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Californian Cabernet Sauvignon 2010

Questions over ripeness made this a controversial vintage, particularly stateside, but the claret-like freshness and elegance should appeal to most British palates, says Stephen Brook

This was a vintage that divided opinion at the time it was released. This was because the growing season had been unusually cool, which slowed the ripening in Napa and Sonoma. Sudden extreme heat in late August caused some sunburn and shrivelling, and there was more to come in late September. Some estates bunch-thinned to speed up maturation. But the vintage was 10 to 20 days later than usual, and heavy rain in late October caused big problems for those estates that hadn’t finished the harvest. However, this was not an issue for most properties.

The Cabernet grapes were deep coloured, thick skinned, kept high acidity and attained moderate sugar levels. The question being asked at harvest was whether the grapes were fully ripe by the time they were picked, or whether they had a greenness that most American palates would dislike.

Europeans, weaned on claret, usually accept a measure of herbaceousness, as it gives the wines cut and verve, but US drinkers are used to high levels of ripeness – something California usually has no problem fulfilling.

Divided opinions
Not surprisingly, the young 2010s proved controversial. Stateside, many tasters and consumers – the domestic market is crucial for Californian Cabernets – did indeed find many of the wines too stringy and herbaceous, although there were some dissenting voices.

When Decanter tasted a wide range of the 2010s in 2013, we were for the most part enchanted by the freshness and elegance of the wines. But there were some green and underripe examples, and also some wines that had an overripe profile as growers sought to override the character of the vintage.

In Napa many of the best wines came from the valley floor, as they tended to be ripe and less overtly tannic than those from mountain vineyards. Again, there would be many exceptions, depending on local conditions and the quality of the farming, as well as the date of harvest. Cabernet was broadly successful across Sonoma, and Santa Cruz Mountains benefitted from a hot October that fully ripened the fruit.

After nearly a decade in bottle, the best wines seem to be on a plateau – certainly approachable now or very soon, but likely to cruise along for a decade or so more, without losing their freshness and balance.

‘The best wines are likely to cruise along for a decade or so more without losing freshness’

CAL CABS: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

2016 A cool year with even ripening, completed by a warm September. An average crop of well-balanced wines.

2015 Some losses at flowering, but the summer was hot and dry with a little rain. But fine concentration and quality across all regions.

2014 A moderate growing season, giving small berries of excellent concentration and early ripening. Rich wines with some overripeness.

2013 Normal growing season, giving small berries with thick skins, leading to powerful, tannic wines. Some wines show overripeness or over-extraction, but overall a fine, structured year.

2012 Consistent growing season and even ripening. Produced elegant Cabernets with supple tannins and moderate alcohols. But some wines lack structure and are too forward.

2011 A small crop with rain at harvest. The best Cabernets were picked before the early October rains. Selection essential.

CAL CABS: THE FACTS

Total plantings for Cabernet Sauvignon across California
Approximately 29,000ha in 2010 compared with 36,740ha in 2016
Breakdown in key regions
Napa 7,217ha (8,400 in 2016)
Sonoma 4,345ha (4,980ha in 2016)
Santa Cruz Mountains 1,333ha (similar in 2016)

Stephen Brook has been a Decanter contributing editor since 1996. He is an author of almost 40 books, including the multi-award winning The Wines of California (Faber & Faber, 1999)
The verdict

The freshness that characterised this vintage on release is still evident eight years on.

Stephen Brook and his panel report on a tasting of enjoyable wines just hitting their stride.

Our panel was familiar with this vintage, thus predisposed to enjoy the wines. And for the most part we did.

It was interesting to reflect on whether the vintage entailed a loss of Californian typicity. Piotr Pietras MS was adamant it did not: ‘The wines have a refreshing character, but they are still fruit-driven and recognisable as Californian Cabernet. What I find admirable is that they have a real consistency of style. They’re fresh and balanced, and thus have good ageing potential. Nor was the oak obtrusive.’ He particularly admired the two wines from Sta Cruz Mountains and, among the Napa wines, those from Oakville.

Alex Hunt MW agreed. ‘Yes, the oak use and the extraction seemed proportionate. Often with a tasting of big reds like Californian Cabernet, the tannins build up on the palate and that can distort one’s appreciation of the wines, especially those at the end of the flight. That wasn’t the case here.

‘In fact that’s because the alcohols were on average a bit lower than usual.’ Indeed, they ranged from 13% to 15%, though the lax US labelling laws mean it’s hard to be certain what the true alcohol level is in any wine. But there were fewer wines than usual with discernible alcohol on the palate.

Hunt was not entirely satisfied by the styles of some of the wines. ‘I find the character of the vintage is under-represented. For me the least satisfactory wines were those that tried to subvert the fresher style that the vintage delivered. There were wines that were both high in alcohol without tasting fully ripe.

‘I suspect that’s because those wineries pushed the ripeness levels excessively, hoping to end up with a big, rich, overly Californian style that wasn’t true to the conditions in 2010. If you’re known for a certain style, then it’s tempting, if not wise, to try to impose it, whatever the vintage. The best wines were made by producers who were comfortable with the hand nature had dealt them.’

