

FIVE DECADES OF
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

THE JORDAN LIBRARY TRUST

BY ROB DAVIS

FOREWORD



My first taste of a California wine with a cork was, amazingly, Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon. It was my senior year in college, at an '80s-era favorite Dallas restaurant called Gershwin's that my best friend's dad, in town for a quick visit, treated us to. With student budgets that didn't support a foodie restaurant habit, the next best thing Melissa and I could do was *read* about great restaurant fare and so, our excitement for this invitation from her dad wasn't about wine at all, but dessert—specifically, Gershwin's famous "chocolate sack" that was all the rage in the food press at the time. And while that mousse- and whipped cream-filled tower did make an impression, it was the wine—1984 Jordan Cabernet—that blew me away.

Until that moment, the closest I had come to a California wine with a story was that told by Orson Welles on the famous Paul Masson jug wine commercials. So, when Melissa's dad, Mr. Steinmetz, ordered a bottle of Jordan off the Gershwin's list and told us about the Jordans having fulfilled their dream of creating a great wine estate in California, I was spellbound. M.L. Steinmetz, having had business dealings with associates of the winery's co-founder Tom Jordan, had tasted the Jordan 1978 Cabernet some years before, and learned bits of the story. The Jordans' dream to own a wine estate, born of trips to French wine country, had taken root in Sonoma County after a bottle of Beaulieu Vineyards' Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley convinced them of the quality potential of California cabernet. As the first estate vintage of Jordan Cabernet, the 1978, Mr. Steinmetz told me, was one to look out for and try if I ever had the chance. *Fat chance*, I thought at the time.

But indeed, that finally happened a decade later in 1998 when, as the beverage director for Windows on the World in New York City, I poured that wine at a dinner for our private club members. At 20 years of age, it was bewitching, just coming into its prime of drink-

ability if, like me, you love the elegant expression and fragrant detail that only the greatest California cabernets achieve with that much time in the bottle.

To me, that subtle complexity in maturity is indeed what defines the “greatest” of California cabernets, and is the ultimate cabernet drinking experience. Not everyone agrees with me. In fact, many of today’s sought-after California cabernets hew to a highly-extracted, high pH, high alcohol, heavily oaked style that has been in fashion with several top critics, and thus consumers, for many years now. How did we get here?

In a nutshell, this “big” style of California cabernet sauvignon first started to come into fashion in the mid-1990s, when wine reviewing publications like *Wine Spectator* and the *Wine Advocate* gave enthusiastic praise and high scores to warm, abundant vintages for which the grapes received excessive “hang-time” ripening on the vine while wineries were rushing to free up their wineries’ tank space for the bumper crop. Absent an established pecking order like Bordeaux’s château classifications or burgundy’s vineyard rankings, a high 100-point scale score from a prominent critic (as many of these mid-90s “big” California cabernets received) helped consumers who were new to the tasting experience, and thus lacked confidence in their own palates’ ability to identify a “good” wine, choose which California cabernets to buy.

We sommeliers understand the appeal of that full-throttle cabernet style to both critics and consumers. The opulent fruit and oak that they sport lavishes the palate with alluring sweetness, and the wines’ intensity gives the senses an attention-getting immediacy of impact that even inexperienced tasters can “get” right away. With experience, however, we sommeliers also come to learn that those wines’ lack of structural backbone—especially acidity—means that many peak at five to seven years, and rarely offer the flavor and texture fireworks with food that we are looking for in guiding our customers’ wine selections. In other words, if I may adapt a trope from the politics of that era—*it’s the acidity, silly*. Simply put, acidity is critical if a wine is to have genuine balance, longevity

and food affinity. Uniquely among California cabernet producers, Jordan, throughout its entire history, has demonstrated a knowledge of and commitment to those principles.

May I explain why this is so important? First, in tasting any wine on its own, a proper balance of acidity refreshes the palate with each sip, and “lifts” and unites the wine’s other sensory gifts, be they fruit, earth, or oak-imparted characteristics, into a harmonious and expressive whole. In the case of great cabernet, all three should make a statement, highlighting both the growing region and the style sensibilities of the estate and the winemaker. Second, acidity is also critical to the ageability of great wines. Whether German Riesling, French Burgundy or great California Cabernet, the wines capable of decades of improvement in the bottle all have an ample acid backbone—which sommeliers consider a part of the wine’s structure—balancing and preserving its other expressive components as they evolve. Finally, there is food affinity. Simply put, and as I always teach my wine students, acidity is like a “spark plug” for other flavors. Think about it: this fact is why most of our condiments, whether a squeeze of lemon, a dollop of mustard or a splash of Worcestershire, have a zest of acidity that’s meant to launch the flavors of your dish while not overpowering it. Great wine can, and should in the view of sommeliers like me, serve the same purpose.

