and blackberry, white pepper, brown spice, mocha, black licorice and a hint of warm, loamy earthiness. The palate possesses tremendous power and depth, offering plump, ripe blackberry fruit, a hint of tar and intriguing white pepper spice, all nestled in a rich robe of texture; supple, medium-full tannins. (1,500 cases)

3. McDowell, 1999 Reserve, Mendocino - \$24: Intense, deep, inviting aromas of cocoa and freshly crushed blackberry and cassis. Smooth and velvety with medium tannins, the wine's generous flavors focus on ripe berry, mocha and brown spice, finishing with a flourish of vanilla. (2,117 cases)

Joseph Phelps, 1997 Napa Valley - \$35: Forward, rich, intense, plummy, peppery, cassis-blackberry aromas are replicated on the palate with a meaty enhancement. Full bodied, rich and luscious with medium-full tannins and a long finish. (1,500 cases)

Hanna, 1997 Bismark Ranch, Sonoma Valley - \$45: Very aromatic, offering ripe blackberry and cassis fruit, white pepper, roasted red meat and vanillin oak. Full bodied and voluptuous with jammy blackberry fruit and a touch of earthiness, this is a bold, blockbuster Syrah that fairly swaggers at 15.9 percent alcohol. (1,002 cases)

Stags' Leap Winery, 1998 Petite Syrah, Napa Valley - \$32: Opulent and powerful, this flagship wine boasts a wonderfully integrated structure that resulted from vinifying the components - petite sirah, syrah, viognier and carignane - together. Intense aromas of black cherry-blackberry fruit, spicy plum and orange peel. Rich, ripe flavors of black cherry, raspberry, coffee bean and brown spice. (14,000 cases)

Bridlewood, 1999 Central Coast - \$20 (6,839 cases)

Cambria, 1999 Tepusquet Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley - \$22 (3,000 cases)

Eberle, 1999 Steinbeck Vineyard, Paso Robles - \$20 (1,549 cases)

Guenoc, 1998 Petite Sirah, North Coast - \$20 (7,925 cases)

Havens, 1998 Carneros - \$26 (1,000 cases)