

WINE News

Napa Valley.



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Greatest Hits from Our Napa Trip

By Bryan Brick

Our annual staff field trip to the Napa Valley is one of the most highly anticipated and, quite honestly, productive trips that we take all year. This year the crew of Muriel Sarik, Gary Norton, Alex Schroeder, Jacques Moreira and myself had the distinct pleasure of meeting with some of the best wineries in the valley today and tasting their amazing wares. Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet-based blends were front and center—I mean, what else do you go to Napa to taste? What we found were a good number of late-release 2013s, a flat-out

superstar vintage at this point, and many 2014s, a vintage that is unduly being looked down upon mostly because of the preceding vintage and not as often judged on its own merits, which are incredibly high—think 2012, but with more balance and focus. Here in these four pages is a quick overview of our recent trip and a handful of the wines and wineries we visited. We hope this will help in picking out some of the top wines currently released from Napa, as we know it can be quite a packed segment of the wine market.

2014 Turnbull Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$42.99) One of the truly stunning wines we tasted on the trip, this dense, ripe and powerfully built Cab has it all, with massive fruit complexity and a modern and generous frame. The boisterous aromas of cut sage, boysenberry and baker's cocoa meld wonderfully with the layered palate, chock-full of star anise, whole blueberry and the polished earth that comes so frequently from Oakville-based fruit. Add a fun finish full of vanilla-laden oak and a brighter turn of red fruit and tobacco, and this is really a steal for the price. **92 JS**



2013 Freemark Abbey Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$39.99) Another massive value—in a land where those are about as common as free tastings! I was blown away at how much this wine has already formed up and eased into its body and power. Dark, black-fruited notes dominate the nose, with pitchy dried meat, wet blacktop and driving concentration. The palate becomes more plush and juicy, with a pleasing core of both red and black currants, sweet oak, tangy olive and laurel notes. Large-scaled and full of umami savor, this is what the 2013 vintage is all about in Napa. **92 RP**



2016 Duckhorn Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc

(\$26.99) If you are looking for something a bit lighter to carry you through the warming days of summer, look no further than this zesty and refreshing wine. Slightly grassy on the nose, this builds around a core of grapefruit and tangerine ripeness and adds a touch of oily, lanolin-like aromas from the high percentage of Sémillon (19%) in the blend—but this is still the same linear and focused Duckhorn Sauvignon Blanc. Add notes of wet rock, passion fruit and lime flesh and this is not only enjoyably complex but is a jolt of bottled sun to the taste buds.



Quality from Coast to Valley: Joseph Phelps

By Alex Schroeder

In an age when we see more and more wineries whose top priorities are profits and capturing market share, it's refreshing to see one whose top priority is simply to make the best wine possible. On a recent buying trip to Napa Valley, the K&L team had the privilege to talk with Will Phelps, grandson of Napa Valley icon Joseph Phelps and current executive manager of the Joseph Phelps estate.

"We're one of the only wineries to scale back production to focus on quality. It's not just about maximizing profits," Phelps said. What a beautiful thing for a wine lover to hear. Indeed, every single one of the Phelps wines is now made entirely from estate-owned fruit, giving them total control of the winemaking process from budbreak to bottling. The commitment to quality is evident in each of their wines.

The **2014 Joseph Phelps "Freestone Vineyards" Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39.99)** was showing great. Phelps explained how they picked from two different plots with different levels of sun exposure to create a complete and complex Pinot profile. Fresh, crunchy, ripe red fruit like raspberries, strawberries and plums with savory elements of spicy earth, forest floor and a touch of salinity make for a beautiful, well-crafted and powerful Sonoma Coast Pinot. **92 W&S**



Next we tried the latest release of one of my favorite Napa wines, **2014 Joseph Phelps Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$64.99)**. This vintage is stellar. It is sourced from the same vines as the ultra-premium Insignia and aged on a unique regimen of half-French, half-American, half-new oak barrels. It has perfectly ripened fruit with expressive flavors of blackberries, plums, violets, black pepper, mocha, licorice and black tea leaves. The tannins are smooth yet powerful and the great acidity ensures that this gem will age beautifully for years to come. **93 JS, 92 RP**



The tasting at Joseph Phelps.

Straight from the Heart: Organically Farmed Wines of Ehlers Estate

By Muriel Sarik

I was already excited to be included in the K&L Napa trip this year, but when I saw Ehlers Estate on our agenda, I was thrilled. This is one of my favorite producers in Napa Valley and I've always wanted to visit this historic winery.

