

# VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

---

*July-August 2018*

*Number Seventy-Six*

---

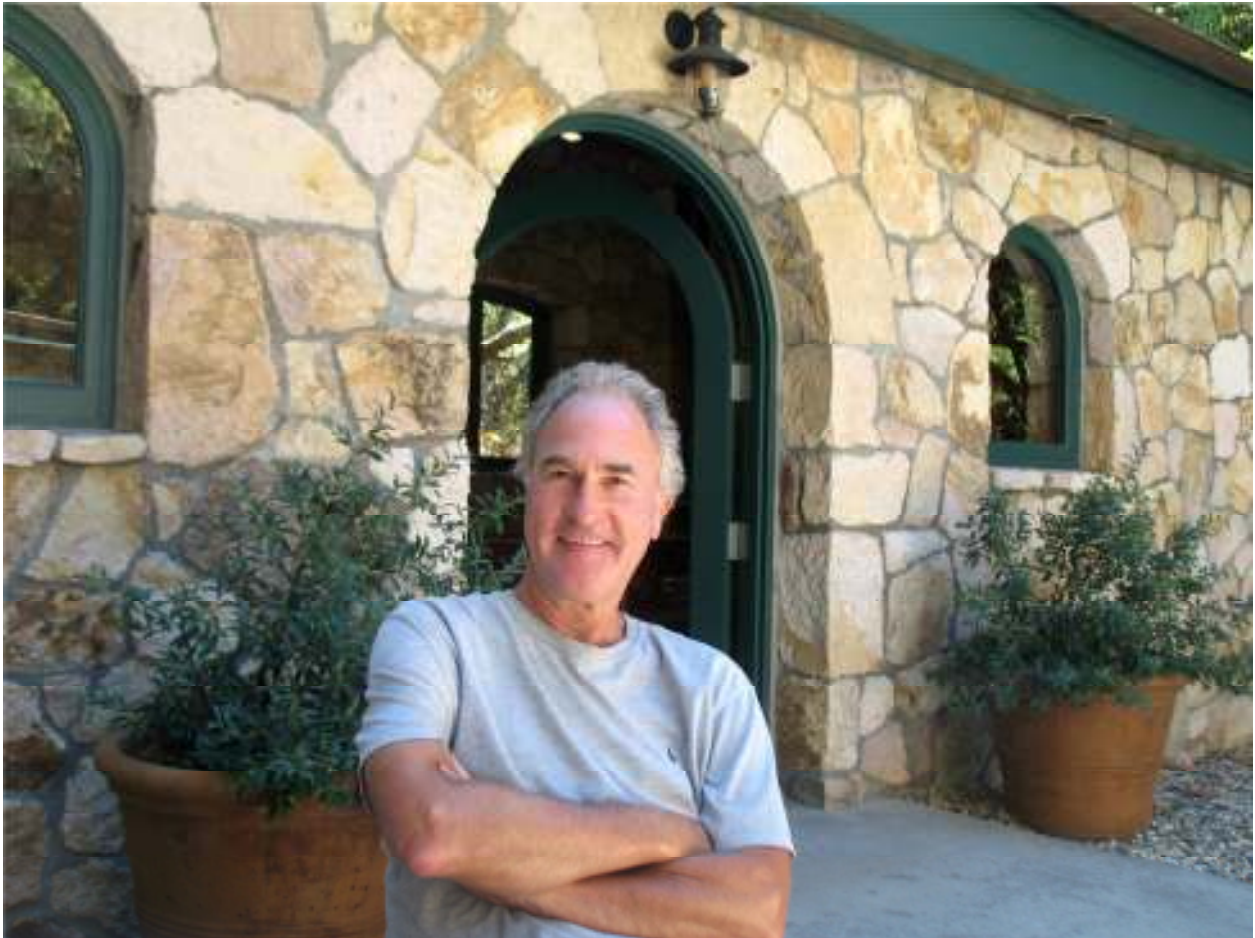
- ❖ *Ric Forman's Iconic Winemaking Career- Charting the Course For California Greatness From Stony Hill to Sterling, Newton and Forman Vineyards.*  
(pages 1-30)
- ❖ *A Shortened Spring Trip to Champagne and Other Recently-Tasted Champagne and Sparkling Wines.*  
(pages 31-65)
- ❖ *Unsung Greatness In the Heart of Pommard- Louis Boillot's les Croix Noires.*  
(pages 66-73)
- ❖ *The Charm and Surprising Elegance of One Old School Cornas- A Marcel Juge Vertical Report.*  
(pages 74-84)
- ❖ *The Bi-Annual Old School and Neo-Classical American Wine Report.*  
(pages 85-136)
- ❖ *The 2017 Vintage From Vouvray's Magical Domaine Huët.*  
(pages 137-140)

## *Coming Attractions*

- ❖ *A Vertical Report On Klaus-Peter Keller's Grand Cru Hubacker.*
- ❖ *The Brilliant and Often Overlooked Grand Crus of Latricières-Chambertin and Chapelle-Chambertin.*
- ❖ *The Annual Loire Valley Report- Early Looks at 2017 and a Full Range of 2016s.*
- ❖ *The Inner Beauty and Light of Aged German Spätlesen.*
- ❖ *Checking In On the 1982 Bordeaux Vintage Today- True Profundity Or Simply Very Good, Ripe Wines?*
- ❖ *The Maestro of Avize- Anselme Selosse, Château Pichon-Lalande, The Hill of Corton, New Releases From the Rhône Valley, Champagne Bruno Paillard, Château Ausone, Spanish Wines Part Two, Nicole Chanrion, Château Montrose, Special Club Champagne, Aged Muscadet, Clape Cornas, Mature Loire Valley Reds, The 2001 Bordeaux Vintage, Recently-Tasted Alsace Wines, Chambertin and Clos de Bèze, Bodegas Riojanas, Domaine François Bertheau, 2017 Beaujolais, Château l'Evangile, Ridge Vineyards, More Champagne and 2017 Burgundies.*

View From the Cellar is published bi-monthly by John Gilman, who is solely responsible for its content. Electronic subscriptions are available for \$120 per year (\$220 for two years), available at [www.viewfromthecellar.com](http://www.viewfromthecellar.com). Inquiries may also be emailed to [john@viewfromthecellar.com](mailto:john@viewfromthecellar.com). Copyright 2018 by John B. Gilman, all rights reserved. Content may be utilized by members of the wine trade and/or media as long as either View From the Cellar or John Gilman are fully credited. Please do not share.

**RIC FORMAN- A TRUE CALIFORNIAN PIONEER  
AND ONE OF THE STATE'S GREATEST WINEMAKERS**



Ric Forman is one of the seminal figures in the history of California wine and he has left a legacy of truly brilliant wines that started right with his very first vintage at Sterling Vineyards all the way back in 1969. He began his career as a twenty-four year-old, straight out of UC-Davis with a freshly-minted Master's Degree, literally opening the doors at Sterling Vineyards and hit the ground running, realizing immediate success. After a decade at Sterling, he went on to spend four years at Newton Vineyards and then started his own, eponymous winery, Forman Vineyards, where he has been turning out superb wines since the inaugural vintage of cabernet here of 1983. From the outset, his inspiration had been the Old World wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy, which he used as his stylistic paradigms and synthesized those sensibilities to the very different conditions of the Napa Valley. In addition to his manning the helm at some of Napa's most important wineries, he has also had some important stops along the way as a consultant at other properties (not to mention as an intern back in his university days), and has had a rich and varied career that spans the entire golden age of California wine. Ric Forman is a true baby-boomer, having been born in Oakland, California in May of 1944. A science whizz from a young age, he was inspired to start studying the fledgling field of oenology when a Chemistry professor at San José State asked him how he thought he might like to apply his aptitude in chemistry and

suggested a possible career path making wine. The idea resonated with Ric and he ended up transferring to UC-Davis the next year, which was just to start to become well-known for their Oenology Department. Ric's graduating class was very small- only eight or nine students- but, amongst them was Justin Meyer who would go on to eventually form Silver Oak Winery. Even before completing his studies with a Master's Degree, Ric found himself in the heart of the blossoming Napa Valley fine wine universe, as he worked the summer and harvest with Fred McCrea at Stony Hill Wine Vineyards in 1967 and the following year at the fledgling Robert Mondavi Winery in 1968 (which had only opened its doors in the fall of 1966) and he was even offered a position at the winery by Robert Mondavi after graduation. However, Ric was looking for an opportunity where he could make his mark early in his career, and he assumed that working at the Robert Mondavi Winery would not offer a lot of potential for top level advancement, as Robert had two sons around the same age as Ric. His intuition was spot on, as Michael and Tim Mondavi, ended up making their careers at the winery and there would not have been a lot of growth potential for Ric Forman at the summit of the winery's hierarchy. Consequently, Ric turned down the Mondavi family's offer and eventually, as he was finishing up his graduate studies at UC-Davis, teamed up with English businessman Peter Newton at Sterling Vineyards.

Before Ric had completed his Master's Degree, it was his summer position in 1967 at Stony Hill Vineyards, working alongside of and learning from Fred McCrea that probably got him started on his path to his own, classically-inclined winemaking style that has come to define his career. Ric's favorite professor at UC-Davis had been Maynard Amerine, one of the most respected figures in these early years in the blossoming world of Napa Valley fine wine. Fred McCrea came to Professor Amerine in the spring of 1967 looking for an intern for the growing season and Ric Forman was recommended by his professor, and spent the summer here at Stony Hill. Ric had already earned his BS and was going back to school to start his Master's program that fall, but worked up through the harvest of '67 at Stony Hill. This was an important first stop for Ric, as he recalls that "I had plenty of the science background already about making wine, but this was the first time I was assisting with fermentations in a professional setting." One has to imagine that the very traditional and relatively non-interventionist style that Fred McCrea had been using here at Stony Hill since the early 1950s was a far cry from the more technologically-inclined style of winemaking taught at UC-Davis.

But, it was really the following summer of 1968, which found Ric working at the Robert Mondavi Winery, where he got the proper training to prepare him to eventually take over the direction of Sterling when he graduated. Mondavi was a much higher volume winery than Stony Hill- even though this was only the family's third harvest here, as Robert Mondavi had grand ambitions for his new project from the outset. Ric recalls that there was a lot more push for the newest innovations on the more technological side of the winemaking scale, with Robert Mondavi very interested in whatever was cutting edge at the time in terms of winemaking equipment, barrels, tanks and cellar techniques. The Mondavi winery was already a much bigger operation than Stony Hill by its third vintage of 1968, with plenty of large fermentation tanks, lots of new barrels and large batches of each varietal being produced and Ric notes "that if I had not spent that summer at Robert Mondavi- where I really learned what was necessary to run a larger commercial winery- I would not have been ready to take over at Sterling after I graduated." Ric worked through the harvest and fermentations of '68 at the Mondavi winery and

then finished up his last bit of schooling and prepared for his first professional step outside of the university sphere. He completed his Master's Degree in December of 1968 and was then fully ready to accept Peter Newton's offer to take the winemaking position at his new winery, Sterling Vineyards. However, there was not yet any winery constructed at Sterling!

Peter Newton was an Englishman and his vinous points of reference had always been the great wine-producing regions of France. He had run a very successful paper business in his first career and was quite wealthy by the time he started Sterling Vineyards and hired Ric Forman. Peter had re-settled in northern California in the mid-1960s, realizing the enormous potential that the fledgling California fine wine business held in Napa Valley. In this regard, he was really quite the visionary. One has to remember that at this time, there were not a whole lot of wineries focusing on fine wines operating in the Napa Valley, as pioneers such as Joe Heitz, Lee Stewart at Souverain, Fred McCrea at Stony Hill, the Mondavis, Louis Martini, Jack Davies at Schramsberg and the teams at Inglenook and Beaulieu Vineyards were really the only principal fine wine players in Napa in the mid-1960s. Peter Newton, founded the business of Sterling Vineyards in Napa Valley in 1964 and started buying land and planting vineyards, but his most important and fortuitous decision would end up being the hiring of Ric Forman fresh out of the university to be his winemaker at the estate at the outset of 1969. Peter had planted his first few vineyards starting in the mid-1960s- primarily chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and merlot- but as the winery for Sterling Vineyards was not yet even under construction at the time, Ric spent much of his first year designing the winery, deciding what equipment was to be ordered and also touring several of the great wine-producing regions of Europe and making plans for how they would produce their own wines at Sterling in the future. His cohort at this time was often Dick Graff, who was running Chalone Vineyards and had approached Peter Newton about financing a company for selling winemaking equipment and barrels in Napa Valley. As Ric recalled, "Peter saw that funding Dick's venture would be good for us at Sterling as well, as I could spend a lot of time with Dick researching tanks, presses and *tonneliers* in Europe and this would benefit us as well when we got going with Sterling in 1969." Consequently, one of the first assignments for Ric once he had joined Sterling was a six week research trip to Bordeaux and Burgundy with Dick Graff, looking at cellar equipment, barrels and winemaking techniques, not to mention tasting in depth in the greatest addresses in the two regions.

This first trip to France laid the inspirational foundation for Ric's traditional style of winemaking, which has been his calling card ever since, as he was immediately impressed by the winemaking culture that he found in all of the great cellars of Bordeaux and Burgundy that he discovered. He remembers that he came away from this first European trip thinking "this is the way that I want to make wine." This approach dovetailed perfectly with what Peter Newton wanted at Sterling, for as Ric recalls, "Peter had said to me that we are Europeans and we would like you to make European-styled wines here in Napa Valley, if it is possible." Some of the techniques that he picked up on while visiting Bordeaux and Burgundy were things such as barrel-fermenting chardonnay, which was *de rigueur* in Burgundy, but which was not being done anywhere in California at the time. He also gained an appreciation of blending at the top estates in Bordeaux, so that eventually, his cabernets would benefit from supporting percentages of cabernet franc, merlot and eventually, petit verdot as well. Ric Forman made his first vintage of Sterling Vineyards in 1969, but the winery construction was still not even close to finished and when the chardonnay grapes were ready to be picked, he still had nowhere to make the wine.

They had created a crush pad and some tanks at the base of the hillside that the winery was being built on up above the vineyards in the valley, but it was not suitable for the chardonnay that Ric was intending to produce, as he had decided to barrel-ferment his first vintage of chardonnay. So he needed somewhere to do this, as there was not yet any winery to use to handle barrel-fermentations and extended barrel aging at Sterling.

Luckily, Jack Davies of Schramsberg Vineyards invited Ric to make his '69 Sterling chardonnay over in the cellars at Schramsberg, as there was extra space down in the lower tunnel there. As the harvest was approaching, he had a container of French oak casks already to unload, but nowhere to put them, and as he wanted to absolutely barrel ferment his first Sterling chardonnay, so the offer from Jack Davies was a godsend. He recalls "that we had to cement the floor of the lower tunnel at Schramsberg, unpack the new barrels and lay hoses across the courtyard from the upper cellar to the lower tunnel to run the juice into the barrels after the pressing." As the Sterling chardonnay grapes were coming from a warmer vineyard planted in Calistoga, Ric decided on an important aspect of his chardonnay philosophy right from the start, which was that he would not let the wine go through malolactic fermentation, as he did not feel the grapes had sufficient acidity to retain their cut and mineral expression if they went through malo. This was in variance with what his friend Dick Graff was doing at Chalone (albeit with grapes from a far different microclimate), but Ric strongly felt the importance of not allowing the malo and he has always blocked malolactic in his chardonnays since that first vintage of 1969. And the earliest vintages of Sterling barrel-fermented chardonnays proved to be a completely new world for this varietal in California and Ric's barrel-fermented style would eventually be adopted by virtually every other ambitious producer of chardonnay in the state.

The first red wines from Sterling were also from the 1969 vintage, and luckily, Ric and his team had been able to construct a rudimentary winemaking facility at the base of the mountain in time to ferment and age the red wines here. As he remembers, "we had built what was essentially a warehouse at the base of the hillside, which had room for fermentation tanks, oak vats and barrels for aging the wines, as well as a small bottling line, with a crush pad outside where we would do the pressing." This facility would eventually become Sterling's case storage area when the winery at the top of the mountaintop was finished in 1972. The 1969 cabernet sauvignon was aged for two years prior to bottling and release, with Ric using what was the standard operating procedure for this varietal in Napa at the time, with the wine spending its first year in large, upright, three thousand liter oak vats and then being racked into small Bordeaux barrels for its second year of *elevage*. As he recalls, "this is how cabernet was made in Napa in the late 1960s- it was the technique used over at Beaulieu Vineyards and by Joe Heitz and this is how everyone was making cabernet at the time, but I had not forgotten how they were doing things over at Trotanoy or Lafite during my visits there, and from the start, I really wanted to have the chance to do the entire *elevage* of the cabernet in small barrels." But, he noted, "we just did not have the space in those earliest years at Sterling to do this." It was not until the formal winery at the top of the mountainside, with its gondola bringing visitors up to the estate, was completed in 1972 that Ric would have the sufficient cellar space he needed to start following the *Bordelais* style of *elevage* in small casks for his cabernet sauvignon.

The 1969s from Sterling were all quite well-received when they were released, with one of the surprising varietals offered by the winery being a Merlot bottling, which virtually no one

else in Napa Valley was producing in 1969. Ric recalls that the 1969 cabernet and merlot were both good wines, but he remembers that he missed a golden opportunity to produce a great cabernet in the 1970 vintage- a stellar growing season- not through any missteps on his part, but because of some large oak tanks which he had ordered for Sterling from an outfit in France and which were installed just ahead of the harvest of 1970. It turned out that the wood for the tanks had not been properly seasoned and as a result, a smoky, creosote element leached out of the wood when they were filled with the wines. The winery was eventually compensated by the French company and new tanks were built and delivered, but that smoky element remained part and parcel of the 1970 Sterling cabernet sauvignon for a very, very long time and Ric has never liked the wine for that reason. That said, it is interesting to note that the bottle of the 1970 Sterling cabernet that I drank last year did not seem to have this smoky, creosote characteristic anymore, so perhaps it is finally working its way out of the wine's aromatic and flavor profile. In these early years, Ric handled his merlot and cabernet sauvignon virtually the same in the cellars, with the wines spending two years aging prior to bottling, with one in the large tanks and the second in two hundred and twenty-five liter casks. The first few vintages at Sterling were raised almost entirely in new oak, as they were a brand new winery and needed to buy casks to outfit the cellars and there were no buying options for used barrels back in this era. After the issue with the large tanks in 1970, the following two vintages were quite difficult in Napa for red wines, as 1971 was a very cool year of marginal ripeness and it rained heavily ahead of the cabernet harvest in 1972, so it was not until 1973 that Ric Forman finally had another vintage where he could really show what he could do with cabernet sauvignon.

As I mentioned above, at this time, he was using a technique for the *elevage* of the cabernet sauvignons that was also used at places like Beaulieu Vineyards, Heitz Wine Cellars and Mayacamas, of aging the cabernets for the first year in these very large oak vats, prior to racking them into two hundred and twenty-five liter French barrels for their second year of aging. Happily the problematic tanks of 1970 had been replaced by properly-cured oak vats in time for the 1971 vintage, so by 1973 all the pieces were in place in the new cellars to craft cabernet sauvignon along the lines of Ric's vision of what could be done with this varietal and he had a great quality vintage with which to work. So it was in the '73 vintage that he started the Reserve cabernet program at Sterling, which would go on to produce some of the greatest cabernet sauvignon bottlings in Napa Valley over the next five years. As Ric remembers, "I had always wanted to do cabernet sauvignon this way, with the *elevage* entirely in small casks as I had seen it done in Bordeaux, but we did not really have room previously to do so." But, in 1973, with the grapes of such excellent quality, he decided to select out a few small lots of the best wines, do the blend from the outset (he was already using small percentages of merlot and cabernet franc in his cabernet sauvignon bottling at this time- again anticipating a trend) and let the wines go through malolactic fermentation and their entire two year *elevage* in small barrels. As he recalls, "with the regular cabernet, we would age each varietal on its own for the first year in the large oak vats, and then settle on our final blend during the racking, before the wines went into the small barrels for the second year of aging." With the first Reserve bottling in 1973, "I did the blend right away for these selected lots and the wine spent its entire *elevage* in small barrels, with the racking done from cask to cask as I had learned how to do it from Christian Moueix at Château Trotanoy when I was visiting there in 1969." The Reserve Cabernet became a staple of the winery from that vintage forward, with the very fine 1973 being followed by the 1974 Sterling Reserve Cabernet, which remains one of the most highly-touted red wines in the



history of California cabernet sauvignon and probably still the most famous wine Ric Forman has ever crafted.



With the first vintage at Sterling Vineyards produced in 1969, it became clear from the outset that Ric Forman was an extremely talented winemaker and Sterling was very quickly a rising star in the blossoming constellation of Napa wineries. From the start, the Sterling wines were very classically-styled wines and were the precursors of what we think of today as emblematic of the greatness of the wines from this era in Napa Valley, with deep, concentrated and beautifully balanced personalities and plenty of structure for aging. The red wines were built for the long haul (even the merlot), with firm tannic structures seamlessly woven into the ripe fruit of Napa Valley. While the winery produced quite a wide range of wines over the early years, the Sterling wines that really made an initial splash were the winery's barrel-fermented chardonnays and eventually their classically built, deep and very pure bottlings of cabernet sauvignon. Their Merlot was also very popular with customers, as there were so few examples of this varietal produced in California in the early 1970s. As Peter Newton had planted vineyards a few years prior to building his winery and starting his own label in 1969, there were some other varietals made at Sterling in the early days as well, including Chenin Blanc and French Columbard, as well as Zinfandel. When I asked Ric how he approached zinfandel in these early vintages at Sterling, he noted "that we had it in the vineyards, so we needed to make it, but it was never really a big part of what we did, so I would just ferment it like I did the cabernet and the

merlot and age it the same, though I would bottle it earlier than the cabernet and it would see no new wood.” Today, though it is completely obscure, the one or two examples I have tasted of the Sterling zinfandels from this era are really good wines! The Chenin Blanc was also bottled occasionally under the Sterling label, but the French Columbard was usually just sold off in bulk. There was even a bit of pinot noir (planted in the Three Palms Vineyard) that Ric produced during the first few vintages at Sterling as well, though Three Palms is a very warm vineyard and it was far from an ideal place for pinot noir and this section of the vineyard was eventually replanted to a better-matched grape variety.

As mentioned above, the Sterling winery construction was quite a bit behind the harvest in the opening vintage of 1969, with the more rudimentary winemaking facility down at the base of the hillside being used (only ready in time to receive the later-picked reds in 1969) while the construction work on the proper winery went on apace up on top of the mountain. The official mountaintop winery space would not be used to make the Sterling wines until the 1971 vintage. Ric Forman, with some assistance from Dick Graff, designed the work space for the Sterling winery, set up on the mountain and employing gravity on its hillside seat to move wine around in the cellars, with the crush pad and press on the top level of the hill, fermentation tanks one floor down and barrel rooms yet another level below this. It was a very well-designed and forward thinking construction and allowed Ric to do a great deal of the work himself when it came to cellar tasks, and he generally only had a skeletal crew of three other people working with him in the cellars at Sterling during his entire decade at the helm here. As he laughs, “it was pretty good that I designed the winery space so efficiently, as I essentially had three high school guys helping me out in the cellars for most of the time I was there!” Given that the winery production grew quite briskly, starting at about ten thousand cases in the 1969 and 1970 vintages, and eventually topping out at seventy-five thousand cases of wine by the end of the Forman era at Sterling Vineyards in 1978, one can sense just how efficiently the winery facilities were constructed at Sterling and also how prodigious was Ric’s work ethic at this time.

The popularity of Sterling Vineyards, from its inaugural vintage of 1969 up through the decade of the 1970s grew nicely, but the profitability of the project was not what Peter Newton needed and he eventually sold out the winery to Coca-Cola in 1976. As Ric recalls of that time, “I think Peter enjoyed the idea of owning a winery and getting the project rolling in the first place, but the business of actually selling the wines we had produced was not really to his liking, and as production grew, more and more of his job became to try and move the cases through the market.” Ric was instrumental in helping Newton sell the winery to Coca-Cola in 1976, and he remembers “how nervous I was going down to Atlanta and addressing the Board of Directors and the shareholders of Coke- I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine at the time- and standing up at the podium and telling these two hundred people in the room why buying Sterling was a good investment for them.” Part of the deal was that Ric Forman would stay on as the winemaker at Sterling, which he did for the next two years. He recalls that “my time at Sterling under Coca-Cola was really quite good, as I continued to do things exactly as I had been doing them from the start and we continued to make good wines.” However, unbeknownst to the board at Coca-Cola, Peter Newton had already started formulating plans for another, smaller winery in Napa (which would eventually become Newton Vineyards) and was already thinking of adding Ric as a partner to the new venture when the time was ripe.



So, after a year or two, he approached Ric with the idea of his joining him again in this new project, seducing him away from Sterling with an offer of making him a partner in the new venture and the chance to once again design a new, smaller winery and buy and plant vineyards to be the foundation of their next business chapter together. After having been a successful employee at Sterling for a decade, the opportunity to be a partner in a new winery was quite attractive to Ric and he eventually gave notice at Sterling in November of 1978, after having overseen the fermentations of the 1978s here. He recalls, “the folks at Coca-Cola were not particularly happy with my wishing to leave, but as I helped them find my replacements and they had some of the cellar team staying on as well, they were pretty well set up to continue on.” Ric had already scouted out some potential vineyard land with Newton up in the hills above St. Helena at the end of 1977 and in the spring of 1978, Peter Newton had purchased seven hundred and fifty acres of rugged hillside land that would eventually become home to the new Newton winery and their first fifty acres of vineyards. Once Ric had taken care of the 1978 harvest and the fermentation of the wines at Sterling, he parted ways with Coca-Cola and threw himself right into this new partnership that would eventually become Newton Vineyards.

The first facet of the new project was the laying out and planting of vineyards on suitable tracts of the land that Peter Newton had bought in the spring of 1978. The property was all hillside and most had been overgrown with forest, but parts of it had once been vineyard land prior to prohibition. All of the first half of 1979 was dedicated to clearing, and planting vineyards on parts of these hillsides, all of which were terraced prior to vines going into the ground and which was a tremendously arduous project. In addition, the new winery had to be designed and built as well, as the plan was to produce a first harvest at Newton Vineyards in 1979 from purchased grapes. It was a very stressful and extremely busy year for Ric and his family life suffered accordingly. On top of this, there were already some strains in the new partnership with Peter Newton as well, as the project was originally to be called Forman Vineyards, but somehow this promise from Newton did not come to pass when the first vintage was ready for bottling and labeling and the winery became known officially as Newton Vineyards (Newton had a fifty-one percent stake and Forman a forty-nine percent stake in the venture). Ric made the 1979s here all from purchased fruit, as the vineyards he had painstakingly cleared and planted would not be ready for production for a few more years. He continued to use purchased grapes for the 1980s and 1981s here (with a problem with volatile acidity in his 1980 cabernet keeping that wine from being marketed under the Newton label), but the rest of the wines he made here under his brief partnership at Newton Vineyards were all excellent in quality and very warmly received in the marketplace. As he recalls, the wines at Newton were made very much in the same manner as he had done at Sterling, with the exception that the new crusher at Newton allowed him to retain the stems if he so chose and he started to press his chardonnay without destemming the fruit.

After the harvest of 1982, Ric informed Peter Newton that he wanted to part ways and be bought out of their partnership, but as the two sides could not formally agree to the valuation, it ended up in court. At this time, Jess Jackson of Kendall-Jackson fame, approached Ric about doing some consulting for his then fledgling winery up in Mendocino, and as Jackson was an attorney by trade, he handled the settlement with Newton for Ric in exchange for winemaking consulting at Kendall-Jackson. As Ric recalls, “I got a call from Jess, who said that he had heard that I might need a bit of assistance with my pending legal issues with Peter Newton” and Jackson noted “that I am a seasoned litigator who might be able to help out with this.” Jackson

continued, “I do not know if you have heard that I have a winery now up in Lake County and I have a problem with some of my chardonnay, and as you are an experienced winemaker, we might be able to help each other out.” This turned out to be a very propitious arrangement for both. The problem at Kendall-Jackson at this time was with several tanks of chardonnay that had stuck in fermentation and could not be started up again, so they contained quite a bit more residual sugar than was desired. Ric recalls “that I was able to get a couple of tanks to start again, but the others were done fermenting and were just going to stay sweet.” So he suggested to Jess Jackson that he go out and buy some bulk chardonnay in the interim, which they did from Tepusquet Vineyard (and which was of such good quality that Jackson eventually would buy the property!) and they settled on a blend of Tepusquet juice and a percentage of the sweeter chardonnay from the stuck fermentations. The resulting wine had quite a bit more residual sugar than chardonnay customarily had at this time, but as Ric Forman so sagely predicted to Jess Jackson, the style could prove to be popular with newer wine drinkers and the raging success that Kendall-Jackson chardonnay would become in the following years was launched out of necessity, due to the recommendation of Ric Forman.

At the time that Ric had been devoted to clearing and planting vineyard land for Newton Vineyards back in the first quarter of 1979, he had also done the same for a parcel of his own land up in the hills above St. Helena that he had bought previously and which would eventually become the first vineyard for his eponymous winery, Forman Vineyards. He had originally purchased these twenty-five acres in the hills- which had once been planted to vineyards before Prohibition- while still at Sterling back in 1977. He recalls that he got a call from a broker and went up to look at the property “and we found some old vineyard stakes there, planted in a five by five (foot) pattern, which was the closest planting density I had ever seen in Napa.” He continues, “the closest planting I had ever seen before that was eight by eight, as anything tighter would not have had enough water to grow the vines properly, so I guessed that we had something very special here under the overgrowth.” He ended up borrowing a backhoe from Sterling and finding out that this property had a very deep gravel bed under the topsoil and he knew that this was going to prove to be a very good site for a vineyard and he ended up buying the property while still working full-time at Sterling. It would prove to be a very providential move when he eventually had his falling out with Peter Newton a few years later.

While he had the bulldozer crew working on the Newton Vineyards clearing, he engaged them to do the same for some of his new land as well and he somehow managed to find the time to plant his own hillside vineyards during that epic work year of 1979. Once he had a settlement hammered out with Peter Newton at the end of 1982, he was finally free to start his own winery project and Forman Vineyards was launched in the 1983 vintage and due to a bit of good luck he already had a young cabernet vineyard planted to serve as the foundation for his new venture. As he recalled, the negotiations with Peter Newton had not gone particularly well, with both sides eventually having tough, hard-knuckled attorneys going at it, but eventually a settlement was reached “and once Peter paid me for my share of the partnership, we never spoke again.” This was now the end of 1982 and Ric knew he was going to have a crop from his new vineyard with which to launch his own winery with the 1983 vintage, as the first year’s fruit from this vineyard had been sold to Newton Vineyards in 1982 and had gone into their cabernet bottling. But, this was still going to be a pretty small venture at the outset, as he ended up only producing about six hundred cases of cabernet sauvignon from Forman Vineyards in the 1983 vintage, and no

chardonnay at all, as he was not entirely content with how the wine had turned out and he ended up selling it off to Charles Shaw Winery, where he was consulting at the time.



*Cabernet franc vines nearing picking ripeness in Ric Forman's vineyards on the base of Howell Mountain.*

While getting Forman Vineyards up and running, Ric also did some additional consulting work beyond Charles Shaw, as his new vineyard and winery were not immediately cash flow positive. He was the consultant that the Woltner family approached and hired when they sold their beloved Château La Mission Haut-Brion to the Dillon family and decided to decamp Bordeaux for Napa Valley and develop their new, chardonnay-only winery of Château Woltner up on Howell Mountain. While he was working on the Woltners' project, he also did a lot of consulting work for Charles Shaw Winery during this same time, putting in a white wine program at the previously red wine-only property, with both of these projects helping to get Forman Vineyards established in the 1983 vintage. The first vintage of cabernet that would become Forman Vineyards was crushed and aged for the first year in barrel in the cellars at Charles Shaw, as Ric did not yet have a winery built on his property up above St. Helena. However, with the help of a sympathetic local banker, he was already at work on the construction of his winery, with intrepid contractors dynamiting out a section of hard bedrock where the winery needed to be placed on the hill. The winery itself was sufficiently completed by the following harvest so that he could bring over his barrels of the 1983 cabernet sauvignon from Charles Shaw to finish their *elevage* at the new facility and he was able to make his 1984 chardonnay and 1984 cabernet sauvignon here as well. The project was settling in nicely into the hills up above St. Helena at the base of Howell Mountain, but there was not a ton of wine in

those early days, as Ric recalls that “I only made three hundred cases of chardonnay in 1984 and another six hundred cases of cabernet, with some of the cabernet fruit sold off, as I did not yet have enough room to produce more wine.”

The production figures for the wines under the Forman Vineyards label stayed about the same for the next few years, until Ric was able to get more cellaring space, by digging a tunnel back into the hillside behind the winery, which was done in 1988. Today, tunnels are the most popular type of cellar at a great many of the top wineries in Napa, but back in 1988, Ric’s was only the third to be dug here and it was quite an engineering feat to get it done in two months’ time, so that he would have the additional storage space available in time for the 1988 harvest. The tunnel is quite the marvel, being a football field long at one hundred yards, fully ten stories below the hillside at its deepest end, and creating a perfect wine storage environment of fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit and ninety percent humidity. Once Ric had his expanded cellar space with the tunnel, he was able to increase production of his wines accordingly to meet market demand, as the Forman Vineyards wines were very popular from the opening vintage of 1983 (which I fortuitously happened to sell back in my younger wine merchant days) and by the early 1990s, production at Forman Vineyards had settled into about two thousand cases a year of chardonnay and sixteen hundred cases a year of cabernet sauvignon. Things were finally starting to fall back into place for Ric, with his new home built on top of the winery (in the classic Burgundian style of home and winery in one place) and his new Forman Vineyards label finding a very appreciative audience in the market.

Of course, like so many in and around Napa Valley, the middle 1990s brought a new and expensive challenge to Ric, as phylloxera started to devastate the vineyards in the region and those at Forman Vineyards were no exception. Ric recalls that “when I first went to look at my property back in 1977, there were still some old vines up there growing wild, and they were on St. Georges rootstock and if I had given it more thought back then, I might have planted my vineyard on the same rootstock and things would have been far different.” St. Georges is resistant to phylloxera and was once the preferred rootstock for viticulture in Napa and Sonoma, but that was early in the twentieth century and by the late 1970s, the recommended and most widely available rootstock was AxR, with which almost all of Napa and Sonoma had been planted and which is not resistant to phylloxera. So the Forman vineyard had been planted on AxR and by the mid-1990s, it was engulfed in phylloxera and had to be replanted. This entailed several years of the Forman wines being produced from purchased grapes, but by the early 2000s, the newly replanted vineyards were back on line and things were back on track. However, the last decade or so has seen a bit of a reversal in the production figures from the winery, as Ric has cut back how much chardonnay he makes each year, so that these days, he is down to five or six hundred cases each vintage, while the cabernet sauvignon production has now settled in at about twenty-two hundred cases a year of the first label, Forman Vineyards, as well as about four hundred cases a year under his second label, Grande Roche.

Over the years, the style of Ric Forman’s wines have been remarkably consistent from stop to stop, with the more classically-inspired style he championed during his decade at Sterling Vineyards (which was by a wide, wide margin, the golden years for this Napa winery, whose star has lost some luster since the 1978 vintage and is now no longer considered the super high quality estate it was during Ric’s time at the helm), staying quite constant through his four

vintages at Newton and his subsequent career at Forman Vineyards. However, when I asked Ric about how his style had remained quite consistent through all the changes that ran through Napa during his career, he pointed out that “there are some things that I did early on in my career that I would not do today, such as adjusting the acidity in the wines in most vintages, as we were obsessed with pH in those early days and could not help trying to get the numbers just right.” But, he continues, “on the flip side, probably those very earliest vintages from Sterling would not still be drinking as well as they do today if I had not adjusted the acidities a bit, but I think my colleagues and I let it get a bit out of hand in the vintages of mid-to-late 1980s and I am glad that most of us have turned away from acidulating the wines on a routine basis.” But, he noted that his professor at UC-Davis, Maynard Amerine, had cautioned all of his students to not drink their own wines, but focus on other wines for their personal consumption, so that they could retain a fresh eye when it came to the wines that they were making. “For that reason” continues Ric, “I have never really enjoyed drinking the wines I have made over the years, as I cannot really drink them without constantly analyzing them and finding their faults and mostly I drink wines from other producers and other countries and only taste my own wines once in a while.” He notes that his favorite white wine is Chablis, and this is the chardonnay-based wine that graces his table most often, though if one were to ask him, he would probably note that he drinks far more red wine than white.

One of the things that is clear from following Ric Forman’s fine career from his first vintage at Sterling Vineyards in 1969 down to the present day, is that his cabernet bottlings have gotten a bit higher in alcohol as the years have gone by, with his earliest vintage coming in at twelve percent alcohol, the late-’70s bottlings at Sterling were in the thirteen percent range, but from the mid-1990s onwards, it is not atypical to find the Forman Vineyards cabernets routinely around 14.5 percent octane these days. I asked Ric about why the change and he noted that “it was probably in the early 1990s that Robert Parker really became important for the California wine business, and he was a big proponent of these higher alcohol cabernets and gave them bigger scores.” He continues, “at that time, I was still making one of the leaner and more structured styles of cabernet and I was curious to taste some of these other wines that Parker gave high scores to, so I went out and started tasting them and was surprised to find that I quite liked their style.” So, he started picking a bit later and getting a bit more ripeness into his cabernets. As he recalled, “in those earliest vintages of cabernet at Sterling, I probably picked the grapes a bit too low in Brix, following the Bordeaux model I had learned during my visits, and in reality, I would have liked the wines to be a bit more accessible early on than they were, as they were pretty structured and tannic cabernets in those first few vintages.” Consequently, the move to a riper style of Napa cabernet sauvignon was already something that Ric had been thinking about when the stylistic shift came in the 1990s and the Forman Vineyard cabernets started to move up a bit in octane at this time. Consequently, starting around the 1990 vintage, he started picking the grapes for his cabernet bottling around 24-24.5 Brix and today, this is more in the range of 25-27 Brix for his red grapes.

However, he is quick to point out that balance is still key in his wines and he is not a fan of the “bigger is better” school of California cabernet that so many of his colleagues today like to produce. In pursuit of balance and complexity, Ric has been a big proponent of blending other Bordeaux varietals into his cabernet sauvignon bottling since very early on in his career (again anticipating, or initiating a trend that did not pick up steam in Napa until really the 1980s), so his

cabernet sauvignon bottlings have included both cabernet franc and merlot since the earliest vintages at Sterling. In the late 1980s, he started to get intrigued with the possibility of petit verdot as part of the blend as well for his cabernet sauvignon, and today it is a small, but key ingredient in the *cépages* each year for his cabernet bottling. When I asked him how he came to be a champion of petit verdot in Napa, he commented “that it was probably the contrarian in me, as back in the late 1980s it was not recommended by UC-Davis for planting in Napa and I thought, why not, so I put a few rows of vines in just to see what would happen.” He continues, “so I got some bud-wood from Davis to initially plant the petit verdot and as it turned out to really add a nice component to the cabernet, that it became a very important element in the blend each year and others started coming around and taking cuttings from my vineyard and I think today that most of the petit verdot that is planted in Napa came from cuttings from our vineyard.” The first vintage of Forman Vineyards Cabernet to include the petit verdot was 1990. Ric commented that he felt that the significant percentage of his cabernet sauvignon blend that is composed of cabernet franc, merlot and petit verdot may be one of the reasons his reds do not tend to seem hot on the palate at the alcohol levels over fourteen percent that they carry these days, and this has definitely been my experience as well with his cabernets since they started to creep up in octane a bit from the mid to late 1990s, as it is a very rare vintage that does not hide its alcohol level very well.

As part of the preparation for this article, Ric Forman sent me out a vertical of several of the most recent vintages of his cabernet sauvignon, so I could get a feel for how the wines are evolving at these higher alcohol levels and I was very, very content to find that they were aging quite gracefully. As Ric told me when we discussed the octane levels of his cabernets in the last fifteen or twenty vintages, he chuckled and said “that I do not think you have to worry- you will not find the wines hot on the palate- as I tend to pick these days just as the grapes are starting to wrinkle a little bit, but nowhere near as late as some of my colleagues.” He noted that he has come full circle a bit in this respect, as the “first couple of vintages of cabernet at Sterling I was a bit disappointed in, as they did not taste like young Bordeaux- not quite enough pyrazines as what one would find in that era from the Médoc- but, now, I work pretty hard to keep that element out of the wines, without sacrificing their freshness and structure.” And he does an admirable job in this respect, as I tasted several of his more recent vintages of cabernet sauvignon alongside some of the other top estates in the US (whose wines are reported on in the feature on American wines further on in this issue) and Ric’s cabernets were quite noteworthy for their inherent complexity and simply impeccable balances, despite alcohol levels often in the 14.5 percent range. As he had promised during our conversation, they were not hot on the palate. The complexity of course can be attributed to his early career decision to incorporate merlot and cabernet franc in the blend with the cabernet sauvignon, and later, petit verdot, and he notes that their presence in the blend may also help to alleviate the impression of alcohol in the finished wines, noting that “for some reason, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot never seem to show the alcohol as much as cabernet sauvignon does on its own.”

As I mentioned above, as Ric was starting out his career in 1969 at the brand new Sterling winery, everything had to be ordered in for the winemaking facilities and aging of the wines prior to the harvest, and this of course included new barrels. Consequently, the first few vintages of Ric’s red wines were raised entirely in new oak casks (though remember, at this time, the first year of the wine’s *elevage* was done in large oak tanks, and only the second year in the



cellars was done in the smaller barrels), and throughout his career, he has continued to use quite a high percentage of new oak for his cabernet sauvignon. Today, that percentage is around eighty percent new oak for the cabernet. However, his cabernet sauvignons have never seemed particularly oaky in personality to my palate; this is certainly true of the old Sterling cabernets I have in my cellar, and from the first vintage of 1983 at Forman Vineyards, the wine was noteworthy for its relatively discreet framing of new oak. This characteristic was probably picked up by Ric during his first trip to Bordeaux in early 1969 and has stayed with him ever since, so that he is quite the master of using relatively high percentages of new oak for his red wines and keeping the new oak profile subdued below the other constituent components of the wine. Part of this was his attention to detail when visiting Bordeaux on that first trip, as he noticed that the *Bordelais* had barrels with far thinner staves than what was then being shipped by French *tonneliers* to California in that era, as he realized that the Bordeaux casks had far less impact on the wine they aged. He immediately started asking for the thinner-staved casks used in Bordeaux, and which he has used since that very first vintage. In contrast, his chardonnays are decidedly less new oaky today than was the case in those first few, very highly-acclaimed vintages of chardonnay from Sterling, and typically the Forman Vineyards bottling of chardonnay today only sees ten percent new oak during its *elevage*.



I should have mentioned earlier on, when we were discussing Ric's early years at Sterling Vineyards, that in addition to handling all of the cellar responsibilities, not to mention designing

the original winemaking facilities and ordering all the equipment for the cellars, Ric was also responsible for overseeing the viticultural side of the equation at Sterling and it was not until his last few years that he had a Vineyard Manager at the winery to assist with this. So he became responsible for deciding when parcels of grapes would be picked, which varieties would eventually be grubbed up and replanted (such as the ill-conceived plot of pinot noir vines at Three Palms Vineyard), planting new vineyards and he would oversee all the steps during the growing season out in the Sterling vineyards in addition to all of his cellar responsibilities with his skeletal crew at the winery. This experience prepared him well when the time came to start the short Newton Vineyards chapter of his story, which entailed an awful lot of viticultural decision making in clearing and laying out the vineyards for the Newton project, as well as his own new vineyard at the base of Howell Mountain. As he has commented in the past, the one aspect of the vineyard clearing at Newton that he would do differently if he had a chance to do it again would be foregoing the creation of terraces in the vineyards, as erosion issues on hillsides are better when the rows of vines just run up and down the incline. His first vineyard at the base of Howell Mountain that would become the foundation for Forman Vineyards was also planted on terraces, but this was corrected when the vineyard had to be redone in the mid-1990s because of phylloxera and now the rows of vines just run up and down the slope.

