

Curtain Call - (The Return of the King - Napa Valley's 2012, 2011 and 2010 Vintages)

October 31, 2013

-Robert Parker-

The Recent Four Vintages

Three of the last four vintages in Napa Valley, 2010, 2012 and 2013, look to be sensational years that have produced a bounty of world class wines.

2010 was a very cold year, and the harvest dates were pushed back considerably, but there is no question that many of the wines have turned out to be brilliant. This year could be a replay of the 2005 vintage, where the wines began life slowly, and continued to put on weight until today they are not far off the pace of such great classic years as 2001, 2002 and 2007. All the 2010s are in bottle, and as the following tasting notes suggest, they are gorgeous wines with obvious structure as well as fabulously pure fruit, a certain accessibility in spite of the tannin levels, and sumptuous ripeness. They are neither over the top nor super high in alcohol, as the 2001s, 2002s, 2005s, and 2007s tended to be. This should be a long-lived vintage, but that may be unimportant as it seems to me that immediate gratification is winning the hearts and minds of more and more wine consumers.

2011, certainly the most challenging vintage in Napa Valley since 1998, experienced it all, including huge rainfalls at harvest time in early to mid-October, persistent fog that produced botrytis, especially in many valley floor vineyards, and tiny yields. As the following tasting notes demonstrate, meager yields and hair-pulling irregularity in quality have made for a winemaker's and wine critic's nightmare vintage. Yet those who put in the time and worked extremely hard could not only make fine wine, (and in the case of my profession, find top wines while also recognizing the troubled wines). It is very difficult to generalize about this vintage. I suspect many consumers will write it off because of today's cultural obsession with all things negative. That would be an egregious error. There are some truly great wines that taste like they came from 2012 or 2010 rather than 2011. The wines that came from higher elevation mountain vineyards such as those on Howell Mountain were clearly the most successful AVA of Napa. The hillsides on both sides of the valley seemed to have done well also. Even some of the valley floor vineyards were successful if the producer was brutal in the selection process, both in the vineyard and on the sorting tables at the winery. Rot and tainted grapes had to be culled out if one was going to make a successful wine. One big advantage of 2011 is that the successful wines are very precocious and evolved with soft tannins and low acidity. The best of them are endearing, charming wines even if they will never have the size, power, concentration and density of the finest 2010s and 2012s. Nevertheless, the top wines are by no means wimpy wines, and can be quite exciting, depending on the winery. Qualitatively, the following tasting notes demonstrate that 2011 is the most site specific vintage I have tasted in Napa.

2012, which I had the opportunity to taste at 12 months of age, looks spectacular. This is a vintage for followers of classic, big, fruit-dominated Napa wines. Not a hot year by any means, it was warmer than 2011 or 2010. It was also not a rainy year, and with the exception of a few heat spikes, it was trouble-free. The resulting wines are exactly what we have come to expect from top years in Napa Valley - exuberant and boisterous, filled with oodles of ripe fruit, exceptional purity and fleshy, succulent, mouth filling, crowd-pleasing personalities of considerable character and richness. The low acidity, sweet tannins and high, but not excessive, alcohols have resulted in a great vintage that appears to be a no-brainer when it comes to consumers' interest. Moreover, compared to 2009, 2010 and 2011, 2012 produced a very generous crop size - the largest since 2007.

Of course there is also 2013, which, by the time this report is published, will largely be harvested and sitting in the wine cellars, most of it having been moved from fermenters to barrel, cement eggs or tanks. 2013 is another trouble-free year that experienced nearly idyllic conditions except for a handful of heat spikes, but none of any serious length or consequence. There was an unusual yet short-lived

rain event in mid-September, but other than that, it looks to be a problem-free vintage of relatively large yields and very high quality.

In summary, we have had three vintages of relatively small crops - 2009, 2010 and a minuscule crop in 2011, the most irregular year - followed by two great vintages that are exceptionally abundant.

What is a realistic price?