There is often said to be a clear divide in Napa, and parts of Sonoma, between wines produced from vineyards on or near the valley floor and those from mountain sites at higher elevations where climatic conditions tend to be different. However, we broadly found quality to be evenly divided between the two locations. It was also agreed that most wines were at that attractive stage when they could be drunk soon or cellared for a few more years – even for another decade. There was little of the blowiness and jamminess that can cause an initially appealing wine to collapse after a few years in bottle.

American wine lovers – and those, Pietras reminded us, from countries more recently captivated by fine wine such as Russia – tend to drink wines such as these too young. They relish the beguiling exuberance of a young Cal Cab, but may miss out on the complex nuances that come with age.

Hunt took up the theme: ‘Napa tends to play safe by making wines that are enjoyable on release, for which there are sound commercial reasons. But with 2010 I applaud those who didn’t opt for immediate accessibility, and were happy to let the wine gradually acquire more complex notes, and to allow the natural balance of the vintage to emerge with time.’

‘It’s clear that 2010 won’t appeal to all Cal Cab lovers, as it is far from stereotypical. But those who enjoy freshness, elegance, and balance will find a great deal to relish, and the best wines will go the distance.

THE JUDGES

**Stephen Brook**

Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996 and has won a clutch of awards for his wine writing. The author of many books, his works include The Wines of California (Faber & Faber 1999), which won three awards. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson’s Wine Companion.

**Alex Hunt MW**

Hunt is purchasing director for Berkman Wine Cellars, which he joined in 2006. He became a Master of Wine in 2010, writing his dissertation on ripeness trends in California and winning the Madame Bollinger Medal for excellence in the tasting exam. He has judged at the Decanter World Wine Awards since 2005.

**Piotr Pietras MS**

Pietras is a wine consultant who was most recently at the Michelin-starred Hide in London. He became a Master Sommelier in 2017, winning the Amorim Scholarship for the highest blind tasting score, and placed second in the Best Sommelier of Europe 2017 and Best Young Sommelier of the World 2017 competitions.
HIGLY RECOMMENDED (Continued) 90-94pts

Cliff Lede, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley 90 SB 92 AH 88 PP 90
£100 Four Corners Wine, Vineyard Cellars
The combination of polished oak and stylish black fruits on the nose is beguiling. Rich and voluptuous, very concentrated and chocolatey. Drink 2020-2029 Alc 15%

Dunn Vineyards, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 90 SB 93 AH 86 PP 91
N/A UK www.dunnvineyards.com
This has toasty blackcurrant aromas of compelling depth. The palate is rich, creamy and full-bodied with a long, spice-driven finish. Drink 2019-2029 Alc 14%

Frank Family Vineyards, Rutherford, Reserve, Napa Valley 90 SB 92 AH 86 PP 92
N/A UK www.frankfamilyvineyards.com
Rich and supple with an appealing silkiness and freshness. Understated and showing charm rather than power, this may lack heft but has balance and elegance. Drink 2020-2028 Alc 14%

Frog’s Leap, Rutherford, Napa Valley 90 SB 90 AH 91 PP 90
POA FMW Wines
A lovely graphite note offsets the inherent richness of aroma here. Throughout the palate there’s an appealing tension between sweet and savoury, plush and grippy. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 14%

Jordan, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 90 SB 91 AH 88 PP 92
POA House of Townend
Concentrated nose of cassis, mulberry and dark raspberry with vanilla and clove notes. Medium-bodied, fresh and stylish, with fine precision and some delicacy. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 13.5%

Mayacamas, Mt Veeder, Napa Valley 90 SB 86 AH 93 PP 90
£89 Roberson
Fragrant nose of blackcurrant, raspberry and sweet spices. The palate is rather lean and delicately vegetal and has a good length. Drink 2021-2028 Alc 13%

Mount Eden Vineyards, Santa Cruz Mountains 90 SB 88 AH 88 PP 94
£55 Roberson
Very elegant nose of blackcurrant, plums and raspberries accompanied by pencil shavings, cigar box and damp earth notes. Drink 2021-2028 Alc 13.5%

Rodney Strong, Alexander Valley, Symmetry, Sonoma County 90 SB 92 AH 86 PP 91
£95 The Wine Treasury
Oaky blackcurrant nose, with a light herbal tone that gives an appetising, edgy quality. Attractive poise and freshness rounded off by a long finish. Drink 2020-2026 Alc 14.5%

Signorello, Padrone, Napa Valley 90 SB 88 AH 92 PP 90
N/A UK www.signorelloestate.com
A gentle currant and mint nose, with a bit of toasty oak in support. There’s a nice graphite edge to the palate which adds an extra dimension, while the structure is grippy but never overbearing. Drink 2020-2029 Alc 14%

Snowden, Reserve, Napa Valley 90 SB 88 AH 92 PP 90
£70 Stannary St Wine Co
An appealing blend of super-ripe fruit aromas along with a fresher, more herbaceous lift. The palate is very dense, yet with firm, tight tannins. Drink 2020-2028 Alc 15%

St Supéry, Elu, Napa Valley 90 SB 91 AH 88 PP 92
£65 Jeroboams
Lean but lifted blackberry and menthol nose. The palate is fresh, limpid and pure, with considerable charm and finesse. Drink 2019-2027 Alc 15%