As I mentioned above, the chardonnay side of the ledger at Forman Vineyards has ebbed and flowed over the years, with production topping out in the mid-1990s at the two thousand case mark, but slowly being dialed back as cabernet sauvignon production rose in the last fifteen years. Part of this reason is that the vineyard where he has always sourced his chardonnay from since the 1984 vintage, the Adamson Vineyard in its initial phase, has gone through a bit of ownership variation over the years. In 1986, a group, which included Reg Oliver from El Molino Vineyards and Ric, came in as partners to purchase the sixty acre vineyard, so he owned a percentage of the vineyard for a couple of decades, and it was during this time that his case production of chardonnay reached its peak. The name of the vineyard was changed to Rutherford Star Vineyard under the partnership. When a new generation of partners came along, one family decided that they would like to own the entire vineyard and Ric, like other junior partners in the venture, were bought out. So, he continued to buy his fruit from the vineyard for the chardonnay bottling, but could tailor his purchase to what the market was looking for, and over the last twenty years, Forman Vineyards has become better known for its exceptional cabernet sauvignon and the chardonnay was not quite as highly sought after. So, it made sense to dedicate more cellar space and energy to the production of cabernet sauvignon and eventually Ric settled into producing the current level of five to six hundred cases of chardonnay per year.

It is pretty interesting to see that the Forman Vineyards Chardonnay has managed to always come from the same vineyard since its inaugural release from the 1984 vintage, and that Ric had also worked with this fruit during the four vintages of chardonnay he produced at Newton Vineyards, so he has a remarkable track record of longevity with the Rutherford Star Vineyard fruit for this varietal bottling. He has produced the wine with the same techniques since the Newton days as well, as the new press he started using after leaving Sterling allowed for him to make his chardonnay with whole clusters and he has done so since that first Newton vintage of 1979. When I asked Ric what the difference was with crushing whole clusters for the chardonnay, he replied that “we got much cleaner juice with the whole clusters- right from the beginning- so the juice would fall brilliantly and leave only a small amount of sediment in the

tanks when the juice was racked into the barrels for fermentation.” He continues, “of course you get a bit of skin tannin this way as well, but I like to think this helps give our chardonnays a bit of their character, and of course, they have proven to age pretty well with these techniques.” He noted during our conversation that he had just drunk a bottle of his 1997 chardonnay a few nights before our conversation “and the wine was still drinking very nicely.” But, this does not come as a surprise to long-time fans of Forman Vineyards, as from the initial release of 1984, the word in the market was always that Ric’s chardonnays would be one of the few in California at this time that would age long and gracefully and this has indeed proven to be the case.

Today, the vineyard that Ric started to plant for his own winery all the way back in 1979 now comprises ten acres, all dedicated to red grapes. The planting of the vineyard pretty much mirrors the *cépages* of Ric’s cabernet bottling, with about seventy-five percent cabernet sauvignon, fifteen percent cabernet franc, eight percent merlot and a couple of percent of that important building block, petit verdot. In addition, stemming from a vineyard management business he partnered in with David Abreu back in the late 1980s- when David was first starting his career in Napa, they co-own another ten acre vineyard that is just up the hillside from the first vineyard and is planted to similar percentages of these red grapes. It is interesting, given that Ric had such success with merlot bottled on its own from the very first vintage at Sterling Vineyards, creating a market that previously did not exist for this varietal, that he does not make a merlot anymore at Forman Vineyards. As he remembers, “I also made some really good merlots at Newton after I left Sterling, and probably produced a merlot bottling here (at Forman Vineyards) for the first six or seven vintages as well, but the California merlot market really changed during that time and it did not seem to make sense anymore to keep making a serious example once the market shifted and started expecting something far different from a bottle of merlot.” So now all of the merlot in the vineyards here is consigned to be an important component in the cabernet sauvignon blend, rather than bottled on its own.

All in all, it has been a pretty extraordinary ride for Ric Forman, as he is now preparing for his fifty-second harvest in Napa. His has been a rich and varied career, with loads of early success during his days at Sterling Vineyards and then some tough times when the Newton partnership turned sour on him in the early 1980s. However, since he has been on his own running Forman Vineyards since that first release from the 1983 vintage, things have progressed nicely and he has settled into a very comfortable routine in the foothills of Howell Mountain, looking down at St. Helena in the valley below. His wines remain as beautiful as they were at the outset of his career and winemaking has never gotten stale for him, as the years have rolled by and many of his contemporaries in the early years of Napa’s climb to international prominence have retired or been bought out from their original wineries. Throughout his long career, his classically-inspired style has continued to provide the foundation for his wines, and his bottlings remain some of the finest produced in all of California for long-term aging. Only Kalin Cellars’ chardonnays last longer than Ric’s bottlings, and his cabernets continue to be reference point wines for complexity and balance, cruising along beautifully for decade after decade in the cellar. The fact that his very earliest vintages of cabernet sauvignon (and merlot and zinfandel as well, for that matter!) from his days at Sterling remain beautiful wines to drink, with his famous Reserve bottlings of cabernet from 1973, 1974, 1975 and 1976 still legends from that golden age in Napa, serve as beautiful testimony to just how good his winemaking style has been from the very outset. Once pegged as the “Boy Wonder Winemaker” of Napa Valley in his early twenties,

Ric is now seventy-three years old and still making great wines up in the hills above the valley, having seen more than a thing or two along the way, but never losing focus on the ultimate goal, of making great, long-lived wine.

### **Forman Vineyards Chardonnay**

*Ric Forman's chardonnay bottlings from his own winery have always been noteworthy for their bright, zesty and well-balanced style. This has been true since the very first vintage produced and marketed here from the 1984 vintage down to today. The non-malo style gives them a cut and early snap that is quite different from a great many California chardonnay bottlings today, and their low percentage of new oak in recent times allows for the underlying soil signature of the Rutherford Star Vineyard fruit to shine through. I have heard elsewhere that the Forman chardonnay is quite "Chablis-like" in personality, but I have never found this to be the case and reason that those who ascribe Chablisienne qualities to the wine just do not have much experience with Chablis. Rather, the wine shows a very nice slice of its own soil composition in the finished wine, due as much to its low percentage of new oak and non-malo personality and it is one of the most elegant, light on its feet examples of Napa chardonnay to be found these days. In my experience, it is still very much built to age and does not really hit its stride until five or six years out from the vintage and can age very gracefully for decades beyond this point in its evolution. Along with Kalin Cellars, Mount Eden Vineyards and Stony Hill Vineyards, Ric Forman's chardonnay is probably the most ageworthy example of this varietal produced in all of California.*

### **2016 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

The 2016 vintage of chardonnay from Ric Forman is a bit more forward in profile in its relative youth than several recent years. The complex bouquet is already quite wide open, offering up scents of apple, almond, white peach, salty soil tones and a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp and full-bodied, but a bit more linear than is customary with this bottling, with sound framing acids, good length and complexity, but an overall slightly deeper-pitched aromatic and flavor package than is customary with this cuvée at two years of age. Maybe it is just my bottle, but this seems pretty easy-going out of the blocks. 2018-2023+? **88.**

### **2013 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

The 2013 chardonnay from Ric Forman is really starting to hit its stride at age five, with the secondary layers starting to emerge and the structure beautifully opening up. The complex bouquet wafts from the glass in a fine blend of apple, pear, a lovely base of minerality, a touch of nutmeg, gentle floral notes redolent of honeysuckle, orange zest and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full and beautifully balanced, with still a fine girdle of acidity, a lovely core, excellent focus and grip and a long, vibrant finish. At age five, this is hitting on all cylinders, but still has many, many years to go and could be even better another half dozen years down the road. Fine juice. 2018-2030+. **92.**

### **2012 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

Ric Forman has been making superb chardonnay for decades and decades, but his 2012 looks likely to be one of his very finest of his career. The wine was raised in ten percent new wood, has its malolactic blocked and tips the scales at a very civilized 13.5 percent alcohol. The bouquet is deep, pure and complex, jumping from the glass in a mélange of apple, tangerine, pear, a complex base of soil, musky floral overtones and a deft touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and supremely elegant in personality, with lovely mid-palate

depth, crisp acids and excellent length and grip on the focused and very refined finish. Great juice that is drinking superbly out of the blocks, but should also age quite well. 2014-2025+. **94.**

**2009 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

I had not tasted a bottle of the 2009 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay since the autumn of 2010 and was very happy to have a chance to see how this wine was evolving in the bottle. The bouquet at age nine is beautifully complex, offering up scents of apple, pear, a touch of beeswax, candied lemon peel, salty soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, bright and full-bodied, with lovely secondary flavor elements, still bouncy acids, a good core and fine length and grip on the complex and well-balanced finish. Good juice. 2018-2030. **92.**



**2008 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

Ric Forman's 2008 vintage of chardonnay is pretty ripe, as the wine comes in at 13.9 percent octane, but is aging very well and offers up a pure and complex nose today of pear, a touch of fresh pineapple, just a whisper of papaya, musky floral tones, a nice base of soil and a gentle framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, ripe and very well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, lovely focus and grip and a long, complex and still quite zesty finish. At age ten, this wine is now in its apogee of peak maturity, but still has plenty of potential life ahead of it and there is absolutely no rush to be drinking it up now. It is a touch higher in

octane than I would find optimal, but has not lost any freshness or bounce as a result of its generous level of ripeness. 2018-2035. **92.**

#### **1984 Forman Vineyards Chardonnay (Napa)**

This was Ric Forman's very first vintage of chardonnay released under his Forman Vineyards label, as he had not been entirely content with the quality of the 1983 version (which hailed from a very challenging growing season) and decided to sell the wine off in bulk. This particular bottle of the 1984 I purchased at auction about three years ago, when I was in the planning stage for this article, and the wine arrived with about five centimeters of ullage, but still good color for its age. The bottle turned out to still be quite fine, offering up a deep and tertiary bouquet of wizened apples and peaches, walnut, orange peel, a touch of butterscotch, salty soil tones and a bit of musky floral nuances in the upper register. On the palate the wine is still crisp, full and focused, with good mid-palate depth, lovely complexity and a long, balanced and still quite vibrant finish. This is old, but not over the hill and still has plenty of verve and flavor interest. Impressive for age thirty-four! 2018-2028. **88.**

#### **Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon**

*In the preparation of this article, I found it quite interesting that I had a preference for Ric Forman's more recent vintages of cabernet sauvignon than I did for the lower octane bottlings from the 1980s that I sampled. Intuitively, going into the tastings, I thought for sure the wines in the 12.5 to 13.2 percent alcohol range (which is where the four vintages from the 1980s all landed) would be in my sweet spot and I would end up preferring their style to those from the last fifteen years, all of which are in the 14.5 percent range. However, while the wines from the 1980s were quite good, I found more depth, complexity and dimension in the riper wines from the early twenty-first century! There is a notable hole in my coverage of Ric's cabernet bottlings at Forman Vineyards, as I did not have any vintages from the decade of the 1990s in my cellar to compare and contrast with those that came before and after, so I do not know how these vintages would have shown in comparison. But, clearly, of the many vintages that I did taste, clearly the wines from 2003 forwards represent a step up in complexity and mid-palate depth, without notably sacrificing any of the elegance that is the calling card of Ric Forman's bottlings of cabernet sauvignon. I still had a preference for the vintages of cabernet in relatively recent times that hailed from the cooler vintages, so those at 14.3 or 14.4 percent alcohol seemed to deliver better purity and vibrancy than those at 14.7 or 14.8 percent, but all in all, I was struck by how much more complex the higher octane wines seemed than those from the lower octane days back in the 1980s here. And though one or two vintages at the higher levels did show a whisper of heat on the backend, most were perfectly balanced at their ripeness levels and really noteworthy for just how complex and elegant they were in profile and clearly echoed Ric's early and long-standing inspiration found in the old school wines of the great classics of Bordeaux.*

#### **2015 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2015 vintage of cabernet sauvignon from Ric Forman, which was his forty-ninth harvest, is a beautifully pure and refined wine on the nose, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, a fine base of gravelly soil, tobacco leaf, just a hint of eucalyptus and a very discreet framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and focused, with a lovely core, excellent soil signature, ripe, suave tannins and a long, vibrant and very discreetly warm finish. This is listed at 14.9 percent octane, but seems a full point lower than that on both the nose and palate. It is already quite complex out of the blocks,



but is still a puppy and deserves at least a decade in the cellar to allow it to properly blossom. Impressive juice! 2028-2080+. **93+**.

**2014 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2014 cabernet from Ric Forman is another absolutely superb wine that seems lower in octane than its stated level of 14.8 percent on the label. The bouquet is precise and beautifully vibrant, offering up a complex blend of sweet cassis, dark berries, Cuban cigar wrapper, a nice discreet touch of eucalyptus, dark soil tones, coffee bean and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and light on its feet, with superb soil signature, a lovely core of fruit, fine focus and grip, ripe, moderately chewy tannins and a long, nascently complex and very classy finish. This is a stunning young bottle of cabernet, with the inherent complexity and transparency one used to find routinely in young Médoc. 2026-2080. **94.**

**2013 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2013 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon is a marvelous wine that is starting to show the first vestiges of its secondary aromatic components in its complex bouquet of cassis, black cherries, cigar smoke, a hint of currant leaf, gravelly soil tones, a hint of allspice and a deft framing of cedary oak. With air a bit of eucalyptus starts to emerge as well in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with a good core, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish- particularly for its 14.9 percent octane! I am stunned that this wine is nearly fifteen percent alcohol, as there are absolutely no signs of *sur maturité* on either the precise nose or palate, and the finish is fairly cool, despite its ripeness level. 2023-2065+. **92.**

**2012 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon from Ric Forman is again a ripe, but very pure and complex wine that is impeccably balanced and carries its 14.5 percent octane very well indeed. The bouquet is focused and complex, offering up a fine constellation of sweet cassis, a touch of black cherry, Cuban cigars, a fine base of soil of almost Médoc-like soil, just a whisper of eucalyptus and a discreet framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very refined in profile, with a lovely core, good transparency, moderate, seamless tannins and excellent length and grip on the ripe and classy finish. There is a precision here on both the nose and palate that belies its octane, and though perhaps one can sense the ripeness here a bit on the backend, it is decidedly not hot. A lovely bottle that still needs some time in the cellar to soften up more fully. 2022-2065+. **93.**

**2011 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

I last tasted the 2011 Forman cabernet sauvignon back in the late spring of 2014 and liked the wine very much. It is typically ripe for this bottling these days, coming in at 14.5 percent, as Ric decided to wait out the rains that came in early September and pick on the back half of the harvest season. It would have been interesting to see what he might have made if he picked the grapes early, as they were probably in that twenty-two or twenty-three Brix range at that point, which was where he picked his cabernet in his first few vintages at Sterling all those years ago. In any case, at age seven, the wine is evolving very gracefully and now offers up a beautifully precise bouquet of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a hint of currant leaf, discreet new wood and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and quite light on its feet, with a lovely core, fine complexity and soil signature, moderate, suave tannins and a long, focused and very well-balanced finish. I have liked this vintage since day one and the wine is evolving very well indeed. It still needs a few more years in the cellar to really start to drink well, but it will not be a long wait! 2020-2060+. **94.**

### **2010 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The roller coaster growing season of 2010 produced one of the ripest cabernets of Ric Forman's career, as the wine is fully 14.9 percent alcohol. Readers may recall that the summer was relatively cool and hang time was long for the bunches, until a protracted heat wave at the end of August sent temperatures well above one hundred degrees for many days and sugar levels soaring. The wine has turned out pretty well for this difficult *fin de saison*, but the wine clearly lacks the precision and complexity that one finds in the two subsequent vintages of 2011 and 2012. The nose offers up scents of black raspberries, cassis, cigar ash, a hint of the chipotle pepper to come, a bit of soil and a modest amount of new oak. On the palate the wine is big, full and plenty ripe, with a fine core, well-integrated, but slightly grainy tannins and a bit of uncharacteristic backend heat on the long and youthful finish. This is okay, big-boned cabernet, but in the context of Ric Forman's stellar track record, this is not a vintage I would reach for any time soon. The slight edge to the texture of the tannins and the riper style make me guess that this will be a fairly short-lived wine by Ric's very high standards and there will be a limited window where the wine really is at its peak. 2024-2045+? **88.**

### **2009 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2009 vintage of cabernet at Forman Vineyards is also plenty ripe, coming in at 14.8 percent octane, but is far more precise and aromatically complex than the 2010 version. Ric managed to bring in his red grapes ahead of the harvest-time rains of 2009, which is the reason this wine has turned out so well. This has the aromatic sophistication one has come to expect from Ric Forman's cabernets, as it wafts from the glass in a refined blend of sweet black currants, black cherries, cigar wrapper, a nice touch of eucalyptus, gravelly soil tones, smoke and cedar. The nose is just starting to show some lovely secondary development as it closes in on its ninth birthday. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and very well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, good backend soil drive, ripe, chewy tannins and excellent length and grip on the still fairly youthful finish. This needs a fair bit more bottle age to soften up fully, but is progressing very nicely in bottle. 2026-2065. **92.**

### **2008 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2008 vintage of cabernet from Ric is really starting to come into its aromatic sweet spot at age ten, with the bouquet offering up excellent complexity in its refined blend of sweet cassis, cigar smoke, gravelly soil tones, a bit of tobacco leaf, a very discreet touch of eucalyptus and a very suave and understated framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is very pure, full-bodied and riper than the sophisticated bouquet suggests, with a lovely core of fruit, fine soil signature, melting tannins and a long, complex and fairly powerful finish for a Forman cabernet. I like the balance of this wine very much, but it is a pretty ripe wine- well over 14.5 percent octane- but it is developing lovely secondary layers of complexity and carries its alcohol pretty well. That said, my score is probably two or three points to the conservative side for those who do not mind this octane level. 2018-2045+. **91.**

### **2007 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2007 cabernet from Forman Vineyards is not quite as aromatically developed as the very expressive 2008 version, but may be holding even greater potential for down the road. The nose is still in the midst of blossoming, but shows outstanding purity in its black fruity blend of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar wrapper, cool eucalyptus, dark soil tones, a bit of espresso and a whisper of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very refined in profile, with a fine core of fruit, ripe, measured tannins, fine focus and grip and a long, ripe and well-balanced finish. This is no shrinking violet in terms of octane, but I like the backend

balance here better than in the 2008 cabernet, as there is absolutely no signs of heat and the wine is beautifully complex and classy. 2021-2060. **93+**.

**2006 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2006 cabernet from Ric Forman is aging beautifully and is starting to really drink well at a dozen years out from the vintage. The complex nose is really quite a synthesis of Bordeaux sensibilities and Howell Mountain fruit, offering up scents of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, a bit of tobacco leaf, a fine undertow of gravelly soil elements, a very discreet base of cedary oak and again, just a touch of subtle eucalyptus in the upper register. On the palate the wine is complex, full-bodied, focused and classy, with fine mid-palate depth, melting tannins and excellent focus and grip on the long, open and very classy finish. Again, this is plenty ripe, but does not show it on the nose at all and is beautifully balanced on the palate. Impressive juice. 2018-2050. **93**.

**2005 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2005 Forman cabernet sauvignon is beautifully complex on the nose and very, very *Bordelais* in aromatic signature, offering up a refined blend of cassis, sweet dark berries, cigar ash, gravelly soil tones, a bit of lead pencil, tobacco leaf and a deft framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is ripe, full-bodied and complex, with fine focus and grip, still a bit of tannin and very good length and grip on the quite well-balanced finish. This is listed at 14.8 percent octane, but carries it remarkably well, with only a faint whisper of heat on the backend. At thirteen years of age, this is almost ready for primetime drinking, but a few more years should let a bit more of the tannin fall away and the wine should be even a bit tastier. Impressive juice. 2020-2050. **93**.

**2004 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2004 vintage of cabernet sauvignon from Ric Forman is a touch riper than the stunning 2003 version, coming in at 14.6 percent octane, but the wine is beautifully balanced and starting to really get complex and drink well at age fourteen. The bouquet today is fabulously complex, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, an exotic touch of spiced meats, eucalyptus, dark soil tones, gentle smokiness and a very discreet touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very transparent in profile, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip, melting tannins, good acids and fine length and grip on the very complex finish. Perhaps there is just a whisper of heat on the backend, but hardly something that detracts from the beautiful complexity of this vintage of Forman cabernet! 2018-2055. **94**.

**2003 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 2003 vintage for Ric Forman is one of the cooler in his fine lineup of cabernet sauvignon from the first decade of this century, as the wine comes in at 14.4 percent alcohol. The bouquet is deep, pure and very precise, wafting from the glass in a superb blend of dark berries, black currant, Cuban cigar wrapper, gravelly soil, a nice touch of eucalyptus, lead pencil and a gentle topnote of currant leaf. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, very complex and flawlessly balanced, with lovely mid-palate depth, excellent focus and grip and a long, complex, softly tannic and very refined finish. The slightly lower octane here translates to laser-like focus and lovely vibrancy on the backend. This is my favorite vintage of Ric Forman's cabernet in the last fifteen years! Great juice. 2018-2050. **95**.



### **1988 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 1988 Forman cabernet sauvignon is a pretty strong example of this difficult vintage. The bouquet is deep and fine, offering up a blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, still a touch of fresh herbs, dark soil, tobacco leaf and a discreet base of smoky new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely soil-driven in personality, with a good core, still a bit of backend tannin and a long, tangy and complex finish. There is a touch of rigidity to the wine on the palate that is probably a reflection of the tough growing season of '88, but overall, this is a very successful wine for the vintage and drinking pretty well at the present time. 2017-2040. **89.**

### **1987 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

I was hoping for just a bit more from the 1987 Forman cabernet, which is a perfectly sound example of the vintage, but does not possess the same mid-palate depth or vibrancy as was routinely found in the old Sterling cabernets under Ric's tenure or in later vintages of Forman Vineyards Cabernet. The wine is nicely cool in this vintage, coming in at 12.5 percent octane and the bouquet offers up a correct blend of cassis, a touch of boysenberry, gentle tariness, a good base of soil, incipient notes of dried eucalyptus and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and gently plush on the attack, with good length and focus, moderate depth at the core, fading tannins and good length and grip on the discreetly complex finish. This is a good, solid wine, but not sterling and seems to be starting to dry out a bit on the backend. Perhaps the drought year of '87 left a bigger imprint on this wine than it seemed likely to do at the time? 2016-2025+. **88.**

### **1986 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 1986 vintage of Forman cabernet sauvignon is a tad riper than either the '85 or '87, tipping the scales at 13.2 percent alcohol, and the wine perhaps has a bit more mid-palate stuffing as a result. This is a very, very good bottle of mature cabernet, wafting from the glass in a mix of cassis, dark berries, dried eucalyptus, dark soil tones, a touch of cola and a topnote of cigar wrapper. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with just a touch of backend tannin remaining, good focus and grip and a long, classy finish. A fine example of this fine vintage that has now reached its apogee, but still has plenty of life in it. 2016-2040. **92.**

### **1985 Forman Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**

The 1985 vintage of Ric Forman's cabernet is a good solid wine, but like the 1987, it was not quite up to my expectations of the intersection of a top vintage and Ric's formidable winemaking skills. Of course, the vineyards were still quite young in '85, so perhaps this has something to do with the showing of this wine, not to mention that the winery construction had just been finished and this was the first vintage entirely produced here. The 1985 Forman Cabernet is nicely cool at 12.8 percent and offers up a fine bouquet of cassis, a touch of eucalyptus, cigar ash, a good base of soil and gentle framing notes of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and *à point*, with sound balance, fleeting tannins and good complexity on the finish. The backend is not particularly precise and wanders quite a bit, and this is really the only thing keeping the score down a tad, as otherwise this is quite tasty. Good, but not great juice. 2016-2030+. **89.**

### ***Newton Vineyards***

*Ric was only at Newton Vineyards for four years, prior to starting his own winery of Forman Vineyards in 1983. His only wine that I have tasted from this era at Newton was the 1981 Cabernet Sauvignon, which was drinking beautifully a few years ago.*

### **1981 Newton Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

One of the earliest vintages at Newton, when Ric Foreman was still patrolling the cellars at this winery, the 1981 cabernet sauvignon is a lovely, stylish and quite low octane example of the vintage. The wine is a cool 12.5 percent alcohol, which translates here into a very stylish and refined example of Napa cabernet. The deep, perfumed and classy nose offers up scents of black cherries, a touch of eucalyptus, woodsmoke, tobacco, incipient notes of petroleum jelly and a delicate topnote of nutskin. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, suave and impressively complex, with lovely, still a bit of remaining tannin and very fine length and grip on the poised and perfectly balanced finish. There was certainly a reason why Ric Foreman was dubbed the "Boy Wonder Winemaker" in his early career, as he left a legacy of simply profound wines at both Sterling and Newton during his time at each winery. 2011-2030+. **92.**

### ***Sterling Vineyards Zinfandel***

*According to Ric Forman, he produced six to eight vintages of zinfandel during his tenure at Sterling Vineyards, which was made from a small parcel of vines right below the winery. As I mentioned above, Ric notes that "it was treated similarly to the cabernet" and "raised in French oak, but not new." No more than three hundred cases were ever produced in any given vintage and the one example I have had the pleasure to drink of late was surprisingly*

*bright and tasty and clearly not an afterthought at the winery, despite it never having really been a focal point during his days at Sterling.*

### **1976 Sterling Vineyards Zinfandel (Napa Valley)**

The 1976 Sterling zinfandel is still a vibrant wine at its apogee, which is probably not surprising, given that it was crafted at an even thirteen percent alcohol and no doubt started out life with the same impeccable balance it retains as it closes in on its fortieth birthday. The complex bouquet wafts from the glass in a blend of dried red berries, black plum, gentle meatiness, a bit of *garrigue*, coffee, a good base of autumnal soil, gentle cedary notes, zinfandel spiciness and a touch of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still nicely structured, with a good core, tangy acids and fine focus and grip on the still moderately tannic finish. Given the drought conditions in 1976, I have to imagine that this wine started out life quite tightly-knit and tannic and has taken its time blossoming, but this has given it the chassis to continue to drink well for at least another couple of decades. A very good example, which is hardly surprising, as Ric Forman seemed to never miss a beat during his tenure at Sterling. Good juice. 2015-2035. **89+**.

### ***Sterling Vineyards Merlot***

*Peter Newton had been a fan of Pomerol and St. Émilion in his formative days and so when he purchased land and decided to plant some vineyards in Napa Valley in the mid-1960s, in addition to chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, he planted a bit of merlot. At that time, there had only been one varietally-labeled bottling of merlot produced in Napa, a 1966 vintage from Louis Martini, but when Ric Forman arrived in 1969, Peter asked him to also start producing a merlot in the portfolio at Sterling. There was never a lot of quantity of this bottling, but it was a staple of the Sterling Vineyards lineup for the ten years that Ric was the winemaker here and the management team at Sterling took the unprecedented step of pricing it at the same level as the cabernet, which was five dollars a bottle in the earliest vintages. As I noted above, Ric Forman basically made his merlots at Sterling Vineyards along the same lines as his cabernets, which is certainly not something that is done today at most estates who fancy themselves skilled practitioners with this varietal, as Ric and Peter Sterling's point of reference with merlot were the top Pomerol estates such as Trotanoy and Pétrus that Ric had visited with Dick Graff back in early 1969, so the goal from the outset was to make an ageworthy example of merlot, rather than something simple and easily quaffable right out of the blocks. Though I have never tasted any example recently, when I spoke with Ric in preparation for this article, he commented "that we did a pretty good job with those merlots at Sterling and I liked the examples I made at Newton during that short stay as well, with the 1980 Merlot in particular a very good wine under the Newton label." I remember the early vintages of Forman Vineyards Merlot also being quite well, but could not locate any bottles at auction to include in the preparation of this article.*

### **1974 Sterling Vineyards Merlot**

Ric Forman made a really lovely and long distance runner merlot in 1974, with some of the same depth and structural integrity of his two superb cabernet sauvignon bottlings in this vintage. The '74 Merlot remains vibrant and at its peak, offering up scents of backed plums, saddle leather, cigar wrapper, a touch of petroleum jelly and a gentle tariness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite rock solid at the core, with fine focus and grip, still a bit of backend tannin and impressive length on the very well-balanced



finish. This does not quite match the cabernets in terms of complexity, but there is life and personality here! 2017-2030+. **89.**

### **1972 Sterling Vineyards Merlot**

Ric Forman did not make a lot of merlot during his time at Sterling Vineyards, but his 1972 has aged very nicely and is a testament to how well he could do with this varietal as well. It is interesting that in this very difficult vintage (it rained heavily for ten days before the cabernet was picked in '72), this is the only red wine that Ric really liked from his lineup at Sterling. In this era, a wine had to be only fifty-one percent of a varietal to be labeled as such, so the 1972 Sterling Merlot is actually sixty percent merlot and forty percent cabernet sauvignon from the well-known Three Palms Vineyard that would go on to become a backbone bottling for Dan Duckhorn. The '72 Merlot is also only twelve percent alcohol, which may be one of the reasons it has aged so gracefully for all these years, as it continues to be a lovely middleweight that is drinking very well indeed. The bouquet offers up a lovely old nose of coffee, dark berries, cigar smoke, a touch of menthol, chipotle peppers and a very nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, tangy and complex, with a sound core, still just a touch of remaining tannin and very nice length and grip on the well-balanced finish. A very pretty wine that still has many years ahead of it. 2015-2025. **90.**



### ***Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon***

*Ric Forman's cabernet sauvignon bottlings from his decade at the helm at Sterling Vineyards remain amongst my favorite examples of this varietal from this era in Napa Valley. Due to the exceptional quality of the 1974 Sterling Reserve bottling of cabernet, the Reserves here are amongst the most famous bottlings of cabernet from this era, but the regular cabernet sauvignons are also truly outstanding wines and the difference in quality between them and the Reserves is not all that dramatic and I have had immense pleasure drinking the bottles of "regular" Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon from Ric Forman's time at the helm here in recent years and find that these wines have aged every bit as well as the more highly-acclaimed Reserves. I mention this because the general perception in the market is not in accord with my experience, with much of the shared perceived wisdom being that the regular bottlings were not built with the same intention for long-term cellaring and thus, they are now generally over the hill or sliding into decline. However, the reality is quite the opposite, and the regular bottlings of Sterling cabernet from Ric's decade here remain wines that are still at their peak periods of drinkability (with the exception of one or two of the very weakest vintages) and still have plenty of future life in them, so they are highly recommended for auction purchase and still continue to offer outstanding value vis à vis the Reserves from Sterling or some of the other top cabernet producers' wines from the mid-to-late 1970s. The one exception to this in my experience has been the 1978 vintage, which was the last that Ric fermented, but he did not remain at Sterling long enough to oversee the entire élevage of the 1978s and (for whatever reason) their quality is not quite up to the high standards of his previous vintages at Sterling. It should be noted that Ric Forman's successor as head winemaker at Sterling Vineyards was completely convinced that Ric's methodology in the cellar was all wrong and he sought to do things his own way soon after he was given the reins of what was then one of Napa's finest and most important wineries. The quality of wines from Sterling from 1978 to the present day I think is sufficient to decide who was right in this debate about winemaking practices! Perhaps these philosophical differences also extended to the élevage of the wines, and this was the reason that the 1978 cabernets here are not up to the very high standard of the wines from 1969 through 1977? In any case, the 1978 Reserve Cabernet is a good, solid wine, but one has to imagine that if Ric had stayed here through its bottling, it would have rivaled the 1974 and 1975 Reserves as one of the greatest cabernets of his long and illustrious career.*

### **1978 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon "Reserve" (Napa)**

Ric Forman vinified the 1978 Sterling cabernets, but left the winery while their *élevage* was still in process and was not responsible for their bottling. Consequently, the finished wines were never quite up to the same level of quality as the other vintages that he crafted during his historic run at Sterling from 1969 to 1978, but this most recent bottle of the '78 Reserve showed as well as I have ever seen it at our tasting in October of 2015. The bouquet is quite impressive, offering up scents of black cherries, cassis, cigar smoke, a bit of mintiness, creosote and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with pretty good complexity, fine focus and very good length and grip on the still modestly tannic. This does not have quite the same degree of complexity as the wines Ric saw from beginning to end, but it retains plenty of vigor and has miles to go before it sleeps. Still, it is hard not to imagine what he might have accomplished with this wine if he had overseen its entire *élevage*, as this was another great vintage that circumstances forced him to miss to a certain degree. 2016-2035+. **90.**

### **1977 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

The 1977 vintage was the very last that Ric Forman saw through from spring pruning to bottling at Sterling, so even though he made the 1978s here, this was the last vintage that he actually had a chance to finish and bottle. The wine is absolutely superb (no surprise here), as it offers up a deep and complex bouquet of black cherries, petroleum jelly, Rutherford dust, a lovely base of soil tones, cigar smoke and a nice touch of chipotles in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and perfectly resolved today, with a lovely core, melting tannins and very fine length and grip on the focused and very classy finish. A lovely bottle with decades of life still ahead of it. 2014-2040. **92.**

### **1976 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

The drought vintage of 1976 took its time softening up, but today, it is one of the best-drinking vintages of cabernet from the superb decade of the 1970s. Ric Forman's cabernet from this vintage is really lovely right now, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of desiccated cherries, cigar ash, lovely spice tones, just a whisper of chipotle pepper, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and still nicely tangy, with a bit of the vintage's tannin still perking up the finish, fine focus and grip and a long, very nicely balanced and vibrant finish. Like so many of the very top 1976s, this still has plenty of life in it and will continue to drink very well for many years to come. 2018-2035. **90.**

### **1976 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon "Reserve" (Napa)**

The 1976 Sterling Reserve cabernet sauvignon comes in at an even thirteen percent octane and is now in its absolute apogee of peak drinkability. The color is still reasonably dark and the bouquet wafts from the glass in a beautiful blend of black cherries, cigar ash, a touch of mint, allspice, petroleum jelly, a fine base of soil tones, a deft touch of cedary new oak and just a hint of the chipotle pepper that will come with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and beautifully resolved, with a fine core, lovely soil signature, still a touch of backend tannin and excellent length and grip on the complex and classy finish. This is really a classy bottle of mature Napa cabernet at its peak or resolution. 2018-2035+. **93.**

### **1975 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

Ric Forman in his heyday at Sterling Vineyards made as fine an example of cabernet sauvignon as one could find anywhere in California, and the wines from this era have aged in exemplary fashion. The last vintage that Ric vinified at Sterling was the 1978, but he departed from the winery soon after the harvest and did not oversee the *elevage* of that wine. In any case, the 1975 is a brilliant example of the vintage, offering up a deep and beautifully sappy bouquet of black cherries, cigar box, a touch of petroleum jelly, smoke, beautiful soil tones and a dollop of eucalyptus in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very sappy at the core, with melting tannins, great focus and complexity and a long, focused and very intense finish. This is a beautiful bottle of cabernet at its zenith, but with decades of life still ahead of it! 2011-2035. **94.**

### **1975 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon "Reserve" (Napa)**

Ironically, the 1975 Sterling Reserve cabernet is still on the young side (or that was the case with this bottle) and needs more time and is currently not as interesting to drink as the regular bottling from this outstanding vintage. The deep and still youthful bouquet offers up a blend of black cherries, a touch of tariness, menthol, dark soil tones, cigar smoke and a whisper of wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and still on the primary side, with a rock solid core, tangy acids and a very, very long, youthful and still pretty tannic finish. I am sure more complexity will emerge here with further bottle age, but today, this is a bit outclassed

by the regular bottling from 1975. Time will tell if the '75 Reserve will eventually blossom more completely and catch or surpass the lovely regular cabernet in this outstanding vintage. 2018-2050. **92+**.

#### **1974 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

While the 1974 Sterling Reserve cabernet sauvignon is rightly recognized as one of the greatest wines of this decade in California, the regular bottling from Sterling in this vintage is often overlooked. This is unfortunate, as the quality between the two wines is not particularly large and this most recent bottle of the 1974 “regular” cabernet was absolutely brilliant! The nose soars from the glass in a youthful and vibrant blend of black cherries, woodsmoke, menthol, a great base of soil tones, hints of petroleum jelly and a bit of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack, with a pure and sappy mid-palate, outstanding focus and balance, still a bit of remaining tannin perking up the finish and magical complexity on the very, very long and classy finish. I have loved this wine for decades (the first time I ever tasted it was in the late-1980s, when it was already approachable and quite delicious), and it seems to get better with every passing year- which is, after all, what cabernet-based wines are supposed to do in the first place! Great juice and an absolute classic. 2017-2045. **94.**

#### **1974 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon “Reserve” (Napa)**

The 1974 Reserve bottling of cabernet is the most famous wine Ric Forman ever produced during his tenure at Sterling Vineyards and the wine is every bit as good as its stellar reputation. At age forty-three, the wine is still deep and youthful in profile, offering up a beautiful bouquet of black cherries, cassis, a touch of eucalyptus, incipient notes of chipotle peppers, cigar smoke, soil tones and a touch of tariness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite powerfully built, with a plush core of fruit, lovely complexity, melting tannins and superb length and grip on the focused and perfectly balanced finish. I first crossed paths with the '74 Sterling Reserve more than twenty-five years ago, and the wine was great then, and it has not lost a bit of bounce or purity over the ensuing quarter century. One of Napa's legendary bottles of cabernet sauvignon, this magnificent wine should continue to drink well for at least another thirty years and maybe longer. That said, the regular Sterling bottling from 1974 can still give it a run for its money! 2017-2055. **97.**

#### **1973 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

This particular bottle of Sterling cabernet from the 1973 vintage had a pretty loose cork, but seemed to still have been sealed quite well and showed lovely color and plenty of vivacity still at age forty-five. The wine included some merlot in the blend with the cabernet sauvignon and came in at a very civilized 12.5 percent octane in this outstanding cabernet vintage. The bouquet is deep, complex and tertiary, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of red and black cherries, sweet cigar, a touch of chipotle pepper, Rutherford Dust, lovely soil tones, a bit of petroleum jelly and a discreet memory of cedar. On the palate the wine is poised, complex, full and beautifully balanced, with still a good core, fine focus and grip, melted tannins and a long, still tangy and refined finish. This is a beautiful bottle that is still cruising along in its plateau of maturity, but it faded a bit after being opened an hour or so, which I think is probably more emblematic of the loose cork in this particular bottle, rather than the wine's point of evolution. This bottle was lovely, but there could well be slightly superior examples still out there! 2018-2030+. **91.**

#### **1973 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon “Reserve” (Napa)**

The 1973 Sterling Reserve cabernet is a touch more delicately styled wine than those produced here in 1974 and 1975, but the wine continues to drink beautifully and shows no signs

of slowing down anytime soon. The deep and beautifully refined nose offers up a fine blend of ripe black cherries, menthol, cigar smoke, a touch of chili pepper, lovely notes of Rutherford dust, incipient notes of chipotles and just a bit of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with a very plush attack, modest tannins, lovely focus and complexity and superb length and grip on the poised and utterly classic finish. While the 1973 Reserve does not have the same inherent power of the 1974 and 1975 versions of this wine, there is nothing weak-kneed here and this an absolute classic bottle from Ric Forman's heady run at Sterling! Lovely juice. 2015-2035+. **94.**

#### **1971 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

This bottle of 1971 Sterling cabernet sauvignon was in pristine shape and really was showing nicely. This was a cool vintage where the weather turned poor before the cabernet could be brought in, so the wine only tips the scales at twelve percent alcohol, as the grapes struggled to ripen up fully in this vintage. Nevertheless, the wine has aged gracefully and is still quite vibrant on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet offering up scents of red and black cherries, eucalyptus, petroleum jelly, cigar wrapper, a nice touch of Rutherford Dust and cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, poised and very precise, with a good, respectable core, excellent soil signature, still a bit of tannin and lovely focus and grip on the very complex and slightly sinewy finish. This has probably always been a touch lean in personality, due to the style of the vintage, but it has aged very nicely at the same time and today, at age forty-seven, it is still a lovely middleweight. 2018-2035. **90.**

#### **1970 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

The 1970 Sterling Vineyards cabernet was only the second vintage for this winery and Ric Forman made a lovely example of the vintage, from what had to be young vines at this point in time. The wine offers up a ripe and still vibrant bouquet at age forty-seven, wafting from the glass in a blend of black cherries, a touch of candle wax, lovely, Rutherford Dust soil tones, tobacco leaf, gentle notes of allspice and a topnote of petroleum jelly. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, vibrant and complex, with still a quite plush core, fine focus and grip, modest remaining tannins and impressive length on the beautifully balanced finish. I drank a bottle of the '70 Sterling three or four years ago that was very pretty, but starting down the far side of its plateau. This is emphatically not the case with this bottle, which remains in the prime of peak maturity! 2017-2035. **93.**

#### **1969 Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa)**

Ric Forman's first vintage of cabernet from Sterling Vineyards continues to drink very nicely, though it is probably just starting to look over the far side of its plateau and may one day in the not too distant future start its descent. But, not today, and it remains a very enjoyable and complete wine to drink, offering up a fully mature and complex nose of desiccated cherries, cigar wrapper, a touch of chocolate, gentle spice tones, a nice touch of soil, a bit of chipotle pepper and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and velvety, with a good core of fruit, melted tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, svelte and easy-going finish that makes the wine still a great pleasure to drink. Perhaps there was a bit more vigor a decade ago, but this wine is still in fine shape and very enjoyable. Not too bad for a first-time effort on his own for Ric Forman! 2018-2030. **89.**

## THE ABBREVIATED SPRING 2018 CHAMPAGNE TRIP AND OTHER RECENTLY TASTED BOTTLES



*The entrance to the beautiful maison of Champagne Bollinger in Ay.*

As readers may recall, I had planned to spend fully two weeks in Champagne at the end of March during my spring trip to France. Sadly, I caught a nasty flu bug after only a few days in Reims and had to cut my trip short and return to New York to convalesce. It was the first time I had ever had to return home early on a tasting trip and I missed a great range of winery visits. In the end, despite having three appointments scheduled every day for the duration of my trip, I was only able to make a handful of visits in Champagne through Wednesday of that first week and by Thursday, I was seriously ill and in no shape to do anything other than make arrangements to go home. To give some idea of just how bad I was by Thursday, I had appointments booked that morning at Ployez-Jacquemart and afternoon tastings with Emmanuel Brochet and Frédéric Savart and had to cancel all of them, without even having the strength to try and make the effort to visit and see if my palate was still intact. I was booked that evening to stay and dine at Les Avisés, the Selosse family's beautiful hotel and outstanding restaurant in Avize and taste the following morning with Anselme Selosse. All of these had to be cancelled and I basically holed up in my room at the hotel with tea and crackers for my time there, only having a chance to say hello to Monsieur Selosse on Friday morning on my way home. The rest of the trip had to also be



washed out and reads like a “who’s who” of top growers in the Champagne region, with appointments cancelled at the backend of my trip with the following: Jean-Marc Sélèque, Jérôme Dehours, Mouzon-Leroux, Champagne Corbon, Aurélien Suenen, Champagne Alexandre Filaine, Benoît Marguet and Vincent Laval, amongst others. Needless to say, even without the flu, having to return to New York early made me sick to my stomach! So, obviously, this report could have been so much deeper and richer if I had managed to avoid the flu in March.

