

Executive Wine Seminars:

2010 California Cabernets

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According to most experts, the 2010 Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon vintage turned out to be very successful, with just about every winery turning in top-notch wines. As supporting evidence, every vintage chart you can find gave a 95 rating or higher to the 2010 Napa cabs. Furthermore, based on our own experience, the 2010 Napa cabs were certainly worthy of being subjected to tough EWS scrutiny. For this exciting blind tasting, the EWS team assembled 13 of the most successful Napa cabernets from the 2010 vintage. All of the 2010 cabernets tasted came with great reviews and high ratings from the wine press. Our lineup included a combination of old favorites and hot newcomers.

Our goal was to put the 2010 vintage in perspective by comparing it to other recent EWS blind tastings of Napa cabernets. The 2007s were big, sturdy, balanced and altogether outstanding. The 2008s that followed were disappointing with very few exceptions. However, Napa cabs rebounded strongly with an excellent set of 2009s.

Many pundits suggested that the 2010s that followed were just as good--in some cases, even better than the 2009s. It was time for us to find the truth.

In the end, we definitely prefer the 2009s to the 2010s, and this tasting was slightly disappointing. Not as much as the 2008s, but disappointing nevertheless. It's not that we didn't find any winners, as each participant thoroughly enjoyed between four and six wines on average. But given the stellar lineup, huge ratings and favorable press, we expected more.

While it's true that all of the 13 wines tasted were young and at least a few were in a "dumb phase," we 2009s at a similar age were noticeably more exciting. That said, let's give a special shout-out to Ovid, whose 2009 finished first in last year's blind tasting. Their 2010 followed suit, winning this year's contest as well. Blankiet, Caymus, Continuum and Ramey also turned in strong performances. But it was the lackluster showing of many other highly touted 2010 Napa cabs that leads to a somewhat less than enthusiastic report. The following are consensus tasting notes, written to share commentary and descriptors, and to convey the overall impression participants had for each wine as it showed on the night of the tasting. Our ratings reflect the quality of the wines and the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) displayed by our group of 20 tasters during in-depth discussions of each wine. Ratings are also more reflective of the "here and now" than of likely future development. Wines are listed in the order in which they were poured. Data is based on 20 voters. Voting tallies: 1st/2nd/3rd A + sign after each rating indicates that the wine will improve with cellaring.

1) 2010 Spottswoode Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Napa Valley - \$305 - 3 points (0/1/1) - 90+ rating

Deep color. Rich, fruit-filled nose is attractive, with notes of black tar, smoke, herbs and bitter chocolate. Big and powerful in the mouth, with lots of tannin. It's nicely balanced and we particularly admire the wine's grip. This youthful cabernet is very primary at this stage, exhibiting very little nuance. It has nice sweet fruit, but the finish displays a lot of alcohol and some greenness at the end. This wine could have a great future, but it wasn't at its best tonight.

2) 2010 Blankiet Proprietary Red Wine Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley - \$275 - 12 points (2/2/2) - 94+ rating

Very dark color. Lovely Pauillac-like aromas offer scents that recall dark plum skins, cedar, leather and tobacco.

Ripe and thoroughly delicious on the palate. This sexy beauty offers excellent acidity and moderate tannins mingling with perfectly ripe fruit. It is a wine without flaws, drinking well this evening, although it is not fully mature. Very long, consistent finish seals the deal. As usual, Blankiet fairs very well at our EWS blind tasting.

3) 2010 Joseph Phelps Insignia Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley - \$200 - 9 points (1/2/2) - 93+ rating

Deep color. Beautiful bouquet filled with sweet and sexy black cherry and cassis fruit, leather, smoke and wood. The ripeness of fruit follows through on the palate. This is a youthful, concentrated, powerful wine with substantial tannins. It's rather chunky and has strong palate presence. There's good material here, with decent acidity. The crisp finish is a bit short, but wine #3 will be enjoyed years down the road. Excellent future.