The vineyards were planted and the farmhouse was built in 1886 by Bernard Ehlers, a merchant who made his fortune selling supplies to gold-seeking miners. After his death, his wife continued to run the winery until 1920. For many years a succession of owners grew grapes there until Jean and Sylviane Leducq purchased the first part of the property in 1987. By 2001 they had bought the stone building and environs and named the winery after the original owner. The winery is held in trust by the Leducq Foundation, an international charity organization that funds research in heart disease.

The 42-acre estate surrounds the winery, so they have complete control of the vineyards. They are CCOF certified for organic farming and practice sustainability and biodynamic viticulture.

What impressed me the most is the unique relationship they have with their employees. They keep a full-time staff and crew year-round, and all employees participate in many aspects of the winery in addition to their primary duties. Every employee manages 10 vines of their own and helps with thinning, shoot positioning, pruning and harvest. Everyone takes part in the harvest!

The tasting room is the original 1886 stone barn that Ehlers built. It's like being in several different living spaces at once, with lots of artwork, sofas and dining tables. The colors, patterns and textiles are inviting and comforting—an ideal spot to sip on some good wine.

We started with the **2016 Ehlers Estate Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$26.99)**. This wine is fresh, with a slick texture and a round mouthfeel with edgy acidity. The fruit and minerality complement each other beautifully. A crisp white wine that has great flavors and a long finish—what more can you ask for?

2014 Ehlers Estate St. Helena Merlot (\$49.99) I found this wine to be like a New World Pomerol. There's the spirit of the Old World in the blend, especially when I got the fresh-rolled cigars, herbs and cassis on the nose. I found bold flavors of spicy, dark plums on the palate, yet it has enough acidity and structure to keep it balanced. The fine tannins just made the long finish more enjoyable.

2014 Ehlers Estate "1886" St. Helena Cabernet Sauvignon (\$99.99) With 95% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Cabernet Franc, 2% Merlot and 1% Petit Verdot, this is the flagship red blend. The aromatics of black raspberries, cocoa powder and chai tea are so inviting. This is a powerful wine, but the firm structure is holding it in for now. It has substantial acidity and dry, leathery tannins. This should age well.



You can practically drink in the cool Pacific fog in this photo, provided by Flowers Winery.

From Flowers to Faust at Huneus Vintners

By Gary Norton

On our second-to-last day in Napa, we sat down with our friends from Huneus Vintners and tasted through a chunk of their portfolio over a life-altering lunch featuring Southern-style fried chicken, Dijon potato salad, bitter greens with Meyer lemon vinaigrette and a side of cornbread. Aside from weaving a passive gloat into this article, I intentionally prefaced the fact that we tasted these wines with food, because frankly, we don't often get the opportunity to do so. All too often we sit down and methodically evaluate dozens of wines without anything but a glass of water, a few semi-stale crackers and more wine. I take the position that a substantial amount of qualitative opportunity is lost without the presence of a wine's oldest and most loyal companion: food! Whether it was dumb luck or a stroke of genius, the current line from Flowers (which was purchased by Huneus Vintners back in 2009) pairs phenomenally well with Southern fare and similarly situated summer foods.

We first delved into the **2016 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir Rosé (\$32.99)**, only the second vintage that this wine has been available in retail. This rosé offers a glassy salmon color and a nose filled with red berries, ruby red grapefruit and orange blossoms. On the palate, the wine is mouthwatering and tangy, laced with more red fruits, rose stems, citrus and subtle notes of sea foam on the finish. The rosé cut through the oiliness of the chicken with brilliance, never overpowering the delicateness of the meat.

We moved on to the **2015 Flowers Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$39.99)**, which left me astonished by its length and balance. On the nose, I picked up lemon flesh, white peach, honey, hints of marzipan and roasted clove. The wine has an amazing mouthfeel: it's dense yet silky, and tastes like ripe citrus fruits, apricot, freshly cut pineapple, a little bit of toast and a touch of sea salt on the finish. The wine paired perfectly with the meal as well, again cutting the richness of the chicken while tempering the nasal-passage-clearing sharpness of the Dijon. A decent chunk of this wine comes from



declassified lots from Flowers' Camp Meeting Ridge, a vineyard that sits at almost 1,500 feet of elevation and is only a few miles away from the Pacific Ocean. **91 VN**