In any case, I did manage to make it to a few of my appointments before the flu bit and I have written up my visits to these houses in the pages that follow. These stops included Champagne Bruno Paillard at the very start of my time in Reims, as well as Krug, Ayala, Bollinger, Rafael Bérèche and Jérôme Prevost at Champagne La Closerie. In addition, I also made visits at Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon of Louis Roederer and with Richard Geoffroy of Dom Pérignon, with those tastings already written up in the previous two issues of the newsletter. In the report that follows, I have listed my winery visits in the order that they occurred, prior to being cut down by the flu. After a recounting of my visits to these estates, I have appended an installment of recently-tasted Champagne since my last full report was released on the region six months ago. Those tasting notes are arranged as has become customary, with non-vintage Brut Nature and Brut Zero bottlings listed first, followed by sections of non-vintage Brut and Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs cuvées, Brut NV and Extra Brut NV, non-vintage Rosé and then vintage-dated wines, again divided by their respective *cépages*, with all of the vintage wines grouped by their year of origin and no account made for their respective levels of *dosage*. I have not reached out to as many estates and importers for samples for this section of the article as I normally do at this time of the year, as I had already tasted a lot of Champagne since the last installment of this bi-annual report and have a huge inventory of American wines to also sample and report on for this issue of the newsletter as well. The second half of the report, which will appear in one of the next few issues will have more wines covered which are currently in the market, as I should have cut down my backlog of samples here dramatically by that time.

My trip started with a few days in Reims, with my notes from Champagne Louis Roederer already appearing in the domaine profile on this marvelous *grand marque* back two issues ago. While in Reims, I had the chance to dine at the Michelin-starred, Japanese-French fusion restaurant of Racine. The wine list was outstanding, the service impeccable, but the cuisine seemed to be slightly overrated to my palate by the team at Michelin and though I enjoyed my meal, the One Star rating seemed a tad generous. After Reims, I moved onto Épernay as my base of operations for two days, but was already starting to fall victim to the flu and really struggled to get through my last couple of days of appointments. But, these did include visits to Bollinger and Ayala in nearby Aÿ, as well as the vertical tasting of Dom Pérignon that was featured in the last issue of the newsletter. My last visit before the flu took me down was with Jérôme Prevost at La Closerie, which had I known more precisely where on the Montagne de Reims the village of Gueux lay, I could have made while I was still staying in Reims, as it is far closer to that city than it is to Épernay! By that time in the trip, my palate was still sound, but my stomach was going south at an alarming rate and my visit with Monsieur Prevost was the last for the trip, though I did roll around in my bed in hotels for a few days hoping it might be something other than the flu and would decamp in time for me to resume my appointment schedule. Sadly, it was not to be and I was home a week ahead of schedule, with the last several days of the trip spent suffering in hotels and hoping the illness would pass, rather than tasting



Champagne! It is no fun being sick on the road in any locale, but when one is in the Champagne region and has a stellar tasting schedule lined up, the discomfort is magnified ten-fold!

### **Champagne Bruno Paillard (Reims)**

I am working on a domaine feature on Champagne Bruno Paillard for a future issue of the newsletter, as I find this one of the most exciting addresses in the entire region and I have immense respect for the work that Bruno and Alice Paillard are doing here at this excellent house, located in a fine, modern winemaking facility on the main road out of Reims in the direction of Épernay. Champagne Bruno Paillard is one of the youngest of the *Grandes Marques* in Reims, as Monsieur Paillard only started his eponymous *maison* in 1981, when he was still only twenty-seven years of age. A very audacious decision it must have seemed at the time to Monsieur Paillard's contemporaries, but it has proven to be a very good one and today, this is one of the top producers in all of Champagne. As I mentioned in the past, Bruno Paillard hailed from a family that had long worked as grape brokers in the region, so he was not new to the Champagne business by any stretch of the imagination, but his desire to hand-craft his own wines overruled business prudence and he set out to create a new Champagne house at the start of the decade of the 1980s. Monsieur Paillard made his first decade-worth of Champagnes solely from purchased grapes, but realized that owning vineyards would be the best guarantee of high quality and eventually bought his first three *hectares* of vineyards, in the village of Oger, in 1990. Today, Champagne Bruno Paillard owns fully thirty-two *hectares* of fine vineyard sites, which produce sufficient grape quantity to handle fifty percent of their production needs. Twelve of these are in grand cru villages such as Oger, Mesnil, Ambonnay, Bouzy and Verzenay.

Bruno Paillard was joined in 2007 by his daughter, Alice Paillard, and she has literally learned the business from the ground up since her arrival. Her first year was spent exclusively focused on the vineyards and cellars, followed by a year developing export markets, and since 2009 she has been Co-Director of the house with her father. The house farms under the *lutte raisonnée* method, avoiding chemical treatments in the vineyards unless the crop is in dire jeopardy for some reason. I do not know what is the farming methods for the smaller growers from whom the Paillards purchase their other fifty percent of their production needs, but one assumes that these are very good growers, as the house has had long-term contracts with a great many of them since the first vintage of 1981. The *vins clairs* here are aged in either stainless steel or small, older casks, depending on the source of the fruit and vintage character, but probably more than fifty percent are routinely aged in barrels these days. Champagne Bruno Paillard produces between 400,000 and half a million bottles each year, with all of their cuvées built for long-term cellaring. On this spring's visit, the focus was on their lovely Première Cuvée non-vintage bottling, which to my mind has enormous potential for the long haul and we tasted through a mini-vertical of this wine when I was here at the winery in March. As Bruno Paillard was one of the very first (perhaps the absolute first) producer to start including the date of disgorgement on his back labels, tracking a series of older bottlings is far easier here than would be the case with other producers. The Première Cuvée represents sixty percent of the house's production and is typically aged three years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement. The cépages is forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty-three percent chardonnay and twenty-two percent pinot meunier for this wine, with reserve wines making up anywhere from twenty to fifty percent of the blend in any given release, depending on the quality of the base year vintage. Since 1984, Monsieur Paillard took the decision that the reserve wines in the cellar would be composed of the final

blend of the previous years' *assemblage*, rather than holding back individual *vins clairs* from Oger or Ambonnay for instance, and so the *cépages* of the Première Cuvée is remarkably consistent from year to year now.

The Paillards have upped the percentage of reserve wines in the blend for Première Cuvée in recent vintages, with the average now in the thirty-five to forty percent range of reserve wines in the new release, which is up from typically twenty to twenty-five percent of the *assemblage* fifteen years ago. Additionally, the age of the reserve wines is also older in the cellars now, as they now stretch back from four to ten years of age for the wines that go into the finished cuvée, which is older than was the case in the 1990s and early 2000s. For this reason, both Alice and Bruno Paillard dislike the moniker of “base year” for a given release of Première Cuvée, and I used it below with apologies in advance, as I could think of no better way to convey the age of the wine in the tasting notes that follow. *Dosage* for this bottling has been quite low for many years now, with the current release having been finished with five grams per liter and the wine effectively an Extra Brut, though it continues to be listed as Brut on the label. The house for many years now also takes the precaution of holding the wines in bottle in the cellars in Reims for four months after their disgorgement prior to shipping them, so that they can be guaranteed to have recovered from the *dégorgement*. We went back quite a ways in our vertical and I was very happy to see that my intuition about the long-term cellaring potential of this bottling was absolutely borne out by the superb quality of the wines in the glass.



*Alice and Bruno Paillard in their comfortable tasting room in Reims- with plenty of art on the walls.*

**Champagne Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged April 2017)**

The new release of Première Cuvée was disgorged in April of 2017 and hails from the base year of 2013. It was finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter and offers a lovely, still quite youthful bouquet of pear, apple, brioche a complex base of chalky soil tones and a nice touch of spring flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and a long, focused and vibrant finish. This will be approachable early on, but as the notes below will attest, its true apogee is still many years down the road. 2018-2050. **93.**

**Champagne Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged September 2014)**

This version of Première Cuvée, which had been disgorged in September of 2014, is from the base year of 2010. This is now three and a half years out from its disgorgement (when I tasted it in mid-March) and is really reaching a beautiful moment in its evolution for drinking, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a composed blend of apple, fresh-baked bread, almonds, dried flowers, lovely soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full, bright, wide open and very complex, with lovely mid-palate depth, elegant *mousse* fine focus and grip and a long, pure and still zesty finish. In a perfect world, this is the point where I would choose to start drinking bottles of Première Cuvée, as three and a half years out from the disgorgement is where the wine really starts to hit on all cylinders! 2018-2045+. **93.**

**Champagne Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged December 2009)**

As Bruno Paillard observed, “here we are ninety-nine months out from the disgorgement and things are starting to get very interesting,” referring to the lovely secondary layers of complexity that emerge from the Première Cuvée that was disgorged in December of 2009. This is from the base year of 2005 and offers up a stunningly refined and complex nose of pear, a touch of tangerine, lovely soil tones, hazelnut, a dollop of marzipan and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully complex, with a patina of nuttiness from its bottle age, a fine core of fruit, still excellent backend mineral drive and a very long, complex and bouncy finish. This is at its apogee today, but has still plenty of life ahead of it. 2018-2035+. **94.**

**Champagne Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged January 2006)**

This bottle of Première Cuvée hails from the 2002 base year and was disgorged in January of 2006, so it was more than twelve years out from the *dégorgement* when we drank this in March of this year. The wine has evolved beautifully and remains bright and very well structured, with the bouquet delivering a mature mix of fresh apricot, pear, brioche, hazelnuts, chalky soil tones, smoky overtones, dried flowers and a topnote of candied citrus peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full and marvelously complex, with a good core, still plenty of *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a long, poised and seamlessly balanced finish of elegance and verve. Fine, fine juice- one further stage along in its evolution, but as vigorous as ever. 2018-2030. **93.**

**Champagne Bruno Paillard “Première Cuvée” Brut NV (Disgorged September 2001)**

Here is a release of Première Cuvée that is fully sixteen and a half years out from its disgorgement and the wine was drinking the best of all in our vertical tasting! Having been disgorged in September of 2001, this is from the base year of 1997 and offers up marvelous complexity in its tertiary bouquet of fresh apricot, baked peach, hazelnuts, candied orange peel, a complex base of soil, brioche and a touch of marzipan in the upper register. On the palate the wine is elegant, poised and still quite full, with a superb core, excellent complexity and grip, still pinpoint bubbles, lovely focus and balance and a long, vibrant and stunning finish. Great juice. 2018-2030+. **94+.**

## **Champagne Krug (Reims)**

Olivier Krug was very kind to squeeze me into his busy schedule in the late afternoon of my first day in Reims in March, as he was travelling again the next day and I am sure he had a million things to do prior to hitting the road. This was my first visit to Champagne Krug in a couple of years and I ended up going to the wrong address, as the old visiting center at the cellars has now been replaced by a far more expansive location just around the corner from the production facilities. It was previously the family home of the Krug family and has been beautifully adapted for visitors and is really a warm, welcoming and very posh location for visiting the team at Krug and tasting through their beautiful wines. As Olivier was pressed for time and I had already had several large tastings prior to my late afternoon arrival, we contented ourselves with a tour of the new welcome center and a small tasting of some lovely recent releases, including the 2002, 2004 Vintages and the Krug Grand Cuvée “160ème Édition”. I had reported on all of these fairly recently, but include notes here to show how the wines are gently blossoming over the last year. I have also included a few more recent notes on bottles of Krug tasted since my visit in March, including the new release of the Grande Cuvée “166ème Édition”, which I was fortunate enough to be invited for a blending seminar back in the spring of 2011 at the *maison* and where we got to play the roles of creators of this new edition with a lovely array of *vins clairs* and a team of seasoned palates around the table. Champagne Krug very kindly commemorated the visit by sending a bottle of the 166ème Édition and photos of our group of happy journalists in Reims during the three day submersion in all things beautifully Krug that spring.

### **Krug Grand Cuvée “166ème Édition” Brut NV (ID #214031)**

The “166ème Édition” Krug Grand Cuvée was not yet ready for tasting at the time of my March visit to the estate in Reims, but as a bottle arrived at my office prior to the publication of this issue, I include the note on the wine here. This is from the base year of 2010 and is composed of a blend of forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty-nine percent chardonnay and sixteen percent pinot meunier. Forty-two percent of the cuvée is composed of reserve wines, but as Cellar Master Eric Lebel observes, many of the reserve wines were relatively young in the blend this year. The wine was disgorged in the winter of 2017 and offers up a superb and absolutely classic nose of apple, pear, caraway seed, sourdough bread, a complex base of soil, a hint of orange peel and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with impressive focus and grip, elegant *mousse*, seamless balance and a very long, complex and vibrant finish. This is superb. 2018-2050. **94+**.

### **Krug Grande Cuvée Brut NV “163ème Édition” (Reims) ID #413066 Half Bottle**

This half bottle of Krug Grande Cuvée is from the base year of 2007 and includes reserve wines back to the 1990 vintage. Half bottles are not aged quite as long *sur latte* as the larger formats of Grande Cuvée, so this wine spent six years on its fine lees prior to disgorgement. The *cépages* of the 163ème Édition was thirty-seven percent pinot noir, thirty-two percent chardonnay and thirty-one percent pinot meunier. Out of half bottle the wine is *à point*, offering up scents of apple, tangerine, caraway seed, a superb base of soil, warm bread and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, focused and complex, with elegant *mousse*, fine balance and a long, refined and wide open finish. Halves of Grande Cuvée always seem ready to drink when they are released and do not last as long as regular bottles, so I would opt for drinking this up in half over the next dozen years or so. 2018-2030+. **93**.

### **Krug Grand Cuvée “160ème Edition” Brut NV (ID #214031)**

The Krug Grand Cuvée “160ème Édition” is from the base year of 2004 and is now starting to really drink well today. It was disgorged in the spring of 2014 and the oldest reserve wines used in this iteration being chardonnays from the villages of Avize and Oger dating back to the 1990 vintage. The final *cépages* ending up forty-four percent pinot noir, thirty-three percent chardonnay and twenty-three percent pinot meunier. I had not tasted this bottling in a year and it was every bit as beautiful at the estate as I remember it when it was paired with the 2004 vintage during its inaugural showing in New York last autumn. The wine offers up a classic and blossoming bouquet of apple, pear, almond, fresh-baked bread, a superb base of soil tones, a touch of upper register smokiness and an exotic topnote of *fleur de sel*. On the palate the wine is pure, focused and refined, with a full-bodied format, lovely focus and grip, elegant *mousse*, a lovely core and a long, vibrant and seamless finish. I love this version of Grande Cuvée and would love to have a case waiting in the cellar to start drinking ten years from now, as that is when it is really going to start firing on all cylinders! 2018-2050. **94.**

### **2004 Krug Brut Millésime (Reims) ID# 316029**

The 2004 Krug remains one of the most beautiful young vintages of this bottling to be released in quite some time. It does not have the power and sternness of structure of the titan that is the 2002, nor the shimmering generosity of the 2003, but it is a great, great classic in the making that already exudes the depth and refinement that is vintage Krug in the finest years. As I mentioned last year, the wine is composed of a blend of thirty-nine percent chardonnay, thirty-seven percent pinot noir and twenty-four percent pinot meunier, with this particular bottle having been disgorged three months later than the last one I tasted, in the summer of 2016. The nose offers up a stunning constellation of apple, pear, a very complex base of soil tones, lovely smokiness, caraway seed, spring flowers, incipient notes of orange zest and a lovely touch of almond in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, focused and full-bodied, with a rock solid core, superb complexity and grip and a very, very long, vibrant and seamless finish. This will be at its true apogee fifteen to twenty years from now, but I wonder how many bottles will survive to that point, as it is a breathtakingly beautiful glass of bubbly already! 2018-2060. **97.**

### **2002 Krug Brut Millésime (ID# 415064)**

It is hard to believe that two and a half years have now passed since Champagne Krug unveiled its long-awaited 2002 Vintage Brut. I do not know if there have been different disgorgements of this bottling, but this one is the same as the last bottle that swept me off of my feet back in the spring of last year, having been disgorged in the autumn of 2015. The wine is a blend of forty percent pinot noir, thirty-nine percent chardonnay and twenty-one percent pinot meunier in 2002 and is already one of the legendary vintages of Krug ever produced. The bouquet is deep, pure, ripe and vibrant, wafting from the glass in a marvelous blend of pear, apple, almond, a stunningly beautiful base of soil tones, subtle spice shading, *patissière*, a touch of citrus blossoms and that signature Krug smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine rock solid, mineral-driven and shows off stellar purity, with its full-bodied format seamlessly supported by great structure and grip. The *mousse* is impeccable, the complexity still youthful and growing with each visit and the finish, long, refined and absolutely perfect. This will last almost forever and I suspect at age fifty-seven, I will never drink it at its absolute zenith of evolutionary perfection. But, I admit very much enjoying my occasional visits as the wine is in climbing mode to that future peak! 2022-2095. **100.**





*Twilight descending over the new welcome center at Champagne Krug in Reims.*

### **Bérêche et Fils (Ludes)**

Raphaël Bérêche is making absolutely stellar wines right now and this is one of the most exciting addresses in all of Champagne at the present time. I visited here four years ago and things were humming along nicely at that time, but my return visit found Raphaël and his brother, Vincent, having taken things up another level in terms of ambition, with now all of the wines aging in the cellars being stored under natural cork, or *sur liège*, with the exception of their non-vintage Brut Réserve bottling, which still ages under crown cap. Back in 2014 the Bérêche brothers had just begun a series of single village bottlings, made from production outside of the family's 9.5 *hectares* of vines and designed to highlight a single *cépages* or sector of Champagne's *vignobles*, but four years ago, a couple of these were being produced from purchased juice. In 2014, these bottlings were not always as good as the wines made from the Bérêche family's own estate grown fruit. However, the couple that I tasted on this visit were as lovely as those made from the Bérêches' own vineyard production and it now seems that those couple of good, but not great bottles were perhaps just a reflection of growing pains with the new project. The new efforts in this series of wines highlighting different *villages* beyond where the family owns vines included a fine 2013 Rilly la Montagne and a surprisingly impressive 2011 Cramant Blanc de Blancs from that challenging vintage. I assume that these are now all made from purchased fruit and the Bérêche brothers are vinifying them. Just to remind readers, only indigenous yeasts are used for fermentation, three-quarters of the *vins clairs* here are barrel-

fermented these days and none undergo malolactic fermentation. The brothers now farm a portion of their vineyards *biodynamically*, with plans to ultimately convert all of their vineyards to this farming method in the future. The family has not used chemical herbicides in their vines now for more than fifteen years. I have listed the wines below in the order that they were presented during my tasting with Raphaël, as we started with bottlings that were a bit lower in *dosage* and worked our way up (though none have more than 6.5 grams per liter). The superb house of Bérêche Père et Fils is currently at the top of its game and producing some of the finest wines in all of Champagne!

#### **2014 Bérêche et Fils “Rive Gauche” Meunier Extra Brut**

The Rive Gauche bottling is from the family’s own vineyards, made entirely from forty-five year-old pinot meunier vines grown in the village of Mareuil le Port. The *vins clairs* are barrel-fermented entirely for this bottling, with the wine aging for three years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and a finishing *dosage* of three grams per liter. The 2014 Rive Gauche was disgorged in November of 2017 and offers up a refined and very promising bouquet of apple, fresh almond, just a hint of passion fruit, meunier floral tones and a superbly complex base of soil. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and shows lovely mid-palate depth, with refined *mousse* and a long, elegant and zesty finish. This is really a beautiful and very refined wine in the making. It is approachable already, but I would give it at least a few years in the cellar to more fully blossom. 2018-2045. **92+**.

#### **2013 Bérêche et Fils “Rilly la Montagne” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut**

This is the first vintage that the Bérêche brothers have offered from the village of Rilly and it is excellent. The wine’s *cépages* is entirely pinot noir and was disgorged in January of 2017, after just under three years aging *sur latte*. The finishing *dosage* was only three grams per liter. The bouquet is flat out superb and quite expressive for a young wine, wafting from the glass in a lovely blend of pear, white peach, *patissière*, a complex base of chalky soil tones and a bit of brioche in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and seamlessly balanced, with a fine core, refined *mousse* and a very long, complex and focused finish. This is a beautiful wine that is accessible already, but will be even better with a bit more bottle age. 2018-2040. **93**.

#### **2014 Bérêche et Fils “Les Beaux Regards” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut**

The Beaux Regards bottling is made entirely from estate-grown chardonnay from the Bérêche family’s vineyards in their home village of Ludes. This had only been disgorged in January of 2018 and was still a bit unsettled in mid-March, but the underlying quality here was still quite apparent. The complex bouquet offers up scents of pear, lemon, chalky soil tones, a hint of buttery oak, fresh almond and white flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, long and elegant in profile, with pinpoint bubbles, a good core and fine length and grip on the very well-balanced finish. The precision that this wine will eventually display was not in evidence after the fairly recent disgorgement, and for that reason I scored the wine in a range, but I would fully expect it to snap into exact focus with a bit more bottle age (it probably has already done so) and rate at the top of my range. It seems likely that the 2014 Beaux Regards will blossom completely a bit ahead of the 2013 Rilly bottling, but this again, could just be an impression caused by its more recent disgorgement. 2018-2035+. **92-93**.

#### **2013 Bérêche et Fils “Campania Remensis” Extra Brut Rosé**

2009 was the first vintage of Rosé that bore the new name of “Campania Remensis” on the label. The cuvée now takes its name from the Latin term for the countryside outside of Reims



that was used during Roman times here. The wine all hails from fruit grown in the village of Orme on the *Petite Montagne*, with the *cépages* sixty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent chardonnay and five percent red still wine (again pinot noir). The 2013 Campania Remensis was disgorged in March of 2017 and was showing beautifully a year out from its disgorgement, offering up a very refined and pure nose of strawberries, white cherries, a touch of orange zest, chalk and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, elegant and marvelously balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip, lovely, delicate *mousse* and a very long, complex and vibrant finish. First class Rosé! 2018-2035. **92.**

**2009 Bérèche et Fils “Campania Remensis” Extra Brut Rosé**

Raphaël Bérèche was kind enough to open up the 2009 Campania Remensis during my visit, so we could check in to see how the first vintage under the new label was drinking. The wine had been disgorged back in November of 2012, so it did not spend quite as much time on its fine lees as the 2013 version, with the finishing *dosage* here three grams per liter. The wine is evolving very nicely, showing some of the solar character of the vintage in its aromatic blend of desiccated red berries, orange peel, chalky soil tones, a bit of woodsmoke and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and more Rubenesque in personality than the svelte 2013 version, with refined *mousse*, lovely balance and a long, zesty and wide open finish. This does not show the same level of refinement of the 2013, but this is the partly the differences in the styles of the two vintages. Still, this is very tasty and drinking beautifully at the moment. 2018-2028. **90.**

**2011 Bérèche et Fils “Cramant” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut**

The 2011 Cramant is again one of the single village bottlings in the relatively new series from Raphaël Bérèche. The wine is lovely for this difficult vintage, offering up a fine, classy nose of pear, *crème patissière*, chalky minerality, fresh almond, spring flowers and just a hint of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, bouncy and complex, with frothy *mousse*, good balance and grip and just a whisper of backend oak showing on the long finish. The only evidence here that this is not from a great years is a tad less precision than in the 2013 Rilly for example. But, given that this is a 2011, this is a very strong result. 2018-2035. **91.**

**2010 Bérèche et Fils “le Cran” Extra Brut Millésime**

Le Cran is the name for the vintage-dated bottling from Raphaël and Vincent Bérèche that is produced from their top estate vineyards in the village of Ludes. The 2004 was the first vintage to wear this moniker, but the 2010 was the first I can recall having tasted labeled as such. The wine is a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay and offers up a beautifully complex and wide open bouquet of pear, a touch of blood orange, stony minerality, incipient notes of pastry cream, white flowers and a whisper of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite refined in profile, with a fine core, excellent complexity and grip, superbly fine *mousse* and a long, focused and very classy finish. Superb juice. 2018-2040. **94.**

**Bérèche et Fils “Brut Réserve” NV (Base Year 2015)**

The soon to be released version of Bérèche et Fils non-vintage “Brut Réserve” is going to be excellent. The wine is its customary blend of one-third each of pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier, with the wine having been disgorged in January of 2017. As is typical of this bottling, one-third of the blend is reserve wines and the finishing *dosage* was 6.5 grams per liter. This is really a lovely wine in the making, offering up a youthful and classy bouquet of apple, pear, chalky soil tones, brioche and just a whisper of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and focused, with lovely *mousse*, excellent balance and grip and a long, zesty and nascently complex finish. A superb non-vintage bottling. 2018-2035. **92.**



### **Bérêche et Fils “Brut Réserve” NV (Base Year 2011)**

The 2011 base year bottling of Brut Réserve from the Bérêche family was disgorged in July of 2013 and is a good bottle, but shows its year of origin just a touch and is not quite as good as these other examples. I should mention that this was drunk with friends in New York, rather than at the winery in March. The wine offers up a complex nose of apple, peach, fresh-baked bread, excellent minerality and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, deep and full, with fine bubbles and very respectable length and grip on the fairly complex finish. There is not quite the customary depth at the core and backend drive of most vintages of this bottling, but it is a very respectable example of 2011. 2018-2025+. **89.**

### **Bérêche et Fils “Brut Réserve” NV (Base Year 2004)**

To finish up, Raphaël Bérêche opened up a couple of older examples of Brut Réserve, with this one being from the base year of 2004. The wine is now fully mature and still drinking beautifully, wafting from the glass in a classy blend of apple, pear, a touch of hazelnut, brioche, chalky soil tones and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, open and very tasty, with a lovely core, still good remaining *mousse* and a long, complex and totally ready finish. This will not cruise along at this level for a whole lot longer, but it is drinking beautifully today. 2018-2023. **91.**

### **Bérêche et Fils “Brut Réserve” NV (Base Year 2003)**

Much to my surprise, the 2003 base year bottling of Brut Réserve was more vigorous structurally than the fully resolved 2004. This was a very hot, solar year in Champagne, but this

wine is aging beautifully and still has plenty of life ahead of it. The nose offers up an excellent blend of baked pears, hazelnuts, a touch of fresh apricot, *patissière* and an impressive base of chalky minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite precise, with a fine core, pinpoint bubbles and impressive bounce and grip on the long and complex finish. This is an excellent 2003 and will drink longer than the 2004 base year wine! 2018-2030+. **91+**.

### **Champagne Ayala (Aÿ)**

By the time I arrived at Ayala, my trip was almost finished, as I was really starting to go south. I could still taste well, but there was not a lot of pleasure in it, as the flu was starting to get the ascendancy. Happily, my host, Philippe-Alexandre Bernatchez took pity on my oncoming illness and we confined ourselves to a nice flight of recent releases from Champagne Ayala, without visits to the cellars and fermenting room. I was very grateful for our abbreviated visit, as it allowed me to go back to my hotel room and sleep from mid-morning until my next appointment at Bollinger in the mid-afternoon. As readers may already know, the Bollinger family purchased Champagne Ayala in 2005, starting a new chapter for this fine *Aÿ maison*, which had originally been founded in 1860. Today, the *Chef du Cave* for Champagne Ayala is Caroline Latrive, who joined the *maison* in 2006 and rose to Cellar Master and head winemaker in 2011. Madame Latrive is making beautiful wines here in the classic Ayala style of no malolactic fermentation, lower *dosage* and fine mineral drive. The house owns enough vineyards to supply between twenty and twenty-five percent of its needs these days, with the remainder of the grapes purchased from smaller growers in the area.

### **Champagne Ayala Brut Majeur NV**

The Brut Majeur bottling is the workhorse wine in the Ayala portfolio and the new release is lovely. The wine is made from a *cépages* of forty percent each of chardonnay and pinot noir and twenty percent pinot meunier. The current bottling is from the base year of 2014 and was disgorged in September of 2017, with twenty-five percent of the blend made up of reserve wines from the previous two years of 2012 and 2013. The finishing *dosage* was seven grams per liter. The wine offers up a bright and zesty nose of lemon, apple, lovely minerality, white flowers, a nice touch of salinity and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and well-balanced, with a perfectly respectable core, fine *mousse* and a long, vibrant and bouncy finish. This is a lovely bottle that will be even better with a year or two in the cellar to really blossom from behind its lovely structural chassis. 2018-2035. **90+**.

### **Champagne Ayala Brut Majeur Rosé NV**

The current release of Ayala's Brut Majeur Rosé is still from the base year of 2013 and was disgorged in July of 2017. The wine is composed of a blend of fifty percent chardonnay, forty percent pinot noir and ten percent pinot meunier, with six percent of the pinot noir component being still red wine from Aÿ. The wine was finished with a *dosage* of seven grams per liter and offers up a very pretty nose of tangerine, chalky minerality, white cherries, a gentle whiff of smokiness and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and well-balanced, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and a long, snappy finish that closes with impressive mineral drive. Good juice, but now wide open and probably best drunk up over the coming decade. 2018-2028. **90**.

### **Champagne Ayala Brut Nature NV**

The Brut Nature bottling from Champagne Ayala is made from the same base wine as the Brut Majeur, but is not given any *dosage* at disgorgement. However, as this wine spends an

additional year in the cellars aging *sur latte*, the current release, which was disgorged after four years in its fine lees in September of 2017, is from the base year of 2013, rather than 2014, as is the case with the new Brut Majeur. The wine offers up a lovely bouquet of lemon, apple, stony minerality and a touch of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with fine *mousse* and a long, youthful and snappy finish. The additional year aging *sur latte* has allowed the wine's acids to relax nicely and this is a very well-balanced example of Brut Nature. 2018-2030. **91+**.

#### **2010 Champagne Ayala Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime**

The Ayala Blanc de Blancs is made up entirely from fruit sourced in the villages of Cramant, Chouilly, Oiry and Vertus. The wine spends fully six years aging on its fine lees prior to disgorgement, which in this case occurred in January of 2017, with the finishing *dosage* having been six grams per liter. I last tasted this a year ago and the wine has blossomed very nicely since then, delivering fine aromatic complexity in its blend of lemon, pear, chalky soil tones, a hint of bread dough, fresh almond and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and still quite racy in personality, with a good core, refined *mousse*, lovely focus and grip and fine, nascent complexity on the long and snappy finish. This cuvée ages very nicely and I would be inclined to tuck the 2010 version away for at least a few more years and let it open up fully. 2020-2040. **92**.

#### **2006 Champagne Ayala “Cuvée Perle d’Ayala” Brut Millésime**

This was my first look at the new vintage of Champagne Ayala's top bottling, the Perle d'Ayala. The 2006 vintage is made up of a blend of eighty percent pinot noir and twenty percent chardonnay, all from grand cru vineyards and the wine is aged under natural cork, rather than crown cap during its ten years in the cellars here. The wine was disgorged in November of 2017, after more than a decade *sur latte* and finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. This is an excellent wine and still quite youthful on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet offering up a refined blend of lemon, apple, a nice touch of wheat toast, lovely soil tones, dried flowers, lemon peel and a hint of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is zesty, focused and full-bodied, with a fine core, excellent soil signature, elegant *mousse* and a very long, well-balanced and nascently complex finish. Though this wine spent ten years on its fine lees, it is still quite youthful in personality and could use at least a few more years of bottle age to really let it blossom properly. It is going to be outstanding and a real long-distance runner! 2020-2050. **93**.

#### **Champagne Ayala Brut “Rosé No. 8” NV**

I loved the new Champagne Ayala Brut “Rosé No. 8” when I last tasted it almost two years ago, and I was delighted to see it in our tasting lineup again when I was at the *maison* in March. As readers may recall, this is from the 2008 vintage, though it is not listed on the label as a vintage wine. The wine is composed of a blend of fifty-one percent chardonnay from the village of Rilly and forty-nine percent pinot noir, hailing from the grand cru villages of Verzy, Verzenay and Aÿ. The wine was disgorged in March of 2016, with a *dosage* of eight grams per liter. The wine is drinking beautifully and is wide open today, wafting from the glass in a classy mix of strawberries, tangerine, chalky soil tones, a dollop of sweet nuttiness and a topnote of cinnamon. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and taffeta-like on the attack, with a lovely core, refined *mousse* and a long, complex finish that closes with lovely soil signature and grip. This is a touch darker in color than the light salmon-colored Majeur Rosé bottling, but equally light on its feet and very food friendly. High class juice. 2018-2035. **93+**.



### **Champagne Bollinger (Aÿ)**

This was my next to last stop of the trip and my flu was really starting to throw its weight around by my afternoon visit to Bollinger. I was sorry to be under the weather, as this was the first time I had ever visited this *grande marque* and would have liked to have been at the top of my game. The lovely lady who showed me around apparently did not notice my hints of my internal stomach distress and we did the entire tour of the facilities, which I would have loved to have saved for my next visit and a far more robust health, but we eventually got to the tasting room and ran through a nice selection of current releases from Bollinger. We walked through one of the ungrafted parcels of vines that still goes into the Cuvée Vieilles Vignes here, but did not taste any bottles. It was a very nice visit and a pleasure to see Bollinger for the first time, but at the end of the day, this was a tourist visit and not a whole lot was accomplished for the two hours spent in the facilities in Aÿ.

### **Bollinger “Cuvée Spéciale” Brut NV**

The new release of Bollinger “Cuvée Spéciale” non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2013 and was disgorged in April of 2017. The *vins clairs* for this bottling are now raised in seventy percent stainless steel tanks and thirty percent old casks. The *dosage* of this bottling is eight grams per liter and the wine offers up a lovely nose of apple, fresh-baked bread, chalky soil tones, a bit of smokiness and a nice touch of citrus peel in the upper register. On the palate the

wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a good core, elegant *mousse* and fine cut and grip on the well-balanced and vibrant finish. A lovely release. 2018-2035. **92.**

**Bollinger “Cuvée Spéciale” Brut Rosé NV**

The Bollinger “Cuvée Spéciale” Brut Rosé now on the market was disgorged in the summer of 2017 and is composed of a blend of sixty-two percent pinot noir, twenty-four percent chardonnay and fourteen percent pinot meunier. Again, it was finished with a *dosage* of eight grams per liter and wafts from the glass in a very refined aromatic blend of melon, *fraises du bois*, chalky soil tones, rose petals, rye bread and that telltale Bollinger smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and focused, with frothy *mousse*, fine focus and lovely length and grip on the energetic and wide open finish. This is a really good bottle of non-vintage Brut Rosé! 2018-2030. **92+.**

**2007 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Millésime**

I had not tasted a bottle of the 2007 Bollinger “Grande Année” in about a year, so I was glad to see it in our lineup, so I could check to see how it is progressing. The wine is now more open than was the case in the spring of 2017 and delivers a fine nose of apple, peach, smoke, hazelnuts, lovely notes of *patissière* from the pinot noir in the blend and a complex base of chalky soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and quite classy in profile, with fine depth at the core, elegant *mousse* and impressive backend mineral drive on the bright, balanced and complex finish. Lovely juice, from a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay. 2018-2035+. **93+.**

**2007 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Rosé Millésime**

The 205 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Rosé is an excellent wine and is drinking very well indeed, with a vibrancy on the nose and backend energy that is most impressive. The bouquet offers up a fine combination of tangerine, wild strawberries, wheat toast, chalky minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and zesty, with a very suave attack, a lovely core, elegant *mousse* and a long, refined and bouncy finish of impressive complexity and delineation. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2035. **93.**

**2005 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Rosé Millésime**

This particular lot of 2005 Bollinger “Grande Année” Brut Rosé was a later-disgorged version, having been removed from its fine lees in January of 2017. The wine is lovely and really quite *à point* at the present time, offering up a complex and fairly mature aromatic profile of cherries, smoke, a hint of autumnal elements, orange peel, hazelnuts and a fine base of chalky soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, long and full-bodied, with a wide open personality, good depth at the core, elegant *mousse* and a fairly easy-going, wide open structure that suggests drinking this up over the near-term would be merited. I wonder if this is the bottle, or if this wine is really that forward? This bottle: 2018-2021. **91.**

**Champagne La Closerie- Jérôme Prevost (Gueux)**

Jérôme Prevost is one of my very favorite producers in all of Champagne and I have enjoyed his wines for several years now, but this was my first visit to his cellars in the Montagne de Reims village of Gueux. Monsieur Prevost inherited his two *hectare* vineyard of Les Beguines from his grandmother, who had always sold off the grapes to the large houses. In 1987, Jérôme began to take over the farming of these vines and started selling off the grapes himself, but by the mid-1990s, he shifted gears and began working with Anselme Selosse in Avize. At the suggestion of Monsieur Selosse, Jérôme Prevost began making his first wines a few years later, commencing with the 1998 vintage, which he produced at the Selosse cellars in Avize, as there

was no cellar space set up by the family in Gueux. He continued to make his wines in Anselme's cellars until 2001, when he was able to build cellars next to his vineyard in Gueux. Like Monsieur Selosse, Jérôme Prevost farms without recourse to chemical treatments, keeps his yields quite low and barrel ferments his *vins clairs* with indigenous yeasts. As is the case with several of the top, smaller producers these days, Monsieur Prevost allows his *vins clairs* a bit of an extended *elevage* in cask and *demi-muids* until July of the following year before making his *assemblage*. His barrels and *demi-muids* that he uses for his Champagnes are now ten to twelve years of age and quite neutral. He makes two wines, both from his vineyard of Les Beguines- an Extra Brut and an Extra Brut Rosé- both of which are disgorged typically after eighteen months aging *sur latte* and non-*dosé*. However, Jérôme Prevost seems to be extending the time *sur latte* for his wines these days, as the 2014s we tasted here had been disgorged in July of 2016, which would mean they had two years *sur latte*. He told me that the wines are typically disgorged with 2.5 grams per liter of *dosage* these days, but as I had previously understood that they were often non-*dosé*, I may have misunderstood him on this point and it may well be just that the 2015s (which we were talking about at the time) saw this level of *dosage*. In any case, due to the low *dosage* that he prefers and the relatively short time on the fine lees, they tend to be quite youthful when first released and really are built for some time in the cellar, but once they have had a chance to blossom with a bit of bottle age, they are truly exceptional bottles of Champagne.

The village of Gueux is located on the northwestern flank of the Montagne de Reims, about ten kilometers from Reims, and Monsieur Prevost farms almost exclusively pinot meunier in his two *hectares* here. As one climbs further up the Montagne from Gueux, the villages closest are Vrigny, Écueil and Chamery. The vineyard of les Beguines is fairly unique in its soil type than many that we are familiar with in other sectors of the Montagne de Reims, as Monsieur Prevost notes that he has just completed a two year study of the vineyard, drilling hundreds and hundreds of holes to chart the *terroir* here, and the dominant type in the soils here is sandstone. I had always understood, prior to this visit, that les Beguines was planted exclusively to pinot meunier, but if my French is to be trusted, Monsieur Prevost told me that actually the vineyard is planted to a bit more than eighty-five percent of this varietal, with the remainder a field blend of pinot blanc, chardonnay and pinot noir. The vineyards were planted in the late 1950 and early 1960s, so these are old vines by the standards of Champagne, where vines are often replanted at a fairly young age to keep yields up high. Jérôme Prevost typically will crop his old vines at half the legal limit, following on the Selosse methodology of getting depth and complexity in the *vins clairs* through low yields. While these wines may not be composed entirely of pinot meunier, the very large percentage of pinot meunier in the blend certainly defines the wines on both the nose and palate. The Rosé bottling is essentially the same wine as the regular *cuvée*, with the exception that it is finished with ten percent still pinot meunier red to give it its light salmon color.

Jérôme Prevost does not specifically vintage-date his wines on the label, but each is from a single harvest, and he has a code on the front label that will indicate which year the wine hails from. This code is "LC" followed by the two digit number of the vintage, so for example, "LC09" is the bottling from the 2009 vintage. I should mention that he may use a different code for his Rosé, but we did not taste any bottles with labels in the cellars, so I am not sure what it might be and I have used the LC code for both bottlings below to designate the vintage of the wine, even if the alphabetic section of the code may not be correct for the Rosé. He is now doing



a bit of experiment with longer *elevage* for the *vins clairs* prior to bottling and I tasted a 2012 bottling of La Closerie during my visit where he had allowed the *vins clairs* for this wine to spend a year and a half in cask prior to bottling, rather than the customary ten months that he does when the *assemblage* is done in the July following the harvest. It was a very interesting approach to the wine (especially in the stellar 2012 vintage) and I hope he may try this again with other vintages in the future and perhaps add a third bottling to his lineup in the future from this extended *elevage* technique. That said, I would not say that it was superior to any of his wines made by his standard operating procedures today, just a different interpretation of vintage and the lovely *terroir* of les Beguines. I should mention that we also tasted the newly disgorged 2016 here, as well as bottles of both wines from 2015 that had been given an additional year aging *sur latte*, but as all three had only been disgorged one week before my visit and were still a bit agitated as a result, I did not take precise notes on those wines and will wait until next year to write about them. As this was my last visit of my trip, before the flu start to really crash over the dike, my notes are not quite as long and precise as I would like, but at least my palate held up long enough for me to finally make my first visit with Jérôme Prevost in his small winery in Gueux, and that was certainly some comfort on the long flight home and the ensuing convalescence from this uninvited flu.



*Jérôme Prevost in his winery on the edge of the les Beguines vineyard in the village of Gueux.*

### **Champagne La Closierie “les Beguines” Extra Brut NV “LC14”- Jérôme Prevost**

The 2014 vintage of les Beguines is outstanding. Monsieur Prevost noted that “this is from the year of the Suzuki fly” and it was quite the challenge. The wine has turned out beautifully, offering up a bright and youthfully complex bouquet of pear, apple, a nice touch of orange zest, *patissière*, a complex base of the vineyard’s soils and a gentle touch of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and classy, with a rock solid core of fruit, great mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and outstanding length and grip on the young and very promising finish. This wine was disgorged in July of 2016. It is approachable today, but will be even better a few years down the road. 2018-2040. **93.**

### **Champagne La Closierie “les Beguines” Extra Brut Rosé NV “LC14”- Jérôme Prevost**

The 2014 version of Monsieur Prevost’s Extra Brut Rosé was also disgorged in July of 2016 and is also outstanding. The superb nose jumps out of the glass in a fine blend of tangerine, white peach, chalky soil tones (even though this vineyard is sandstone!), dried flowers, just a whisper of oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, crisp and full-bodied, with beautiful balance and grip, a lovely core, fine focus and a long, complex and zesty finish. This is excellent, with the ten percent of still red wine from pinot meunier adding a very delicate extra element of complexity. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2040. **93+.**

### **Champagne La Closierie “les Beguines” Extra Brut NV “LC13”- Jérôme Prevost**

The 2013 vintage of les Beguines shows a cooler and more reserved aromatic profile and probably will need a few years of bottle age to blossom to the point the 2014 is at already, but once it is ready, it will edge out the 2014. The nose is pure and classy, delivering scents of apple, tart orange, complex soil tones, a touch of *patissière* and lovely, meunier-generated floral tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, vibrant and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a very, very long, energetic and perfectly balanced finish. I love this vintage of les Beguines! 2021-2045. **94.**

### **Champagne La Closierie “les Beguines” Extra Brut NV “LC12”- Jérôme Prevost**

I am not sure if this, longer-aged bottling of the 2012 will be commercialized, but this is the bottling I mentioned in the opening, where the *vins clairs* spent fully a year and a half in cask and *demi-muids* prior to bottling. This too is a stellar wine and it would be interesting one day to compare it to the wine that was bottled in July of 2013 after the standard ten months in cask. The nose is deep, pure and very precise, offering up a fine mix of pear, peach, broche, truly stunning minerality, dried flowers and a bit of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and absolutely rock solid at the core, with racy acids, laser-like focus, beautiful *mousse* and a very long, very pure and nascently complex finish. This is already stunning, but I would not touch bottles for a few more years and let the next layer of complexity emerge. 2018-2045. **94.**

### **Champagne La Closierie “les Beguines” Extra Brut Rosé NV “LC09”- Jérôme Prevost**

The 2009 Extra Brut Rosé from Jérôme Prevost is really drinking beautifully today and has impressive elegance and cut for a wine from this solar vintage. The nose is now wide open and shows lovely secondary elements in its mélange of orange, white cherries, salty soil tones, rye bread, gentle smokiness, dried flowers and a bit of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and *à point*, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil signature, pinpoint bubbles and a long, zesty and bouncy finish. Lovely juice. 2018-2035. **92.**

## ***Recently-Tasted Champagne Back Here in New York***

### ***Non-Vintage Brut Nature and Brut Zero***

#### **Claude Cazals “Cuvée Vive” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

This bottle of Cuvée Vive from Champagne Cazals was disgorged in September of 2017 and finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter. The wine is quite stylish on the nose, offering up a fine blend of pear, apple, a touch of almond custard, chalky soil tones and a gently floral topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and focused, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles, fine balance for its lower *dosage* and a long, nascently complex finish. Good juice that will be even better with a bit of bottle age to allow the secondary layers of complexity to start to emerge. 2018-2040. **91+**.