4) 2010 Hundred Acre Cabernet Sauvignon Few and Far Between Napa Valley - \$495 - 8 points (1/2/1) - 93+ rating

Fairly deep color. Attractive, sweet, exotic nose recalls lavender, coconut, chocolate croissant and black raspberry syrup. Tannic and youthful on entry, with the same dark berry flavors found in the aromatics. This youthful cabernet has outstanding intensity and concentration, but is holding something back right now. Wine #4 has an interesting Rhône feel, and a burnt syrah flavor. Long, penetrating finish shows a hint of bitterness, but otherwise well balanced. Needs a few years to settle in.

5) 2010 Caymus Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Special Selection Napa Valley - \$145 - 20 points (5/1/3) - 96+ rating

Deep color. Sweet, modern nose offers lots of new oak and is very inviting. The fruit reminds us of blackberry, cassis and plum. We also get notes of violet, chocolate and smoke. Big, chewy, tannic and concentrated in the mouth, but the heavily extracted fruit makes its presence felt. For a big, complex wine, #5 is deftly in balance. Maybe there is a touch more alcohol than we like, but the delicious finish, featuring chocolate and pastry crust flavors, solidly wins us over.

6) 2010 Continuum Estate Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley - \$180 - 16 points (3/3/1) - 95+ rating

Deeply colored. Rich, ripe, chocolatey nose is quite sweet and recalls cherry bubble gum. There's a citric quality that we get on the palate, with nice sweetness and layers of chocolate cake. This wine has firm tannins and is "very Napa," with moderate weight and excellent acidity. It's somewhat disjointed now, a byproduct of its youth, but a very long, penetrating finish convinces us that this one's a keeper.

7) 2010 Morlet Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Coeur de Vallee Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard Oakville Napa Valley - \$195 - 4 points (1/0/1) - 90+ rating

Fairly deep color. Initially restrained aromatics don't reveal much, but with aeration we get notes of sweet cherry, chocolate, smoke and leather. Youthful and quite tannic on entry; this wine is nowhere near prime drinking. It's a compact cabernet with excellent grip. There's decent acidity and wine #7 is well balanced overall. The finish is long and shows good concentration and complexity in this back-loaded wine. Give it time.

8) 2010 Dominus Estate Red Wine Napa Valley - \$250 - 6 points (0/2/2) - 91+ rating

Dark color. Rich, dry, concentrated, fairly tight aromas feature red berry fruit, wet soil, mushroom, smoke and leather. Also restrained in the mouth and clearly crying out for a stint in the cellar. It's somewhat dry but well balanced, and offers good acidity. In the company of other wines, #8 is relatively simple and one-dimensional, a byproduct of its youth. Moderate length. Another wine nowhere near its peak.

9) 2010 Ovid Red Wine Napa Valley - \$270 - 24 points (6/2/2) - 97+ rating

Dark color. Interesting, different, sweet and ultimately very attractive bouquet offers scents that remind us of mint and iodine, with a slight herbaceous note. Quite dramatic and intense on the palate; a wine that immediately captures us. It's big, rich, tannic and youthful. We love the beautiful honeysuckle and tart raspberry elegance. There's a feminine quality to wine #9 that adds to its appeal. Long and complex finish, with a tarragon note at the end. Certainly a wine that draws you back to the glass for more.

10) 2010 Hewitt Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford Napa Valley - \$100 - 3 points 87+ rating

Deeply colored. Sweet, somewhat overripe, high-alcohol nose is compared to Amarone and port. Notes include prune, burnt tire and funky, briney, old hay scents. On the palate, the fruit is fine and the wine has decent structure and mouth feel. But the alcohol, which clearly tipped this bottle out of balance,

overwhelms us. Yes, one person voted for it, but that must have been a mistake as this bottle was easily the weakest in the tasting.

11) 2010 Vine Hill Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley - \$200 - 2 points (0/0/2) - 90+ rating

Deeply colored. Attractive nose displays a strong influence of oak. Notes include ripe plum, crushed coconut, cinnamon and smoke. In the mouth, this wine displays very good fruit and acidity. The structure is fine too, although not a heavyweight. It's a young, interesting, modestly tannic wine that finishes with a metallic flavor and tea leaf complexity.