How fitting then, that Jordan commits 10 percent of each harvest to the library, so that restaurants and wine lovers not positioned to buy and then cellar their wines in perfect storage conditions, will have access to the rewards of such conscientious patience. By staying true to the authentic Jordan Cabernet style, which was crafted from the get-go for restraint, food affinity, balance and textural grace by winemaker Rob Davis with input and vision from the legendary André Tchelistcheff, Jordan is uniquely positioned to showcase for cabernet sauvignon lovers the magic of both approachability and food affinity in youth on the one hand, and bottle age on the other.

What do I mean by approachability? Very simply, it means that the plump fruit, silky tannins and fragrant aromatics of the wine

are already apparent and charming in youth. For me, young Jordan Cabernet is always macerated but lively with plums and berries, sweet pipe tobacco and spice potpourri, and suede tannin that hugs the palate for a moment, and then gently lets go.

This style profile also drives the wine's food affinity. Of course, California cabernet classic matches like lamb, steak and duck are unimpeachable, but for me the charm of Jordan is its versatility beyond these classics. Because my husband John and I geek out on a daily basis with food and wine pairings, I can tell you that fresh pasta with butter and sage; or with toasted nuts, arugula and goat cheese; or fresh basil pesto, are easy and stunning pairings with Jordan Cabernet. Chicken or Cornish hens roasted with sage or thyme stuffed beneath the skin is another seamless match, as are rosemary roasted potatoes, mushroom risotto, funghi pizza, and cedar plank-cooked salmon. Jordan Cabernet is also marvelous with most firm cheeses but especially (to me) Spanish Manchego, French Beaufort and Saint-Nectaire. Jordan's estate chef may want to muzzle me, but I also love it with Cambozola cheese, and popcorn seasoned with truffle salt, or with butter, salt and chopped fresh herbs.

And so we come to the ageability, to which the Jordan library program gives us immediate access, without needing to have thought a decade (or more) ago to cellar some wine for future enjoyment. What's the upside? One attentive taste reveals the answers to that question, and they vary depending on the stage of the wine's age. While each vintage and bottle is of course different, I would like to share my thoughts about what to look for and think about as you behold these wines across their lifespan:

PALATE—Fresh and plump red and black fruits in youth, which with time attenuate into compoted fruits with softened acidity that melts with the tannin and body into a 3-D but silken and savory-sweet mouthful.

NOSE—Fruit scents, autumn leafy earthiness, along with sweet spice notes from barrel aging in youth, evolve into confiture, pot-

pourri, leather and tobacco character and ultimately, as the wine reaches peak, truffle and consommé notes.

FINISH—Jordan's youthful finish is unique among California cabernets: savory, a little smoky and meaty, a little floral sometimes, neither "big" and jammy (at all) nor boring. With time, gently and lovingly aged Jordan Cabernet finishes on a spectrum from pipe tobacco and a reverb of the autumn leafy earthiness, to notes of truffle, wild mushroom and veal demi-glace, and always in my experience, with a draped satin texture.

As a sommelier, my great joy from this type of sensory swoon was in sharing it with my restaurant customers who were newbies to these bottle age characteristics—which of course was most of them. At *Windows on the World*, we were unbelievably lucky to have great cellar depth in the classic collectible wines, including top California cabernet, that we could offer at affordable prices. What fun we had in delivering a singular experience for our guests that few other restaurants could match. With the Jordan library program, today's restaurateurs can do the same, and change the game for their wine-loving patrons, many of whom may never have experienced the complexity crescendo of a properly cellared, great wine.

When I think of this spectrum of sensory expression and excitement from merely a wine, I can presume to imagine the types of scents and flavors that so long ago must have caught the Jordans' attention, and motivated them to create what we behold today. Certainly, we experience the flagship cabernet sauvignon similarly and while that is the cornerstone of the winery, the Jordans quickly and wholeheartedly immersed themselves into pioneering the notion of wine country hospitality that would bring their estate to life for visitors. I am lucky to have heard first-hand from the late and cherished Margrit Mondavi, about how she and co-founder Sally Jordan used to compare notes and ideas on how to create inimitable wine country hospitality experiences for those who made their way from all over the world, to our vinous paradise north of San Francisco. To this day, many decades later, their shared idea of experiential winery hospitality based on a gracious table, has become

the standard for California wine country hospitality, and the envy of and model for wine regions worldwide.

I feel extremely lucky to be a first-hand witness to much of the history and ongoing legacy that is Jordan—the people, their genuine warmth and commitment to the land and their stakeholders, their sustained viticultural and enological precision and vision, and their very important, and very special, Cabernet Sauvignon. I wish you many occasions to share in that legacy through a glass of Jordan Cabernet, enjoyed with those you love.

ANDREA IMMER ROBINSON
Master Sommelier