#### **René Geoffroy “Purité” Brut Nature NV (Aÿ)**

This particular bottle of Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy’s “Purité” Brut Nature is composed of a blend of 2010 and 2011 wines and was disgorged in 2017. I like the wine best on the nose today, as it is pretty tight and snappy on the palate. However, the bouquet is focused and refined, offering up scents of apple, a touch of peach, brioche, a good base of soil tones and gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is brisk, full-bodied and bone dry, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and a long, focused and still very snappy finish. More bottle age may allow the acids to peel back a bit more on the finish and give the wine a bit more of a pleasurable palate impression, but today, this is pretty much exclusively for diehard lovers of Brut Nature. 2018-2030. **88+?**

#### **Vouette et Sorbée “Cuvée Fidèle” Brut Nature NV Lot R14 (Buxières sur Arce)**

I am assuming that the lot number of R14 means that this wine is from the base year of 2014. The wine is a Blanc de Noirs, though there is no mention of this on the label that I could locate and it was disgorged in November of 2017. The wine offers up a deep bouquet of crab apple, flinty minerality, sourdough, a bit of menthol and a topnote of lemon peel. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and a bit austere in profile, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and good length and grip on the bone dry finish. This could have used a bit more time in the cellar to allow the acids to soften, as with zero *dosage* present, they are pretty snappy at the present time. It will be a better drink with a bit of bottle age and today, though it is well-made, it is really only for purists. 2018-2030+. **89**.

### ***Non-Vintage Blanc de Blancs Brut and Extra Brut***

#### **Claude Cazals Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger) Served from Magnum**

I have had some lovely wines from Champagne Claude Cazals, but this magnum of non-vintage Blanc de Blancs was not quite up to their usual high standards and made me wonder if it was from the base year of 2011. The wine was disgorged in September of 2017 (which probably makes it quite a bit younger than 2011), but was a bit sinewy on the palate. The bouquet is pretty, offering up a youthful mix of pear, pastry cream, chalky soil tones, spring flowers and smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full, young and racy, with moderate mid-palate depth, fine focus, pinpoint bubbles and good length and grip on the snappy finish. Perhaps more obvious mid-palate depth will emerge with a bit of bottle age? 2018-2035. **88+?**

#### **Dhondt-Grellet “les Terroirs Fines” Blanc de Blanc Extra Brut NV (Flavigny)**

The current release of les Terroirs Fines from Dhondt-Grellet hails from the base year of 2014 and includes thirty percent reserve wines from their solera, started all the way back in 1986. It was finished with a *dosage* of two grams per liter and disgorged in December of 2016. The

bouquet is now starting to show some secondary layers in its complex mix of pear, delicious apple, brioche, lovely, chalky soil tones, a whisper of oak and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, bright, seamless acids and excellent length and grip on the complex and bone dry finish. The combination of the extended bottle age and the thirty percent reserve wines from the solera allows for the very low *dosage* to work beautifully, and this wine is drinking beautifully today and is really at its best served at the table throughout the meal. Fine juice. 2018-2035+. **91+**.

**Fallet-Prévostat Blanc de Blanc Extra Brut NV (Avize)**

I do not know how old this wine was, as I drank it off a wine list in Beaune back in the spring. Based on its evolution on both the nose and palate, I would guess that it is at least ten to fifteen years out from its original release right now, but there was no way for me to be certain of this as there was no information on the label. In any case, the wine is lovely, offering up a superb nose of pear, grilled brioche, plenty of smokiness, just a touch of *crème patissière*, a fine base of chalky minerality and a topnote of almond. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and seamless in its balance, with a fine core, lovely backend mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and zesty finish. A beautiful wine. 2018-2035+. **93**.

**Henri Giraud “Blanc de Craie” Brut NV (Aÿ)**

The Champagne Henri Giraud “Blanc de Craie” non-vintage Brut is a new cuvée from Claude Giraud, made entirely from chardonnay, with ninety percent of the blend from vineyards on the Montagne de Reims and ten percent from the home base village of Aÿ. The *vins clairs* here are aged twelve months before blending, with the Montagne chardonnay raised in stainless steel and the Aÿ chardonnay in Argonne oak casks. After blending, the wine was given twenty-four months of aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement. This particular bottle was disgorged in October of 2015, making this from the base year of 2012. The wine offers up a complex and classy nose of pear, apple, brioche, hazelnut, chalky soil tones, a whisper of buttery oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, well-balanced and rock solid at the core, with excellent mineral drive, elegant *mousse*, fine focus and grip, bright acids and a long, complex finish. The touch of oak used for the *elevage* of the Aÿ portion of chardonnay shows a bit more on the palate than on the nose, but it is very well done and does not distract from what is a lovely bottle of Blanc de Blancs and a very welcome new addition to the Giraud family lineup. 2018-20340. **92+**.

**Philippe Gonet “3210” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

The Philippe Gonet “3210” cuvée of Blanc de Blancs is made from a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay from the villages Mesnil-sur-Oger and Montgueux in the Aube, and though it is listed as an Extra Brut, it is non-*dosé*. This bottle had a lot number of L270217, which I assume means it was disgorged in the second quarter of 2017. The wine offers up a classy bouquet of tart orange, apple, wheat toast and a good base of chalky minerality. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and fairly complex, with good mid-palate depth, bright acids, pinpoint bubbles and good, solid length and grip on the wide open and well-balanced finish. Good juice. 2018-2030. **90**.

**Philippe Gonet “Ter” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

This was the first time I had tasted the “Ter” bottling of Blanc de Blancs from Champagne Gonet. I did not have any technical details on this bottling and there was no information regarding base year or date of disgorgement on the back label, but I did note that this was Lot “L151216” and perhaps the information is encoded there. In any case, this is a good

bottle of wine, offering up a beautifully refined nose of pear, pastry cream, chalky soil tones, fresh almond and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with a good core, elegant *mousse* and a slightly short finish, which is the only thing that keeps the score down here a bit. With a bit more backend length, this would rank several points higher, as I really like the flavors and aromatics. 2018-230. **89.**

**Lanson Extra Age Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Reims)**

The new release of Lanson's Extra Age Blanc de Blancs is a blend of the 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages, as is the case with the regular Extra Age bottling currently in the market, but the Blanc de Blancs is a bit more tightly-knit at the present time and has not quite blossomed as completely. The nose is starting to blossom nicely (even if the palate is still a bit reticent), as it offers up scents of pear, delicious apple, brioche, chalky soil tones, fresh almond and a nice touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and very nicely balanced, with a youthful profile, a fine core, elegant *mousse* and fine length and grip on the still fairly primary finish. This is not a bad glass of bubbly today, but it is still clearly a few years away from really coming into its own and I would opt for cellaring it for at least a few more years and let it open up as nicely as the regular Extra Age bottling. 2020-2045. **92+.**

**Le Brun Servenay "Mélodie en C" Extra Brut NV (Avize)**

The new release of Le Brun Servenay "Mélodie en C" non-vintage, Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut is composed of grapes from the grand cru villages of Avize, Cramant and Oger. The *vins clairs* are raised in stainless steel and do not undergo malolactic fermentation. The wine is aged three-plus years *sur latte* and this release was disgorged in January of 2017, making this wine from the base year of 2013. It was finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter and offers up a fine nose of pear, delicious apple, almond, brioche, limestone minerality and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely mid-palate depth, frothy *mousse*, and very good balance on the long and wide open finish. This is drinking beautifully today. 2018-2030+. **91.**

**David Léclapart "l'Apôtre" Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut "LV10" (Trépail)**

This bottle of David Léclapart's "l'Apôtre" Blanc de Blancs is from the 2010 vintage and the wine is starting to really drink well at eight years of age. The bouquet is pure and refined, wafting from the glass in a classy blend of apple, pear, brioche, chalky soil tones, hazelnut and lovely upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite complex, with zesty acids, fine focus and grip, refined *mousse* and a very long, quite dry, but perfectly balanced finish. Fine, fine juice with decades of life ahead of it. 2018-2040. **93+.**

**Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Cramant)**

The Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs non-vintage Brut that is currently in the market is fifty percent from the base year of 2014, thirty-five percent from the previous year and fifteen percent reserve wines. It was disgorged in the summer of 2017 and finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter, so it is effectively an Extra Brut bottling, though the label still says Brut. The wine is composed entirely of grand cru fruit from the villages of Cramant, Chouilly and Oiry. The bouquet is bright and promising, offering up a youthful mix of pear, lemon, chalky minerality, fresh-baked bread and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, snappy and well-balanced, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles and fine focus and grip on the long, youthful and nascently complex finish. With its lower *dosage*, this wine could really do with a bit of time in the cellar to relax structurally, but all of the constituent components are in place for this wine to blossom nicely with just a bit of bottle age. 2020-2040. **90.**

### **Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs “Perle” Brut NV (Cramant)**

The Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs “Perle” non-vintage Brut bottling is the family’s old vine cuvée, hailing exclusively from their vineyards in the village of Cramant, which is bottled at a lower pressure than their other wines. The current release is from the base year of 2013, with thirty-five percent of the blend made up of reserve wines. The *dosage* is five grams per liter and the wine was disgorged in the fall of 2017, after spending three and a half years aging *sur latte*. The wine delivers a beautiful bouquet of pear, delicious apple, a touch of orange zest, pasty cream, limestone minerality and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely frothy, with a lovely core, superb focus and grip, refined *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the poised and very nicely balanced finish. This is still a young wine, but in contrast to the regular non-vintage Blanc de Blancs from the estate, the combination of the extra year on its fine lees and the older vines makes this wine far more accessible out of the blocks and a great pleasure to drink in its youth. It will still age beautifully, but it will not demand any patience! 2018-2040. **92.**

### **Robert Moncuit Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

This is a new disgorgement of the non-vintage Blanc de Blancs from Robert Moncuit, which is eighty percent from the base year of 2013 and twenty percent from the previous vintage of 2012. However, this bottling was disgorged in February of 2018 (spending an additional sixteen months *sur latte*) and finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter, rather than the five grams of the previous release of this cuvée (which I reviewed a year ago). As I noted last year, the *vins clairs* for this bottling are eighty percent raised in older casks, with the balance in stainless steel. The new release offers up a fine bouquet of apple, pear, chalky minerality, a nice touch of nuttiness, brioche and a whisper of oakiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with excellent mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and fine grip on the long and very well-balanced finish. With the extra time *sur latte*, the acids have backed off a bit from the previous release and the lower *dosage* seems just perfect to balance the wine precisely. I really like this rendition! 2018-2035+. **92.**

### **Pierre Peters “Parlement Européen” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV**

This bottling is produced (or labeled) specifically for the European Parliament and was purchased by a friend of mine in France eight to ten years ago. The wine has aged quite nicely and now offers up a nice secondary patina to its bouquet of apple, *crème patissière*, chalky soil tones, almond and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, fairly complex and well-balanced, with good, but not exceptional depth at the core, elegant *mousse* and a long, zesty finish. This is fully mature today and drinking well. 2018-2030+. **90.**

### **Jean-Marc Sélèque “Quintette” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut NV (Pierry)**

Jean-Marc Sélèque’s “Quintette” Blanc de Blancs is from the base year of 2014, with twenty percent of the blend coming from the new solera that he has created for this bottling a few years back. The cuvée takes its name from the five different villages where the chardonnay for this bottling hails from: Pierry, Vertus, Épernay, Dizy and Mardeuil. The wine was disgorged in November of 2017 and was finished with a *dosage* of only two grams per liter and offers up a superb bouquet of pear, *crème patissière*, fresh almond, chalky soil tones, a whisper of buttery oak and a gently floral topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with brisk acids, excellent focus and grip, refined *mousse* and a very long, complex and youthful finish. With the low *dosage* of two grams per liter, I would be inclined to give this a bit of bottle age before starting to drink it in earnest, just to let the acids relax a bit more and some of its secondary layers of complexity emerge. 2020-2040+. **92.**



### ***Non-Vintage Brut and Extra Brut***

#### **Barnaut “Grande Réserve” Brut NV (Bouzy)**

The current release of Barnaut “Grande Réserve” non-vintage Brut was disgorged in December of 2017 and its *cépages* is its customary two-thirds pinot noir and one-third chardonnay. The wine hails from the base year of 2014 and all of the *vins clairs* go through malolactic and are raised in stainless steel tanks. It was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter and offers up a fine nose of apple, white peach, fresh-baked bread, lovely, chalky soil tones and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with pinpoint bubbles, bright, zesty acids and fine grip on the long and complex finish. This is a fine bottle that is drinking nicely in its youth, but clearly will age gracefully and will be even more interesting with another three to five years in the cellar. Fine juice. 2018-2040. **91.**

#### **Barnaut “Quintessence du Pinot Noir” Blanc de Noirs Brut NV (Bouzy)**

Philippe Secondé took over the direction of the family Barnaut Champagne house in 1985 and first fashioned his Blanc de Noirs bottling in 1995. Since that time, it has become one of the yardstick bottlings for this style of wine, which he makes entirely from pinot noir. The current release was disgorged in December of 2017 and I believe hails from the base year of 2014; it was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine offers up a fine nose of white peach, apple, fresh-baked bread, chalky soil tones, and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely focus and grip,



refined, pinpoint bubbles and lovely soil signature on the long and vibrant finish. Like all of the Barnaut bottlings, this is really good at table. 2018-2035. **91+**.

**Dhondt-Grellet “Dans un Premier Temps” Brut NV (Flavigny)**

The Dhondt-Grellet “Dans un Premier Temps” non-vintage Brut is a blend of fifty percent chardonnay, thirty percent pinot noir and twenty percent pinot meunier. The wine is a blend of seventy percent base year 2014 and thirty percent reserve wines from a solera started in 1986, with the finishing *dosage* here five grams per liter. The wine was disgorged in October of 2017 after two and a half years aging *sur latte*. The nose wafts from the glass in a fine blend of apple, fresh-baked bread, lovely soil tones, a bit of smokiness and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still youthfully snappy, with a fine core, lovely soil signature, pinpoint bubbles and a long, nascently complex and nicely balanced finish. This is a lovely example that will only get better with a bit of bottle age. 2018-2040. **91**.

**Gosset “Grande Réserve” Brut NV (Épernay)**

The current release of Gosset “Grande Réserve” is drinking beautifully out of the blocks and offers plenty of potential for evolution in the cellar as well. The bouquet is bright and expressive, delivering scents of apple, white peach, a fine base of minerality, fresh-baked bread and a touch of caraway seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with bright acids, refined *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the complex and vibrant finish. This bottle was drunk in a restaurant in Reims in March, so I do not have the technical details on this release. But, it is very tasty. 2018-2040. **92+**.

**Jacquesson “Cuvée No. 741” Extra Brut (Dizy)**

The Jacquesson “Cuvée No. 741” Extra Brut is from the base year of 2013 and includes approximately twenty percent reserve wines in the cuvée. This year the *cépages* is fifty-seven percent chardonnay, twenty-two percent pinot meunier and twenty-one percent pinot noir, with the wine disgorged in September of 2017 and finished with a quite low *dosage* of 2.5 grams per liter (though this is up a full gram from the Cuvée No. 740). The wine is quite beautiful already on the nose, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of apple, pear, warm bread, a touch of hazelnut, a superbly complex base of soil tones and a touch of dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, bright and quite open structurally, with fine acids, pinpoint bubbles, lovely focus and grip and a long, nicely mineral and bone dry finish. For my palate, the low *dosage* has me wanting to tuck this away for two or three more years before having at it in earnest, but for those that really like low *dosage* bubbly, it is already drinking quite nicely today. It is certainly not as tight structurally out of the blocks as the Cuvée No. 740 and will drink earlier on in its evolution. 2018-2040+. **92**.

**Lanson “Black Label” Brut NV (Reims)**

The present bottling of Lanson Blanc Label in the market was disgorged in October of 2017. The wine is drinking very nicely, offering up a complex nose of apple, a touch of peach, lovely soil tones, fresh-baked bread and incipient smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and focused, with a good core, pinpoint bubbles, fine acids and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. This has the cut and backend bounce of a non-malo bubbly, but with the acids beautifully buffered. A fine Brut NV. 2018-2035. **91**.

**Lanson “Green Label” Brut NV (Reims)**

The new Lanson “Green Label” non-vintage Brut is the first wine from this fine Champagne house made entirely from organically-farmed grapes certified by Eco-Cert. This is an important and very laudable step from Lanson and I was very happy to find the wine absolutely superb. The wine hails from eight *hectares* of vines that Lanson bought from LeClerc-

Briant when the proprietor of this house passed away in 2010, and which had been farmed biodynamically for several years prior to the sale. The *cépages* here is a bit different from the Black Label bottling, as the blend is made up of fifty percent pinot noir, thirty percent pinot meunier and twenty percent chardonnay. The new release was disgorged in March of 2018 and is from the superb base year of 2012; it was finished with a *dosage* of nine grams per liter. The wine offers up a complex nose of white peach, chalky soil tones, *patissière*, a touch of smokiness and a lovely, gently floral topnote from the high percentage of pinot meunier in the blend. On the palate the wine is crisp, full and focused, with a very good core, refined *mousse* and very good length and grip on the vibrant and wide open finish. The extended period aging *sur latte* has allowed the wine to blossom beautifully and this is drinking with bounce and generosity today. Fine juice. 2018-2035. **92.**

#### **Lanson Extra Age Brut NV (Reims)**

The current release of Lanson Extra Age is composed of a blend of the 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages and was disgorged in February of 2017, after fully ten years aging *sur latte*. The wine's *cépages* is sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent chardonnay. It is drinking beautifully today and may well be my favorite rendition thus far of the Extra Age cuvée, which always brings together three top flight vintages for an extended period of maturation in the cellars in Reims prior to release. The wine offers up a superb and beautifully developed bouquet of apple, white peach, bread dough, a touch of orange peel, a complex base of salty soil tones and a lovely topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and shows off excellent mid-palate depth, with refined balance, elegant *mousse*, superb cut and grip and a long, complex and wide open finish. This wine is now at its apogee, but as it is a classic, non-malo wine from Lanson, it probably still has at least twenty more years of positive evolution ahead of it. *Hors Classé*. 2018-2040+. **93+.**

#### **Laurent-Perrier “Grande Siècle” Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

This version of Laurent-Perrier “Grande Siècle” non-vintage is made up of 1988, 1990 and 1993. The wine is now fully mature and already quite tertiary in its aromatic constellation of baked apples, complex minerality, sourdough bread, smoky overtones and a bit of caraway seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and more than ready, with still quite good acidity, fine *mousse* and a long, moderately complex finish. This is moving in the direction of a very mature and gentle Champagne, with plenty of smoky and nutty tones, but it does not have quite the complexity I would have expected for this point in its evolution. This is particularly true, given how good it was closer to release. I would opt for drinking this version of Grande Siècle over the relative near-term, as I do not think it is going to improve. 2018-2030. **91.**

#### **Marie Weiss Brut NV (Ludes)**

The new release of Marie Weiss non-vintage Brut (from Ployez-Jacquemart) is a lovely middleweight in the making. The wine was disgorged in April of 2017 and is composed of its customary blend of fifty percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent each of pinot noir and pinot meunier. It is from the base year of 2014 and was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The nose offers up a fine blend of white peach, pear, bread dough, chalky soil tones and a bit of upper register floral notes. On the palate the wine is young, crisp and fullish, with a good core, lovely focus and balance, refined *mousse* and a long, complex and bouncy finish. The Marie Weiss cuvée from Ployez-Jacquemart is always a bit higher-toned in style and this is true of this bottling, but it has plenty of personality and is really a lovely aperitif-styled Champagne and always a good value. 2018-2033+. **90.**

**Philipponnat “Royale Réserve” Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The Philipponnat “Royale Réserve” non-vintage Brut that is now in the market is from the base year of 2013 and the wine is really lovely. The *maison* has begun to age the reserve wines used for this bottling in older casks for up to two and a half years before using them in the blend, which gives lovely depth and a bit of roundness to the younger wines in the cuvée. The *cépages* of the new release is sixty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier, with the wine finished with a *dosage* of eight grams per liter after its disgorgement in October of 2017. The excellent bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of apple, lemon, a touch of *crème patissière*, chalky soil tones, sourdough bread and apple blossoms. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and very nicely balanced, with bright acids, fine focus and grip, a good core, pinpoint bubbles and a long, poised and nascently complex finish. Fine juice. 2018-2035. **91.**

**Ployez-Jacquemart “Extra Quality” Brut NV (Ludes)**

The new release of Ployez-Jacquemart non-vintage Brut is from the base year of 2013 and is composed of the traditional *cépages* for this cuvée of forty percent each of chardonnay and pinot meunier and twenty percent pinot noir. It was aged more than three years *sur latte* and disgorged in October of 2017. The bottle delivers a superb bouquet of pear, apple, gentle, meunier-based floral tones, brioche, chalky soil tones and just a whisper of buttery oak in the bass line. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and impeccably balanced, with lovely focus and grip, a fine core, elegant *mousse* and a long, vibrant and classy finish. Non-vintage Brut just does not get better than this bottling, year in and year out! 2018-2035. **92.**

**Frédéric Savart “l’Accomplie” Vieilles Vignes Extra Brut NV (Écueil)**

The new release of Frédéric Savart’s “l’Accomplie” non-vintage Extra Brut was disgorged in January of 2018 and is composed of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay. The *vins clairs* for this bottling are raised both in stainless steel and older casks, with the wines raised in oak only going through partial malo. The finishing *dosage* is five grams per liter and the wine delivers lovely complexity in its vibrant nose of apple, white peach, chalky minerality, bread dough and a touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully balanced, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip, refined *mousse* and a long, complex and very classy finish. This is terrific non-vintage bubbly! 2018-2040. **92+.**

**Jean-Marc Sélèque “Solessence” Extra Brut NV (Pierry)**

The current release of Jean-Marc Sélèque’s “Solessence” Extra Brut is from the base year of 2015, with this being the first vintage that he has produced from his new cellars. The wine’s *cépages* is fifty percent chardonnay, forty percent pinot meunier and ten percent pinot noir and was finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter, making this the first bottling to be released as an Extra Brut. It was disgorged in December of 2017 and offers up a beautifully refined bouquet of white peach, apple, lovely meunier floral tones, a touch of fresh nutmeg, white lilies and a complex base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still youthfully snappy, with excellent depth at the core, superb soil signature, refined *mousse* and budding complexity on the very long, precise and vibrant finish. This is an outstanding young wine, but at its lower *dosage*, I would opt for tucking it away in the cellar for just a couple of years and letting the acids back off a bit more and the next layer of complexity emerge. It has outstanding potential! 2020-2040. **92.**

### **Champagne Tarlant “Brut Réserve” NV (Oeuilly)**

I love Benoît Tarlant’s wines and only wish that he made a few more bottlings with just a bit of *dosage*, as his non-vintage Brut Réserve is one of his few where he uses a bit. This particular bottle is from the base year of 2007, which is composed of a blend of one-third each of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier. I last tasted this back in the beginning of 2015, when it was first released, after more than sixty months aging *sur latte* in the family cellars in Oeuilly. The wine is developing beautifully and is now wide open on the nose, offering up scents of apple, hazelnuts, chalky soil tones, warm biscuits, a touch of lemon zest and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and impeccably balanced, with refined *mousse*, a fine core and a long, crisp and vibrant finish. This is first class non-vintage Brut! 2018-2035. 92.



### ***Non-Vintage Rosé Brut and Extra Brut***

#### **Barnaut “Authentique Rosé” Brut NV (Bouzy)**

The Barnaut Authentique Rosé non-vintage Brut is made in the *saignée* method and includes between ten and fifteen percent chardonnay in the blend, all from the home vineyards in Bouzy. The rest of the blend is made up of Bouzy pinot noir, with the skin contact here giving the wine a beautifully deep salmon color and plenty of vinosity. The wine only spends eighteen months aging *sur latte*, to preserve its freshness, with the current release having been disgorged in July of 2017 and hailing from the base year of 2015. The finishing *dosage* here is six grams per liter and the wine offers up a beautiful nose of cherries, blood orange, a nice touch of spice,

chalky soil tones, woodsmoke and rye bread. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core, excellent *mousse*, bright acids and lovely balance and grip on the long, vinous, and zesty finish. While this wine has the broad shoulders of Bouzy pinot noir, it is still very bouncy and light on its feet and an outstanding bottle of Rosé. 2018-2035. **92.**

#### **Lanson Brut Rosé NV (Reims)**

The current release of Lanson non-vintage Brut Rosé was disgorged in October of 2017 and is composed of a blend of fifty-three percent pinot noir, thirty-two percent chardonnay and fifteen percent pinot meunier. The wine is a pale salmon color and offers up a bright and nascently complex bouquet of cherries, tangerine, chalky minerality, rye bread and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and nicely zesty, with a good core, fine soil signature, elegant *mousse* and a long, vibrant finish. The non-malo house style of Lanson really makes their non-vintage Rosé a fine companion at the table. 2018-2030+. **90.**

#### **Lanson Extra Age Brut Rosé NV (Reims)**

The present day example of Lanson Extra Age Brut Rosé also hails from the three vintages of 2004, 2005 and 2006. The blend is sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay, with I assume five percent of the pinot being still red wine to give the bottling its lovely salmon color. This wine was disgorged in June of 2014, so it did not spend quite as long aging *sur latte* as the other two new Extra Age releases. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a classy blend of tangerine, rye bread, smoky overtones, a fine base of chalky soil elements and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and beautifully complex, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and fine grip on the fairly long finish. This wine is wide open, admirably complex and ready for drinking, though the wine seems just a touch shorter on the backend as the other two current releases of Extra Age. 2018-2030+. **92.**

#### **Philipponnat “Royale Réserve Rosé” Brut NV (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The current release of Philipponnat “Royale Réserve Rosé” is from the base year of 2013 and the wine is lovely. It is comprised of a mix of seventy-five percent pinot noir, twenty percent chardonnay and five percent pinot meunier and was disgorged in September of 2017, with a finishing *dosage* of nine grams per liter. The bouquet is very pure and vibrant, jumping from the glass in a lovely blend of strawberries, tangerine, chalky minerality, gentle smokiness, a touch of clove and a topnote of caraway seed. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and seamlessly balanced, with bright acids, elegant *mousse* and fine focus and grip on the very long and classy finish. This is an outstanding value for non-vintage Brut Rosé. 2018-2030+. **91+.**

#### **Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut Rosé NV (Ludes)**

The new release of Ployez-Jacquemart Extra Brut non-vintage Rosé was disgorged in November of 2017 and is from the base year of 2014. The *cépages* is this cuvée’s customary fifty percent chardonnay, thirty-seven percent pinot noir and thirteen percent pinot meunier, with ten percent of the pinot noir still red wine. The new version offers beautifully purity on the nose, wafting from the glass in a lovely mix of strawberries, a touch of tangerine, complex, chalky minerality, bread dough and a touch of rose petal in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with lovely transparency, refined *mousse*, zesty acids and excellent focus, length and grip on the elegant and complex finish. This is more accessible out of the blocks than the base year 2013 version was at this point in its evolution last year, but I have the sense this will age just as long and gracefully. Just lovely Rosé. 2018-2040. **92+.**

### **Frédéric Savart “Bulle de Rosé” Extra Brut NV (Écueil)**

Frédéric Savart’s lovely “Bulle de Rosé” Extra Brut bottling seems to get a touch lighter with each passing vintage. The wine is a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with eight percent of the pinot noir still red wine. The new release was disgorged in January 2018 and finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine is very pale salmon in color and offers up a beautiful, youthful nose of wild strawberries, tangerine, a bit of rye bread, chalky minerality, dried flowers and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, young and complex, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse* and excellent length and grip on the beautifully balanced and zesty finish. This is still a young wine and will be even better to drink with another couple of years’ worth of bottle age, as there are more layers of complexity to unfold, but it is so well balanced that it is already very tasty in its youthful guise. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2035+. **92+**.

### **Jean-Marc Sélèque “Solessence Rosé” Extra Brut NV (Pierry)**

Jean-Marc Sélèque’s “Solessence Rosé” non-vintage Extra Brut is from the base year of 2015 and includes forty percent wines from the solera that Jean-Marque has set up for this cuvée. The *cépages* is forty-five percent chardonnay, forty percent pinot meunier and fifteen percent pinot noir, with the color given from an addition of small amounts of both red still wine from pinot noir and some skin contact in the pinot meunier. The *dosage* is four grams per liter and the wine was disgorged in January of 2018. The color is quite a pale salmon and the bouquet is beautifully reflective of its high percentage of pinot meunier in the blend, offering up scents of peach, a touch of tangerine, lovely meunier floral tones, rye bread, chalky soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and beautifully soil-driven in personality, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip, frothy *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the very well-balanced and quite dry finish. Superb juice. 2018-2040. **92+**.

### ***Vintage-Dated Blanc de Blancs Brut and Extra Brut***

#### **2012 Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Cramant)**

The 2012 Lilbert-Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime hails entirely from their vineyards in their home village of Cramant and was finished with a low *dosage* of four grams per liter, after its five years aging *sur latte* and its disgorgement in the spring of 2018. The nose shows all of the refinement and depth of this magical vintage, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of pear, apple, fresh almond, chalky minerality, a touch of brioche, fruit blossoms and gentle upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full and focused, with lovely depth at the core, refined *mousse*, brisk acids and excellent length and grip on the youthfully complex and still tightly-knit finish. Again, with a low *dosage*, there is not enough here right now to buffer the youthful acidity and a bit of cellaring is required. The wine will be more generous and really excellent once its relaxes its acidity just a bit more, but right now it is a bit youthful to my taste. 2020-2045+. **92+**.

#### **2010 Robert Moncuit “Vozémieux” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Mesnil-sur-Oger)**

The 2010 Robert Moncuit “Vozémieux” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime is the first bottling for this *lieu à dit* bottling from the village of Mesnil-sur-Oger (which now joins his other single vineyard bottling from the better known les Chétillons which was first produced in the 2008 vintage). The *vins clairs* are all fermented in stainless steel and go through full malo and the wine was disgorged in March of 2017 and given a very low *dosage* of 1.12 grams per liter. The wine offers up superb aromatic complexity in its mix of apple, pear, limestone minerality,



gentle smokiness and a nice touch of lemon zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, still youthfully snappy and very mineral-driven, with a fine core, promising complexity and a very long, very young finish. With its low *dosage*, this wine needs bottle age to blossom a bit more completely from behind its fine structure, so I would tuck this away for three to five years and really let it come into its own. It will be excellent. 2022-2045+. **92.**

**2009 Aurélien Suenen Blanc de Blanc Extra Brut Millésime (Cramant)**

The 2009 vintage of Blanc de Blanc from Aurélien Suenen was disgorged in January of 2017 and was finished with a *dosage* of 3.5 grams per liter. The wine is still quite youthful on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet offering up scents of pear, a touch of tangerine, chalky minerality, brioche and a nice dollop of fresh nutmeg in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and still quite racy, with a fine core, excellent backend mineral drive (particularly for a 2009) and a long, nascently complex and classy finish. This still needs at least five years in the cellar to my palate to truly start to blossom, and will last many decades. One of the serious long-distance runners of the 2009 vintage. 2023-2060. **93.**

**2008 Philipponnat “Grand Blanc” Extra Brut Millésime (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The 2008 Philipponnat “Grand Blanc” Extra Brut was made with an extended period of *élevage* in tanks or casks in the cellars in Mareuil, prior to its going into the bottle in June of 2009. The wine then spent more than seven and a half years aging *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in March of 2017. It was finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter in this vintage. The is beautifully expressive on the nose, offering up a complex bouquet of delicious apple, pear, brioche, hazelnut, chalky soil tones and a smoky topnote. As the wine sits in the glass, a touch of oak influence also starts to show, so I suspect that some of the *vins clairs* here were barrel-fermented. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and focused, with a lovely core, refined *mousse*, excellent backend mineral drive, bright acids and lovely focus and grip on the very long, complex and classy finish. This is already drinking beautifully at age ten, but has the balance and structure to also age long and gracefully. High class juice. 2018-2040+. **93.**

**2007 Clos Lanson Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime**

The 2007 Clos Lanson was disgorged in July of 2016, after more than eight years aging *sur latte*. This is the second iteration of this bottling to be released, made from a tiny parcel of vines right out behind the winery in the heart of Reims, with the inaugural vintage having been the 2006. The 2007 Clos Lanson was given a very modest *dosage* of three grams per liter and allowed an additional year of cellar aging to recover after its disgorgement prior to release into the market. The wine offers up a beautiful and very refined bouquet of apple, pear, fresh-baked bread, a lovely base of soil, discreet smokiness, almond and a gentle topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, focused, full-bodied and very refined in profile, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, excellent complexity and a long, zesty and beautifully balanced finish. This is outstanding wine! 2018-2040+. **94.**

**2000 Lanson “Noble Cuvée” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Reims)**

The 2000 Lanson “Noble Cuvée” Blanc de Blancs is drinking beautifully and at its apogee at age eighteen. The bouquet shows lovely secondary layers of complexity in its mix of pear, delicious apple, wheat toast, chalky minerality, a touch of nuttiness and plenty of upper

register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very refined in personality, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and impressive length and grip on the wide open, vibrant and complex finish. This is a perfect moment to be drinking the 2000. 2018-2035+. **94.**



### ***Vintage-Dated Brut and Extra Brut***

#### **2012 Frédéric Savart “Expression” Brut Nature Millésime (Écueil)**

The 2012 Frédéric Savart “Expression” Brut Nature is composed entirely of old vines of pinot noir in his home village of Écueil. It is raised for ten months in three hundred liter barrels prior to bottling for the secondary fermentation and sees no *dosage*, with the 2012 version having been disgorged in January of 2017. The wine offers up superb depth and nascent complexity on the nose, wafting from the glass in a fine blend of peach, apple, *patissière*, complex soil tones, a bit of vanillin oak and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and still quite zesty, with a rock solid core, stellar soil inflection, refined *mousse* and a very long, bright and complex finish. There is plenty of acidity here, but it has been softened up by its extended aging *sur latte* and the wine is quite tasty already, though it will be even more generous on the palate with further bottle age. I very much like the gently oaky influence from the casks here, which round off the acids a bit and give the wine plenty of backend amplitude. This is excellent Brut Nature! 2018-2045. **93+.**

### **2012 Jean-Marc Sélèque “Partition” Extra Brut Millésime (Pierry)**

The 2012 “Partition” Extra Brut Millésime from Jean-Marc Sélèque is a blend of seventy-two percent chardonnay and fourteen percent each of pinot meunier and pinot noir. Monsieur Sélèque makes a selection from seven barrels from seven different *lieux à dits* for this bottling (La Justice in Vertus, Les Frileux in Épernay, Moque Bouteille in Dizy, Les Basses Ronces in Mardeuil, and from his home village of Pierry, Les Tartières-Porgeons, Les Gouttes d’Or and Leas Gayères.) The wine spent four and a half years aging *sur latte* under cork, rather than crown cap, and was disgorged in October of 2017 and finished with a *dosage* of two grams per liter. The wine is outstanding on the nose, wafting from the glass in a composed blend of pear, delicious apple, brioche, chalky soil tones, a bit of buttery oak, a touch of almond and lovely, meunier-derived floral tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, precise, full-bodied and perfectly balanced, with lovely depth at the core, pinpoint bubbles, bright, seamless acids and outstanding length and grip on the nascently complex finish. I have been very, very impressed with each and every wine I have tasted from Jean-Marc Sélèque over the last handful of years, but this 2012 Partition is perhaps the finest I have yet tried. He is in new cellars now and has been able to make some winemaking changes he has wanted to use for several years and it may well be that we are entering upon a new and very exciting chapter for this outstanding *vigneron* from Pierry. Stay tuned! 2018-2045. **93+**.

### **2011 Philipponnat Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut Millésime (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The 2011 Philipponnat Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut is made up entirely of pinot noir and spent nearly six years aging *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in January of 2017. It was finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter. The wine is quite good for this vintage, offering up a bright and elegant nose of apple, white peach, *patissière*, lovely soil tones, a touch of almond and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and still quite youthful, with a fine core, frothy *mousse*, bright acids and fine length and grip on the complex, but slightly lean finish. This does not quite have the same backend amplitude one would find in a vintage like 2012, but it has admirable complexity and balance. 2018-2040. **91+**.

### **2008 Jean Moreau Brut Millésime (Ambonnay) Served from magnum**

The 2008 Brut Millésime from Jean Moreau is composed entirely of pinot noir. The wine offers up a fine and still fairly youthful bouquet of peach, *patissière*, stony minerality, warm bread and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and zesty, with a good core, elegant *mousse* and very good length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. This is not overly complex today, but perhaps it is still just a bit too young for primetime drinking? 2018-2040. **90+?**

### **2008 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Extra Brut Millésime (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The 2008 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Extra Brut Millésime was crafted entirely from grand cru vineyards, with the *cépages* fifty-eight percent pinot noir and forty-two percent chardonnay. The wine was disgorged in March of 2018 after nine and a half years aging *sur latte* and was finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter. The nose is excellent, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of apple, white peach, chalky soil tones, brioche, white flowers and a touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, young and very well-balanced, with a good core, refined *mousse*, well-integrated acids and excellent length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This is a classic 2008 and will be even better with another couple of years in the cellar, but is already pretty tasty. 2018-2040. **92**.

### **2008 Philipponnat “Mareuil-sur-Aÿ” Extra Brut Millésime (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The 2008 Mareuil-sur-Aÿ bottling is composed entirely of pinot noir and most of the *vins clairs* were barrel-fermented and raised in older casks, without undergoing malolactic fermentation. A smaller percentage of the *vins clairs* are raised in tank and do undergo malo. The wine was disgorged in September of 2017 and finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter. Not all of the fruit hails directly from the Clos des Goisses for this bottling, with a small percentage of the grapes coming from plots that lie adjacent to the famous Clos. This was first produced in the 2006 vintage and this outstanding 2008 is the second vintage to be released. It offers up a superb young bouquet of white peach, apple, *patissière*, chalky soil tones, a touch of dried flowers and a gentle topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and beautifully structured, with ripe, well-integrated acids, excellent depth at the core, elegant *mousse*, impressive purity and a long, complex and zesty finish. This is certainly approachable at age ten, but in reality is still a young wine and I would be inclined to let it blossom with a bit more time in the cellar. It is a beautiful wine in the making. 2021-2055+. **94+**.

### **2008 Philipponnat “les Cintres” Clos des Goisses Extra Brut Millésime (Mareuil-sur-Aÿ)**

The 2008 Philipponnat “les Cintres” is the second vintage that the *maison* has produced of this Blanc de Noirs selection from the three *lieux à dits* that have the warmest microclimate. I loved the debut vintage of 2006 of les Cintres and the 2008 is a brilliant follow-up. The pinot noir for this bottling is all barrel-fermented, without undergoing malolactic and the wine was eventually disgorged in September of 2017, after more than eight years aging *sur latte*. The finishing *dosage* of the 2008 les Cintres was 4.5 grams per liter and delivers superb aromatic fireworks in its blend of white peach, apple, a touch of walnut, exotic, a beautifully complex base of Clos des Goisses limestone, gentle floral tones reminiscent of lilacs and lavender and a nice topnote of *patissière*. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and very elegant in profile, with a rock solid core, great soil signature, elegant *mousse* and bright, zesty acids adding grip and structure on the very, very long and perfectly balanced finish. This is still a tad on the youthful side to my palate, but so beautifully balanced that is already an extraordinary pleasure to drink. Still, try to give in a couple more years in the cellar and allow more of its secondary layers of complexity to emerge. Stunning Champagne! 2018-2050+. **96**.

### **2007 Benoît Lahaye Brut Millésime**

Benoît Lahaye’s 2007 Brut Millésime is composed of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay and was disgorged in November of 2012, giving it approximately four and a half years on its fine lees. The finishing *dosage* of this vintage was four grams per liter. The wine is outstanding on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet now offering up a fine, vibrant blend of white peach, apple, a complex base of soil, plenty of smokiness, sourdough bread and a nice touch of citrus zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very precise, with a fine core, elegant *mousse* and a long, refined and complex finish. This is just starting to drink in its plateau of peak maturity and has plenty of life ahead of it, but it is really in a good place right now! 2018-2035+. **93**.

### **2007 Lamiable “Cuvée Phéerie” Brut Millésime**

The 2007 Lamiable “Cuvée Phéerie” is fully mature at age eleven and drinking very well indeed. The bouquet offers up a nice secondary patina to its mélange of baked apples and peaches, a touch of walnut, lovely soil tones, rye toast and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is still quite bright and bouncy, with good depth at the core, a full-bodied format, pinpoint bubbles and very good length and grip on the complex finish. This is not the most

finesseful of Champagnes, but it has plenty of personality and is very easy to drink right now! 2018-2030+. **91.**



**2005 Lanson “Gold Label” Brut Millésime (Reims)**

The 2005 Lanson “Gold Label” Brut Millésime is comprised of a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and was made entirely from grand cru village fruit. The current release was disgorged in December of 2014 after more than eight and a half years aging *sur latte*. The wine is now absolutely beautiful on the nose, offering up an *à point* blend of apple, warm biscuits, complex soil tones, lovely smoky overtones and the first whisper of the nuttiness of maturity in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, focused and full-bodied, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and excellent length and grip on the well-balanced and complex finish. This is now drinking beautifully at age thirteen, but still has decades of life ahead of it. Lovely juice. 2018-2045+. **92+.**

**2000 Lamiable “Cuvée les Meslaines” Vintage Brut**

The 2000 Lamiable “Cuvée les Meslaines” is a good, solid example of this vintage, with plenty of proper evolution in the aromas and flavors. In fact, my only complaint with this wine is that it is really a touch short on the finish, but otherwise, there is a lot to enjoy here. The maturing nose offers up scents of baked peach, caraway seed, plenty of smokiness, a good base of soil and a topnote of hazelnut. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and fairly complex, with a good core, bright acids, slightly coarse *mousse* and a focused, but rather short finish. Not bad. 2018-2030+. **88.**

**1998 Philipponnat “Clos des Goisses” Brut Millésime (served from magnum)**

The 1998 vintage of Clos des Goisses is drinking beautifully at age twenty and is now fully into its apogee. The refined and properly maturing nose offers up scents of apple, peach, fresh-baked bread, stony minerality, citrus peel and signature Clos des Goisses smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and wide open in personality today, with vibrant acids, lovely focus and grip, a very good core, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is not a great vintage of Clos des Goisses, but rather a very good one that shows just how good this wine can be even in less advantaged growing seasons. 2018-2040. **93+**.

