

Stephen Tanzer's

Winophilia



A Taste of the IWC

Napa Valley, version 2.012

Last year at this time, I published notes on the most spectacular cabernet - and merlot-based red wines I tasted on my annual late-winter tour of the best Napa Valley wine addresses. This year's top scorers are mostly from the wonderfully rich, velvety, balanced 2009 vintage, a consistently excellent year in which growers could pick perfectly ripe grapes *without raising of the fruit*.

I call this article "wine porn" because these are flamboyantly rich, arresting wines that most consumers will read about but never experience first-hand. But that moniker is a bit unfair. These wines may be gloriously endowed but they are natural beauties—some of the world's most extravagantly rich and seamless reds. I should note that all of these wines rated 96 points or higher in Issue 162 of the International Wine Cellar.

The uncompromising Bill Harlan has no fewer than three bottlings on my 2012 best-of list. The **Harlan Estate 2009 Red Wine Napa Valley** (\$750) is an impressively deep, saturated ruby color, offering enticing floral lift to its aromas of cassis, licorice, menthol and pungent minerality. This very pure, primary wine already boasts an extraordinarily fine-grained texture, and its palate-saturating finish features wonderfully silky tannins and great mounting persistence.

Two bottlings under Harlan's **Bond** label are also exceptional in '09. The **Bond 2009 Vecina Red Wine Napa Valley** (\$375) shows powerful but reticent aromas of dark berries, licorice, mint and bitter chocolate, and conveys a strong impression of gravelly minerality. It's downright plush on entry, then large-scaled and generous in the middle but with little in the way of easy sweetness. The very long finish displays chocolatey-rich, seamless tannins. Although it's showing spectacularly today, this very refined wine really calls for patience. The **Bond 2009 Pluribus Red Wine Napa Valley** (\$375) is a considerably more backward example. It offers strongly mineral-driven aromas and flavors of cassis, black cherry, licorice, violet and exotic herbs. While it's large-scaled, creamy and deep, it also possesses the brooding energy to leaven its lush texture. The finish is classically dry and serious, with big but fully ripe tannins that reach the front teeth.

I've been a huge fan of the **Blankiet** wines almost since their first vintage in 1999 and 2009 is a great vintage for this property in the western hills of Yountville. The **Blankiet 2009 Proprietary Red Wine Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley** (\$195) offers subdued but very pure aromas of blueberry, cassis, violet, mocha and minerals. It's sweet, broad and wonderfully deep, with dark berry and mineral flavors complicated by a soil-driven saline element. This utterly seamless cabernet-based blend is fully ripe, perfumed and extremely long, with major tannins coating the teeth. It's the screaming value in this line-up—relatively speaking, of course.

A renowned cult wine since its first vintage in 1992, **Screaming Eagle** has been on a roll in recent years under new ownership. The **2009 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** (\$750) (blended with 8% cabernet franc and 5% merlot), California's most expensive wine, boasts vibrant aromas of crushed cassis, ripe redcurrant, licorice, bitter chocolate, tobacco and spearmint. It's smooth and impressively concentrated, with a hint of medicinal

austerity to the intense flavors of black fruits, violet, bitter chocolate and menthol. This gripping wine finishes with a firm tannic spine and outstanding, slowly building juicy length.

Consistent outperformer **Colgin Cellars** has also had an outstanding vintage in 2009. Their **IX Estate Red Wine Napa Valley** (\$350), from the vineyard around the winery on top of Pritchard Hill overlooking Lake Hennessey, boasts very pure aromas of black cherry, blueberry, menthol and sweet butter. It's pure liquid pleasure in the mouth, at once tannic and penetrating without betraying any rough edges. The very strong, long finish of this Bordeaux blend shows a mouthfilling chocolatey ripeness and serious underlying structure.

Lou Kapcsandy makes one of the world's greatest merlots that is *not* from the fabled Pomerol plateau, and I suspect it would give many top Pomerols serious competition. The **Kapcsandy Family Winery 2009 Roberta's Reserve State Lane Vineyard Yountville** (\$350) blended with 4% cabernet franc) exudes a captivating high-pitched perfume of blackberry, licorice, violet and pungent flinty minerality. Like all of these Napa superstars, it's utterly seamless in texture and shows great purity and lift to its sappy dark fruit flavors. The finish boasts great palate-staining length and perfume as well as a serious structure for aging that's rare for merlot in California.

Jayson Woodbridge has expanded his portfolio of offerings in recent vintages, and in 2009 my favorite bottling was the one from the spectacular amphitheater vineyard around his winery at the base of Howell Mountain. The **Hundred Acre 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon The Ark Vineyard Napa Valley** (\$300) delivers lively aromas of black raspberry, blueberry, boysenberry and violet. It's compellingly rich and chewy, with a 3-D texture and great inner-mouth energy to its flavors of black fruits, licorice and spices. The finish features utterly noble tannins and outstanding slow-building length.

Finally, I did not taste the 2009s from **Verité** this spring because they were just being bottled, but Pierre Seillan's 2008's, the current vintage in the marketplace, are stunning. My favorite was the **2008 Le Desir Red Wine Sonoma County** (\$450) a "Saint Emilion blend" of 61% cabernet franc, 31% merlot, and 4% each cabernet sauvignon and malbec). With its musky aromas of blueberry, licorice and dusty spices, and the sappy, saline intensity to its dark berry, dark chocolate, clove and mace flavors, it stands out for its great energy and exhilarating inner-mouth spice character. The tannins are serious but suave and are perfectly carried by the wine's density of texture and lingering fruit.