Next we moved into the reds, starting with the beautifully layered **2014 Flowers Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39.99)**, a wine with tremendous verve and tenacity. Made in a lovely, open-knit style, both aromatically and on the palate, this wine toes the line between boisterous and restrained, imparting aromas and flavors of dried strawberry, rhubarb, Bing cherry, shaved fennel, baking spices and cherry cola. The palate doubles down on the aforementioned characteristics, along with savory, dark fruits, a splash of fresh violets and ocean air in the mix. I will freely admit that I've always been a fan of Flowers, but this year each and every wine they poured was nothing short of ethereal. **93 WE**

We wrapped up lunch at what has been playfully coined by someone the "Faust House," formerly the St. Clement Winery. We sat at a string of picnic tables overlooking the valley floor and dove straight into one of the best sub-\$50 values on the market right now, a bottle of **2014 Faust Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$44.99)**, a wine that Robert Parker described as "deep, wonderfully fruited, rich and savory." He later stated, after tasting Faust along with Quintessa, that it was "probably the best set of wines" he had tasted from Huneus. It's tough not to believe such a statement after tasting the wines and knowing that virtually all of the fruit comes from either Rutherford, Coombsville, Atlas Peak, Mount Veeder or St. Helena—some of Napa's most prized valley and mountain terroirs. This is a beautifully layered, unctuous wine, and an absolute steal for the money. It's a wine built for a thick-cut steak, pommes frites and sautéed greens of your choice. In a climate where your entry-level Napa Cab is hovering around the \$50 price point, you should take a good look at Faust, as most wines in this category simply lack the acclaim and raw materials to compete with it. **90 RP**





Heitz: A Handshake Deal and a Grand Cru

By Jacques Moreira

When I was invited to go to Napa on one of our staff trips to the wine regions of California, I felt it would be an opportunity to finally shake off, once and for all, my undeserved reputation as being a Eurocentric wine drinker—or more exactly, a diehard Francophile par excellence.

As has been said before: a good wine is a good wine is a good wine. And in Napa, not only do good wines abound, but there are gems well-deserving of their international following. The great wines of Heitz Wine Cellars exemplify such gems. There is a sense of family, tradition, history and continuity as you enter the winery and are made most welcome by everyone. A glimpse of Alice Heitz was like a good omen that this visit would be most remarkable—indeed, it was. Their pursuit of quality is uncompromising and stressed in all levels of winemaking. The grapes come from vineyards that are 95% certified organic, 50% of all energy required is generated by solar panels, and there are years with no release at all for some wines. Consistency of quality reigns supreme here.

Walking through the winery with a glass of **2016 Heitz Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$21.99)** in hand set the tone for this delightful visit. This lively, no-oak Sauvignon has lifted aromatics of peaches and citrus, is very refreshing, and a fine accompaniment to salads, seafood and oysters. The fruit comes from the famed Ink Grade vineyard, with its cool mornings and warm afternoons. Crisp, ripe, consummate aperitif wine.

2015 Heitz Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$24.99) This Chardonnay has a well-balanced oak influence that lends the wine just a hint of woody spices, creaminess, and a touch cinnamon and cloves. The oak is never intrusive, and is in harmony with the elegant minerality and fruit. A style of Chardonnay that's clearly aimed toward elegance and balance.



2007 Heitz “Trailside Vineyard” Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$79.99) Located along the Silverado Trail, this certified organic vineyard, owned by Heitz, has been producing the kind of wine that put Rutherford on the list of the great terroirs of Napa. The reason is simple: The naturally well-drained gravelly soils, perfect for Cabernet Sauvignon, and the masterly hands of David Heitz. The 2007, released in 2012, shows exquisite woody aromatics of lacquer, exotic incense, cherries, cassis and tobacco. Although still young, it is a pleasure to drink now, but for sure we will be talking about this bottle 20 years from now. **92 JS, 92 VN**

2012 Heitz “Martha’s Vineyard” Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$219.99) Martha’s Vineyard covers 34 acres of land near to the Mayacamas foothills just south of Oakville, and is the closest piece of land that Napa—or California, for that matter—has to a “Grand Cru.” I wonder if perhaps one day it will officially have such a designation. The fortuitous handshake deal between the May and Heitz families, with the agreement that Heitz would exclusively buy the May family’s grapes, has put its Cabernet wine on the same footing as the most heralded crus of the Médoc, I dare say. Here we have a multilayered wine, with its classic notes of cassis, along with berries and that famous Martha’s eucalyptus note. The sweet fruit is restrained and discreet—it intermingles perfectly with pleasant green notes and the ripe tannins. A complex wine that, although it would be more than at ease among the Bordeaux greats, is a Napa Cabernet in a class of its own. **96 WE**



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