**1988 Pol Roger “Cuvée Winston Churchill” Brut Millésime (served from magnum)**

The 1988 Pol Roger “Cuvée Winston Churchill” is drinking very nicely from magnum, having entered into its tertiary stage of development, but still retaining good shape and grip on the palate. The bouquet is a lovely and mature mix of baked peach, apple, walnut, complex soil tones, rye toast and a touch of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and at its peak, with sound acids, still good remaining *mousse*, fine focus and grip and a long, suave and bouncy finish. I suspect it is time to drink this wine up in regular-sized formats, but it has still plenty of life ahead of it in magnum. 2018-2035. **92**.

***Vintage-Dated Rosé Brut and Extra Brut***

**2007 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Extra Brut Rosé Millésime**

The 2007 Philipponnat “Cuvée 1522” Extra Brut Rosé is composed of a blend of seventy percent pinot noir and thirty percent chardonnay, with most of the grapes for this bottling hailing from grand cru villages. The wine was given a slightly longer *elevage* until June of 2008 prior to bottling, spent fully eight years aging *sur latte* and was finished off with a modest *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter. The still red wine in the blend hails from the house’s vineyards in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ. The wine offers up an excellent nose of orange, white cherry, a touch of clove and cinnamon-like spices, rye bread, complex minerality and a topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and quite dry in profile, with a fine core, very refined *mousse* and very good length and grip on the still fairly youthful finish. This is drinking nicely already, but is still climbing and will be even better with a few more years’ worth of bottle age. A classy Rosé millésime. 2018-2040. **93**.



**LOUIS BOILLOT'S HIDDEN JEWEL  
HIS POMMARD "LES CROIX NOIRES"**



It is often said today that Burgundy no longer holds any secret, undiscovered wines, as everything has already been unearthed and brought to light in the white hot Burgundy market of the last decade. However, this is most emphatically not the case, as so many of the new to Burgundy collectors searching for the gems of the Côte d'Or are still finding their way and generally confine their red wine searches to the most popular villages of today's market: Gevrey-Chambertin, Morey St. Denis, Chambolle-Musigny, Vosne-Romanée and Volnay, with many of the other top red wine-producing communes overlooked for the most part by a large percentage of today's collectors. So, once one strays out in search of the best wines of some of these other, less sexy communes, the possibility for great wines outside of the spotlight grows exponentially. A case in point is the utterly brilliant, premier cru Pommard "les Croix Noires" from Louis Boillot. Everything about Monsieur Boillot's hidden treasure in the heart of Pommard is perfect to keep the wine relatively undiscovered and secret: Monsieur Boillot's cellars are in Chambolle-Musigny, he owns plenty of very old vine parcels in more popular communes such as Gevrey-Chambertin, Chambolle and Volnay, and, (along with his brother Pierre) he is really the only producer of serious merit of this tiny premier cru. The other producer that routinely makes a bottling of les Croix Noires is Domaine de Courcel in Pommard, but as they presently make

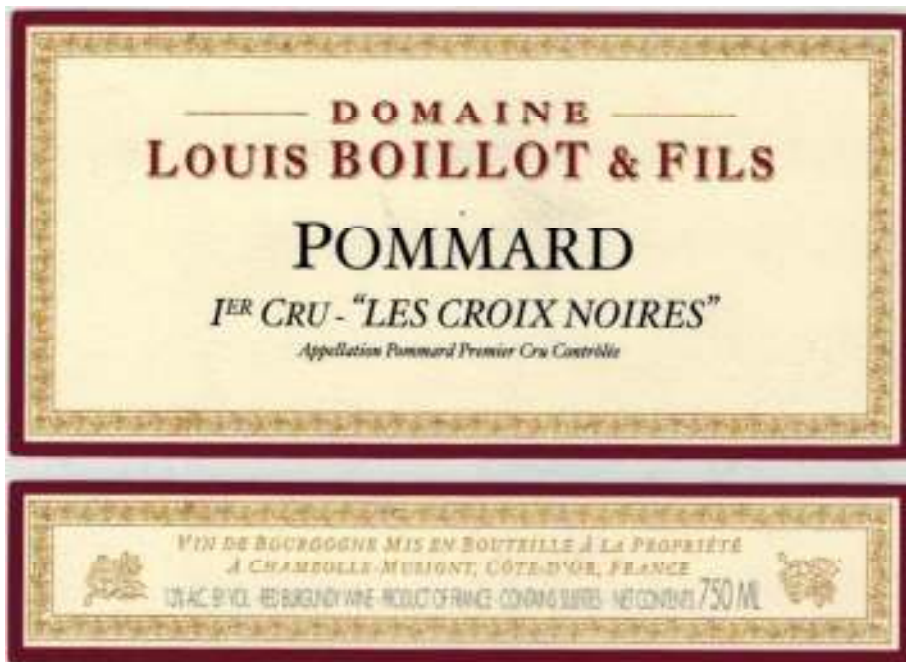
wines under a variation of the old Guy Accad method, their example is really not of interest to lovers of classically-inclined red Burgundies. The other couple of owners of parcels in this very small premier cru do not bottle les Croix Noires on its own, but blend it with other of their holdings to make a Pommard “Premier Cru” cuvée, so Monsieur Boillot’s wine is really the only classically-styled reference point for this great *terroir*.

The vineyard of les Croix Noires is in the heart of the *vignobles* of Pommard, located center-slope in the band of premier crus that lie south of the center of town in the direction of Volnay. The better known vineyard of les Fremiers lies immediately south of les Croix Noires, extending along the slope to the Volnay border. Above it on the slope is the premier cru of les Chaponnières, which lies between les Croix Noires and les Rugiens *Bas*. Below it on the slope are still two premier crus before the land flattens out into *villages* level vineyards which run down to the *Route Nationale*, so one can clearly see that this is prime real estate in the midst of the premier cru slope here south of the center of Pommard. The vineyard is small, totaling only 1.28 *hectares*, which is one of the reasons that les Croix Noires has managed to stay below the radar of so many Burgundy lovers. Like its premier cru neighbor of les Fremiers, there is a touch of Volnay elegance to the style of les Croix Noires- at least in the hands of Louis Boillot, and this has to rank as one of the most polished and refined examples of Pommard premier cru in the commune. There is a strong vein of iron that runs through the clay and chalky soils here, which gives the resulting wine its fine backbone, while still allowing the elegance found in this proximity to Volnay to play the starring role in the finished wines. Though it is just down the slope from les Rugiens *Bas*, I find that les Croix Noires is a more elegant, plummy and polite wine than Rugiens *Bas* (at least in its youth), without the same mineral drive and spice elements found in top examples of Rugiens from the likes of top practitioners such as Domaine Michel Gaunoux. If Rugiens *Bas* can be thought of as the Bonnes-Mares of Pommard, les Croix Noires is more like the les Cras of this commune, without quite the same depth or power of Rugiens *Bas*, but no shortage of complexity, refinement and merit in its own right. It is a beautiful premier cru that is far more elegant at full maturity than today’s general reputation surrounding Pommard might suggest, and it is truly one of the great hidden gems in the world of red Burgundy.

Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils is not an old estate by Burgundy standards, as Louis’ first vintage on his own was in 2003. However, he is the fourth generation of *vignerons* in the Boillot family, and he worked alongside of his father Lucien and brother Pierre at the family domaine in Gevrey-Chambertin, Lucien Boillot et Fils, for many years before taking his share of the family vineyards with him and starting out on his own in the 2003 vintage. He was born in 1957 and finished up his degree in viticulture in 1978 and had been a fixture in the family’s cellars in Gevrey from that time on. However, in 1983 he met Ghislaine Barthod and as their relationship blossomed, they bought a home together in Chambolle-Musigny in 1987. Louis continued to work with his father and younger brother Pierre at the family domaine in Gevrey, but he longed to take another step up in quality with the family’s wines, while his father and brother thought that everything was just fine as it was with the way they were doing things in Gevrey. Given that previous generations of the Boillot family had experienced less than cordial relations at times with each other- inter-family warfare was one of the reasons that Louis’ father Lucien had decamped from Volnay for Gevrey in the first place, Louis had zero interest in adding another chapter of discord to the Boillot family legacy, but he was also not entirely content with the level

of quality that they were producing while still working together. Finally, after the 2002 vintage, the brothers agreed to split up the family vineyard holdings right down the middle and the cellars were expanded at Louis' and Ghislaine's home in Chambolle-Musigny to make room for the newly-minted Domaine Louis Boillot.

Today, Louis has been joined by his and Ghislaine's son, Clément, at the domaine and together, they now farm 6.8 *hectares* of vines. As the Boillots were originally based in the village of Volnay, about half of the domaine's parcels are to be found in the Côte de Beaune communes of Beaune, Pommard and Volnay, but, as noted above, with Louis' father, Lucien Boillot settling in Gevrey-Chambertin in the 1970s, the family's vineyard patrimony is pretty much evenly split between the Côte de Nuits and the Côte de Beaune. As I have written about in the past, after the split in 2002, Louis Boillot inherited a superb array of premier cru and top village wine parcels in the communes of Gevrey-Chambertin, Chambolle-Musigny, Nuits St. Georges, Beaune, Pommard and Volnay, with the vast, vast majority of his plots planted to seriously old vines. Young vines *chez* Boillot these days are in the range of fifty years of age, and he owns a couple of parcels that have now celebrated their one hundredth birthdays! His parcel in les Croix-Noires is no exception to the old vine rule here, as these vines were planted by his grandfather in 1928 and will be celebrating their ninetieth birthday when the picking gets started this year in Pommard. The les Croix Noires is one of his very smallest parcels, as Louis only owns seventeen *ares* of vines here.



Like many of his generation, Louis Boillot believes passionately that great Burgundy is made in the vineyard and he is a consummate farmer. He practices *lutte raisonnée* in his parcels, with the vines farmed without any chemical treatments unless absolutely necessary to save the crop. Replanting is done on a plant by plant basis, to guard the old vines, with individual vines replaced if

necessary through *selection massale* taken from other old vines in the Boillot vineyards. In the cellars, he started out his career destemming almost everything prior to fermentation, but has been moving in the last several years to include a bit of whole clusters for certain cuvées in certain vintages, if the conditions are favorable for the inclusion of some stems. Fermentations are always done with indigenous yeasts, with an eye keenly directed towards very gentle extractions to keep the inherent elegance front and center in the finished wines. This emphasis on finesse (Louis is based in Chambolle after all!) may be one of the reasons that his bottling of les

Croix Noires stands out each year as one of the most elegant examples of Pommard to be found in the entire commune (though my gut feeling that this is also inherent in the *terroir* here). The entire range of Boillot wines are raised in a very modest percentage of new oak in most vintages, with a range from twenty to thirty percent the norm here for new wood. They are bottled unfined and unfiltered. One gets the sense that Louis would probably keep the percentage of new oak around twenty percent for all of his wines if he could, but some of the cuvées are quite small, and when one only has three barrels of a given wine, the most logical approach is to give it one new barrel out of the three. In most vintages, this is the case with his les Croix Noires, which ranges between two and three barrels' worth of wine in most years, though for example, in the hail-shortened vintage of 2012, there was only a single cask of this superb wine *chez* Boillot.

As the les Croix Noires is one of the smallest cuvées in the cellar here, when I suggested to Monsieur Boillot that I would like to write a feature on this bottling, we decided not to open the youngest range of vintages, as I had tasted them in the recent past out of barrel during my annual visits to the cellars here. We started our vertical with the 2008 vintage and worked back, so that bottles under ten years of age *chez* Boillot could be left to rest comfortably, rather than opened up long before their time just to give more recent tasting notes for the article. Consequently, the notes found below from the 2016 vintage back to 2009 are reprints of my barrel sample notes on these wines and I included them here simply to make it easier to find the notes in a single place for those who might reference the article in the future. The tasting notes on the wines from 2008 vintage on back are from my visit to the cellars here in the spring of this year, as it made sense not to try and squeeze this mini-vertical in after working through the 2016s *chez* Boillot during my November visit of last year. The 1996 vintage of les Croix Noires was of course, bottled while Louis was still working with his father and brother at the family domaine in Gevrey-Chambertin. As I hope the notes below will attest, this is a great cuvée of red Burgundy that is built to age and will deliver at its apogee all of the pleasure, complexity and refinement of the very finest premier crus from some of the tonier villages in the Côte d'Or. Stylistically, it reminds me more of the best examples of Grands Epenots than it does its close neighbor of Rugiens *Bas*, with a more plummy, black fruity personality and a very refined signature of soil. To my palate, it is routinely the finest premier cru *chez* Boillot each year from his fine lineup of Côte de Beaune holdings, and he also has old vines in some of the very best premier crus in Volnay! So, if this is a wine that you are not presently familiar with and are looking around for an alternative bottling to replace some of those other famous premier crus that you used to cellar each year and now can only find infrequently in the market and at dizzying price levels, then this is a wine from Louis Boillot that you should search out with alacrity- you will not be disappointed!

### ***Barrel Samples***

#### **2016 Pommard "les Croix Noires"- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

As I have mentioned in the past, the tiny premier cru of les Croix Noires is one of my very favorite *terroirs* in the Côte de Beaune and the 2016 version from Louis Boillot is a gorgeous wine in the making. The superb nose soars from the glass in a complex mix of black cherries, black raspberries, a touch of red plum, gamebird, dark soil tones, gentle spice elements and a lovely topnote of violets. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and sappy at the core, with outstanding balance and grip, ripe, seamless tannins and marvelous backend mineral drive on the long and complex finish. Great juice. 2028-2060+. **94+**.

### **2015 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The stunning 2015 les Croix Noires is every bit as refined as the les Premiers this year and perhaps even a touch more complex! This is a beautiful wine in the making, delivering a stunning aromatic constellation of red and black cherries, a touch of raspberry, gloriously complex minerality, cocoa, *pigeon*, just a touch of new oak and a gentle topnote of exotic spices. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and mineral-driven in personality, with a great core of sappy red fruit, fine-grained tannins, stunning focus and grip and a very, very long, seamlessly balanced and vibrant finish. Brilliant young Pommard! 2025-2065+. **94+**.

### **2014 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The les Croix Noires is outstanding in 2014 and the inherent elegance of the vintage is front and center in this lovely wine. The bouquet is a blend of cherries, quince, gamebird, vinesmoke, sweet nutskin, a touch of raw cocoa, gentle notes of vanillin oak and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with a fine sense of reserve, a sappy core, lovely transparency and a very long, primary and ripely tannic finish. This will be outstanding. 2025-2060+. **93**.

### **2013 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The beautiful 2013 les Croix Noires was the last of the Côte de Beaune wines to finish its malo in this vintage, as it did not complete malo until August 15<sup>th</sup> of 2014, and at the time of my visit, it was still resting on its fine lees in barrel. The wine is going to be stunning, as it offers up glorious purity and exceptional depth. The bouquet delivers a lovely constellation of cherries, quince, gamebirds, a beautiful base of complex minerality, woodsmoke, coffee and again, a lovely topnote of fresh thyme. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with great purity at the core, suave tannins and a very long, tangy and perfectly balanced finish. All this beautiful wine needs is some bottle age! 2023-2060. **93+**.

### **2012 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The sole barrel of 2012 les Croix Noires *chez* Boillot is outstanding. Monsieur Boillot chose to do the malo for this wine in a new barrel and then rack it into a two wine barrel for the remainder of its *elevage* and it will prove to have just the right dollop of new wood to it by the time it is ready for bottling. This is a great, great wine in the making and was clearly the finest example of Pommard I tasted on this trip. The stunning nose soars from the glass in a blend of red and black plums, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, raw cocoa, gamebirds, currant leaf and a touch of toasty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and very, very refined on the attack, with a great core of sappy fruit, flawless focus and balance, suave tannins and simply stunning length and grip on the ripely tannic and effortless finish. A legend in the making and one of the most hauntingly beautiful young Pommards I have ever had the pleasure to taste! 2023-2060. **95**.

### **2011 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The 2011 les Croix Noires is an absolutely brilliant wine in the making, soaring from the glass in a blaze of red and black cherries, dark soil tones, a touch of blood orange, woodsmoke, gamebirds, fresh herbs and a very stylish base of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure on the attack, with stunning transparency, great mid-palate depth and a very long, tangy and ripely tannic finish. This is probably the greatest example of Pommard I tasted on the entire trip! Great wine! 2020-2055+. **94**.



### **2010 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

It is beginning to become my opinion that this tiny jewel of a vineyard in the center of Pommard is the greatest, little-known *terroir* in the entire Côte de Beaune. The 2010 from Monsieur Boillot is stunning, soaring from the glass in a totally refined mélange of cherries, red currants, a touch of blood orange, woodsmoke, a beautifully complex base of soil, fresh herbs and just a hint of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very sappy at the core, with stunning transparency, tangy acids, suave, fine-grained tannins and incomparable elegance for a young Pommard on the very, very long and focused finish. A great, great wine in the making. 2020-2075+. **95.**

### **2009 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

Les Croix Noires is the smallest premier cru in Pommard and has only three owners, Louis Boillot and his brother, Lucien, as well as the Domaine de Courcel. I love this vineyard's aromatic and flavor profile, as it is one of the most elegant premier crus in the village, and a vintage of the style of 2009 certainly plays right into its hands. The bouquet on the Louis Boillot '09 Croix Noires is stunning, as these more than eighty year-old vines have produced aromatic fireworks of red and black cherries, blood orange, stunningly complex minerality, gamebirds, fresh herbs, a touch of vanillin oak and a floral topnote redolent of roses. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and nascently complex, with great purity of fruit at the core, a very soil-driven personality, ripe tannins and superb length and grip on the focused and tangy finish. A great young bottle of Pommard and one of the hidden gems in all of Burgundy. 2018-2045+. **94.**



*A very content Louis Boillot in his cellars in Chambolle, after finishing up our tasting of his wines.*



### ***Recently Opened Bottles***

#### **2008 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

At age ten, the 2008 vintage of Monsieur Boillot’s les Croix Noires is getting close to peak drinkability, but still deserves at least another three or four years in the cellar to blossom completely. The bouquet today is starting to show some lovely secondary layering in its blend of cherries, red plums, violets, beautifully complex soil tones, gamebird and a lovely array of discreet spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, transparent and very elegant in profile, with a lovely core of fruit, still some fine-grained tannins on the backend and a long, tangy and beautifully focused finish. Fine, fine juice that just needs a bit more time in the cellar to peak. 2022-2055+. **94.**

#### **2007 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

Like so many of the 2007 red Burgundies, Louis Boillot’s les Croix Noires is really drinking beautifully today and has just entered its plateau of peak drinkability. The wine is pure, complex and wide open on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet jumping from the glass in a lovely mix of red and black cherries, a nice touch of currant leaf, *pigeon*, woodsmoke, dark soil tones, raw cocoa and a nice topnote of spices again. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, vibrant and generous, with a lovely core, fine soil signature, modest tannins and excellent length and grip on the tangy and perfectly balanced finish. This is really, really good today and still has decades of life ahead of it! 2018-2050. **94.**

#### **2006 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

The 2006 les Croix Noires is quite a bit more black fruity in personality than either the 2007 or 2008 versions. The fine nose offers up scents of black cherries, sweet dark berries, a hint of the black truffle to come, a superb base of soil tones, a touch of Chambolle-like mustard seed, spice elements and a discreet framing of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with fine-grained, ripe tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, well-balanced and still fairly youthful finish. This is a lovely bottle in the making, but it is still several years away from its primetime. It will be quite a bit longer-lived than either the 2007 or 2008, but with sufficient bottle age, it should approach both of those lovely wines in terms of absolute quality. Just be patient! 2024-2070. **93+.**

#### **2005 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

It was clearly an act of infanticide to open up a bottle of the 2005 les Croix Noires in the Boillot cellars in March, but both Louis and I enjoyed the wine immensely and I have to imagine that several hours later, at the dinner table, this wine might have blossomed quite nicely and been a very attractive partner at the table. The bouquet is very young and very sappy in personality, offering up a gorgeous blend of black cherries, sweet dark berries, gamebird, dark soil tones, bonfire, a bit of charred wood, a hint of cedar and a pungent topnote of violets. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and absolutely bottomless at the core, with impeccable balance, fine-grained tannins, tangy acids and superb focus and grip on the very, very long, still quite youthful finish. This will probably be the greatest wine produced here in this range of vintages, but it will need time in the cellar- like so many of the top 2005s! 2030-2090. **95+.**

#### **2004 Pommard “les Croix Noires”- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

Louis Boillot’s 2004 les Croix Noires is an excellent example of the vintage and the wine is starting to really blossom nicely at age fourteen. The nose offers up a fine aromatic constellation of dark berries, cassis, a touch of pepper, dark soil tones, a dollop of cola and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish, long and tangy, with modest tannins, lovely focus and complexity, a good signature of soil and a long, vibrant and classy finish. This

wine is evolving very nicely in the bottle, with no remaining signs of the vintage's "greenies" and just a touch of pepper to belie its vintage of origin. It is a cool and black fruity interpretation of the *terroir*, as this is after all, a vintage of only moderate ripeness, but the wine is quite complete in its expression and quite comfortable in its skin. 2020-2045+. **91.**

**2003 Pommard "les Croix Noires"- Domaine Louis Boillot et Fils**

In the inaugural vintage of 2003, Louis Boillot decided to harvest his parcel of les Croix Noires a bit later, on September 4<sup>th</sup>, after that had been a bit of rain. The results speak for themselves today, as this is one of the best 2003 red Burgundies I have tasted in the last decade! The nose offers up a black fruity blend of black cherries, sweet dark berries, a bit of balsamic overtones, *pigeon*, dark soil tones, currant leaf and espresso. On the palate the wine is deep, full, complex and very, very well-balanced (particularly for a 2003!), with a fine core, still a bit of tannin and a long, complex and wide open finish. Lovely juice and a terrific example of this difficult vintage! 2020-2060. **93+.**

**1996 Pommard "les Croix Noires"- Domaine Lucien Boillot et Fils**

I really like the balance today of the 1996 les Croix Noires from the Boillot family, as the acids here remain beautifully integrated into the base of the wine and both the nose and the palate are evolving in a relaxed, classic manner. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a fine blend of cassis, dark berries, coffee grounds, a fine base of the vineyard's dark soil tones, a touch of chicory and a delicate topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, long and tangy, with excellent transparency, fine focus and grip and a long, gently tannic and quite complex finish. This is now into its apogee, but has the balance to continue to cruise along beautifully for several decades. A fine example. 2018-2040. **92.**

## THE BEAUTIFULLY OLD SCHOOL AND ELEGANT CORNAS OF MARCEL JUGE



*Marcel Juge, making a point, in his old cellars under his home in the center of Cornas.*

Marcel Juge is one of the last of old school traditionalists that carried on the northern Rhône's fine wine legacy in the decades of obscurity for the region in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He is from the same generation as other greats in Cornas such as Noël Verset, Auguste Clape, Robert Michel and Alain Voge, who hand-crafted great wines in this era and who eventually paved the way for the relative fame that Cornas has come to realize today. Marcel Juge officially retired after the 1999 vintage, and passed on his vineyards to his daughter Olga, who worked at that time full-time for the regional railroad, the SNCF and was only able to devote part-time energies to the family domaine. However, for several years, Marcel and Olga

continued to make some wine together from some of the oldest vines in the family vineyards, with the rest of the parcels rented out to neighbors. Consequently, many of the Juge wines from the early-2000s could be found in bottle with Olga Juge's name on the label, but it remained very much a collaborative effort with her father, who still had way too much energy at age sixty-five to actually retire! After the 2004 vintage, Olga Juge decided that it was just too much work making and marketing the wines (while still working full-time for the SNCF and only having a her spare time to devote to the family wines) and stopped carrying on the family legacy, but Marcel Juge was able to continue on in a small way, as the French *Officials* allow retired vintners to still make a small bit of wine for personal consumption as a hobby. Consequently, from the 2005 vintage forwards, Marcel Juge was limited to only producing about one hundred and fifty cases a year of his lovely Cornas. Finally, after the 2015 vintage, Monsieur Juge truly went into retirement and this was his last vintage. He left behind a remarkable legacy of great Cornas, with his stylistic calling card always one of elegance, which can be a bit unexpected, given the appellation's reputation for robust and virile examples of syrah.

Looking back to the formative days of Monsieur Juge's career, when the young appellation of Cornas (it was only established officially in 1938) struggled to find any traction in the international wine markets of the post-war era in France, it is remarkable that Marcel Juge, along with his contemporaries, chose to continue to work the steep granite slopes here and make wine for a relatively uncaring world. In this era, the wines were not commanding anything close to a serious price, most of the young people in the village were decamping for other lines of work in Lyon, Valence or other parts of France and the future of both the wine and the town of Cornas looked to be in serious jeopardy. The real nadir for Cornas in the twentieth century came in the early 1950s, when the population in the town had dwindled to only one hundred and twenty souls, with almost all of the younger generation having turned their backs on the possibility of winegrowing in the beautifully steep, granite slopes that border the town to the west and sought career options outside of the region. Marcel Juge (along with people like Noël Verset and Marius Gentaz) was a teenager at this time. In this era, Cornas was a poor, old, rusty town, mostly inhabited by older people, where the men continued in their advancing age to work the steep slopes and make the wines of Cornas, as this is really the only thing that they knew how to do well, but almost all of them also had to hold a second job to support themselves and their families. The wines were almost never even bottled in this era as well, as it was typical for the young wines to all be sold off to the big *négociants* such as Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Chapoutier and the like, with the *négociants'* tanker trucks rolling into town and everyone watching their new vintage of Cornas pumped into the tankers and hauled away for blending in the cellars of these big firms. This was true even for the very finest growers in Cornas, such as August Clape, Noël Verset and Marcel Juge. In fact, it was not even until the end of the 1940s that *Messieurs* Clape and Verset first started to bottle and label a tiny slice of their production for sale to locals that this cycle of each year's harvest in Cornas disappearing *en masse* in the tankers from the *négociants* was finally broken, and the first very tentative steps towards today's renaissance in the appellation were taken.

But, it was a slow process, and like many of the other appellations in the northern Rhône, Cornas did not prosper through the decades of the 1960s and 1970s either, with the slowly growing percentage of wine sold in bottle starting to get a toehold in the market, but hardly making the local *vignerons* financially comfortable men who could rely solely on wine

production to pay the bills. The decade of the 1980s was the turn of the tide for this appellation, as the wines started to attract attention in Paris, London and with America and importers who started to comb through the town looking to represent some of the great traditionalists here. Cornas was lucky at this time, in comparison to the appellation of Côte-Rôtie for instance, in that it did not have a famous winemaker such as Marcel Guigal who embraced the modern side of winemaking and whose excellent, high quality and new oaky wines started to cause a pull away from the old school methods of winegrowing. There was no such modern trend here in Cornas in the 1980s, with the old school traditionalist families such as Clape, Verset, Michel, Voge and Juge the measuring sticks of Cornas excellence and the appellation was able to retain its authenticity far better than was the case in some of the other towns in the northern Rhône at this time. Jean-Luc Colombo attempted to bring in a Guigal-inspired, modern style to Cornas in the 1990s, but with quite limited success, and it was really the old school crowd that served as the inspiration for the top producers we have today in Cornas.

Throughout the very slow, but steady climb in reputation of Cornas in the 1980s and 1990s, Marcel Juge probably retained the lowest profile of any of the old vanguard of traditionalists in the appellation. He had started working at a young age, leaving school at sixteen to start tending vines, and he was head of the Growers' Syndicate for many years here in Cornas, but his wines were not spoken of with the same reverence as those of *Messieurs* Clape and Verset as the fame of Cornas started to grow. Perhaps part of the reason for this was that Marcel Juge was a bit of a curmudgeonly figure in the village of Cornas, known to be a bit prickly about giving out tasting appointments and prone to political discourses for his guests' benefit during their visits to the cellars. But, another possible cause for his relative obscurity as Cornas started to build a bit of a reputation for quality in the latter half of the 1980s was that Marcel always produced one of the most elegant expressions of Cornas in the appellation (this is a relative term naturally here), and in the earlier decades of Cornas' fame, the wine was known for being one of the burliest and most naturally powerful wines in the Rhône Valley. No doubt, this sobriquet was mostly earned by the wines from Auguste Clape, which were indeed big, powerful and robustly tannic wines out of the blocks and took several decades to start to civilize, but it was not true of the wines from Noël Verset, Alain Voge, Robert Michel or Marcel Juge in this era, so one does wonder a bit why this moniker was bestowed upon Cornas at the time. In any case, for whatever the reason, the wines from Marcel Juge continued to fly principally under the radar even as the wine world discovered Cornas, despite the fact that Marcel was clearly making some of the very finest wines in the appellation in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

The very traditional style of Marcel Juge's wines was always pretty easy to maintain in the region of Cornas, as the steep, granitic slopes terraced to the west of town always required work and picking by hand, so the temptation of mechanization of the farming was never an issue here. In the cellars, Marcel Juge, like all of the other greats of his generation in Cornas, fermented with the stems, using solely indigenous yeasts and liked to get in the vats in the old-fashioned manner to submerge the cap with his feet during fermentation, avowing that this was the secret to the elegant style of his Cornas, as one could never get the same sense of gentle extraction using other methods such as pushing down the cap with grills or other mechanized implements. He always aged his wines at least two years in old, six hundred liter *demi-muids* (with more tannic vintages often going a full three years in these big, old casks) prior to bottling, which was done with a fining, but no filtration. His cellars have always been down under his

home in the center of Cornas- dark, small and cramped, but sufficient to craft more than sixty vintages of superb, old school Cornas. The *demi-muids* in the cellar were indeed old, as when John Livingstone-Learmonth went to visit him in 2004 while researching his book on the Northern Rhône, Marcel estimated that his *demi-muids* were fully fifty years-old at that point. Marcel Juge always detested the taste of new oak in wines from the northern Rhône, so there was never any chance he would follow along when Jean-Luc Colombo came to town in the 1990s with his slick winemaking techniques and pile of new oak barrels and foolishly tried to change what was already a perfectly fine wine in traditional Cornas!

At the peak of his career in the 1980s and 1990s, Marcel Juge farmed three and a half *hectares* of vines, with three of these in Cornas and a half *hectare* planted to roussanne in nearby Saint-Péray. As I had written about back in my article on Noël Verset many years ago, the traditional approach to Cornas by most of the classicists of Marcel's generation was to blend different parcels together, in the style of old school Barolo, as the philosophy was that a blended Cornas from a variety of different *terroirs* made for a more complete wine. However, this was not always Marcel Juge's approach, as he would often produce two (or sometimes three) different bottlings, made from different sections of the *vignobles* of Cornas. Marcel's main parcels (just over two *hectares* of vines) were in the southern, slightly more sandy side of Cornas, near the Saint-Péray border. The *lieu à dit* he had his vines planted in is called Combe, the most southerly vineyard in the appellation. The granite base in this southerly sector is decomposing, and this gives a slightly more refined expression to a young Cornas here, which again helped contribute to the Juge style of relatively elegant Cornas. Another of his parcels was in the well-known *lieu à dit* of Champelrose, where the granite is harder and there is a vein of clay as well. This sector is right up above the center of town and gives some of the most structured wines of the appellation. Marcel had a one-third of a *hectare* plot in Champelrose, which had been planted in the 1970s. His oldest vines, which were planted in the 1950s, were in the higher slopes of the *lieu à dit* of Cayret (also called Barjasse), just to the northwest of town and close to the parcel of les Reynards (made famous by Thierry Allemand).

In many vintages, Marcel Juge liked to make different cuvées of his Cornas, corresponding to his different slopes and soil types. His regular bottling (which he sometimes called *Pied de Coteaux*, though the name did not appear on the label anywhere) was from the lower sections of his hillside vineyards, mostly from the southern *lieu à dit* of Combe. He also made a bottling called "Cuvée C" (for *Coteaux*) for his steeper hillside vineyards, which would often include the fruit from Cayret and Champelrose. He also began to produce a new bottling called "Cuvée SC" (for *Sélection de Coteaux*), hailing from his oldest vines on the steeper slopes, which, to the best of my knowledge, made its debut in the superb 1983 vintage in Cornas. The "SC" was only made in very top vintages in the appellation, but Marcel ran into minor problems (probably more aptly described as irritants) in the marvelous troika of vintages of 1989, 1990 and 1991, as he was not entirely content with how the market reacted to his Cuvée SC bottling in these years. It seemed that everyone on his client list was clamoring for this bottling at the expense of the other two cuvées and it completely complicated his allocations, as he never produced more than eight hundred bottles of Cuvée SC in a given vintage. So, it is my understanding that the Cuvée SC was discontinued after the 1991 vintage. However, the Cuvée C bottling from the Juge family continued to be produced up until his official retirement in 1999



and it was also produced during the time that Marcel worked with his daughter Olga on producing the wines, so there was one made up through the 2004 vintage.



When Monsieur Juge had “officially” retired after the 1999 vintage, he had hoped that his daughter Olga would continue to carry on the family domaine, and this was indeed the plan of both father and daughter in the first few vintages after he reached the age of sixty-five. Marcel and Olga worked together to produce the Domaine Juge wines in 2000, 2001 and 2002, and then Olga went ahead and made the wines here as the principal proprietor in both 2003 and 2004. What input Marcel had on the 2003s and 2004s here is unclear, but it is hard to imagine that he was not at least looking over Olga’s shoulder and readily available if questions or issues should arise. However, by the time she had finished up the 2004s, she realized that the life of a *vigneronne* in Cornas was a bit more arduous than she was cut out for and the family had to shift gears again. So Marcel leased out or sold more of his vineyards and started producing wines in much smaller quantities on his own, as was still allowed to do under the French retirement laws without jeopardizing his pension. As Marcel had to content himself with a fairly small quantity of wine, he reverted back to only a single Cornas bottling, though presumably at first this continued to be from the older vines on the slope up above town for several vintages from 2005 forwards, rather than from the sandier and more decomposed granitic soils found in his parcels in Combe on the southern border of the appellation. However, as he got older, it became impossible for him to continue to work the steeper sections of these vineyards and he rented out his top of

the hill parcels to Stéphane Robert after the 2010 vintage (Monsieur Robert had already leased the Juge vines in Saint Péray and much of the vines in Combe from Marcel after the his “first” retirement in 1999), and from 2011 forwards the Juge wines were made from his lower sections in his parcel in Champelrose.

As he got older, not only was it impossible to keep working his vines at the top of the slopes, but there was stretch where Marcel was not able to bottle the wines he had made, and they rested comfortably in those old *demi-muids* in the cellar under his house for several years. At this point, Monsieur Juge was continuing to make his one hundred and fifty cases or so of Cornas a year, as was allowed under the “hobby exception” to the *vignerons*’ retirement mandate from *les Officials*, but he did not have the energy to organize the bottling or market the wines anymore. He was essentially just still making the wine as this is what he had always done his whole life, and it still gave him great pleasure and satisfaction to do so. Fellow *vigneron* Éric Texier was actually quite instrumental in helping Marcel get out of this situation, as Éric suggested to a New York importer, Doug Polaner, that he buy Marcel’s wines and hire a bottler to come in and help him get these lovely vintages from his later retirement vintages out into the market. Doug was more than happy to do so! As Éric said of Marcel after a visit to taste in the cellars in the late spring of 2016, “Marcel is doing just fine and he is still able to manage doing things himself in the cellar, so my contribution is just to help out with the logistics.” At that point, Éric had just tasted the 2013, 2014 and very young 2015 from Marcel and he commented that “the old man knows how to make wine, for sure- to me, he is still the best remaining northern Rhône producer!”

It turned out that the 2015 Cornas that Éric Texier was tasting in the cellars in the spring of 2016 was the last vintage that Marcel Juge would produce, as he effectively decided it was time to retire in earnest as he reached eighty-four years of age. It was probable that he was starting to feel a bit unwell in the spring of 2016, for over that Christmas, he had a health scare and had to be hospitalized for some time, but eventually recovered his strength sufficiently to return home to Cornas, but it was quite evident that he had been correct that the 2015 vintage was a good place to call it a full career and retire from his erstwhile retirement completely. There was some ebb and flow during those last eleven vintages that he made under his retirement exemption from 2005 to 2015, as in his first few vintages after his daughter Olga decided to not pursue the winemaking anymore, Marcel would tend to bottle his wines as he had orders from clients. This was before Éric Texier had introduced him to Doug Polaner and gotten the logistical side in order for Marcel for his last handful of vintages. So in a vintage like 2005, 2006 or 2007, he might get an order for fifty cases of wine and bottle up that quantity, racking the remainder of a six hundred liter *demi-muid* into a small half barrel to hold it until a further order arrived. Given that he was living on a pension, saving on the cost of bottles, corks and capsules is fully understandable at this point in his life, but it could and did lead to a bit of bottle variation with the wines. However, one has to remember that this style of bottling was very much a tradition in the Rhône throughout much of Monsieur Juge’s career, as it was still not atypical to find 1978s in *foudres* or *demi-muids* awaiting orders when I was visiting the cellars here in the late 1980s, so bottling up an entire vintage in one or two passes is a relatively recent phenomenon for the region.



In any case, despite a few struggles in those last eleven vintages, brought on principally by the advance of old age that we all must face at one point, the last wines produced in Marcel Juge's long and very successful career were some of his best wines. As I mentioned above, he had always made one of the most elegant renditions of true old school Cornas in the village, and this was not always recognized in a positive light, so his wines were sometimes ranked at a lower level than those of some of his contemporaries such as August Clape, Noël Verset, Robert Michel and Alain Voge in the marketplace. However,

those same *vignerons* from his generation whose wines might have realized a bit more fame at the world at large were always very respectful of Marcel Juge's wines and they recognized in them truly exceptional examples of Cornas- wines that were born from the same commitment to hard work tending the vines in the steep, terraced slopes of the appellation and winemaking in the traditional method that eschewed short cuts and stayed true to the vibrant traditions of Cornas. However, the elegant moniker that the Juge wines wore in Cornas must be seen within the context of the old school in the village to which his wines are absolutely wed, for though they have a refinement to their tannic structures out of the blocks (probably due to a combination of the more decomposed soils and gentler slopes in his principal vineyard holdings in Combe and his punch-downs by foot to extract as gently as possible), they are still true Cornas, with a lovely, slightly wild and brambly expression of syrah fruit tones, plenty of pepper and meatiness and superb signatures of the granitic soils of the appellation. And they have always aged brilliantly, as my fairly recent note on the 1985 will attest, and over time, the stylistic difference between Marcel Juge's wines and those of his more famous contemporaries tends to diminish as the inherent refinement that all great Cornas shows in its advancing years starts to take center stage- even in the wines that are the most burly in their youth.

Ironically, in the last years of his winemaking in retirement, the market seemed to finally have woken up to the great quality of Marcel Juge's wines, and they are now very, very hard to find and in the last year or two have become quite expensive. It is too bad that the market had not made this discovery many, many years ago, so Marcel and his family might have benefited a bit from it and perhaps lived a more financially comfortable life in the later years of his full-time career prior to his "first" retirement in 1999, but this never happened. Like many of his generation, Marcel Juge was not a *vigneron* in Cornas for fame or fortune, but simply because he came from a family of *vignerons* and this is what he knew how to do, having left school to work the vines in his teens and making wines to the best of his abilities, because it was the right thing to do. And the new generation of very serious younger *vignerons* who followed in his wake in Cornas have benefitted greatly from Marcel and his generation who continued to carry the torch for great, traditional wines in this appellation during the long, dark period when it seemed no one beyond the confines of the town itself (or a few *négociants* in Tain or Ampuis) valued the wines sufficiently in relation to their absolute quality. But, such was life in Cornas during much of Marcel Juge's long career and, tasting through the wines, one has to admire the row he continued to hoe and admit that he did one hell of a job!

The following wines were all tasted at a recent vertical of Marcel Juge's wines organized by Jayson Cohen here in New York and held in early June. Many thanks to Jayson for getting our group together, for despite the present day fame of Monsieur Juge's wines, it seems that there are not all that many of us in the New York area that have a lot of them in the cellar. But, as Éric Texier did for Monsieur Juge in his last handful of vintages, Jayson took care of the logistical side for us and we were able to convene a convivial group to tackle this lineup of Marcel Juge Cornas. As noted above, the 2004 bottle of Cuvée C was made when Olga Juge was the erstwhile proprietor of the estate and Marcel's contribution to that particular vintage is uncertain. The only note below that is not from this June vertical tasting is the 1985, which hails from a horizontal tasting of the 1985 vintage in Cornas and Côte-Rôtie organized in San Francisco by Mannie Berk of the Rare Wine Company a couple of years back, and which I wrote up in an article on the vintage at that time. I have included the note again here to give a bit more perspective on just how beautifully the wines of Marcel Juge have always aged. I wish I had notes in my archives on several other mature vintages of Monsieur Juge's wines, or more bottles of them in my cellar, as I would love to be able to fill in the vintage gap a bit more in this report, but this is not the case. I will just have to content myself with the younger bottles of Juge in my cellar getting to a ripe old age, as they will in due course.