Napa Valley wine prices, for someone from the East Coast and someone who knows the European price models, evoke mixed emotions. For a high end Chardonnay, the price starts around \$40-\$50 and rises from there. For Bordeaux varietals, whether Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon or a Proprietary Blend, the price for the top wines tends to open around \$50-\$75 a bottle, and then soar to nearly \$1000 a bottle for such wines as Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and whether a wine is realistically priced or over-priced largely depends on wine consumers and how much discretionary income they are willing to devote. Nevertheless, it seems that Napa has a dangerously high-priced, luxury image, largely based in fact, not fiction. However, with the economy beginning to slowly rebound, most wineries seem to be selling their wines at high prices despite the omnipresent whining and hysteria from segments of the blogging/wine writing community. These complaints just don't seem to have much traction with producers. Of course, there are plenty of alternatives to California elsewhere in the world. If you don't want to spend this sort of money for a Napa wine, don't. One thing is clear, Napa Valley remains, like many AVAs in California, a true Shangri-La for viticulture and wine quality. There is a reason why we now have three families associated with three of the greatest wines made in Bordeaux, Mouton-Rothschild, Petrus and most recently, Latour, buying vineyards and making wine in Napa Valley. And I predict this is only the beginning of a 21st century gold rush, with the French, Italians and Asians buying stakes in more and more Napa vineyards. They recognize the consistency and brilliance of vintages from year to year, as Napa harvests are far more uniform and consistent in quality than Bordeaux. Most importantly, world-class quality from Napa Valley is a fact, not a myth. All of the fallacies about Napa wines being too rich, short-lived and over-the-top are, in fact, absurd drivel often created by Euro-centric wine drinkers that have been proven false time and time again. If you are not following what is going on in Napa Valley, you are missing some of the world's most compelling and provocative wines. End of story.

The Tastings

All of the tastings for this extensive report, the largest Napa report that The Wine Advocate has ever published, by me or anyone else, were done in Napa during the last two weeks of August and the first week of September, with follow-up tastings in the office in Monkton, Maryland in September.

This is Part I of a two-part review of the wines of Northern California, with the wines of Sonoma and a handful of other areas scheduled to be published in the December, 2013 issue.

—Robert Parker

<http://www.erobertparker.com/members/winedata/articles/article769.asp>

2009 Dominus Napanook Proprietary Red Wine – 93pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2028

\$48-\$70 (75)

The 2009 Napanook, which Moueix claims to be one of his favorite wines of the last decade, is among the finest they have made. A blend of 87% Cabernet Sauvignon and the rest Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc, it exhibits a dark plum/purple color along with a big, sweet bouquet of licorice,

incense, roasted herbs, loamy soil, kirsch, black currants and underbrush. Medium to full-bodied with silky tannins and a round, opulent mouthfeel, this beauty can be drunk now and over the next 12-15 years.

Looking at the harvest dates for the 2009 through 2012 Napanook and Dominus reveals that none of these were early, very warm years, such as 2013 is promising to be in northern California. For example, in 2009 the harvest took place between October 5 and 12; 2010 between October 4 and 23; 2011 between October 15 and 24; and 2012 between October 9 and 21. Production has remained steady because the estate crop-thins as much as 50% of the harvest to ensure bunch regularity, even ripening and reasonable yields. The second wine, Napanook, tends to come in around 3,000 cases per year, and Dominus around 5,000 cases per year. I was joking with Christian Moueix when I visited the winery and I told him I am one of the geezers old enough to remember his first vintage of 1983, which was tasted at the Rombauer Cellars until he moved to what appears to be an old bank building in downtown St. Helena, after which they constructed a spectacular winery in Yountville that resembles an extension of their historic terroir. Another great vintage, the 2012s have slightly lower alcohols than the 2009s and 2010s, which surprised me given the exuberant nature of this vintage and its boisterous fruit and glycerin. I was shocked to realize that 2013 will mark over thirty vintages for Christian Moueix and Dominus, not to mention my visits each year. How time flies!

