Wine Spectator

TASTING REPORTS

Sauvignon Blanc, California Style

The continued surge of terrific Sauvignon Blancs from California has cemented the wine's reputation as one of the most consistent and affordable whites in the state. What's even more exciting for fans of this complex, fragrant and refreshing variety is how many different expressions there are. The examples I have reviewed over the past year represent impressive quality across a diverse mix of styles.

In recent years, I have been highlighting the various means by which Golden State producers have shown their enthusiasm for Sauvignon Blanc, including the use of updated farming techniques and cellar practices, the employment of a range of fermentation vessels and an increased focus on ageability.

By MaryAnn Worobiec. Posted March 8th, 2022.

Alma de Cattleya 2020 Sauvignon Blanc

Mouthwatering and aromatic, offering lime blossom, ruby grapefruit, passion fruit and Meyer lemon. Smooth and juicy. —M.W. **92 points.**

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All of these efforts have resulted in a category of wine that defies a single style. Sauvignon Blanc's signature juicy acidity shows through, as does its telltale core of citrus and stone fruit flavors, yet the bottlings under review reveal a range of textures and a variety of aromatics, including herbal, floral, mineral and tropical notes.

"What's special [about Sauvignon Blanc] is its ability to show different characteristics and styles," says Quintessa winemaker Rebekah Wineburg. "I would argue that's what makes it one of the great grape varieties—it can do all that and still have an ability to show *terroir*."

Wineburg made the outstanding Sauvignon Blanc Napa-Sonoma Counties Illumination 2019 (91 points, $50). To build the wine's character, she uses five different fermentation vessels: concrete eggs to highlight minerality, new French oak barrels for spice, acacia barrels that add an exotic wood note, neutral French oak barrels for texture, and stainless-steel barrels to emphasize the grape's linear fruit focus. Meanwhile, Wineburg also makes a Sauvignon Blanc under the Faust label in a more direct and fruit-forward style.

This is a familiar scenario among many of the top-scoring Sauvignon Blancs—the same producer will make multiple expressions of the grape. Some are single-vineyard or regional blends, others are based on barrel and lot selection, but just as often winemakers are simply exploring what the grape is capable of.

Bibiana González Rave (center) and husband Jeff Pisoni sort Sauvignon Blanc grapes for their Shared Notes label. (Chris Andre)

Bibiana González Rave explains that when she and her husband, Jeff Pisoni, started Shared Notes to focus only on Sauvignon Blanc,

"We had it in our heads to make the best wines we could."

Their two Sauvignon Blanc bottlings consistently dominate among the top-scorers: the Loire-style Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Les Pierres Qui Décident 2020 (94, $65) and the Bordeaux-inspired Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon Russian River Valley Les Leçons des Maîtres 2020 (92, $65). Rave also makes the Alma de Cattleya Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 2020 (92, $22), with purer grape flavors at the core.

Rave focuses on low yields in the vineyards, which she feels is critical to quality. She also keeps an eye on improvement.

"Every single year and every experience will make you better, if you are paying attention," she explains. "We keep trying to do a better wine every year."

Another impressive showing comes from Grieve. Consulting winemaker Philippe Melka made two distinct but outstanding Sauvignon Blancs: the Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Grieve Family Estate 2018 (93, $90), where the majority of the wine was aged 17 months in new French oak barrels, and the Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Double Eagle 2019 (90, $48), primarily aged in concrete and named after owner David Grieve's golf passion.

According to Dry Creek Vineyard winemaker Tim Bell, Sauvignon Blanc isn't shy about expressing its character: "It has a big, complex variety of flavors that you can get out of it." Bell made two outstanding wines in this report, the Fumé Blanc Sonoma County 2020 (92, $16) and the Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley 2020 (90, $20). Bell's focus is in the vineyard. "You can really shape the flavor in the vineyard a lot—and not have to throw a lot of winemaking tricks at it." He and other winemakers point out the usefulness of machine harvesting for Sauvignon Blanc, which allows for some maceration of the skins before the grapes arrive at the winery.

Also in the Dry Creek Valley AVA, Quivira fielded four outstanding Sauvignon Blancs in this year's report: the Dry Creek Valley Fig Tree Vineyard 2019 (93, $27), Dry Creek Valley Alder Grove Vineyard 2019 (92, $27), Sonoma County 2020 (92, $19) and Dry Creek Valley The Quivira Collection Wine Creek Ranch Vineyard 2019 (91, $32). Quivira winemaker Hugh Chappelle suggests that this multiple-bottling program affords him flexibility. "We can ebb and flow on the volumes of the higher-end expressions," he says. "If we're only making one Sauvignon Blanc, it's going to be what Mother Nature gave us that year."

Chappelle advocates a practice that's increasing in popularity among Golden State producers: phased picking. "There's no true moment of ripeness," he says of Sauvignon Blanc. "There's a spectrum of ripeness."

To that point, he picks grapes at three different passes. In a typical year, 20% will be picked at the lower end of the spectrum to capture grassy notes and crisp acidity; the majority will be picked at what he calls the "classic" citrus spectrum that he expects from Dry Creek Valley grapes; and then another 20% to 25% will be picked at the more tropical side of ripeness.

"Phased harvesting," Chappelle explains, "allows us to balance our wines out with the absolute least manipulation. We're just using the blending process. It's a bit more work in the beginning since you need to manage more lots, but we feel it's worth it." This is also an approach to maintain vintage-to-vintage consistency and complexity, he adds. "Layer on top of that a mix of stainless-steel and acacia barrels [for fermentation]," he says. "Layer on top of that clonal diversity."

It's clear that clonal diversity is an advantage for California winemakers. Most vintners report working with at least a couple of different Sauvignon Blanc clones or more. Compare that with the successful Sauvignon Blancs of New Zealand, where most vintners work with the same single clone, and it's no wonder that the spectrum of flavors and styles of California versions are much more varied.

The enthusiasm California vintners have been pouring into their Sauvignon Blanc programs has resulted in a boost in the quality of the wines—and a boost in fans as the grape's popularity grows. "I think the world of Sauvignon Blanc," says Wineburg. "I think it's good for people to learn about its different expressions. And don't forget, it's ageable!"