### **2015 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

This was Marcel Juge's final vintage and I have heard reports that he decided to try extraction enzymes with this wine. I am not sure of the accuracy of the stories, but I put it out here just for the sake of discussion. As the story goes, Monsieur Juge was under pressure from the INAO for making a wine "too light for Cornas" in both the 2007 and 2011 vintages, which prompted him to try using extraction enzymes with one cask of each vintage to try and add a bit more muscle and make the INAO happy. A fine sommelier visiting the Juge cellars several years ago was given both versions of the 2007 to taste blind, but whether or not the cask with the enzymes was eventually blended into the others in '07 is not certain. The speculation is that the enzymes may have come into play again with the 2015, due to Monsieur Juge not being in robust health during that period and they could have been utilized to ensure there would be no further

hassles from the INAO with his ultimate vintage. In any event, the 2015 Juge Cornas is lovely, but seems just a bit more “polished” out of the blocks than any other of the vintages in our vertical tasting. The nose offers up a fine and youthful mix of red and black raspberries, smoked meats, pepper and a fine base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite primary, with a fine core, good focus and balance and a long, ripely tannic finish. The length and grip here on the backend are just fine, and even if this ends up being a rather glossy and slightly out of context Juge Cornas, it is still certainly a very well-made wine. 2025-2075. **92.**

#### **2014 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

The 2014 vintage from Marcel Juge seems absolutely classic in personality and shows lovely promise for such a young wine. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a fine blend of black raspberries, cassis, pepper, roasted meats, stony soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, nascently complex and shows off outstanding depth at the core, with ripe, beautifully-integrated tannins, excellent focus and grip and a long, youthful and very well balanced finish. This is a classic in the making, and though it does not differ dramatically from the 2015, there is something here that suggests that this wine may well outperform the 2015 in the fullness of time. 2024-2075. **92+.**

#### **2013 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

I am a big fan of 2013 northern Rhône and the Cornas from Marcel Juge is no exception! This is a stellar young wine that is already starting to show beautifully transparency on both the nose and palate. The superb aromatic constellation delivers scents of sweet dark berries, cassis, spiced meats, black olive, dark soil tones and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely soil-driven, with a lovely core of fruit, great focus and grip, a very elegant, classic Juge profile, fine-grained tannins and a long, promising and classic finish. Fine, fine juice that is destined to be one of the classic vintages from Monsieur Juge’s long career. 2023-2075. **94.**

#### **2012 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

The 2012 Juge Cornas is another strong effort, but our bottle at the vertical tasting did not show the same precision and transparency as found in the 2013. I should note that this wine was brought to the tasting without being double-decanted, so perhaps a bit of precocious sediment was partly the reason for the less precision shown in the 2012. In any event, this bottle offers up a fine young Cornas nose of smoked meats, dark berries, pepper, bonfires and a good base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, primary and rock solid at the core, with firm, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex finish. This is still adolescent and needs more bottle age, but I am willing to bet that the focus is here and just not showing in this particular bottle, due to a bit of agitation to the sediment. If this proves to be the case, the wine will merit a score at least at the top of my scale. 2024-2065+. **90-92?**

#### **2010 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

The 2010 vintage from Marcel Juge is an outstanding example of both the vintage and this superb appellation and this will be one of the greatest vintages produced by Monsieur Juge after his official retirement in 1998. The wine is deep and youthfully complex on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of cassis, black raspberries, smoked meats, black olives, pepper and a superb base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full and complex, with great mid-palate concentration, ripe, firm and fairly chewy tannins, excellent focus and grip and a long, poised and very, very promising finish. This is emerging from its adolescence and is approachable



today, but given the quality of this vintage, I would not touch a bottle of this for at least another seven or eight years, as there are many more layers here still to unfold. 2025-2075. **94.**

#### **2009 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

It will be great fun to compare and contrast the evolutions of the 2010 and 2009 vintages from Marcel Juge. The 2009 is another absolutely stellar young wine, with perhaps a bit more early plushness in evidence than in the slightly more structured 2010, but the same impressive depth of fruit and razor-sharp soil signature. The bouquet here delivers a superb blend of red and black raspberries, stony minerality, pepper, roasted meats, emerging spice tones, woodsmoke and a topnote of lavender and incipient violets. On the palate the wine is deep full-bodied and still quite young, with a rock solid core, ripe, seamless tannins and excellent length and grip on the focused and complex finish. As is the case with the 2010, there is no signs of the torrid nature of the vintage here and this is another great wine in the making. Like the 2010, it is possible to drink the 2009 Juge Cornas today, but it will be significantly better down the road, so I would leave it alone in the cellar. 2025-2075+. **94.**



*Monsieur Juge's superb 1985 Cornas front and center in San Francisco a few years ago.*

#### **2008 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

The 2008 vintage from Marcel Juge is another simply stellar young Cornas, and while this year does not possess quite the same mid-palate stuffing as the two following wines from 2009 and 2010, it lacks for absolutely nothing and is flat out superb. The nose is deep and

classic, offering up a fine and vibrant mélange of black raspberries, cassis, pepper, black olives, stony soil tones, spices meats and still a bit of youthful, medicinal Cornas overtones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, structured and plenty deep at the core, with superb transparency, ripe, moderate tannins and excellent focus and grip on the long and complex finish. This does not have quite the same ripeness as found in the two subsequent vintages, but perhaps this allows the wine to be even more defined by its beautiful, underlying *terroir*. Another absolutely superb vintage for Monsieur Juge. 2022-2065. **93+**.

#### **2004 Cornas “Cuvée C”- Domaine Olga Juge**

The 2004 Cuvée C has a slightly lactic element on the nose that mars the wine slightly, but there is also plenty of complexity and interest still to be found under this note. The bouquet, in addition to the lactic note, offers up scents of raspberries, smoked meats, a fine base of stony soil and pepper. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and a bit flat by the high standards of Monsieur Juge, with good length on the complex finish, but not the customary grip and bounce. I am not sure if it was just our bottle that was slightly off, or if this is the wine in 2004 and perhaps Marcel’s daughter was completely on her own in this vintage. ???

#### **1995 Cornas “Cuvée C”- Domaine Marcel Juge**

This was a good, old bottle, but not in the most pristine of shape, and Jayson (whose wine it was) noted that he had drunk superior bottles of this wine in the past. The nose is lovely and complex, offering up a tertiary blend of black raspberries, grilled meats, pepper, a nice range of spice tones and an autumnal soil signature of forest floor. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and deep at the core, but again, a bit flat and lacking in vibrancy on the long finish. The tannins are just about resolved here and the wine is complex and focused, but I would guess that there are even better bottles of the 1995 Cuvée C out there than this particular example. This bottle: 2018-2025. **88**. That said, I would expect pristine examples to rate more like 2018-2040 and merit **91** points.

#### **1985 Cornas- Domaine Marcel Juge**

Marcel Juge seems to have been the oft-overlooked star of Cornas during his long and very successful career, but despite his lack of fame, his wines have always been some of my favorites in the appellation and his 1985 is absolutely stellar. The bouquet here is simply stunning, soaring from the glass in a refined blend of baked red fruit, pepper, gamebird, a touch of chipotle, lovely soil tones and plenty of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and drinking at its apogee, with a fine core, resolved, melting tannins and excellent focus and grip on the long and classy finish. In my experience, the Juge wines of this era were always the most suave and elegant examples of Cornas out of the blocks, which may account for their being overlooked a bit, but this is a very strong testament to balance early on being the cornerstone of greatness down the road. Great juice. 2016-2035. **93**.



## THE SUMMER OF 2018 NORTH AMERICAN WINES NEO-CLASSICISTS AND OLD SCHOOL PRODUCERS



I always enjoy working on this report bi-annual feature on North American wines, as it affords me the opportunity to get caught up on what some of the great classical producers of yesteryear are doing these days, as well as taste the new releases from the growing legion of younger producers and wineries that are making very traditionally-styled wines of *terroir* from their respective wine regions. Any work order that includes tasting current releases from the likes of gifted artists such as Terry and Frances Leighton at Kalin Cellars, Steve Edmunds, Ric Forman or Cathy Corison, alongside of those from a younger generation of winegrowers such as David Jeffrey at Calluna, Brianne Day of Day Wines or Chad Stock at Minimus is better than a vacation in my book! And of course, I have not stinted myself from drinking mature bottles from the US as well over the course of the last six months, so there are plenty of notes stretching back into the decade of the 1970s, which remains my favorite ten year stretch to date in the deep legacy of North American fine wine. The new article is a nice blend of these new releases and more mature wines from some of my favorite, Old School and Neo-Classical producers to be found in California, Oregon and Washington, as well as the new releases from one talented and intrepid winemaker in Ontario, Canada. As this issue of the newsletter also includes an historical feature on the deep and rich career of Ric Forman, I have had plenty of opportunity to drink

California wines over the last few months all the way back to Ric's first vintage at Sterling Vineyards in 1969, so I have had a very lovely mix of old and new over the course of the summer months in preparing this report.

One of the pleasures of preparing this particular article was the chance to attend a small Mayacamas Vineyards dinner here in Westchester County in April, between my tasting trips to France and Germany in the spring, which allowed me to taste a handful of older vintages and some of the new releases made by the present-day owners of Mayacamas, the Schottenstein family and their winemaker, Andy Erickson. Readers know my long-standing passion for the wines of Mayacamas, as they were crafted under their previous owners, the Travers family, and Bob Travers will always rank as one of my top handful of winemakers of all time in California. I would rate him right up there with the likes of Joe Heitz, André Tchelistcheff, Lee Stewart, Paul Draper, Ric Forman and the like as one of the most important winemaking pioneers in the history of California wine. The Travers family sold Mayacamas Vineyards in 2013, allowing Bob to finally retire (his first vintage at Mayacamas was the legendary 1968, so he had been tending vines and making wines up on top of Mount Veeder for quite a while!) to a small group that included Jay Schottenstein and Charles Banks (formerly of Screaming Eagle), though eventually Mr. Banks' legal troubles would necessitate his selling his share of the historic winery to the Schottenstein family a year or two later. Ever since the retirement of Bob Travers, long-time fans of Mayacamas have wondered if the new team would be committed to retaining the classic, old school style at the winery that literally made it the "Château Latour of Napa" for the stunning longevity and quality of their cabernet sauvignons. The recently released 2013 reds are the first wines made entirely under the watch of the new ownership, with Andy Erickson, former winemaker at Screaming Eagle, having taken control of the cellars here in 2013 and continuing to this day to man the helm at Mayacamas.

Our guide for the dinner tasting was Jimmy Hayes, who left a fine sommelier career (most recently as head of Thomas Keller's entire restaurant group- Per Se, The French Laundry etc.) to join the management team at Mayacamas Vineyards. Jimmy's insights into the current chapter at Mayacamas were invaluable, and it seems very clear that the new team at Mayacamas is very aware and respectful of the legacy left behind here by Bob Travers and seeks to continue the Mayacamas story much as it had been previously written, retaining the core winemaking values that made it one of California's greatest estates for so long, while tweaking things just a touch around the edges to help bring Mayacamas a bit more into the present day world of wine. As Jimmy noted, "the Schottenstein family is absolutely committed to continuing the style of Mayacamas, but at the same time, we all realize that we need to nudge the style of the winery a bit more towards the modern age, as cabernets that are not even accessible for the first ten years after bottling- which was certainly Bob Travers' style- are not really suited to the world we live in today." Jimmy continued that the aspirations for the Mayacamas cabernets under Andy Erickson are to "make the wines a bit more accessible early, maybe after five or six years, and still have thirty years or more of potential longevity" and if "the cabernets do not live fifty or sixty years, as they did under Bob, thirty years is still not too bad." While this philosophy probably makes fiscal sense for the winery, it is not going to reassure long-time fans of Mayacamas Vineyards, who cherished their wines because they were crafted in a classic style that sought to simply maximize potential quality and did not bow to any modern commercial considerations that might compromise the goal of ultimate quality in the bottle.

However, it seems likely that much of the tweaking of the Mayacamas style will revolve around picking dates and sugar levels for the grapes, not to mention replanting some of the very old vineyards to increase crop size for the winery, and at least the core winemaking values will remain the same from the Travers' era. These include no malolactic fermentation for the chardonnays, only five percent new oak for the whites, long, slow *elevage* for the red wines, with the initial year and a half of aging still taking place in ancient, huge thousand gallon *foudres* that date back to Bob Travers' earliest vintages (and many of which he bought used back in the late 1960s, already with many vintages under their belt), prior to the wines being racked to smaller oak barrels to complete their *elevage*, with only twenty percent of the casks new in any given vintage. Jimmy Hayes did note that the winery now practices a bit shorter period of maceration for their cabernets today than Bob Travers did; they will typically let the wines go about ten days now on their skins, where Bob would normally allow a full two weeks. He did not mention if Andy Erickson still includes the stems, as Bob did, but my gut feeling is that a significant percentage of stems are still retained for the fermentation, though probably not all whole clusters, as was the case in Bob Travers' time. In the vineyards, Jimmy noted that "today we pick with a bit of a *window* of sugar levels, whereas back in Bob's days, once the cabernet grapes got to 23.5 brix, he picked- period." Today, it seems that Mayacamas probably averages a bit more sugar in their grapes than in the past, but with the Travers' mantra of 23.5 brix always in the back of their mind. It is hard to glean how successful the range of ripeness practiced under Andy Erickson is going to be just from a tasting of his new 2013 cabernet sauvignon, which was after all, from a warm, drought vintage and therefore may not be truly emblematic of the style the new ownership will pursue with this bottling at Mayacamas. As Jimmy Hayes mentioned at our dinner, "for those who are fans of bigger cabernets, buy the 2013, as that is the last vintage you will see from us in that style and we are much more content with the style of the 2014 and following vintages, where we narrowed our window for picking and have produced wines even more in line with the old style here."

As far as our tasting went, I was left with the impression that a very serious effort is being undertaken to keep things much as they were at Mayacamas Vineyards during the period of the Travers family ownership of the property. This is particularly true on the winemaking side. However, I wonder what the future will bring when some of the extensive replanting of the vineyards up on the top of Mount Veeder starts to take effect here. I once asked Bob Travers, not long before he sold Mayacamas, how he managed to harvest physiologically ripe grapes and still keep the alcohol levels at or below thirteen percent for his cabernets and he replied, "that is quite easy, we just keep our yields down and the vines have no problem completely ripening up the tannins without the sugars getting out of control." Of course, Bob was doing this with lots of old vines, and it will be a challenge for Andy Erickson and Mayacamas' vineyard manager, Phil Cotturi, to be able to still do the same when the majority of their vines are much younger and far more vigorous. It will not be easy, at least based on most Napa cabernets one tastes today, as they are mostly made from young vines and large croploads, which is why we have wines made from grapes with potential alcohol levels of seventeen or eighteen percent, watered back down to fifteen and a half percent or so alcohol, with all of the override elements evident below the glossy surface of black raspberry-flavored commercial yeasts. I do not foresee that in Mayacamas' future, but it will be interesting to see how the replanting here affects the wines down the road, as it is going to take some serious management of the yields to be able to ripen up tannins without letting sugar levels soar far beyond Bob Travers' old mantra of 23.5 Brix.

Beyond the tasting of the first wines from the new regime at Mayacamas, there was other big news out of Napa Valley as I was preparing this report, as the McCrea family has sold their winery, Stony Hill Vineyards, at the end of August this year to the Hall family of Meadow Wood Ranch. This marks the start of a new chapter at Stony Hill, which was founded by Fred and Eleanor McCrea all the way back in 1943 and has been run by their grandchildren, Frederick and Sarah McCrea for many years now. Long-time winemaker at Stony Hill, Mike Chelini, whose first vintage here was the stellar 1973, will stay on to oversee the 2018 vintage at Stony Hill, and then retire, after forty-six vintages at the helm of this fine Napa property. Mike will stay associated with Stony Hill in the position of Winemaker Emeritus, but the Hall family will bring in another winemaker for the 2019 harvest here. Reports are that the Hall family has deep respect for the long and illustrious history at Stony Hill and has no plans to change the style of the wines, but it is expected that they will start to replant some of the oldest vineyards on the property and how this will affect the wines remains to be seen. Let us hope that they avail themselves of the great old Wente clones that Fred McCrea originally planted here in the forties and fifties and use *selection massale* for any new plantings in the vineyards here, as it would be sad if different clones were brought in and the inimitable style here at Stony Hill was diminished.

The following wines were all tasted since the last installment of the feature on North American wine was written, which was during the summer of 2017. The notes are all organized by varietal (for the most part), and then listed both chronologically and alphabetically within each varietal section. I should mention that a few of my favorite producers in Oregon, such as Jim Anderson at Patricia Green Cellars, Domaine Drouhin and Kelley Fox, decided to wait for part two of this report to send samples, figuring that the wines would be happier crossing the land mass of North America sometime after the summer, rather than in the midst of this torrid season of 2018. As I was trying to get back on schedule after the very late release of Issue 74 last month, I did not reach out to all of my favorite neo-classicists and old school winegrowers or their distributors (figuring that I already had an awful lot of samples piled up in shipping boxes in my back hall- and the cellar now is completely full!) and I just had nowhere to put more cases, so if some familiar names are not in the pages that follow, it is simply a reflection of the “no vacancy” sign being lit up for samples at the present time and those estates will be featured in the next part of this cyclical report. As the notes below will attest, there are great things going on in certain corners of the world of North American wine and I do believe that with each passing vintage, more and more producers are championing the styles of wines that first made this continent a great wine-producing area back in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The lead back in those days was certainly taken by California, but today, it is hard to say that the golden state has a qualitative edge on the top producers from Oregon and Washington, and it seems more fair to stay that all three states have a great number of producers making truly stunning, world class wines of *terroir* and the beautiful balance to age long and gracefully in the cellars.

I should mention that I am probably one of the worst-placed individuals to have any true sense of where the movement towards balanced and *terroir*-driven North American wines stands in comparison to the blockbuster, heady, new oaky and over the top style that was so vociferously championed by Robert Parker, The Wine Spectator crew and others of a similar mindset back in the decade of the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium. The reason for this is that producers who make wines in that style do not generally send me samples, or if they do so, it is only tends to be on a single occasion, as they generally do not like the scores that

those wines receive here and they take their next vintages off in search of greener pastures. Which is just fine with me, for though intellectual curiosity often has me wondering what is going on in that camp of winemaking, the curiosity is not strong enough to have me seeking out wines in that style to find out if they are being dialed back a bit these days, or if they continue to happily hum along with their alcohol levels set to stun, masquerading as high quality wines for those without the sufficient experience or compass to differentiate between good wine and good marketing. In any event, it seems to me that it is better that those wines do not cross my path with any frequency anymore (though I know that long-time fans of the old Road Kill feature would love to see more of those wines reviewed in these pages), as I find those types of wines very fatiguing to taste and the less of them I see in my piles of samples, the better. And, as the many, many pages that follow will attest, there are so many good, low octane, *terroir*-driven and classically-styled wines being made now in North America that I do not have the time or energy to keep up with all of those very worthy wines, so it is better to keep tasting those types of balanced wines (which are certainly going to be of more interest to readers), rather than expanding the playing field to include more wines from the over the top camp. I should also mention that the following report includes a couple of worthy wines from Chile that were sent to me, but which I had not found an outlet to include tasting notes in previously, so this North American wine report includes a couple of bottles from the southern hemisphere as well. I have placed those notes in their respective varietal section below.





## ***Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon***

### **2017 Sauvignon Blanc & Sémillon- Calluna Vineyards (Chalk Hill)**

This is the second vintage of David Jeffrey's lovely Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon blend, with the percentages in the blend this year fifty-eight percent of the former and forty-two percent of the latter. Both varietals are barrel-fermented and the wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane and offers up a superb nose of lemon, fresh fig, a touch of beeswax, gentle notes of petrol, citrus peel and a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and very well-balanced, with an excellent core, fine focus and grip, bouncy acids and a long, still quite primary and classy finish. This is structured like a top white Bordeaux and could really do with at least a year or two in the cellar to allow more layers to emerge. 2019-2027+. **91+**.

### **2017 Sauvignon Blanc- Heitz Wine Cellars (Napa Valley)**

The 2017 vintage of sauvignon blanc from Heitz Wine Cellars is nicely grassy and proud of its varietal heritage, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of gooseberry, lime, fresh-cut grass, salty soil tones and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and quite deep at the core, with bright acids, fine focus and grip and plenty of Sancerre-like grassiness perking up the long and very well-balanced finish. This is plenty ripe at 13.5 percent octane and the really pretty herbaceousness here is the grape, rather than underripeness, and this is just a beautifully unabashed example of the grape, which I happen to really, really like. 2018-2023. **91**.

### **2017 Sauvignon Blanc- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Erie North Shore) Screwcap**

The 2017 Sauvignon Blanc from North 42 Degrees is pretty ripe for a wine from Ontario, coming in at a full 13.5 degrees alcohol. The wine offers up a lovely, Loire-inspired nose of lime, gooseberry, a touch of fresh-cut grass, orange peel and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely complex, with fairly modest acids, but lovely focus and grip on the long and bouncy finish. The good ripeness here was bought at the cost of some acidity, so I would drink this wine over the next year or eighteen months, but the flavor depth is quite good and this is going to be a very tasty bottle over the next several months. Good juice. 2018-2020. **89**.

### **2017 North 42 Degrees Sauvignon Blanc Extra Dry**

This sparkling sauvignon blanc from North 42 Degrees is made by the Charmat method, so the bubbles are not quite as fine as they would be if the wine had seen its second fermentation in the bottle. However, there is still quite a bit to like here, as the nose is bright and expressive, offering up scents of gooseberry, lime zest, bread dough and a nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and frothy, with a good core and very good length and grip on the zesty and really quite dry finish. This is tasty and easy to drink, though the texture of the *mousse* is a bit difficult for my palate, particularly given how many superb bottles of Champagne I have also been tasting for this issue of the newsletter. But, this is a well-made sparkler at a very fair price. 2018-2023. **87**.

### **2016 Sauvignon Blanc "La Chênaie Vineyard"- Bow & Arrow (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Sauvignon Blanc "La Chênaie Vineyard" from Scott Frank is fermented and aged in old *puncheons* for ten months, with the exact same cellar handling as the Union School Vineyard bottling (please see below). Yet, the wines are quite different, as the 2016 La Chênaie bottling is a touch riper at 12.5 percent and delivers a lovely nose of lime peel, a touch of musky orange, a fine base of soil, a nice bit of grassiness and a gentle topnote of candied citrus peel. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and complex, with good acids, fine focus and grip, and a long, well-balanced finish. Fine juice. 2018-2023. **91**.



### **2016 Sauvignon Blanc “Union School Vineyard”- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Sauvignon Blanc “Union School Vineyard” bottling from Bow & Arrow is fermented in old *puncheons* and aged ten months prior to bottling, giving the wine just a whisper of oak. The wine is nicely cool at twelve percent octane and offers up a complex nose of lime, gooseberry, a touch of fresh-cut grass, lovely soil tones and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and zesty, with fine complexity and grip, lovely balance and a long, vibrant finish. This is lovely wine. 2018-2023. **91.**

### **2016 Sauvignon Blanc- Pied à Terre (Sonoma County)**

The 2016 Sauvignon Blanc from Richard Luftig’s Pied à Terre is surprisingly ripe, coming in at 14.1 percent alcohol. This is the same octane level as his superb cabernet sauvignon (please see below), but the sauvignon blanc comes across with a bit riper range of aromatics on the nose, wafting from the glass in an expressive blend of grapefruit, tart orange, a bit of damp grass, a nice touch of soil, white pepper and gentle upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and quite ripe (with the alcohol seeming a bit higher than 14.1 percent to my palate), with a good core, solid framing acids and good length on the slightly hot finish. I would always prefer to have a bit more grassiness and cut from this varietal and less of the very ripe fruit tones and touch of backend heat. This is okay, but it is the Pied à Terre cabernet sauvignon that sets off the fireworks! 2018-2020. **86.**

### **2015 Sauvignon Blanc “Monterey”- Morgan Winery (Screwcap)**

The 2015 Sauvignon Blanc from Morgan Winery is sealed under screwcap and was already showing a bit of reduction when I tasted it at the very end of December of last year. The wine has a fairly strong streak of asparagus in its bouquet of candied lime, damp grass, the aforementioned asparagus (which I attribute to the reduction) and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and fairly hot (though only purported to be 13.5 percent octane on the label), with a fair bit of residual sweetness vying with the alcohol on the backend. The acids are sharp and not particularly well-integrated and the overall impression is a wine where its constituent components are in strife with each other. Not a strong effort and only exacerbated by the choice of closure. I have tasted some lovely wines from Morgan for this report, but this bottle was not signing. 2018-2019. **78.**

### ***Riesling, Chenin Blanc Other White Wine Varietals***

#### **Time Machine Blanc 1.0- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The Time Machine Blanc 1.0 from Bow & Arrow is a roughly fifty-fifty blend of chenin blanc and sauvignon blanc, both barrel-fermented and blended together. The wine is 11.5 percent octane and bright and snappy on the palate, with a lovely nose of lime, apple, a touch of honeycomb, citrus peel and salty soil. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish, bright and bouncy, with a fine core, lovely soil signature and just a bit of the wildness on the backend of a natural wine. This is loaded with personality and very tasty- not to mention a great, great value! 2018-2023. **90.**

### **2017 Aligoté- Day Wines (Ribbon Ridge)**

Brianne Day makes great wines across the board, but I do have to confess to being a tad disappointed when I asked her New York distributor for current releases and only received Brianne’s new Aligoté bottling. Not that this wine is anything but lovely, but Brianne’s makes such stellar pinot noirs and syrah-based wines that I was really hoping for some red wine

fireworks as well! In any case, her 2017 aligoté is excellent, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of tart pear, crab apple, salty soil tones, dried flowers and a nice touch of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, bright and full, with lovely depth and intensity of flavor, impeccable balance and a long, vibrant and zesty finish. This lithe and lovely white wine is all of eleven percent in alcohol, yet packs loads of personality. Bravo Brianne! 2018-2025. **92.**

**2017 Vin de Days- Day Wines (Willamette Valley)**

I have really liked this blend since I first tasted it at the winery last summer. Brianne Day puts together an eclectic blend to make this highly quaffable wine, which this year is composed of a blend of thirty-eight percent Pinot Blanc, twenty percent Müller Thurgau, nineteen percent Riesling, eighteen percent Pinot Gris and five percent Muscat. The wine comes in at a cool twelve percent octane and offers up a lovely nose of white peach, salty soil tones, white flowers and a touch of petrol. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-bodied, bright and focused, with lovely intensity of flavor and bounce, good grip and a long, complex and dancing finish. This is an exotic blend where all of the components work together seamlessly to create a really lovely bottle. 2018-2023. **90.**

**2017 Grüner Veltliner “Acadia Vineyards”- Franchere Wine Company (Columbia Gorge)**

The 2017 Grüner Veltliner from Franchere comes in at a very cool 11.7 percent octane and offers up a bright and precise bouquet of green apple, quince, lovely minerality, plenty of smokiness and a touch of rosemary in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full, focused and very nicely balanced, with good intensity of flavor, lovely bounce and good length on the finish. This is a leaner styled wine, but it is quite tasty and has plenty of flavor interest. 2018-2023. **89.**

**2017 Viognier “Petaluma Gap”- Kendric Vineyards (Marin County)**

Stewart Johnson’s 2017 Viognier is one of the lowest octane examples of this varietal I have seen in quite some time, coming in at what is a cool 13.6 percent for this varietal. The wine offers up a lovely and quite serious nose of peach, pear, musky floral tones, a nice touch of salty soil and a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a lovely interplay of a good core of fruit and fine minerality. The finish is long, bright and complex, with excellent grip and backend energy. This is really, really good Viognier! 2018-2025+. **92.**

**2017 Gewurztraminer- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore) Screwcap**

Jan Schulte-Bisping has been the winemaker at North 42 Degrees for the last couple of years and clearly he has a superb touch with Gewurztraminer. The 2017 version is ripe at fourteen percent octane, but perfectly balanced and wide open out of the blocks, with loads of aromatic personality wafting from the glass in its classic blend of lychee nut, a touch of spices meats, rosewater, lovely spice tones and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, modest acids and lovely length and grip on the classic finish. As is the case with the sauvignon blanc here, the superb ripeness of fruit seems to have come at the expense of a bit of acidity, so this is going to be a fairly short-lived wine, but it is going to deliver plenty of pleasure during its prime! Apparently Ontario is a great region for Gewurztraminer! 2018-2022. **91.**

**2017 Riesling- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore) Screwcap**

The regular bottling of 2017 Riesling from North 42 Degrees Winery is quite tasty and done in a dry style, though with a lovely, low alcohol level also of eleven percent. The bouquet offers up a youthful mix of apple, a touch of petrol, salty soil tones and a touch of lilac in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, complex and nicely balanced, with

sound framing acids, good focus and grip and a long, vibrant finish. I would love to see a bit more mid-palate volume here for a Riesling done in a dry style, but at the same time, there is a lightness of step here that is very pleasing. Good, solid and classy Riesling. 2018-2025. **88.**

**2017 Sweet Riesling- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore) Screwcap**

The 2017 Sweet Riesling bottling from Jan Schulte-Bisping is done in a Spätlese style and comes in at ten percent alcohol in this vintage. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a pretty blend of apple, peach, spring flowers, a touch of salty soil and a nice touch of citrus zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, focused and nicely complex, with a lovely core, fine balance and grip and a long, soil-driven finish. This has completely different *terroir* from what one is accustomed to in Germany, but the Spätlese sensibilities here are impeccable and this is a very tasty wine, once one gets used to the different soil signature on the backend. 2018-2025+. **89+.**

**2017 Riesling Reserve “Late Harvest Dry”- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie N.S.)**

The 2017 Riesling Reserve from North 42 Degrees is finished with a cork and is ripe and aromatically very impressive, jumping from the glass in a fine blend of apple, peach, a touch of citrus zest, complex soil tones and a potpourri of fruit blossoms in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, complex and quite solid at the core, with fine transparency, impressive focus and grip and a long, zesty and quite powerful finish. This comes in at 13.6 percent octane and reminds me quite a bit of an Alsace Grand Cru Riesling, albeit, again, with quite different soil signature. This is really good, with a hint of Rangen de Thann to it on both the nose and palate. 2018-2030. **91.**

**2017 Grüner Veltliner “I Have Powdery Mildew” Johan Vineyard- Minimus**

This is part of Chad Stock’s program to occasionally produce wines with modest flaws, so as to revisit our perceived knowledge and reflect upon some of these depredations. He had done this in the past with both volatile acidity and brettanomyces, and now we have a Grüner Veltliner from the biodynamically-farmed Johan Vineyard where powdery mildew got a hold of the grapes and did not let go. Always up for a challenge, Chad decided to see what the grapes might offer with a thoughtful vinification. The wine is really quite good (as has been the case with every one of these cuvées I have tried so far in this series), offering up a lovely nose of kiwi, rosemary, lime peel, fine soil tones, a hint of white mushroom and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with the powdery mildew a bit more evident than on the nose, but with good acids and grip and a long, complex and quite vibrant finish. The backend is obviously not clean, as the powdery mildew is most apparent here, but the wine had depth, complexity and *terroir* and offers up some serious food for thought. I like the nose here better than the palate, but I could also see drinking this with the right dish (say a wild mushroom risotto) and not really even notice the powdery mildew on the backend. 2018-2023. **88.**

**2017 Vermentino “Layne Vineyard” Dictionary Series- Minimus (Applegate Valley)**

The 2017 Layne Vineyard Vermentino from Chad Stock’s Dictionary Series at Minimus is pretty ripe, coming in at a generous 13.7 percent octane in this vintage. The vineyard was once planted to cabernet sauvignon, but vermentino was grafted onto the *franc de pied* rootstocks here to produce this fruit. The vineyard is red volcanic soils and sits at 1600 feet above sea level, giving the wine plenty of cut and grip at its riper octane level in 2017. The lovely nose offers up a youthful mix of tart orange, green olive, salty minerality, dried flowers and a nice touch of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with good framing acids, lovely mineral drive and a long, classy finish. This is loaded

with personality, but it is a tad on the soft side by Chad's high standards and probably will want drinking in the next half dozen years. Fine, fine vermentino. 2018-2023. **92.**



**2016 Melon “Johan Vineyard”- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

There is not a lot of Melon (the grape of Muscadet) planted in Oregon, but the superbly farmed, biodynamic Johan Vineyard has some and I have to imagine it would be amongst the first choices of most winemakers interested in producing this lovely varietal. Scott Frank's 2016 version spends six to eight months aging *sur lies* and comes in at a refined 11.5 percent octane. The nose wafts from the glass in a classic blend of lemon, briny overtones, a nice touch of lees, dried flowers and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, crisp and complex, with a fine core, lovely focus and grip and a long, zesty and well-balanced finish. Very Muscadet-like, but without the granite and a completely different soil signature. Fine juice. 2018-2025+. **91.**

**2016 Chenin Blanc “Omero Vineyard” Origin- Minimus (Ribbon Ridge)**

The Origin label from Chad Stock has its first chenin blanc in the 2016 vintage. As Chad has written, he intends for this chenin blanc bottling to reflect the growing conditions of each year, so the inaugural wine was made in a dry style and barrel-fermented and aged in old oak casks. It comes in at 13.2 percent alcohol and offers up a beautiful, youthful nose of apple, fresh pineapple, a touch of quince, chalky soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and superbly focused, with a lovely core, excellent transparency and

grip and a long, nascently complex and zesty finish. It will be interesting to follow this wine and see how it ages, as it seems to have the requisite structure out of the blocks to age long and gracefully. Fans of Domaine Huët's Vouvray Sec bottlings would love this wine! 2018-2035? **92+.**

**2016 Gewürztraminer "Since I Fell For You"- Ovum Wines (Rogue Valley)**

This bottling of 2016 Gewürztraminer from Ovum Wines is from the Gerber Vineyard, which was planted back in 1976, making these vines forty-one years of age in this vintage. The wine is pretty ripe this year, tipping the scales at 14.1 percent and offering up a very classical nose of lychee, apple, a touch of spiced meats, rosewater and a beautiful base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, ripe and powerful, with a lovely core, good focus and grip, fine soil signature and just a whisper of backend heat poking out on the long and complex finish. This is very Alsace-like in personality and a very classy wine. I do admit I liked the 2015 version better, which was under thirteen percent, but this is still a very well-made wine and one of the finest examples of Gewurztraminer made in the US. 2018-2025. **90.**

**2016 Big Salt- Ovum Wines (Elkton)**

The 2016 Big Salt from Ovum Wines is blend of ninety percent Riesling and Gewurztraminer (co-planted in a field blend in this parcel), eight percent Muscat and two percent of a mix of Melon, Savignin Rose and Pinot Noir, with the juice from the two red wine grapes pressed and removed from the skins pronto. The wine comes in at a cool 12.8 percent and offers up a lovely, complex nose of apple, peach, a bit of rosewater, lychee floral tones and a touch of Gewurztraminer spices in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, complex and fullish, with a fine core, bright acids and excellent focus and grip on the long and exotic finish. The Gewurztraminer in the blend is quite a bit more dominant on the palate than on the nose, and the wine has a nice touch of bitterness on the finish and is a complex and really good food wine. A completely unique blend that works beautifully! 2018-2023. **90.**

**2016 Riesling "Base Line" Bradley Vineyard- Ovum Wines (Elkton)**

The 2016 Riesling "Base Line" from Ovum Wines is done in a dry style and comes in at 13.5 percent octane in this fine, ripe vintage. The bouquet is pure, complex and beautifully expressive out of the blocks, offering up scents of apple, tart orange, gorgeous minerality, dried flowers, a touch of citrus peel and just a whisper of petrol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and fairly powerful in profile, with a lovely core, good soil signature, bright acids and lovely grip on the long, balanced and still quite youthful finish. I put my nose in the glass here and was reminded immediately of Alsace in style, albeit with quite different *terroir* front and center. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2035. **92.**

**2016 Riesling "Memorista"- Ovum Wines (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Riesling "Memorista" from John House's Ovum Wines is quite a bit riper than the last example I tasted back in 2014, as this wine comes in at 13.9 percent octane this year. The wine offers up beautiful precision on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of apple, peach petrol, a touch of rosemary-like spice tones (almost Rangen de Than-like), lovely soil elements and a topnote of citrus blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with a bone dry finish, fine focus and grip, good complexity and a long, fairly crisp and well-balanced finish. There is no sign of backend heat here whatsoever, but this is a pretty ripe Riesling and I would guess that it will be best drunk up in its relative youth. 2018-2025+? **89.**

**2016 Riesling "Off the Grid"- Ovum Wines (Rogue Valley)**

The 2016 "Off the Grid" Riesling from Ovum Wines is a bit less ripe than the Memorista this year, tipping the scales at 13.2 percent alcohol. The nose is a bit more expressive, delivering

a lovely constellation of apple, a touch of tangerine, gentle notes of petrol, complex soil tones, dried flowers and a touch of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely transparent, with a fine core, good framing acids, lovely focus and grip and a long, complex and bone dry finish. I love this wine's balance and style. 2018-2030+. **92.**

**2016 Riesling “Toro y Scorpio”- Ovum Wines (Ribbon Ridge)**

The 2016 Riesling “Toro y Scorpio” from John House is the lowest octane of these Riesling bottlings, reaching 12.5 percent alcohol and delivering a bright and complex bouquet of tart orange, apple, petrol, lemongrass, salty soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and the most youthfully structured of all of these lovely 2016 Riesling bottlings from Ovum, with a good core, zesty acids and fine focus and grip on the nascently complex and very well-balanced finish. This is fine juice in the making, but this is the one 2016 Ovum Riesling I would give a year or two in the cellar to allow it to blossom, rather than drinking it right away. 2020-2035+. **92+.**

**2016 Chenin Blanc “Mount Pajaro Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

This is the first vintage I have tasted of Chenin Blanc from Rhys Vineyards and the wine is lovely. It comes in at 12.5 percent octane and is done in a completely dry style. The nose wafts from the glass in a mix of apple, pineapple, dusty soil tones, a touch of lanolin and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-bodied and nicely soil-driven, with bright acids and good length and grip on the moderately complex finish. This is a nice, pleasant wine that should age quite nicely. 2018-2030. **88+.**

**2016 Grenache Blanc “Monterey”- Morgan Winery**

Morgan's 2016 Grenache Blanc is also sealed under screwcap and the wine seems exceedingly discreet on the nose, offering up very vague notes of lemon, apple, salty soil tones and a hint of acacia blossoms in the upper register. On the palate the wine is more definitive and enjoyable, with its full-bodied format showing reasonable depth at the core, sound framing acids and good focus and grip on the slightly warm finish. This is 13.5 percent alcohol and shows just a bit of backend alcohol, but is really a pretty good wine, with a nice sense of juiciness, if not a lot of complexity. A perfectly respectable wine, which I would be inclined to drink over the next twelve months, as it is not particularly high in acidity and sealed under a screwcap. 2018-2019. **85.**

**2015 Grüner Veltliner “Alfaro Vineyard”- Vöcal Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2015 Grüner Veltliner “Alfaro Vineyard” bottling from Vöcal Vineyards was raised in fifty percent old oak casks and fifty percent stainless steel tanks, with the wine not undergoing malolactic fermentation. It comes in at an even thirteen percent octane and offers up a fine, ripe and complex nose of grapefruit, orange peel, plenty of smokiness, a good base of soil and a bit of rosemary oil in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and pretty powerful in personality, fairly soft acids and good length and grip the rock solid finish. This has the inherent power of Grüner Veltliner, but I would love to see a bit more lift on the backend-though perhaps this is just the style of the vintage? 2018-2028. **87.**

**2014 Viognier “Hayley Marie Cuvée”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River Valley)**

The 2014 Viognier “Hayley Marie Cuvée” from Porter Creek is quite ripe, as is typical for this beautifully aromatic varietal, tipping the scales at a hefty 14.8 percent alcohol. The wine offers up lovely notes on the nose, including peach, pear, acacia blossoms, a touch of honey and orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, ripe and generous on the attack, with a



good core, respectable framing acids and a bit of alcohol poking out on the long finish. This is not bad until the backend, where the octane of the wine gets in the way of the pleasure for my palate. 2018-2020. **85** (but add four points for fanciers of higher octane whites).



### *Chardonnay*

#### **2016 Chardonnay “Anderson Valley”- Alesia (Rhys Vineyards)**

The 2016 Alesia Anderson Valley Chardonnay is a nicely cool customer at 12.5 percent and quite aromatically expressive, wafting from the glass in a fine blend of peach, a touch of guava, lovely soil tones, touch of fresh almond, fruit blossoms and a discreet base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, bright and beautifully light on its feet, with a good core, fine, nascent complexity and a long, well-balanced and bouncy finish. Good juice. 2018-2025+. **89+**.

#### **2016 Chardonnay “Santa Cruz Mountains”- Alesia (Rhys Vineyards)**

The Santa Cruz Mountains bottling of 2016 Chardonnay from Alesia is even a touch lower in octane than the stylish Anderson Valley bottling, as this comes in at 12.3 percent alcohol. Despite its lower octane, the wine has plenty of personality on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet delivering a fine mélange of apple, a hint of pear, almond, a really good base of white soil tones, a touch of orange peel and a refined framing of new wood. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full, focused and quite solid at the core, with lovely balance and grip,

excellent backend mineral drive and a long, zesty and promising finish. This is lovely and even a hair better than the very good Anderson Valley bottling this year. 2018-2030. **90+**.

**2016 Chardonnay “Russian River Valley”- Bravium Wines (Sonoma County)**

The 2016 Russian River Valley Chardonnay from Bravium is a lovely bottle, offering a fine combination of ripeness and elegance in its 13.5 percent octane framework. The stylish nose wafts from the glass in a mix of pear, apple, a touch of almond, alluvial soil tones and a judicious framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely nutty in a Meursault sort of way, with a fine core, bright acids and impressive length and grip on the complex finish. This is classically Russian River Valley in personality, but with just a hint of French inspiration. Fine juice! 2018-2023+. **91.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Bunker Hill”- Lingua Franca (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Lingua Franca “Bunker Hill” Chardonnay is a lovely bottle, offering up lovely precision and soil signature in its svelte, thirteen percent octane chassis. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a fine blend of pear, hazelnut, lovely soil tones, a touch of fresh nutmeg, acacia blossoms and a generous serving of buttery new oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and beautifully structured, with a lovely core of fruit, excellent mineral drive, bright acids and fine length and grip on the complex and gently new oaky finish. This carries quite a bit of new wood, but does so very nicely and is very well-balanced and should age very well indeed. 2018-2030. **92.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Dijon Free”- Minimus (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Chardonnay “Dijon Free” cuvée from Minimus is once again a terrific example of this varietal, just loaded with personality and youthful complexity. The 2016 version came in a 13.1 percent octane and included a blend of clones such as Musqué, Old Wente, Mendoza, Espiquette and Mount Eden- pretty much anything Chad could find that was not a Dijon clone. It was raised in two and three year-old Chablis barrels and offers up a beautiful bouquet of white peach, pear, fruit blossoms, lovely soil tones, a hint of fresh nutmeg, citrus peel and a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full and still quite youthfully zesty, with a rock solid core, excellent minerality, bright, snappy acids and excellent backend lift on the long, poised and nascently complex finish. This is more tightly-knit out of the blocks than I remember either the 2014 or 2015 version showing at a similar age, but every bit as compelling! 2020-2040. **94.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Mount Eden Clone”- Minimus (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Chardonnay “Mount Eden Clone” bottling from Chad Stock is one of his “Dictionary Series”, and originally this was intended to be part of his fine “Dijon Free” bottling from Minimus, but it stood out so uniquely on its own prior to the blending that it seemingly insisted on being bottled on its own in 2016. There were four casks of this wine, fermented and raised in old barrels. The clone hails all the way back to the original Paul Masson, who brought it in from Burgundy at the start of the twentieth century and tends to ripen more slowly than most other chardonnay clones planted in the Willamette Valley. The wine delivers superb aromatic complexity in its mix of pear, apple, a bit of acacia blossom, fresh almond, lovely soil tones and a hint of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, cool and full-bodied, with a superb core, lovely transparency and great backend energy and grip on the long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This wine starts out nicely discreet on the attack and simply soars on the backend and will age beautifully. *Chapeau!* 2018-2035+. **93+.**

**2016 Chardonnay “1984” Stein Vineyard- Minimus (Yamhill-Carlton)**

The 1984 bottling of chardonnay from the Stein Vineyard hails from vines that went into the ground in 1984 (as the name suggests) and which were planted on their *franc de pied* roots,

rather than on a phylloxera-resistant rootstock. Today, they are fighting the losing battle against the root louse, but still producing high quality fruit, with tiny, small berries and such character that Chad Stock has given them their own bottling in the 2016 vintage. The bouquet here is gently reductive and quite Jean-François Coche-like in its mélange of pear, apple, iodine, gorgeously complex soil tones, almond, apple blossoms and a hint of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and nicely youthful in profile, with a rock solid core, superb soil signature, bright, zesty acids and laser-like focus on the extremely long, nascently complex and perfectly balanced finish. In the context of Minimus bottlings, this saw a bit more “new” oak than most chardonnays here, as this was raised in one wine casks. This is stunning juice and deserves some bottle age to allow its secondary layers to emerge! 2020-2040+. **95.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Santa Cruz Mountains”- Model Farm (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

This is the very first chardonnay to be produced under the Model Farm label by Sean Castorani and his wife Joanna Wells. The wine comes in cool and vibrant, tipping the scales at 12.5 percent octane and offering up a beautifully refined bouquet of pear, delicious apple, acacia blossoms, a touch of fresh almond, lovely soil tones and a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, bouncy and intensely flavored, with a medium-full format, good depth at the core, excellent focus and grip and a long, zesty and nascently complex finish. This will age quite well and could do with a few years in the cellar to allow the secondary layers of complexity to start to emerge. Not surprisingly, given that Sean is the assistant winemaker at Rhys Vineyards, this is indeed, quite Rhys-like in style and potential. An absolutely superb first effort with this varietal! 2020-2035. **92+.**

**2016 Chardonnay- Omero Cellars (Willamette Valley)**

It is so nice to see Chad Stock’s Omero Cellars label appear again after a one year hiatus, due to some divorce issues with the previous owners of the vineyard. The 2016 chardonnay is produced from what Chad calls “heirloom clones”, which I assume means no Dijon clones of chardonnay in the blend. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in a combination of half barrels, one hundred and forty liter Chablis barrels and regular Burgundy casks, none of which are remotely close to new. The wine offers up a lovely nose of pear, apple, a touch of clove-like spice tones, lovely soil elements, a bit of leanness and a topnote of apple blossoms. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and absolutely loaded with personality, with a fine core, superb soil signature, crisp acids and excellent focus and grip on the long and impressively complex finish. This is a superb bottle of chardonnay and a stellar value! 2018-2026+. **92+.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Russian River Valley”- Porter Creek Vineyards**

The 2016 Russian River Valley bottling of chardonnay from Alex Davis is a bit riper than his lovely old vine bottling from George’s Hill, coming in at 13.8 percent alcohol. The wine is very stylish on the nose, offering up a wide open blend of pear, apple, lovely soil tones, spring flowers and a touch of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, ripe and well-balanced, with a full-bodied format, good framing acids and lovely length and grip on the focused and juicy finish. This is not the most complex example of chardonnay, but it hits all the right notes and is very easy to drink. 2018-2024. **89+.**

**2016 Chardonnay “George’s Hill Vineyard- Old Vine”- Porter Creek (Russian River)**

Alex Davis is making terrific wines these days at Porter Creek Vineyards and his George’s Hill Vineyard chardonnay is outstanding in 2016. The wine comes in at a cool 13.1 percent octane and offers up a superb and quite complex bouquet of pear, apple, a touch of hazelnut, complex soil tones, spring flowers, a whisper of iodine and a discreet base of vanillin

oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and complex, with a lovely core, excellent transparency, fine focus and grip and a long, zesty and well-balanced finish. This is a young wine on the palate and clearly will age quite nicely, but it smells so beautiful out of the blocks that the temptation is going to be there to drink the wine in the blush of youth. Try and give it a few years in the cellar to fully blossom on the palate! 2018-2030. **92.**



*Chad Stock's glorious troika of chardonnay magic from the 2016 vintage.*

#### **2016 Chardonnay “Bearwallow Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Anderson Valley)**

After the ripe drought year of 2015, it is nice to open the 2016 Bearwallow Chardonnay from Kevin Harvey and his team at Rhys and see the alcohol level at 12.5 percent. These are still young vines, as the first vintage of chardonnay produced here was the 2014, but the vines' youthful vigor is obviously nicely reined in. The bouquet here is lovely, offering up a nascently complex and refined blend of pear, white peach, a hint of fresh nutmeg, a lovely base of soil, a dollop of almond and a discreet base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and beautifully transparent, with a good core, fine focus and grip, bright acids and lovely balance on the long and complex finish. There is a touch of thoroughbred leanness here on the palate that I really, really like. 2018-2030. **92.**

#### **2016 Chardonnay “Horseshoe Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Horseshoe Vineyard Chardonnay from Rhys is again a cool and classy customer, tipping the scales at 12.6 percent octane. The nose is pure and beautifully expressive

out of the blocks, wafting from the glass in a fine blend of pear, delicious apple, acacia blossoms, complex minerality, fruit blossoms and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, focused and shows excellent intensity of flavor at the core, with excellent balance and grip, lovely complexity and a long, elegant and vibrant finish. This is excellent wine. 2018-2035. **93+**.