*[*RL note: this portion included in all reviews, just posted here once by me*]*

2010 Dominus Napanook Proprietary Red Wine – 92pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2028

\$47-\$60 (75)

The 2010 Napanook (98% Cabernet Sauvignon and 2% Petit Verdot) reveals a pungent, spicy, earthy, slightly herbal nose, and an exuberant mouthfeel with lots of plum, licorice, red and black currants and a hint of sweet cherries. The wine is slightly more in-your-face and aggressive than most Napanooks, but I enjoyed its exuberant style. Drink this beautiful 2010 over the next 12-15 years.

2011 Dominus Napanook Proprietary Red Wine – 87pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2023

The 2011 Napanook, from a challenging vintage, is a blend of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Petit Verdot and 8% Cabernet Franc. It reveals lots of weedy underbrush and herbal characteristics along with pomegranate, sweet cherry and saffras notes. It also possesses an attractive earthy/autumnal vegetative character, but finishes narrowly with light tannin. Consume it during its first 8-10 years of life.

2012 Dominus Napanook Proprietary Red Wine - (91-93)pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2028

The 2012 Napanook displays a classic profile filled with cedarwood, Christmas fruitcake, spice box, saffras and plenty of red and black currants. Some firm tannins are present, but they are well-integrated. This fruit-forward, opulent effort is a terrific second wine. Interestingly, it is a blend of 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot that should drink well for 15+ years.

2009 Dominus Proprietary Red Wine – 97pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2038

\$144-\$244 (175)

The 2009 Dominus saw about 40% new oak compared to the 20% for Napanook. A seamless classic, it offers a symphony of red and black currants, Asian plum sauce, lavender, and underbrush. Sweet Christmas fruitcake characteristics emerge from this magnificent Dominus that finished at 14.5% natural alcohol (slightly higher than usual). The seamless integration of acidity, tannin, wood and alcohol, the brilliant length and overall compelling complexity and richness make it one of the great classics from this historic estate. It should drink well for 20-25 years.

2010 Dominus Proprietary Red Wine – 100pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2038

\$150-\$238 (175)

Composed of 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot, the stunning, full-bodied 2010 Dominus boasts an exceptional perfume of hoisin sauce, licorice, underbrush, forest floor, plums, black currants and jammy cherries intertwined with hints of cedar, baking spices and oak. Full-bodied and voluptuously textured, the 2010 is on a slightly faster evolutionary track than the 2009 (somewhat of an anomaly for these two vintages). This exquisite as well as prodigious 2010 can be drunk young, but it should age effortlessly for 20-25 years. Bravo!

2011 Dominus Proprietary Red Wine – 89pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2025

The 2011 Dominus (86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Petit Verdot and 5% Cabernet Franc) displays a streak of herbaceousness. Tasting the wine one can see the stress this vineyard on the valley floor must have endured with all the fog and botrytis. It is exceptionally well made in this agonizing year for vignerons, exhibiting a dark plum/ruby hue along with notes of sweet Provencal herbs intertwined with red and black currants, loamy soil, underbrush and spice. This medium-bodied 2011 is best consumed over the next 10-12 years.

2012 Dominus Proprietary Red Wine - (98-100) pts

Wine Advocate #209 Oct 2013

Robert Parker

Drink: 2013 - 2033

Another candidate that flirts with perfection is the 2012 Dominus. Composed of 93% Cabernet Sauvignon and the rest Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc that came in at 14.3% natural alcohol, it could turn out to be as great as the 2010, but very different stylistically. The 2012 recalls the 1991 and 1994. Flamboyant aromas of fruitcake, Asian spices, black currants, kirsch and unsmoked cigar tobacco are followed by a wine that's still an infant, but exhibits explosively rich fruit, lots of glycerin, a full-bodied mouthfeel and a pungent, penetrating intensity that goes on and on in the mouth. It has been seamlessly constructed and should age effortlessly for 20+ years.