

Wine Spectator

James Suckling

I have Joined the Cult

The tasting in Zurich, Switzerland, late last year was like a Super Bowl of California cult wines. Swiss wine collector Silvio Denz (who bought Château Faugères in St.-Emilion last year) put together the two-day event, at which a small group of guests tasted a decade of vintages of many of Napa Valley's top wines.

I really didn't know what to expect of the tasting. Because I live in Europe, I rarely taste these superstar reds; my experiences with them have mostly occurred during trips to the United States. You don't see them much in Italy, or anywhere else outside the States for that matter. And who can afford them? I felt very lucky to be at the tasting.

To be honest, I have always been skeptical of what I've perceived as American wines' high-alcohol, fruit-forward, in-your-face style. I never thought they would age very well. And I never would have put them in the same class as top reds from Europe, especially those of Bordeaux.

I was wrong. I am now a believer.

The tasting proved to me how glorious and glamorous these top Napa reds are. Not only do they seduce with their opulent fruit, they impress you with their unique character, or, for lack of a better word, *terroir*. Moreover, they have the structure to improve with age. These are not just expensive fruit bombs, or jam juice as I have occasionally called them. They are structured and classy reds with personality and style.

Denz's tasting included verticals of Cabernets (or Cabernet-based blends) from Araujo, Bryant Family, Colgin, Dalla Valle, Harlan Estate and Screaming Eagle. The vintages ranged from the early 1990s to 2002. The reds of each winery were tasted in separate flights. So, for example, there were 11 vintages of Bryant Family Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (1992 to 2002) and 10 vintages of Colgin Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Herb Lamb Vineyard (1992 to 2001). The wines were not tasted blind.

You can check out my tasting notes at *Wine Spectator* Online. I have posted my scores, accompanied by the magazine's published ratings by my colleague, James Laube.

Most of the vintages were excellent, with 2000 the

notable exception. In fact, I found 1997, 1996, 1995 and 1994 all very close in quality. The middle two years—'96 and '95—are much less expensive than the outside two. I also preferred 2001 to 1999, but only by a fraction. I think that just about every vintage of these wines is a winner, so I wouldn't get too hung up on paying a premium for what is perceived as the best vintage.

My favorite wine of the tasting was the Harlan Estate Napa Valley 1997.

Its powerful tannic backbone and dense fruit reminded me of a great young Château Latour. Yet the Harlan was more flamboyant, almost sexy. It showed masses of fruit and berry, currant and coconut flavors that lasted for minutes. This is a wine that will improve for decades. I gave it a perfect score on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. The Harlan Estate 1996 earned 98 points, and I gave scores of 97 to the Araujo Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Eisele Vineyard 1997, Colgin Herb Lamb Vineyard 1997 and two vintages of Screaming Eagle, 1997 and 1992.

I visited Harlan Estate, Colgin and Araujo earlier this year, and I was very impressed with the vineyards and the wineries. I quickly understood why their wines are so extraordinary. Everything was performed to perfection, from the pruning of the vines to the care of the barrel cellars. Nothing seemed to be overlooked in the quest to produce great, handcrafted wines. Moreover, their owners—Bill Harlan, Ann Colgin, and Bart and Daphne Araujo, respectively—spoke of winemaking with the passion and dedication of other great winemakers I have met in my career, whether in Pomerol, Piedmont or Pommard.

Years ago, the late, great Bordeaux enologist Emile Peynaud told me that outside of France, only a few special places existed to make great wines. More precisely, he said that California only had a small amount of *grand terroir*. The tasting in Zurich proved to me that Napa Valley certainly has some *grand terroir* for making extraordinary reds. And that's why I'm now a full-fledged member of the California cult.

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