**2016 Chardonnay “Alpine Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The Rhys Vineyards’ bottling of chardonnay from the Alpine Vineyard is one of my very favorite white wine cuvées in all of California, and the 2016 vintage of this bottling is outstanding. The wine is another cool chard, coming in at 12.7 percent and offering up excellent aromatic refinement in its blend of pear, nectarine, fresh almond, a beautifully complex base of soil, spring flowers and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with an excellent core of fruit, lovely mineral drive, bright acids and superb length and grip on the very classy finish. This is like a top flight Puligny premier cru with different minerality. 2018-2035+. **94.**

**2016 Chardonnay “X Novo Vineyard”- Walter Scott Wines (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Chardonnay “X Novo” from Ken Pahlow and Erica Landon is an outstanding follow-up to the brilliant 2015 version, offering up a beautifully pure and very French-inspired nose of apple, pear, hazelnut, iodine, complex soil tones and a bit of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, focused and superbly structured, with a fine core of fruit, excellent transparency, bright acids and lovely focus and grip on the long, youthfully complex and very refined finish. This is the first vintage where Ken and Erica are getting all of the fruit from the X Novo Vineyard, so there is more of this wine to go around than was the case with the 2015 and that is very, very good news! This is bottled in a slightly reductive style very much reminiscent of the very top couple of producers in Meursault, and it will age very well indeed. It is delicious out of the blocks, but further complexity will build with bottle age. 2018-2030+. **94+.**

**2016 Chardonnay “Peters Vineyard”- The Withers (Sonoma Coast)**

The 2016 Chardonnay “Peters Vineyard” from The Withers is the first chard I have tasted from the winery, though they have produced one at least since the 2015 vintage, so it is not an entirely new edition to this fine estate’s portfolio. The wine is pretty ripe for a chardonnay from the Sebastopol Hills, coming in at 13.8 percent octane and offering up a refined and complex nose of apple, a touch of passion fruit, hazelnut, lovely soil tones, a bit of browned butter, a discreet of vanillin oak and a lovely topnote of gently musky floral tones. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with fine focus and grip, good complexity and a long, ripe and zesty finish. Good juice. 2018-2025. **91+.**

**2015 Chardonnay- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

Andy Erickson’s 2015 chardonnay is very, very good, but it is a bit riper than most of those made here previously by Bob Travers. The wine is listed at 14.25 percent octane and was made without malolactic and saw only five percent new oak during its *elevage*. The wine is really lovely and opens up in an almost exotic direction with a bit of air, eventually offering up a complex and vibrant bouquet of apple, lemon, passion fruit, lovely soil tones and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and nascently complexity, with vibrant acids and lovely length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. Good juice. 2018-2035. **92.**

**2015 Chardonnay “Highland” Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

The 2015 Morgan “Highland” Chardonnay is a pretty ripe wine, coming in at 14.2 percent octane, but offers up quite good freshness in its bouquet of apple, pear, fresh almond,

good, salty soil tones, a bit of beeswax and a deft base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core, bright acids and just a whisper of backend heat on the finish that keeps the score down a hair. This is a well-made bottle of chardonnay that would be outstanding if it were a half point lower in alcohol. 2018-2022. **89.**

**2015 Chardonnay “Double L Vineyard”- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

The 2015 Double L Vineyard bottling of chardonnay from Morgan is also 14.2 percent alcohol, but seems to lack a bit of the freshness on the nose that the Highland cuvée displays. The bouquet is deep and offers up scents of nectarine, a bit of guava, a good base of soil, white flowers and buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and not as light on its feet as the Highland bottling, with a good core, moderate framing acids and good length and grip on the ripe finish. This carries its backend alcohol a bit better than the Highland, but I prefer the bounce of the former wine to the riper flavor profile here. Again, good wine, waiting for a lower octane to find its inner beauty. 2018-2022. **87.**

**2014 Chardonnay “Estate Bottles”- Mount Eden Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The current release of estate chardonnay from Jeffrey Patterson at Mount Eden is outstanding and just starting to blossom nicely and drink with generosity. The nose wafts from the glass in a fine blend of pear, apple, hazelnut, stony soil tones, white flowers and a well done framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and well-balanced, with a fine core, excellent soil signature, bright acids and impressive length and grip on the focused and blossoming finish. This comes in listed at 13.5 percent octane and is pretty ripe, but also pure and very nicely structured and will age long and gracefully. It is quite approachable today, but still really in its adolescence and it will be quite a bit more complex to drink four or five years down the road. 2018-2040. **92+.**

**2013 Chardonnay “The Terraces”- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

The Terraces bottling of chardonnay was a special cuvée produced from a plot of old, Wente clones that were planted in the 1950s by the Taylor family up on top of Mount Veeder and which were on their way out in this vintage. Mayacamas decided to make this old vine bottling from them in 2013, prior to their being grubbed up and replanted the following year, so this is a one-time cuvée. The wine is listed at 14.25 percent octane, but seems just a touch higher, as there is a whisper of backend heat on the finish. The nose is deep and still quite youthful, offering up scents of pear, a touch of fresh pineapple, salty soil tones, buttercups, a touch of fresh nutmeg and a very discreet base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and focused, with a good core, bright acids and the aforementioned touch of backend alcohol poking out on the finish. This is good and built to age, but I would have loved to have seen it at a slightly lower octane. 2018-2030. **89.**

**2009 Chardonnay- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

The 2009 Mayacamas chardonnay is drinking very nicely at age nine, but it has not developed as much complexity with bottle age as many of Bob Travers’ chardonnays do in other vintages. The nose is open and quite stylish, offering up scents of apple, orange peel, a hint of butterscotch, salty soil tones and a dollop of woodsmoke in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, long and well-balanced, with a good core and fine length and grip on the tasty finish. Not a great vintage of Mayacamas chardonnay, but a good one that still has plenty of life in it. 2018-2035. **90.**



### **1994 Chardonnay “Cuvée W- le Willy”- Kalin Cellars (Livermore Valley)**

The 1994 Kalin Cellars “Cuvée W” Chardonnay “le Willy” is the most recent release of this varietal from Terry and Frances Leighton, and it has been designated as one of their “stealth cuvées.” The wine was aged for twenty-two months in fifty percent new oak prior to bottling, with fining, but no filtration and has been resting comfortably in the Kalin cellars since August of 1996. Readers may recall that this bottling hails from the oldest chardonnay vines in all of California, produced from cuttings having been brought over by Charles Wetmore from Louis Latour’s Corton-Charlemagne at the end of the nineteenth century and these vines now date back to the early twentieth century. The wine is now a beautifully mature, light golden color, offering up a deep and vibrant nose of fresh apricot, peach, orange zest, hazelnut, gentle notes of butterscotch, salty soil tones, a touch of honeysuckle and a beautiful base of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and at its apogee, with a superb core, excellent acids and outstanding length and grip on the complex and beautifully balanced finish. At age twenty-four, this bottle is drinking superbly well, but has plenty of life still ahead of it. A magical example of chardonnay! 2018-2035. **95.**



### ***Rosé***

#### **2017 Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore)**

North 42 Degrees Winery is based in Ontario and makes very good wines. Their 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé comes in at 12.5 percent octane and offers up a pretty nose of cherries,

orange peel, a touch of smokiness, dried flowers and a good base of soil. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full and nicely vinous in style, with sound framing acids, good focus and grip and a long, well-balanced finish. This is quite tasty and reminds me stylistically of Cabernet d'Anjou Rosé. It is sealed under a screwcap, so I would opt for drinking it on the young side. 2018-2020. **88.**

**2017 Rosé “Old Vine”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Mendocino County)**

The 2017 Rosé “Old Vine” from Porter Creek is made from a blend of eighty-five percent zinfandel and fifteen percent carignan. The wine offers up a fine nose of peach, melon, a nice touch of almond, a good base of soil and dried rose petals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely balanced, with good soil signature, bright acids and a long, slightly dusty finish. This has a lot of character and impressive length and grip, but it needs food to show its best. 2018-2020. **88.**

**2017 Rosé- The Withers (El Dorado)**

The 2017 Rosé from The Withers is produced from a blend of fifty-one percent mourvèdre and forty-nine percent grenache. It is a lovely salmon color and comes in at an even thirteen percent octane, while delivering a fine aromatic blend of melon, tangerine, a nice touch of musky spice tones, salty soil and orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely vinous, with a good core, plenty of flavor personality and a long, complex finish. Good juice. 2018-2022. **89.**

***Zinfandel***

**2016 Zinfandel “Old Vine”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Sonoma County)**

The 2016 Zinfandel “Old Vine” bottling from Alex Davis is excellent, and not particularly heady by the standards of this varietal these days, as it comes in at a pretty civilized 14.1 percent in this vintage. The nose is bright and nicely brambly, wafting from the glass in a mix of raspberries, spice tones (cumin and cardamom?), a bit of meatiness, a nice signature of soil, a touch of fresh dill and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, bright and plenty tangy, with a fine core, lovely focus and grip, moderate tannins and a long, youthful and promising finish. This has plenty of ripe tannin, but it is going to age far longer on its tangy acidity and should be a proper long distance runner. A fine, old school zin! 2020-2045. **90+.**

**2013 Zinfandel- Sky Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

The 2013 Zinfandel from Sky Vineyards is really, really good and really classical in profile, with an alcohol level of only 13.4 percent and outstanding complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is flat out stellar, delivering a superbly complex blend of black raspberries, cassis, lovely spice tones, a bit of cigar smoke, a great base of mountain soil, smoked meats and a whisper of cedar (despite seeing no new oak and being raised in one to ten year-old casks). On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with ripe tannins, good, bright acids, excellent focus and grip and a long, balanced and promising, old school finish. Sky's founder and present owner, Lore Olds, started Sky by purchasing and planting property up above Mayacamas in 1973 (where he was working at the time) and today, this is about as close as one can get to a Bob Travers wine as you could ask for! I am clearly long, long overdue for a visit to Lore Olds and his beloved, rugged Sky Vineyards! This is great mountain zinfandel that needs some cellaring time to blossom properly, but it will be long-lived and flat out superb for a long, long time, once it is ready to drink! 2023-2065. **93.**

## ***Syrah, Other Rhône Varietals and a Few Exotic Blends***

### **2017 Rock Well Red- Minimus (Carleton)**

Chad Stock's Rock Well Red is a very exotic blend in 2017, being composed of a mix of cabernet franc, syrah, gamay, viognier and sauvignon blanc! The wine tips the scales at 13.7 percent octane and is raised for nine months in a mix of older casks and puncheons, with the wood being a combination of acacia and chestnut! The nose is bright, complex and nicely red fruity in profile, offering up scents of raspberries, red currants, lovely spice tones, a fine base of soil, a hint of pepper and *garrigue*, dried flowers and a topnote of bonfire. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with a good core, modest tannins, tangy acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, complex and very nicely balanced finish. This is a beautiful blend (albeit, probably never made anywhere in the history of wine outside of the Carleton cellars of Minimus!) that produces a complex, balanced and very classy wine that just exudes personality! Give it a try! 2018-2035. **93.**

### **2016 Cotillion- Frenchtown Farms (Sierra Foothills)**

The Cotillion bottling from Aaron and Cara Mockrish's Frenchtown Farms is produced from the oldest-running vineyard in all of California, Jessie's Grove in Lodi, which was planted in the late nineteenth century. It is planted to a blend of sixty percent carignan and forty percent zinfandel, which the Mockrish family crushes whole cluster, by foot and raises in old *puncheons* after a short maceration period. The 2016 version comes in at 13.1 percent octane and offers up a youthfully complex nose of brambly black fruit, roasted meats, bonfire, a fine base of soil tones, a nice touch of spice and a bit of chicory in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and moderately tannic, with a fine core, lovely focus and grip and very good length on the promising finish. This is bottled with modest SO<sub>2</sub> and there was a prickle of carbon dioxide bubbles in the wine when I tasted it, but I am not sure if this is by design of Aaron and Cara or a reflection of not quite enough SO<sub>2</sub>. The wine has good structure and should age nicely, and could do with a bit of time in the cellar to soften up a bit more. 2021-2045+. **89+.**

### **2016 Syrah "Petaluma Gap"- Model Farm (Sonoma Coast)**

Model Farm was the most pleasant surprise of all the new wines I tasted last year for this report. It is a small project of the husband and wife team Sean Castorani and his wife Joanna Wells. As I mentioned last year, Sean's day job is working as the assistant winemaker at Rhys Vineyards, so Sean and Joanna farm their small syrah vineyard in the Petaluma Gap when opportunity allows. The first vintage here was the 2014, and the couple's 2016 Syrah is another stellar, low octane beauty, coming in at 12.75 percent octane and delivering a gorgeous young bouquet of cassis, black raspberries, smoked meats, a touch of coffee bean, pepper, complex soil tones, a bit of eucalyptus (as well as other, more exotic botanicals) and a topnote of bonfires. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and beautifully soil-driven, with a good core, superb intensity of flavor, well-measured tannins and a very long, nascently complex and vibrant finish. This has beautiful fruit, but the backend is driven by its intense minerality and this characteristic augurs superbly well for its future greatness, but give it some hibernation time to blossom. Low fat and absolutely stellar syrah! 2024-2060. **94.**

### **2016 Counoise- The Withers (El Dorado)**

The Counoise from The Withers is a new varietal in 2016 (or at least this is the first time I have seen it) and the wine is quite impressive. To the best of my recollection, this is the first time I have ever tasted Counoise bottled on its own and I was surprised by how light the color is, as this is not much darker than a well-done bottle of pinot noir. The wine is also admirably low

in octane, coming in at 12.9 percent alcohol and offers up a complex and transparent nose of red berries, lavender, a touch of tree bark, gentle meatiness and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nicely soil-driven and quite tangy, with excellent focus and grip, moderate tannins and a long, complex and vibrant finish. This is a nicely high acid grape and the 2016 from The Withers is really good at the table. It is drinking quite well already, but it should age nicely as well and will probably be even better a few years down the road. Tasty juice. 2018-2035. 91+.



### **2015 Syrah “The Ornbaun” Drew Family Wines (Mendocino Ridge)**

I really like Jason Drew’s wines and his 2015 syrah bottling is very good indeed. The 2015 is a full half point lower in octane than the 2014, coming in at 13.4 percent octane and offering up a fine, youthful bouquet of cassis, black cherries, woodsmoke, roasted venison, a bit of *garrigue*, pepper and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and impressively soil-driven in personality, with a fine core of cool fruit tones, ripe, well-integrated tannins, tangy acids and fine focus and grip on the nascently complex finish. Like the 2014, this wine is composed of a varietal mix of eighty-four percent syrah, eight percent grenache, five percent mourvèdre and three percent viognier and included fifty percent whole clusters in the fermentation. A year ago, I wrote that I would have loved to have seen the 13.9 percent alcohol 2014 version come in a half point lower, which is exactly the case for the 2015 and the wine is notably more precise on both the nose and palate as a result. This is really good

syrah that will age long and gracefully, and though it would work very nicely with a steak on the grill today, the prudent course would be to tuck it away in the cellar for at least the next five years and let the tannins fall away a bit and the wine really blossom. Fine juice. 2023-2055. **92.**

**2015 Côtes de Crow's- Morgan Winery (Monterey) screwcap**

The 2015 Côtes de Crow's from Morgan Winery is made from a rather unique blend of fifty-two percent grenache, forty-four percent syrah and four percent tempranillo and comes in at 14.2 percent alcohol. The wine is quite black fruity on the nose, as the syrah seems to suavely take the upper hand in its mix of cassis, black raspberries, pepper, a nice dollop of Monterey herb tones and a lovely spiced meat topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely peppery, with plenty of syrah character, a good core and fine focus and balance on the bright and moderately tannic finish. This is impressively light on its feet for the blend and is a very tasty bottle! Normally, given the syrah grape's penchant for reduction, I would have been worried about this wine under screwcap, but it is drinking beautifully right now and shows no ill effects from its closure. 2018-2030. **90.**

**2015 Syrah "G17"- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

I used to think of Morgan as a chardonnay and pinot noir specialist, so I was quite surprised to see so many cuvées of syrah and other Rhône-inspired blends in this round of sample bottles. The winery's "G17" bottling is a blend of eighty-seven percent syrah, nine percent grenache and four percent tempranillo, with the octane listed at 14.4 percent. The wine offers up a fine, ripe aromatic blend of red and black raspberries, cherries, roasted meats, a fine base of soil, a nice touch of *garrigue* and just a bit of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and quite well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, good focus and grip, fine-grained tannins and a long, nascently complex and gently warm finish. Again, this seems a bit higher in octane than its purported 14.4 percent, but it carries its ripeness pretty well and is only marginally warm on the backend. What I find intriguing about this wine, in comparison to the Côtes de Crow's cuvée is that this carries far more syrah in the *cépages*, but has less overtly syrah personality than the blend above! But, this is a well-made wine that should age nicely and provide plenty of pleasure once it is ready to drink. Would love to see it a half point lower in octane, to give a little structural tension to the backend and no heat. 2022-2045+. **89+.**

**2015 Syrah "Double L Vineyard"- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

Interestingly, the 2015 Syrah "Double L Vineyard" bottling from Morgan Winery is lower in octane than the pinot noir from the same vineyard, as this wine comes in at 13.6 percent octane, while the pinot (please see below) is 14.2 percent alcohol. This is really, really good syrah, delivering a classically-inclined aromatic constellation of cassis, black raspberries, grilled meats, pepper, dark soil tones, a bit of bonfire and just a touch of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely plump at the core, with ripe, well-integrated tannins, tangy acids and fine balance and grip on the long, complex and very promising finish. This is certainly quite approachable today, but it is still a young wine and I would be tuck it away in the cellar for at least a couple of years and let the tannins soften up a bit. Fine, fine juice. 2021-2050. **92+.**

**2015 Carignan- La Onda (Mendocino)**

La Onda is the brainchild of Dani Rozman, who made his first couple of vintages in the facilities at Clos Saron, but has now set up on his own in the Sierra foothills. His 2015 Carignan comes in at a very civilized 13.4 percent octane, is made entirely with indigenous yeasts, whole clusters and aged in old French prior to bottling, straight from the barrel. The wine is outstanding on the nose, offering plenty of depth and complexity in its mélange of black cherries, chicory,

roasted meats, a bit of bonfire, a fine base of soil, a touch of Indian spice tones and a very discreet brush of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very well-balanced, with a rock solid core, ripe, moderately chewy tannins, tangy acids and excellent focus and grip on the long and youthful finish. There is plenty of complexity here, but the wine is young and needs a bit of bottle age to truly hit its stride. It is going to be excellent when it is ready to drink. 2023-2050+. **92.**

**2015 Syrah “Horseshoe Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

As I mentioned last year, with the 2014 vintage, there is only a Horseshoe Vineyard bottling of Syrah from Rhys Vineyards, as their parcel of this variety in their Skyline Vineyard was budded over to pinot noir. Given how beautiful the 2016 Skyline pinot is this year (please see below), it is hard to argue with the decision to expand the pinot noir in this vineyard, but at the same time, this 2015 Horseshoe Vineyard syrah is a pretty strong argument that less Rhys syrah is not the most desirable solution! The 2015 Horseshoe Syrah is a brilliant wine in the making, coming in at a cool 12.9 percent alcohol and delivering a stunning bouquet of cassis, pepper, black olive, a very complex base of minerality, just a whisper of cedary wood and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant in profile, with a fine core, great soil signature, ripe, suave tannins and outstanding length and grip on the pure and nascently complex finish. This is young, but its future greatness is already very, very easy to appreciate. 2025-2075. **95.**

**2015 Carignane Old Vine “The Pleasant Peasant”- Clos Saron (Sierra Foothills)**

Gideon Beinstock makes beautifully complex, unmanipulated wines from his Clos Saron winery. The Pleasant Peasant bottling is made entirely from carignan vines planted in 1900, with the grapes foot-trod and fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged in old French casks. The 2015 Peasant is pleasant indeed, offering up a superb, old viney nose of black fruit, woodsmoke hung game, a superb, gently autumnal soil signature, a bit of cigar ash and an excellent mélange of spice and savory topnotes. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nobly rustic in personality, with a great core, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the focused and very well-balanced finish. This is a young wine and deserves some extended time in the cellar, but it is going to be a superb drink when it is ready to go. Stylistically, there is a lot of similarity here with Gerard Chave’s wines back in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s (albeit with a different *cépages* and *terroir*), with that same sort of inner complexity buried beneath a slightly *sauvage* opening movement. This wine has outstanding potential (and can certainly be drunk in a pinch through its youthful tannins!) and is very impressive juice. 2022-2055+. **93+.**

**2015 Carignane Old Vine- Porter Creek Vineyards (Mendocino)**

Alex Davis makes excellent Carignane and his 2015 Old Vine bottling is no exception, with the wine coming in at a very civilized 13.3 percent octane and offering up a refined bouquet of black cherries, sweet dark berries, hung game, a hint of pepper, dark soil tones, a touch of tree bark and a topnote of vinesmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and more robust in personality than the very sophisticated nose suggests. There is excellent depth at the core, fine focus and balance, chewy, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex and nicely peppery finish. Fine juice that could do with at least a few years in the cellar to allow those backend tannins to soften up a bit more. 2022-2050. **92.**

**2015 Mr. Burgess- The Withers (El Dorado)**

The 2015 bottling of Mr. Burgess from The Withers has a bit more syrah than last year, with the *cépages* here ninety-three percent syrah and seven percent mourvèdre, and grenache in the blend from the last few vintages not included. Additionally, the wine is again lower in octane



than last year (which was down from the 2013- a trend I heartily applaud), as the 2015 comes in at a very civilized 12.9 percent alcohol. The bouquet of the 2015 Mr. Burgess offers up a fine, bright and youthful mix of red and black raspberries, pepper, a nice touch of spiced meats, lovely soil tones and a bit of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely transparency, ripe, fine-grained tannins and a long, tangy and very well-balanced finish. This is very nicely structured and could do with a few years in the cellar to blossom, but it is an excellent wine and should have a long and superb life in bottle once it has blossomed. The last few vintages of this wine have been very good, but this is a notable step up in terms of precision, soil signature and complexity. Bravo! 2021-2050. **93+**

**2015 Ruben- The Withers (El Dorado)**

The 2015 Ruben bottling from The Withers is a blend of eighty-six percent mourvèdre and seven percent each of syrah and grenache, and again, the alcohol of the 2015 drops down from that of the 2014 version (from 13.9 to 13.5). The wine is ripe and balanced on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a complex blend of raspberries, fruitcake, roasted game, *garrigue* and pepper. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and well-balanced, with a fine core, good soil signature, well-measured, moderate tannins, good focus and fine length and grip. This is approachable today, albeit still a tad chewy and carries its octane very well; I like this better than the higher octane 2014 version. Fine juice. 2018-2035+. **91.**

**2014 Ancient Field Blend “Old Hill Ranch”- Bucklin (Sonoma)**

The 2014 Ancient Field Blend “Old Hill Ranch” from Bucklin is made up primarily of zinfandel (close to sixty percent), but includes more than twenty other varieties in the blend, including alicanté bouchet, mourvèdre, carignan, petite sirah and many others. The vines were planted all the way back in 1885! The wine is raised in forty percent new oak and comes in at a robust 15.3 percent octane in the 2014 vintage. The nose offers up a ripe and pleasantly jammy blend of black raspberries, brambly tones, cigar smoke, a bit of sultana raisin, lovely soil tones and a nice mix of spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely suave on the attack, with a good core, impressive complexity, moderate tannins and a long, fairly warm finish. If one can handle this octane level, add five more points to my score, but despite this wine’s impressive depth and complexity, it is just too hot for my palate. 2018-2030+? **86.**

**2014 Syrah “Barsotti Ranch”- Edmunds St. John (El Dorado County)**

It has been nearly two years since I last tasted the 2014 Barsotti Ranch Syrah from Steve Edmunds, as I last tried this wine when it was still a puppy during a visit out to taste with Steve in Berkeley. I did not note at the time how beautifully low in octane this wine was, as it comes in just under twelve percent alcohol in 2014. This was the first vintage of Barsotti Ranch Syrah bottled on its own by Steve, as these old vines had been abandoned for several years before he nursed them back to good health in time for the 2013 vintage (which saw the grapes blended into his North Canyon Road bottling. The 2014 Barsotti was stellar two years ago and is blossoming beautifully today, offering up a pure and very complex nose of dark berries, black raspberries, smoked meats, pepper, granite, a touch of blood and iron. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and very transparent, with a fine core of fruit, superb intensity of flavor, excellent focus and grip, moderate, ripe tannins and outstanding length and grip on the complex and soil-driven finish. This is a beautiful bottle of young syrah! 2024-2065+. **94+.**

### 2014 Syrah “Timbervine Ranch”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River Valley)

The 2014 Syrah “Timbervine Ranch” bottling from Porter Creek Vineyards is a cool customer, coming in at 13.1 percent octane and delivering a refined and properly refined aromatic constellation of black raspberries, pepper, roasted meats, black olive, superb soil tones and a nice touch of old school Chave-like spices in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully structured, with a fine core, ripe, buried tannins, good acids and outstanding focus and grip on the very long and very classy finish. This is great wine in the making! 2021-2055+. **94.**



### 2012 Syrah- Bayo Oscuro (Casablanca Valley- Chile)

This bottle of syrah has been patiently waiting in my cellar to be tasted for a couple of years, but as I have not written a feature on South American wines, it has been waiting to be opened. I decided I would be better off adding it here in this feature on North American wines, even though it is a bit out of its latitude, so that the note could find its way into the database. The winery is run by the Kingston family, whose earliest *arriviste* in Chile arrived in search of gold. Five generations have passed and the Kingston family is now producing wine from the family farm, with their 2012 syrah coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol and offering up a ripe nose of black raspberries, cassis, black olive, pepper, roasted venison, a fine base of soil and a touch of saddle leather in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely balanced for its octane, with a lovely core, a bit of chewy tannin, no sign of backend heat

and a long, complex and impressive finish. I quite like this wine, which shares some flavor similarities with Touriga Nacional on the palate, but shows impressive depth and quite good balance. Good juice. 2018-2040. **90**.

**1994 Syrah “Durrell Vineyard”- Edmunds St. John (Sonoma County)**

This most recent bottle of the 1994 Durrell Vineyard syrah from Steve Edmunds was quite shut down and never really had a chance to blossom over the course of our dinner, as there were more than twenty people in attendance and it (understandably) went pretty quickly. The bouquet is deep and fairly tight when first poured, offering up scents of cassis, new leather, a touch of black raspberry, pepper, a fine base of soil and a bit of roasted game. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and tangy, with a rock solid core, fine soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, complex and still fairly youthful finish. The last bottle of this I drank was given plenty of time in decanter prior to serving and was just singing, but this bottle never got the chance to fully blossom before it was happily consumed. I am sure my score would have been a bit higher with thirty minutes of decanting time. 2018-2050. **93+**.

***Gamay, Gamay Blends and Sangiovese***

**2016 Gamay Noir- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Gamay from Scott Frank’s superb Bow & Arrow label comes in at thirteen percent octane and is fermented and raised in cement tanks, with a semi-carbonic maceration. This is one of the winery’s workhorse bottlings and immensely popular in Oregon (it is already sold out at the winery), and it is easy to see why, as it is very true stylistically to the variety and its home base of Beaujolais. The bright and youthful nose jumps from the glass in a blend of black cherries, pepper, a bit of fresh herbs, good soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and loaded with personality, with fine mid-palate depth, tangy acids and fine length and grip on the youthfully crunchy finish. This is still a touch marked by its stems on the backend and will be even better to drink with a bit of bottle age, but it is very well-balanced and is easily quaffable today! 2018-2030. **90**.

**2016 Rhinestones- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Rhinestones bottling from Bow & Arrow is composed of a blend of sixty percent pinot noir and forty percent gamay, all originating in the fine Johan Vineyard. The wine comes in at 12.5 percent octane and delivers a bright bouquet of red and black cherries, a touch of cranberry, dark soil tones, a touch of pepper, woodsmoke and fresh thyme. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crunchy and a nicely peppery, with a good core, fine focus and grip, lovely nascent complexity and a long, vibrant and tasty finish. Interestingly, though the gamay is only forty percent of the blend, it seems the more dominant varietal in the personality of the wine. This is very tasty out of the blocks and a lovely blend. 2018-2030. **90+**.

**2016 Gamay Noir “Bone-Jolly”- Edmunds St. John (El Dorado) screwcap**

The 2016 Bone-Jolly from Steve Edmunds is a bright and bouncy fellow, coming in at 12.47 percent alcohol and offering up a lovely, light and crystal clear color. The nose jumps from the glass in a vibrant and red fruity mélange of cranberries, cherries, a touch of orange peel, pepper, a dollop of fresh herbs, roses and a good base of stony soil. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, zesty and intensely flavored, with fine focus and grip, a touch of CO2 on the backend, fleeting tannins and tangy acids adding shape and grip on the long finish. Lovely wine that deserves a more serious closure. 2018-2023+? **91**.

**2016 Gamay Noir- Omero Cellars (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Gamay Noir from Chad Stock's Omero Cellars is fermented in cement tanks with ten percent whole clusters and then raised in old oak casks for ten months prior to bottling. The wine offers up a bright and bouncy bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, a bit of bonfire, pepper, a fine base of soil tones and just a whisper of stem influence in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and nicely fleshy at the core, with tangy acids, excellent focus and grip and a long, complex finish. This is really lovely! 2018-2030+. **91.**

**2016 Gamay Noir- The Withers (El Dorado)**

The 2016 Gamay Noir from The Withers is the first I have tasted from this varietal from the winery, and the wine is lovely. It comes in at a cool and tangy 12.8 percent alcohol and offers up a bright bouquet of cherries, cranberries, a touch of bonfire, acorn, good soil tones and a nice touch of fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and nicely structured, with fine intensity of flavor, bright acids and fine focus and grip on the nascently complex finish. Good juice that should age nicely and, like a good Morgon, will be even better with a few years down in the cellar. 2018-2030+. **89.**

**2015 Sangiovese "Reward Ranch"- Kendric Vineyards (Shenandoah Valley)**

Even though Stewart Johnson's Kendric Vineyards is based in Marin County, the grapes for his fine sangiovese bottling hail from the Reward Ranch in the Shenandoah Valley. The 2015 vintage of this lovely sangiovese comes in at 13.9 percent octane and offers up an excellent bouquet of cherries, lovely soil tones, coffee, a bit of orange peel, fine spice tones, a touch of fresh oregano and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and very transparent in personality, with a sappy core of red fruit, moderate tannins, lovely acids and impressive focus and grip on the long and still youthful finish. This has a bit of backend chewy tannin to resolve (though this is mitigated already with the right food) and could use a bit of time alone in the cellar to soften up a bit. It is a superb example of this fine varietal, which so often in California seems to end up pumped up like Barry Bonds in his last days with the Giants. This, however, is pure and classic in profile and very impressive! 2020-2040. **91.**

***Pinot Noir*****2016 Pinot Noir "Anderson Valley"- Alesia (Rhys Vineyards)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir "Anderson Valley" bottling from Alesia is really a lovely bottle, offering up bright, sappy fruit, coupled to excellent soil tones on both the nose and palate. The classy bouquet offers up scents of black cherries, pomegranate, a touch of cola, fresh herb tones, woodsmoke and a fine signature of dark soil elements. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely plump at the core, with lovely focus and grip and impressive inner tension on the long and nascently complex finish. This is made from younger vine fruit in the estate vineyards now and shows the lightness of step of all the Rhys pinots and is quite refined in its octane, coming in at 12.9 percent. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2040. **90+.**

**2016 Pinot Noir "Santa Cruz Mountains"- Alesia (Rhys Vineyards)**

The 2016 Santa Cruz Mountains bottling under the Alesia label is also nicely cool and vibrant, with the same alcohol level of 12.9 percent of the Anderson Valley example. The wine is a bit more black fruity and quite a bit more mineral in profile than the lovely Anderson Valley cuvée, offering up a fine bouquet of sweet dark berries, black cherries, woodsmoke, a hint of gamebird, raw cocoa and a superb base of stony minerality. On the palate the wine is precise, full and marvelously tangy, with a fine mid-palate depth, lovely backend mineral drive, moderate tannins and a long, complex and very classy finish. This does not have the same dimension as the

top Santa Cruz Mountain bottlings of pinot under the Rhys label, but it is very easy to see that they all share the same vineyard pedigree. Just a beautiful bottle. 2018-2045. **91+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Anderson Valley”- Bravium Wines (Mendocino County)**

The 2016 Anderson Valley bottling of pinot noir from Bravium is a classically cool and nicely light ruby color, with a very civilized 12.9 percent octane to match. The bouquet is quite refined, offering up a complex and red fruity mix of strawberries, cherries, a touch of beetroot, dark soil tones, incipient cola, discreet cedar and a whisper of Mendocino dill in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, tangy and light on its feet, with a lovely core, fine soil signature, modest tannins and a long, vibrant and nascently complex finish. This is eminently drinkable out of the blocks, but will also age quite nicely and will be more complex with a bit of bottle age. Lovely wine. 2018-2040. **91**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Silvershot Vineyard”- Fossil & Fawn (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Silvershot Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Fossil & Fawn was fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in older oak barrels for only eleven months prior to bottling. The wine offers up lovely purity in its aromatic constellation of black cherries, dark berries, lovely soil tones, raw cocoa, fresh thyme, a bit of mustard seed and a nicely smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is ripe, pure and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, good transparency, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and youthfully complex finish. This is still a young wine and needs three to five years in the cellar to start to stir properly, but it will be very tasty once it blossoms. Good juice. 2023-2050. **91**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Petaluma Gap”- Kendric Vineyards (Marin County)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir “Petaluma Gap” from Kendric Vineyards is yet another beautifully transparent and complex wine from Stewart Johnson, who is clearly one of America’s foremost pinot noir specialists. The wine comes in at a very civilized 13.1 percent octane and offers up a pure and vibrant bouquet of raspberries, cherries, a touch of cola, marvelously complex soil tones, a touch of bonfire, clove-like spices, a dollop of fresh thyme and a discreet framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with stunning soil signature, a fine core of fruit, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, tangy and still quite youthful finish. Stewart Johnson has made some beautiful bottles of pinot noir in the last decade, but this may well be the most complete wine I have yet tasted from him! I hope there will be a 2016 Reserve bottling down the road. Great juice that I would give three to five years in the cellar to allow it to blossom into its secondary layers of complexity and allow the moderate tannins here to soften up a bit more. 2023-2050. **93+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Estate”- Lingua Franca (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir “Estate” bottling from Lingua Franca is a lovely example of this vintage, coming in at a cool thirteen percent octane and offering up a complex and nicely new oaky nose of black cherries, woodsmoke, cola, lovely soil tones, a bit of fresh herbs and a refined framing of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and well-balanced, with a good core, ripe, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and nascently complex finish. This is still a young wine and deserves three to five years in the cellar prior to drinking it in earnest. It has excellent potential. 2021-2050. **91+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Avni”- Lingua Franca (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir “Avni” from Larry Stone’s Lingua Franca is really a lovely bottle in the making, offering up a youthfully complex and very pure bouquet of black cherries, plums, a hint of beetroot, woodsmoke, lovely minerality, a whisper of mustard seed and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and nicely light on its feet, with a good core, fine focus

and grip and a long, still fairly primary, but promising finish. I think I like the delineation and backend length out of the blocks a hair better in the Estate bottling, but this too is very good pinot noir in the making. 2023-2050. **90.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “The Plow”- Lingua Franca (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir “The Plow” bottling from Lingua Franca is really lovely, offering excellent purity in its aromatic constellation of black cherries, black plums, beetroot, a lovely wisp of mustard seed, dark soil tones, raw cocoa and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is focused, full-bodied and nicely structured, with a fine, fine core of fruit, excellent soil signature, tangy acids, ripe, seamless tannins and impressive length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This has a sturdier structure out of the blocks than either the Avni or Estate bottlings and is beautifully built for the long haul. It will be excellent once it blossoms properly. 2023-2060. **92+.**



**2016 Pinot Noir “1968” Chehelam Mountain Vineyard- Minimus (Carlton)**

Chad Stock’s “1968” bottling of pinot noir hails from Dick Erath’s Chehelam Mountain Vineyard and were planted all the way back in 1968, as the name suggests. Most of the vineyard has been replanted over the years, but there remains one small block of these old vines (forty-eight years of age in 2016) that Chad was able to purchase the fruit from and produce two casks of this stellar pinot bottling. The wine was raised in older casks, fermented with twenty-five percent whole clusters and comes in at a cool 12.7 percent octane. The nose is pure and flat out



beautiful, wafting from the glass in a blend of cherries, red plums, a touch of raw cocoa, complex soil tones, a touch of mustard seed, woodsmoke and a whisper of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and has a nice touch of sappiness at the core, with fine-grained tannins, tangy acids and outstanding focus and grip on the long, poised and complex finish. This wine is light on its feet and yet loaded with personality and intensity of flavor. It is quite accessible today, but still emphatically a puppy, and I would not touch a bottle for at least six to eight years and really let the complexity unfold properly. A beautiful and very elegant wine. 2024-2055+. **93.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Willamette Valley”- Nicolas-Jay**

The 2016 Pinot Noir “Willamette Valley” from Nicolas-Jay is a lovely young wine, offering up impressive sappiness and precision in its bouquet of red and black cherries, a bit of beetroot, a fine base of soil, woodsmoke, hints of mustard seed and thyme and a very well-done framing of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with a sappy core, fine transparency, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, tangy and nascently complex finish. This is so well-balanced that it is quite easy to drink in its youth, but the wine has plenty waiting in the wings and I would recommend letting it build in complexity with some bottle age. Fine, fine juice. 2021-2055. **92+.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Bishop Creek”- Nicolas-Jay (Yamhill-Carlton)**

The 2016 Bishop Creek represents the first single vineyard bottling from the new joint venture between Jean-Nicolas Méo and Jay Boberg that I have had the pleasure to taste, and it is an outstanding bottle. The wine is pure and nascently complex on the nose, wafting from the glass in a very elegant blend of cherries, red plums, beetroot, a fine signature of soil, a touch of youthful stems, raw cocoa, a touch of fresh herbs (including cumin) and a nicely done base of cedary new oak. On the palate is bright, tangy and full-bodied, with impressive lightness of step, fine intensity of flavor, moderate tannins and good bounce on the long and youthfully complex finish. This is more structured out of the blocks that the Willamette Valley bottling and will need some bottle age to blossom, but it should prove to be the more complex and transparent wine when it is ready to drink. Impressive! 2023-2065. **93+.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Momtazi”- Nicolas-Jay (McMinnville)**

The Momtazi Vineyard is located next to Kelley Fox’s winery and is one of the few fully biodynamic vineyards in the area. It is a lovely vineyard and I was very pleased to see that Nicolas-Jay is buying grapes here and producing a single vineyard bottling from Momtazi. The wine is a touch more black fruity on the nose than the Bishop Creek, offering up a fine aromatic constellation of dark berries, black cherries, incipient notes cola, a touch of stems, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a discreet dollop of fresh herbs and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully soil-driven, with a fine core, moderate, seamless tannins, good acids and lovely balance and grip on the long, complex and suave finish. There is still a nice, youthful touch of stems on the backend here, but this is not quite as tightly-knit out of the blocks as the Bishop Creek and should start to drink a few years earlier. It will age just as long and gracefully. 2021-2065. **93.**

**2016 Pinot Noir- Omero Cellars (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Pinot Noir bottling from Omero Cellars is a lovely example of its varietal and a terrific bargain, as Chad Stock sells this on the winery’s website for \$25 per bottle! The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane in this vintage and delivers a fine aromatic constellation of cherries, beetroot, a touch of mustard seed, nice soil signature and a whisper of cedar. On the palate the wine is fullish, tangy and nascently complex, with lovely intensity of flavor, fine focus

and grip, modest tannins and a long, vibrant finish. This is very tasty out of the blocks, but is still young and will add another layer of maturity with a bit of bottle age. Do not be deceived by the very, very fair price Chad Stock asks for this wine, as it will age very nicely indeed! 2018-2040. **90+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Family Farm Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (San Mateo County)**

Whenever I taste the single vineyard pinots from Rhys Vineyards, I always do them together, so that I can go back and forth between the various expressions of *terroir* in each wine. While this is a fascinating exercise for me, it is probably not all that fair to the two beautiful bottlings from San Mateo County, as they hail from *terroir* that is not as comfortably familiar as those from Anderson Valley or the Santa Cruz Mountains. Nevertheless, there is plenty of *terroir* in both the Family Farm and Home Vineyards bottlings, albeit, expressed quite differently than in the pinots from the other two regions. The 2016 Family Farm is a really lovely bottle of pinot noir, offering up a wide open and very classy nose of sweet dark berries, bitter chocolate, a touch of *pigeon*, woodsmoke and a lovely base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and generous on the attack, with a fine signature of soil, a good core, moderate tannins and lovely length and grip on the bouncy and complex finish. This svelte bottling comes in at 12.6 percent octane this year and is just lovely. 2018-2045. **92+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Home Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (San Mateo County)**

The 2016 Home Vineyard bottling from Rhys is also a fine wine in the making, but this is a touch lower in alcohol than the Family Farm (12.3 percent) and is a bit more tightly-knit out of the blocks as a result. The bouquet is beautifully precise and nascently complex, wafting from the glass in a black fruity mix of cassis, dark berries, espresso, a hint of graphite, a lovely base of dark soil tones and a bit of bonfire in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and still fairly primary, with lovely intensity of flavor, refined tannins, tangy acids and lovey focus and grip on the long and classy finish. While I would not feel guilty about drinking another bottle of Family Farm tomorrow, the Home Vineyard bottling in 2016 really deserves at least a few more years in the cellar to properly blossom. 2021-2045+. **92+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Bearwallow Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Anderson Valley)**

The two Anderson Valley bottlings of pinot noir from Kevin Harvey and his talented team are absolutely beautiful in 2016. Both wines come in at a cool and generous 12.9 percent alcohol, with the Bearwallow offering up a superb aromatic constellation of black plums, black raspberries, cola, woodsmoke, a refined base of soil tones, a touch of fresh herbs and just a whisper of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a sappy core, suave, seamless tannins, excellent focus and grip and a very long, vibrant and elegant finish. This is just lovely. 2022-2050. **93**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Porcupine Hill”- Rhys Vineyards (Anderson Valley)**

The high density planting from which the Porcupine Hill cuvée hails has produced a wine that is even a bit deeper and more precise than the lovely Bearwallow. The bouquet is beautifully black fruity, offering up a blend of black plums, black raspberries, coffee bean, a touch of cola, dark soil tones, gentle smokiness and a discreet touch of oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and more tightly-knit out of the blocks than the above, with superb mid-palate depth, excellent focus and grip, fine-grained tannins and lovely purity on the long, refined and still quite youthful finish. The higher density planting has produced a wine with a bit more structure than the Bearwallow, but also greater potential for the long haul. 2025-2055+. **94**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Horseshoe Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Horseshoe Vineyard pinot noir is absolutely stellar. The wine is a cool customer, coming in at 12.5 percent octane and offering up a beautifully complex and classy bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, cola, beautiful spice tones, excellent minerality, a touch of cedar and a topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, pure, full-bodied and already quite complex, with a sappy core, fine focus and grip, seamless tannins and a very long, focused and energetic finish. The mineral drive of all of these Santa Cruz Mountain pinots from Rhys is very impressive this year. 2022-2055+. **94+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Alpine Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Alpine Vineyard from Rhys is a gorgeous pinot noir in the making. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a fine blend of black cherries, cassis, charred wood, cola, a fine base of Gevrey-like black minerality, incipient notes of beetroot and a discreet framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and perfectly balanced, with a fine core, refined, moderate tannins, tangy acids and laser-like focus on the very long and very pure, dancing finish. This is still a fairly young wine, but it is going to be stunning when it is ready to drink. 2024-2060. **95**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Skyline Vineyard”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

I often have a very, very slight preference for the Alpine bottling over the Skyline Vineyard, but this is not the case in 2016, where this vineyard seems to have absolutely nailed the vintage (or vice versa). The bouquet is superb, delivering a vibrant and very pure mix of black cherries, sweet dark berries, bitter chocolate, woodsmoke, a touch of pomegranate, a beautifully complex base of mineral shadings, a bit of cumin and cedar. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely reserved in personality, with a lovely core, great balance and grip, fine-grained tannins and stunning length on the pure and energetic finish. This is a great wine in the making! 2024-2060. **95+**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Swan Terrace”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Swan Terrace bottling from Rhys is also outstanding, and trying to select a favorite this year amongst this stellar lineup of pinot noir is virtually impossible. The bouquet here exudes purity of fruit and mineral precision as it delivers scents of cassis, black plums, a touch of gamebird, a great base of black minerality, espresso, a gentle framing of cedary wood and a topnote of bonfires. On the palate the wine is deep, full, complex and perfectly balanced, with moderate, buried tannins, great focus and grip and a very, very long, refined and intensely flavored finish. I love the backend lift here. 2026-2065. **95**.

