

2011 vintage shows glory of Napa Valley sauvignon blancs



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In Napa Valley, we take our sauvignon blanc seriously. It remains the second-most-popular white wine here, and that's no surprise.

It is easy to list the positive attributes of sauvignon blanc: It's aromatic, certainly more so than our other favorite white, chardonnay; the grape is naturally high in acidity, so the wines are crisp and refreshing; we can ripen the grape in Napa Valley to give it lots of fruity flavors or grow it in a cooler spot and bring out the herbaceous zing the grape so eagerly provides; we can leave sauvignon blanc

unoaked and let the fruit shine, or round out the mouth feel with the use of neutral oak and lees stirring. We can introduce oak flavors to add complexity to the final wine, and more.

The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel sat down late last month at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone to review the 2011 vintage of Napa Valley sauvignon blancs. Several years ago, when panelists tasted through the 2008 vintage, it sparked a long debate on whether sauvignon blanc should be oaked or not, with numerous wines showing heavy oak-influenced flavors. The 2009 vintage brought fewer wines with excessive oak, followed by a showing of more balanced sauvignon blancs in 2010.

So what was the 2011 vintage like? There are crisp, fruit-forward wines and those rounded out and spiced by oak flavors — but no matter the style, the wines as a group were showing incredible balance. This vintage is Napa Valley sauvignon blanc in all its glory.

With 36 different wines from the vintage to be tasted, the room was divided and each half tasted 18 wines in three flights of six. The top three from each flight were then included in a grand taste-off to find the favorite Napa Valley sauvignon blancs of the vintage.

Merryvale Juliana Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (\$26) won the top spot. This is the wine that panelists decided was the best structured, most balanced, and most exciting to taste. The wine is barrel fermented and then aged on its lees, adding complexity to the final wine. Ripe pear and melon with citrus and a bit of floral come in this beautifully crafted wine.

It is hard to think of the Cade Estate Sauvignon Blanc (\$26) and not think of Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom. But it is a good combination — powerful owner and powerful wines. With this vintage, the winery increased the percentage of sauvignon blanc that is barrel fermented and the wine itself combines the fruit's fresh citrus and ripe fruit flavors with a touch of spice. The winery sits on Howell Mountain and was created to complement the valley floor wines made at its sister winery, PlumpJack.

The GRADE Cellars' Sea-Fog Sauvignon Blanc (\$25) is, like the winery's other wines, 100 percent varietal and devoted to specific sites. All of the fruit for this sauvignon blanc comes from Calistoga. There is citrus, stone fruit flavors, ripe apple and spice — lots to love.

Tyler Florence Wines Sauvignon Blanc (\$19.99). A winner with the panel, yes — but also, if you were in downtown Napa last month, you may have seen a mob of people spilling out of a celebration of Florence wines at a tasting room on First Street. Florence sure knows how to draw a crowd. Evening hours for happy hour or special group tastings are offered.

Crosby Roamann is named after what sounds like two feisty family members — a great-grandmother and grandmother, one a brazen chorus girl from the roaring '20s and the other a tough-as-nails poet with a head of thick, fiery red curls. The wine comes at you with lemon citrus, ripe apple and light oak-influenced flavors in a wonderfully balanced sauvignon blanc.

Ma(i)sonry Napa Valley, Hudson Vineyard (\$40) is a sauvignon blanc for those who love the combination of ripe red apple and oak spices. The Ma(i)sonry label, is the wine label connected to the wine, art and design gallery in Yountville. It is made by Blackbird Vineyards' winemaker Aaron Pott.

Round Pond Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Rutherford (\$24) lets the peach fruit and lemon, orange and lime citrus sing without additional flavors of oak. It is a wonderfully balanced wine. The name Round Pond comes from a camping retreat near West Point, N.Y., which the owner often visited as a child. Today he shares his Napa Valley retreat, the winery, with all guests.

Crab season is not too far away, and putting a few of these sauvignon blanc wines aside in anticipation of that tasty pairing is a very good idea.

(Only wines from Napa Valley Vintner member wineries are accepted and tasted. Not all wines submitted are chosen to be tasted, as often there are more wines submitted than tasted. The wines are chosen at random. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program; visit napavintners.com/programs and click on “Napa Neighbor” to learn more.)

Top 2011 sauvignon blancs

1. Merryvale Vineyards, Juliana Vineyards, \$26
2. Cade Estate Winery, \$26
3. The Grade Cellars, Sea-Fog, Calistoga, \$25
4. Tyler Florence Wines, \$19.99
5. Crosby Roamann, St. Helena, \$32
6. Ma(i)sonry Napa Valley, Hudson Vineyard, \$40
7. Round Pond Estate, Rutherford, \$24.

Star/NVV panelists

The following panelists attended the recent sauvignon blanc tasting held in the Rudd Center at the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone:

Bill Dyer, Dyer Vineyard

Tom Simoneaux, Vintage Wine Estates

Sean Scully, The Weekly Calistogan

Jim Sullivan, Castello di Amorosa

Michael Scholz, St. Supéry

Chris Phelps, Swanson Vineyards

Catherine Seda, Balzac Communications

Bob Bath, Culinary Institute of America at Greystone

Sara Fowler, Peju Province Winery

John Skupny, Lang & Reed

Nile Zacharle, David Arthur Vineyards

Kyrsta Scully, The Weekly Calistogan

Chris Hoel, Soutirage

Elizabeth Vianna, Chimney Rock

Kristin Belair, Honig

Graham Wehmeir, Merryvale

Michael Beaulac, Pine Ridge

Aron Weinkauf, Spottswoode

Landon Donley, Spottswoode

Reed Skupny, Brand Napa Valley

Eric Carpnetter, Dean & DeLuca

Rene Hu, Soutirage