**2016 Pinot Noir “Horseshoe Hillside”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Horseshoe Hillside pinot noir bottling from Rhys is a stunningly beautiful young wine, coming in at a cool 12.8 percent octane and offering up stellar complexity on both the nose and palate. The refined bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of black cherries, beetroot, gorgeous mineral undertow, exotic spice tones of cardamom and clove, woodsmoke, raw cocoa, a discreet base of spicy new oak and a touch of savory elements in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, poised and sappy at the core, with superb mineral drive, ripe, seamless tannins, tangy acids and laser-like focus on the very long and complex finish. This is a beautiful wine in the making, but despite the generous, youthful nature of the 2016 vintage (which this wine shares to a certain degree), this is really built to be a long-distance runner and should be forgotten in the cellar for a decade. The wait will be more than worth it! 2026-2065. **96+**.



### **2016 Pinot Noir “Alpine Hillside”- Rhys Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2016 Alpine Hillside bottling of pinot noir from Kevin Harvey and his very talented team is a whisper riper than the Horseshoe Hillside, coming in still at a very svelte 12.9 percent. The nose is stunning, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, black cherries, a touch of beetroot, complex minerality, espresso, gentle meatiness, woodsmoke, discreet savory elements, allspice, fresh nutmeg and a nice touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is focused, full-bodied and utterly refined, with outstanding mid-palate depth, great intensity of flavor, ripe, perfectly integrated tannins, bright acids and impeccable balance on the long, focused and complex finish. This is a bit more tightly-knit out of the blocks than the 2016 Horseshoe Hillside, but they both share the vintage’s imprimatur of elegant structure and this is going to be every bit as refined when it is truly ready to drink. A great wine in the making, and choosing between the two Hillside bottlings this year is not possible, as both are great and quintessential expressions of their respective *terroirs*! 2026-2065. 96+.

### **2016 Pinot Noir “Sojourner Vineyard”- Walter Scott Wines**

The Sojourner Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Walter Scott is the winery’s younger vine cuvée, grown in volcanic soils, but the wine is always complex and well-balanced. The 2016 version is just a touch less ripe than the 2015, coming in at 13.4 percent octane and offering up a beautifully red fruity bouquet of cherries, strawberries, a touch of cocoa powder, beetroot, lovely soil tones, fresh herbs and a whisper of oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, tangy and complex, with lovely soil signature, tangy acids, moderate tannins and impressive length and

grip on the wide open and bouncy finish. This is really a charmer on both the nose and palate and is already drinking very nicely out of the blocks, but will also age very well over the next twenty years or more. 2018-2040+. **91.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Clos des Oiseaux”- Walter Scott Wines (Eola-Amity Hills)**

As I mentioned last year, the Clos des Oiseaux Vineyard has been leased by Ken Pahlow since the 2011 vintage, and he has been farming it by organic methods since 2014. The 2015 bottling was outstanding and the 2016 Clos des Oiseaux is also excellent, coming in at a relatively cool 13.1 percent alcohol in this ripe vintage and delivering a classy, youthful and quite complex bouquet of black cherries, beetroot, a touch of gamebird, dark soil tones, raw cocoa, a dollop of cedary oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and still quite tightly-knit, with an excellent core of fruit, fine transparency, ripe, fine-grained tannins, tangy acids and excellent length and grip. This is far more backward than the Sojourner Vineyard bottling and deserves some time to blossom in the cellar, but it is going to be absolutely outstanding when it is ready to drink. 2023-2060. **93+.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Claire’s Vineyard”- The Withers (Mendocino County)**

The 2016 pinot bottling from Claire’s Vineyard is pretty ripe, coming in at 13.8 percent octane, but pretty well balanced on the palate. The nose wafts from the glass in a classic Mendocino blend of weedy black cherries, cola, lovely, dark soil tones and a touch of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a good core, fine focus and grip, a touch of backend tannin and a long, ripe and tangy finish. This is a good bottle of riper pinot, but I would love to see it a touch lower in octane next year. 20120-2040. **88.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “English Hill”- The Withers (Sonoma Coast)**

I missed tasting the 2015 version of English Hill pinot from The Withers last year, but am very impressed with this svelte 2016 version. The wine is pure and nicely cool in octane, coming in at 12.9 percent and offering up a bright and youthful nose of black cherries, pomegranate, a fine base of soil, cola, a touch of fresh herbs, woodsmoke and a very discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, nascently complex and very nicely balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip and a long, bouncy and well-balanced finish. There is lovely backend tension here and this wine will be lovely once it has blossomed. It is certainly quite approachable today, but it is still quite primary and deserves some time in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to emerge. 2021-2050. **92.**

**2016 Pinot Noir “Peters Vineyard”- The Withers (Sonoma Coast)**

The 2016 Peters Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from The Withers comes in at a ripe 13.9 percent octane, but offers up pretty good purity in its lovely, red fruity nose of cherries, strawberries, a bit of beetroot, fresh herb tones, incipient notes of cola and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with a nice core of red fruit, good soil signature, moderate tannins, good bouncy acids and just a whisper of backend heat on the long, nascently complex finish. The ripeness of the fruit here takes away a touch of the precision on the palate that the nose promises (and which keeps the score down a touch), but this is a well-made and very tasty bottle of pinot noir. 2018-2038. **89.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Hughes Hollow Vineyard”- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

Scott Frank started working with fruit from Hughes Hollow Vineyard primarily for the gamay planted here, but he had to take this parcel of pinot noir as well, which is on a north-facing slope. He relates that he was hardly enthusiastic in that first vintage, but has come to recognize that this is some of the best fruit he gets to work with each year and the resulting wine

is complex and classy. The 2015 version offers up a fine, complex bouquet of black cherries, a hint of raspberry, a superb base of dark soil tones, woodsmoke, and discreet floral tones gently intertwined with savory elements. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, black fruity and nicely sappy at the core, with ripe, well-integrated tannins, good acids and fine length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This is nicely low octane, coming in at 12.5 percent alcohol and is approachable out of the blocks, but is really built for the cellar and deserves at least a few years of bottle age to allow those secondary layers to start to emerge. There is a whisper of VA on the backend when the wine is first poured, but this blows off with some time in decanter and is not a concern. 2022-2055. **92.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Vitae Springs Vineyard”- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The pinot noir bottling from the Vitae Springs Vineyard from Bow & Arrow is a cool climate site and the wine comes in at 12.5 percent octane in the warm summer of 2015. The wine offers up lovely aromatic complexity in its bouquet of black cherries, a touch of plum, woodsmoke, fresh thyme, dark soil tones and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with good soil signature, nascent complexity, tangy acids and fine length and grip on the well-balanced finish. Like the Hughes Hollow Vineyard bottling, there is just a whisper of backend volatile acidity here when the wine is first poured, but it disperses with some extended air. This is not quite as complex out of the blocks as the Hughes Hollow Vineyard pinot, but I like its balance every bit as well (and perhaps a bit more) and am willing to bank that it will catch the above in complexity with some extended bottle age. 2024-2055. **92.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Mimi’s Mind”- Lingua Franca (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2015 Mimi’s Mind bottling of pinot noir from Lingua Franca is outstanding, offering superb depth on both the nose and plate. Like all of the Lingua Franca pinots that I tasted for this report, the wine comes in at a nicely managed 13.5 percent octane and offers up a beautifully complex, black fruity nose of black cherries, sweet dark berries, a lovely panoply of savory herb tones, a fine base of soil, a touch of cola and a judicious framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and well-balanced, with an excellent core, fine soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, nascently complex and rock solid finish. This is an excellent wine in the making, but it is still a puppy and needs to be tucked away in the cellar for a handful of years to allow it to blossom properly. 2023-2055+. **92+.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Origin” Johan Vineyard- Minimus (Eola-Amity Hills)**

The 2015 Minimus bottling of Johan Vineyard pinot noir is produced from the 943 Pinot Noir Clone, which is not a Dijon Clone, though it also found its origins in Burgundy. It comes from the biodynamically farmed, cool Johan Vineyard and tips the scales in this vintage at thirteen percent alcohol. Chad Stock used seventy percent whole clusters for this wine and made four casks, all of which were used. The wine is absolutely superb, offering up the lovely red fruity tones of the Johan Vineyard (and apparently Clone 943) in its aromatic constellation of red plums, cherries, lovely spice elements, a fine base of soil, raw cocoa, a hint of gamebird and just a bit of spicy oak elements from the older barrels. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and very elegant in profile, with a sappy core, lovely transparency, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, nascently complex and precise finish. This is a beautiful wine in the making, but give it some time in the cellar to blossom properly. 2025-2055+. **93.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Twelve Clones”- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

The 2015 Pinot Noir “Twelve Clones” bottling from Morgan Winery comes in listed at 14.1 percent octane, but seems just a tad riper than this to my palate. I like the nose quite well,



which offers up a lovely fruit mélange of red, black cherries and quince, to go along with notes of woodsmoke, a nice base of soil, beetroot, a dollop of fresh herbs and a discreet framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and well-balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip, modest tannins and a long, tangy and ever so slightly warm finish. This is not the most complex bottle of pinot noir, but I like its overall sensibilities and the only thing that keeps its score down a touch is its bit of backend heat. 2018-2035. **88.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Double L Vineyard”- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

The 2015 Double L Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Morgan Winery is pretty dark in color for this varietal, but comes in listed at 14.2 percent and is quite fresh and vibrant on both the nose and palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a fine blend of black cherries, sweet dark berries, cola, fresh thyme, a fine signature of soil and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nascently complex and nicely focused, with a good core, pretty good transparency, fine-grained tannins and a long, tangy and very well-balanced finish. This bottling is a significant step up in complexity from the Twelve Clones cuvée. 2020-2045+. **91.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Rosella’s Vineyard”- Morgan Winery (Santa Lucia Highlands)**

The 2015 Rosella’s Vineyard pinot noir from Morgan is nicely pure and both the nose and palate, but its 14.4 listed alcohol makes its weight felt a bit on the slightly hot finish. But, other than a bit of backend warmth, there is an awful lot to like here, as the complex nose wafts from the glass in a mix of black cherries, dark berries, fresh rosemary, cola, incipient beetroot and a good dollop of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nicely tangy and well-stocked at the core, with seamless tannins and fine focus and grip on the slightly hot finish. This could be terrific a half point lower in octane- perhaps a bit more structured out of the blocks, but poised, taught and very promising for the cellar. As it is, 14.4 percent alcohol is just a touch too high for this wine and keeps its score down a bit, though the depth and complexity here are admirable. 2020-2040. **89.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Estate”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River Valley)**

The 2015 Estate bottling of pinot noir from Alex Davis is outstanding, coming in at a cool 12.9 percent octane and offering up a pure and sappy nose of red plums, cherries, a touch of fresh nutmeg, lovely, alluvial soil tones, beetroot, incipient notes of cola and just a touch of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bouncy and youthful, with lovely depth at the core, tangy acids, moderate, seamless tannins and excellent length and grip on the nascently complex and marvelously balanced finish. This is a lovely bottle of pinot noir in the making! 2022-2055. **91.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Fiona Hill Vineyard”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River Valley)**

The 2015 Fiona Hill Vineyard bottling from Porter Creek is another absolutely stellar young pinot noir. This is a touch riper than the Estate bottling, as the hillside faces due south, but still very civilized at 13.3 percent octane. The bouquet is pure, precise and nicely black fruity in profile, wafting from the glass in a fine mix of black cherries, plums, a bit of cola, dark soil tones, a touch of mustard seed and a discreet base of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, ripe and seamless, with a fine core of fruit, excellent transparency, fine-grained tannins and excellent focus and grip on the nascently complex, long and beautifully balanced finish. This is very high class juice in the making! 2024-2060. **92+.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Winegrower’s Reserve”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River Valley)**

The 2015 Pinot Noir “Winegrower’s Reserve” from Alex Davis is the ripest wine in his pinot noir lineup in this vintage, but still highly civilized at 13.4 percent alcohol. The wine is outstanding aromatically, wafting from the glass in a complex mix of cherries, red plums, a touch

of cocoa powder, gorgeous soil tones, a whisper of beetroot, a discreet seasoning of mustard seed and a very refined framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nascently complex, with a superb core of fruit, excellent soil signature, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, vibrant and tangy finish. This is one of the more structured 2015 pinots from Porter Creek and will need a good decade out from the vintage to really start to hit on all cylinders, but once it is ready to drink, it will be outstanding! 2025-2065. **93.**

**2015 Pinot Noir “Hillside Vineyard- Old Vine”- Porter Creek Vineyards (Russian River)**

The 2015 Hillside Vineyard- Old Vine bottling from Porter Creek Vineyards is one outstanding pinot noir in the making. This is the coolest of this fine quartet of 2015 pinots, coming in at a svelte 12.5 percent octane and offering up the most complexity out of the blocks on both the nose and palate. The precise bouquet delivers a marvelous blend of cherries, red plums, incipient notes of beetroot, raw cocoa, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a bit of fresh thyme and a very polished framing of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, tangy and intensely flavored, with a fine core, superb transparency and grip, bright acids, moderate tannins and a long, youthfully complex and perfectly balanced finish. All this superb middleweight needs is time in the cellar to fully blossom! 2025-2060+. **94.**



*A good look down at the morning fog line (that defines the Santa Cruz AVA) from Mount Eden's vineyards.*

### **2015 Pinot Noir “Charles Vineyard”- The Withers (Anderson Valley)**

The 2015 bottling of pinot noir from the Charles Vineyard from The Withers is an excellent bottle, with a nicely black fruity personality and impressive soil signature on both the nose and palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a classy blend of black cherries, woodsmoke, cola, dark soil tones, lavender, a hint of anise and a very understated framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely structured, with a lovely core of pure fruit, fine soil drive, ripe, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and nascently complex finish. The 2015 Charles Vineyard is listed at the same 13.7 percent octane as the 2014 version was, but seems cooler in profile and far better balanced on the palate than its predecessor. This is the finest young pinot noir I have yet tasted from The Withers, and they have produced some very good bottlings from this variety in recent vintages! 2020-2045+. **93.**

### **2014 Pinot Noir- Mount Eden Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2014 Pinot Noir from Mount Eden Vineyards comes in this year at a cool thirteen percent octane and delivers lovely aromatic sophistication in its youthful nose of red and black cherries, pomegranate, vinesmoke, lovely minerality, incipient notes of cola and a wisp of mustard seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, focused and full-bodied, with a sappy core, lovely transparency, suave tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. This is beautifully light on its feet and all too easy to drink out of the blocks, but it is a serious example of pinot noir that deserves cellaring time to allow its secondary layers of complexity to unfold. One of the best young vintages of Mount Eden pinot noir in many years- Martin Ray and even old Paul Masson himself would have been proud! 2024-2060. **94.**

### **2014 Pinot Noir “Lilo Vineyard”- Vöcal Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)**

The 2014 Pinot Noir “Lilo Vineyard” bottling from Vöcal Vineyards comes in at a cool 12.5 percent alcohol and was raised in a modicum of new oak, as of the twelve casks of this wine that were produced in the drought year of 2014, only two were new. The wine was made with twenty-five percent whole clusters and offers up a lovely, youthful nose of beetroot, cherries, a hint of cola, emerging spice elements from the stems, a touch of mustard seed and a superb base of gently autumnal soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and beautifully transparent, with superb focus and grip, tangy acids, moderate tannins and excellent length and grip on the very well-balanced and still youthful finish. This is a superb bottle in the making, but it needs at least a handful of years in the cellar to properly blossom and start drinking with generosity. It still has a touch of youthful weediness on the backend from the stem inclusion, but this will mitigate nicely with bottle age. This is the first pinot noir I have tasted from Vöcal Vineyards and it is quite impressive! 2022-2050. **92+.**

### ***Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Bordeaux Blends***

#### **2015 Andrew Will Cellars “Ciel du Cheval Vineyard” (Red Mountain)**

The 2015 Ciel du Cheval Vineyard bottling from Chris Camarda is a blend this year of sixty-three percent merlot and thirty-seven percent cabernet franc and comes in at 14.5 percent octane. The wine offers up a beautifully refined, black fruity nose of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar smoke, a touch of espresso, dark soil tones and a very understated framing of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and nicely focused, with an excellent core, impressive complexity, suave, ripe tannins and a whisper of backend heat on the very long and classy finish. This will age long and gracefully, and despite being a touch higher in alcohol than I would ideally like, there is nothing here to not be excited about! 2025-2055+. **92.**

### **2015 Andrew Will Cellars “Champoux Vineyard” (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2015 vintage of Champoux Vineyard from Chris and Andrew Camarda is a blend this year of fifty-one percent merlot, thirty-two percent cabernet franc, twelve percent cabernet sauvignon and five percent petit verdot. The wine is ripe, coming in at 14.5 percent, but also pure and expressive on the nose, delivering a smoky mix of black plums, black cherries, cigar ash, a touch of mocha, a lovely dollop of soil and a very classy framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, ripe and seamless, with a lovey core of fruit, beautiful complexity and grip, suave, buried tannins and just a touch of backend heat poking out on the long and very classy finish. I would have loved to have seen this a half point lower in octane, but it is nicely balanced and impressively complex, so I suppose I could learn to live with its alcohol level! The octane is the only caveat in what is otherwise a flat out brilliant wine. 2022-2060. **92** (and add a couple of points if 14.5 percent is not above your comfort level).

### **2015 Andrew Will Cellars “Sorella” Champoux Vineyard (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2015 Sorella cuvée from Andrew Will is heavily-weighted towards the old vine (planted in 1972) cabernet sauvignon this year, with fully eighty-five percent of the blend made up of this varietal, to go along with six percent each of merlot and cabernet franc and three percent of petit verdot. It too comes in tipping the scales at a ripe 14.5 percent, but is beautifully cool and pure on the nose, which offers up scents of cassis, black cherries, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil, a touch of coffee bean and a discreet framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, nascently complex and beautifully balanced, with lovely roundness on the attack, a rock solid core, fine-grained tannins and a very long, pure and nascently complex finish. Though this is listed at the same octane as the Champoux Vineyard bottling, it seems cooler in the mouth on the finish and is impeccably well-balanced for the long haul. Though its palate impression is already quite seamless, this is still a young and quite primary wine and I would try to not touch a bottle for the next five to seven years and really let its secondary layering emerge. Great juice. 2023-2075. **94**.

### **2015 Andrew Will Cellars “Two Blondes Vineyard” (Yakima Valley)**

The Two Blondes bottling is the ripest of the four blends from Chris Camarda in 2015, as this wine tips the scales at 14.8 percent alcohol. The *cépages* is one-third each of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, and seventeen percent each of cabernet franc and malbec. The wine delivers beautiful freshness and complexity on the nose, jumping from the glass in a complex blend of cassis, black cherries, a touch of menthol, cigar smoke, gravelly soil tones, a touch of tobacco leaf and a very discreet framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a great core of fruit, lovely soil signature, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, focused and complex finish. Again, there is just a bit of backend heat here on the finish that keeps the score down a touch, but if you are less sensitive than I to octane, add a couple of points. This should age very gracefully, despite coming in at 14.8 percent. 2025-2055. **91+**.

### **2015 Calluna Vineyards Cuvée (CVC)- Calluna Vineyards (Chalk Hill)**

The 2015 Cuvée CVC from David Jeffrey is composed this year of a blend of fifty-one percent merlot, nineteen percent cabernet sauvignon, fifteen percent cabernet franc and eight percent malbec and seven percent petit verdot. The wine tips the scales at a quite civilized octane level of 13.8 percent and offers up a nascently complex nose of black cherries, dark berries, a bit of menthol, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, cigar smoke and cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, superb transparency, suave, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the vibrant and still youthful

finish. This is not a big wine, but it is loaded with personality and has excellent breed and blossoming complexity; it will be a stellar bottle in the fullness of time, but deserves some time in the cellar to soften up properly. A stellar bottle! 2024-2060+. **93+**.

**2015 Calluna Estate- Calluna Vineyards (Chalk Hill)**

The 2015 Calluna Estate bottling is a bit cooler than the CVC in this vintage, coming in at 13.6 percent octane. The *cépages* is also different, as here the blend is forty-seven percent cabernet sauvignon, twenty percent merlot, nineteen percent cabernet franc, ten percent petit verdot and four percent malbec. This is the finest young wine I have tasted from David Jeffrey since the stellar 2011 Calluna Estate bottling, as the wine delivers stellar purity and nascent complexity in its nose of cassis, black cherries, Cuban cigar wrapper, a very complex base of soil, incipient smokiness and a lovely framing of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and shows off beautiful mid-palate depth, with outstanding focus and grip, good acids, seamless tannins and a very long, very young and impeccably balanced finish. This is a great young wine, but it will not be properly ready to drink for at least a decade and not see its peak of maturity for twenty years. 2025-2075. **96.**

**2015 Malbec- Calluna Vineyards (Chalk Hill)**

This is the first vintage of pure Malbec that I have tasted from Calluna Vineyards and the wine is excellent. The bouquet is deep and complex, offering up a fine blend of sweet black fruit, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a touch of chicory, coffee bean and cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven, with a good core, moderate tannins and lovely length and grip on the ripe and classy finish. This is listed at 13.9 percent and carries its alcohol quite well, but is perhaps just a whisper hot on the backend (at least to my sensitive palate). A fine new addition to the Calluna lineup and a wine that should age very nicely. 2018-2040+. **90+**.

**2015 Merlot “aux Raynauds”- Calluna Vineyards (Chalk Hill)**

The 2015 Calluna Vineyards Merlot “aux Raynauds” is another superb example of this varietal from David Jeffrey, who makes as serious a bottling from this varietal as anyone in California. The wine comes in at 13.9 percent octane and offers up a lovely, red fruity bouquet of cherries, a touch of red currant, gentle spice tones, cigar wrapper, soil and cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely transparent, with a good core, ripe, well-integrated tannins and fine balance and grip on the long and nascently complex finish. This is certainly approachable out of the blocks, but it is still quite primary and will be far more interesting when it has had a chance to blossom with a bit of bottle age. 2021-2050. **92.**

**2015 Helios Cabernet Franc “Sunbasket Vineyard”- Corison Winery (Napa)**

The 2015 vintage is the second of cabernet franc to be produced here by Cathy Corison. The wine is a full half point lower in octane than the inaugural vintage, coming in at a cool 13.2 percent alcohol and offering beautiful precision and transparency in its aromatic constellation of dark berries, cassis, cigar smoke, a touch of sweet bell pepper, espresso, a beautifully complex base of soil tones and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and very soil-driven in personality, with lovely intensity of flavor, moderate tannins, impeccable focus and grip and beautiful lightness of step on the long and complex finish. I very much liked the 2014 Helios, but the 2015 vintage here is a step up! A great, old school middleweight that is drinkable now, but really seems likely to age long and gracefully and will probably find its sweet spot of maturity five to ten years down the road. 2018-2050+. **93+**.

### **2015 Claret- White Rock Vineyards (Napa Valley)**

The 2015 Claret from White Rock Vineyards is a blend of sixty-five percent cabernet sauvignon, twenty-three percent merlot and six percent each of cabernet franc and petit verdot. The wine is aged in thirty percent new oak for twenty-one months and comes in listed at 14.3 percent octane. The nose is deep, pure and complex, wafting from the glass in a fine blend of red and black cherries, cigar wrapper, lovely soil tones, a touch of allspice, a discreet base of nutty oak and a bit of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely suave on the attack, with a good core of fruit, fine focus and grip, moderate tannins and a long, complex and gently warm finish. The backend here suggests that the wine is a touch riper than its listed 14.3 percent, but I like its aromatic complexity and soil signature. If it could come in a bit lower in octane, this would be stellar, instead of just quite good! 2020-2040+? **88.**



### **2014 Andrew Will Cellars “Ciel du Cheval Vineyard” (Red Mountain)**

The 2014 Ciel du Cheval Vineyard comes in at a ripe 14.5 percent octane in this vintage and is composed of a blend this year of sixty-one percent merlot and thirty-nine percent cabernet franc. The complex nose wafts from the glass in a blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and focused, with good complexity, a plush core, chewy tannins and a long, gently warm finish. I love the nose and flavor profile here, but this is a ripe vintage for this lovely bottling and I like it better when it is a touch lower in octane. 2022-2050. **90+.**



#### **2014 Andrew Will Cellars “Champoux Vineyard” (Horse Heaven Hills)**

This has been one of the flagship vineyard designates in the Andrew Will lineup since its first release in the 2000 vintage and the 2014 bottling is excellent. This vintage comes in at 14.5 percent octane and is composed this year of a *cépages* of forty-three percent merlot, thirty-three percent cabernet sauvignon, twenty-two percent cabernet franc and two percent malbec. The nose wafts from the glass in a sophisticated mix of dark berries, black plums, dark chocolate, plenty of cigar smoke, a fine signature of soil, a touch of Pomerol-like herb tones and a gentle base of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and nicely plush on the attack, with a fine core, excellent focus and grip, nicely-integrated tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. This carries its octane beautifully and will age very gracefully, but is already very, very easy to drink! 2018-2050. **93+**.

#### **2014 Andrew Will Cellars “Sorella” Champoux Vineyard (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2014 vintage of Sorella from Andrew Will Cellars is not quite as cabernet sauvignon-centric as the 2015, with the *cépages* this year coming in at seventy-four percent cabernet, eleven percent each of merlot and cabernet franc and two percent each of petit verdot and malbec. The wine is again beautifully pure and complex on the nose, offering up scents of cassis, cigar smoke, a hint of eucalyptus, a lovely base of soil, espresso and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core of fruit, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is fully 14.5 percent alcohol in 2014, but carries it very, very well and there is only a faint hint of heat on the backend. 2024-2075. **93**.

#### **2014 Andrew Will Cellars “Two Blondes Vineyard” (Yakima Valley)**

Chris Camarda and his partners in this vineyard, Bill and Melody Fleckenstein, planted this parcel only in 2000, so with each passing year, the vines get older and the wines get more complex. The 2014 vintage finds the blend from Two Blondes composed of fifty-six percent merlot, twenty percent cabernet franc, fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon and nine percent malbec. The wine comes in listed at 14.5 percent and delivers superb aromatic fireworks in its mix of cassis, dark berries, coffee bean, a touch of mocha, gravelly soil, a touch of cedar and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is ripe, full-bodied, focused and nicely velvety already on the attack, with lovely mid-palate depth, ripe, suave tannins and fine balance and grip on the long, complex and very classy finish. This is absolutely superb and built to age long and gracefully, but is so impeccably balanced out of the blocks that it is deceptively easy to drink right now! I would still let it blossom with at least a handful of years in the cellar, for as good as it is to drink today, it is going to be far better down the road! 2022-2060. **93+**.

#### **2014 High Dive Red Wine Blend (Napa Valley)**

The 2014 vintage of High Dive is composed of a blend of sixty-four percent cabernet sauvignon, nineteen percent merlot, fourteen percent cabernet franc and three percent petit verdot. The wine is raised in sixty percent new French casks and comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane. The bouquet offers up a refined blend of red and black cherries, a bit of raspberry, cigar wrapper, plenty of Taransaud-like spicy oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and new oaky, with a good solid core, a fair bit of backend oak tannin and good length and grip on the nascently complex finish. This carries its alcohol quite well and is not hot in the mouth, but the new oak has not yet been absorbed and the uncovered oak tannin on the finish detract from its pleasure today. Perhaps there is enough stuffing here to eventually absorb the wood tannins, but it will take at least a few years. There are some good elements here, but the new oak (even at sixty percent) is not all that well done. However, this is the first vintage here

and there are signs to be encouraged about, so perhaps the overly-oaky aspects are simply growing pains in the first vintage. 2022-2050? **87-89** (depending on how the oak eventually is absorbed).

#### **2014 Merlot- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

The winery's assertion that 2014 will be a much more classically-styled vintage at Mayacamas than the inaugural 2013 seems quite likely, based on this excellent merlot. It is still just a bit riper in profile than the 1999 cellar release that was paired up with it at our dinner, but this is still good, old Mayacamas merlot in personality. The bouquet is deep and impressively complex, offering up notes of sweet dark berries, cigar smoke, dark chocolate, a fine base of soil and a nice touch of fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip and a long, complex and classy finish. Merlot for grownups. 2018-2040. **92.**

#### **2013 Andrew Will Cellars "Ciel du Cheval Vineyard" (Red Mountain)**

The 2013 vintage of Andrew Will Ciel du Cheval has a bit more cabernet franc in the blend than was the case in the 2014, with the percentages in this vintage being fifty-six percent merlot and forty-four percent cabernet franc. The wine is listed at the same 14.5 percent alcohol as the 2014 version and delivers a fine nose of cassis, black raspberries, cigar wrapper, a fine base of dark soil tones, cedary wood and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is plush, full-bodied and settling in nicely, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature, buried tannins and fine length and grip on the complex and still gently warm finish. This is still riper than I would ideally like to see it, but the wine is classy and should age very nicely. 2022-2050. **91.**

#### **2013 Andrew Will Cellars "Champoux Vineyard" (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2013 Champoux Vineyard bottling from Andrew Will Cellars is composed of a mix of forty-four percent merlot, twenty-nine percent cabernet franc, eighteen percent cabernet sauvignon and nine percent of petit verdot and malbec. The wine is ripe at 14.5 percent octane, but carries it beautifully and shows lovely refinement on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is starting already to show some secondary layers of complexity in its classy blend of cassis, cigar ash, gravelly soil tones, a bit of coffee grounds, gentle notes of cedar and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite solid at the core, with lovely soil signature, well-integrated, moderate tannins, fine focus and grip and a long, ripe and elegant finish. There is a whisper of heat on the backend here, but it is quite unobtrusive and will not adversely affect this lovely wine's ability to age for several decades. 2023-2060. **92+.**

#### **2013 Andrew Will Cellars "Sorella" Champoux Vineyard (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2013 Sorella is made from a blend of seventy-eight percent cabernet sauvignon, ten percent merlot, six percent cabernet franc and the balance a mix of petit verdot and malbec. The wine offers up stellar complexity on the nose, wafting from the glass in a constellation of black cherries, sweet dark berries, coffee bean, gravelly soil tones, cigar smoke and a nice framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and very nicely focused, with excellent depth in the mid-palate, fine soil signature, ripe, chewy tannins and lovely length and grip on the complex and ripe finish. This is listed at 14.5 percent octane and does show a bit of backend heat on the finish, but seems quite well-balanced despite this and should age very well indeed. 2024-2060. **92.**

#### **2013 Andrew Will Cellars "Two Blondes Vineyard" (Yakima Valley)a**

What I love about Chris Camarda's top wines is that he changes the blend each year to reflect how best the components fit together, based on the relative strengths of the vintage. His

2013 bottling of Two Blondes Vineyard is comprised this year of forty-four percent merlot, thirty-four percent cabernet sauvignon and twenty-two percent cabernet franc. The nose is excellent, offering up a superb blend of cassis, dark berries, a bit of currant leaf, gravelly soil, espresso and a bit of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and precise, with a lovely core, fine soil inflection, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the complex and classy finish. This is listed at 14.5 percent octane, the same as the other 2013 single vineyard bottlings, but, for some reason, seems a touch cooler than the other three. This is superb wine, but it needs some time alone in the cellar to blossom. 2025-2060. **93+**.

### **1999 Merlot- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

At nearly twenty years of age, the 1999 Mayacamas merlot is drinking at its apogee, but shows no signs of slowing down any time soon. The nose wafts from the glass in a sophisticated blend of cassis, black plums, a touch of bell pepper, dark chocolate, a deft touch of cigar wrapper and a lovely base of mountain soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still shows lovely mid-palate depth, with melted tannins, fine focus and balance and excellent grip on the complex and vibrant finish. Fine juice. 2018-2035. **92**.



## ***Cabernet Sauvignon and Friends***

### **2016 Air Guitar- Bow & Arrow (Willamette Valley)**

The 2016 Air Guitar red from Scott Frank's Bow & Arrow is composed this year of sixty percent cabernet sauvignon and forty percent cabernet franc and comes in at a cool and classy twelve percent octane. The bouquet is lovely and really recalls Bourgueil in its aromatic mixture of cassis, dark berries, a touch of tree bark, cigar ash, dark soil tones and a bit of saddle leather. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, excellent soil signature, modest tannins and a long, poised and very classy finish. Though this is a low octane bottling, there is plenty of intensity of flavor and nothing lean about this lovely wine! It is quite approachable already, albeit still quite youthful in profile, and it will be more complex with further bottle age. A great value! 2018-2035+. **91.**

### **2016 Cabernet Franc- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore)**

This is the first red wine I have tasted from Jan Schulte-Bispine at North 42 Degrees and I was surprised to see its octane level at a very heady 14.7 percent. However, the wine offers up impressive precision on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke, a nice touch of soil, a bit of coffee grounds and a discreet framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and rock solid at the core, with moderate tannins, good focus and grip, bright acids and a bit of backend heat poking out on the long finish. This is a bit ripe for my tastes, but there is complexity and promise here and I would love to see this wine under 14.2 percent, so that we could really see the potential for this grape in this sector of Ontario. The potential here is quite obvious, but this is a bit too hot to rate outstanding. 2018-2025+. **87.**

### **2016 Cabernet Sauvignon- North 42 Degrees Winery (Lake Eerie North Shore)**

In contrast to the Cabernet Franc, the 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon from North 42 Degrees comes in a bit cooler, at an even fourteen percent octane. The wine starts out a touch weedy on the nose when first poured, but fifteen minutes in decanter allows the wine to properly blossom and these elements are subsumed in a fine mélange of cassis, cigar wrapper, espresso, smoky overtones, a fine base of soil and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with ripe, well-integrated tannins, good acids and fine focus and grip on the long and nascently complex finish. The touch of weediness that the nose shows initially is still apparent on the palate right now, but that is just a passing phase of its youth and if this wine is tucked away in the cellar for six to eight years, this should evolve into interesting tobaccoey elements and this wine is going to be really very good. I have never tasted a cabernet sauvignon from Ontario with this degree of promise! Kudos Jan! 2025-2050. **91.**

### **2015 Cabernet Sauvignon “Esploso”- Andrew Will Cellars (Columbia Valley)**

The Esploso bottling of cabernet sauvignon from Andrew Will is made by Chris Camarda's son, Will Camarda. The 2013 vintage was the first for this bottling, with each subsequent vintage having the same *cépages*. The 2015 Esploso is made up of seventy-five percent cabernet sauvignon from the Champoux Vineyard, fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon from the Ciel du Cheval Vineyard and ten percent cabernet franc from the Two Blondes Vineyard and the wine comes in at 14.8 percent octane in this vintage. The bouquet is very pure and precise, offering up scents of sweet cassis, black cherries, a touch of currant leaf, lovely soil tones, cigar ash and a nicely discreet framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, ripe and vibrant, with an excellent core of fruit, fine backend soil drive, ripe tannins and a long, focused and ever so slightly warm finish. Despite a bit of backend heat, I like the balance here

and think the wine will age quite well. I would be thrilled if it were a half point lower in octane, as it would be stunning, but it manages its alcohol pretty well and offers up plenty of potential. 2025-2050. **89.**

**2015 Cabernet Sauvignon- Corison Winery (Napa)**

Cathy Corison's 2015 cabernet is a breathtakingly beautiful young wine, with all of its charms based in purity, balance and gorgeous perfume. The wine is a cool and classy 13.6 percent octane this year and offers up a stunning bouquet of red and black cherries, a touch of pomegranate, Cuban cigar wrapper, Rutherford Dust, refined soil tones and a discreet framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, refined and full, with great focus and seamless balance, a lovely core, excellent soil signature, ripe, fine-grained tannins and a very long, nascently complex and classy finish. If I were going to make a cabernet sauvignon in St. Helena, this is exactly the understated and refined wine I would choose to make! Stunning juice, but give it time in the cellar to properly blossom! 2025-2080. **94.**

**2015 Cabernet Sauvignon "Sunbasket Vineyard"- Corison Winery (Napa)**

The 2015 "Sunbasket" Cabernet Sauvignon from Cathy Corison is only the second vintage where this vineyard has been bottled on its own, as it made its debut as a vineyard designate here in 2014. Cathy purchased this vineyard in 2015, after having bought fruit from it for nearly twenty-five years. It is a classic Rutherford Bench vineyard in St. Helena and the 2015 version from Cathy offers up a superb nose of black cherries, sweet cassis, cigar wrapper, gravelly soil tones, a touch of Rutherford Dust and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and very elegant in personality, with an almost velvety attack, a gorgeous core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, ripe and perfectly balanced finish. This is a lovely wine in the making, but like any proper Rutherford Bench cabernet, it needs time alone in the cellar before it will be ready for primetime serving. 2025-2075. **93+.**

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon "Esploso"- Andrew Will Cellars (Columbia Valley)**

The Esploso bottling of cabernet sauvignon from Andrew Will Cellars is made by Chris Camarda's son, Will Camarda. The 2013 vintage was the first for this bottling, which is composed of seventy-five percent cabernet sauvignon from the Champoux Vineyard, fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon from the Ciel du Cheval Vineyard and ten percent cabernet franc from the Two Blondes Vineyard. The 2014 Esploso comes in at 14.5 percent octane and delivers a fine nose of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, a touch of espresso, dark soil tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and nicely solid at the core, with fine-grained tannins, impressive nascent complexity ripe tannins on the long and ever so slightly warm finish. This carries its octane quite well and my gut feeling is that it will age very nicely indeed, but as it is ninety percent cabernet sauvignon, it needs some cellaring time to soften up properly and start to blossom. I really like the complexity out of the blocks here and feel this will be excellent in the fullness of time. 2024-2060. **91+.**

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon "Mays' Discovery Vineyard"- Andrew Will (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2014 Mays' Discovery Vineyard" Cabernet Sauvignon from Chris Camarda is made entirely from cabernet and comes in at a very civilized 13.5 percent octane in this vintage. It spent eighteen months in cask prior to bottling and offers up a beautifully pure and classy nose of cassis, cigar wrapper, black cherries, dark soil tones, a bit of tobacco leaf and a very discreet framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely structured, with a superb core of black fruit, ripe, perfectly-integrated tannins, and superb balance and grip on the very long, very classy, young finish. This is great, old school cabernet sauvignon, with a

proper structure for long-term cellaring and outstanding promise. Great, old school juice that harkens back to the best cabernets from vintages like 1974 and 1978. It will need time in the cellar to blossom, but it will be stunning when it is ready to drink! 2024-2060. **93+**.

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon “Kronos Vineyard”- Corison Winery (Napa)**

Cathy Corison’s 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon “Kronos Vineyard” bottling is breathtakingly beautiful out of the blocks. The wine comes in at a cool (particularly for the Rutherford Bench!) 13.5 percent octane and offers up a classically stellar bouquet of red and black cherries, Cuban cigar, a touch of pomegranate, a very complex base of Rutherford Bench soil tones, allspice and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is very pure, full, suave and seamless on the attack, with a superb core of fruit, lovely backend mineral drive, ripe, buried tannins and a long, nascently complex and vibrant finish. This is a brilliant and utterly refined wine in the making! 2027-2075+. **96**.

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon “Puente Alto Vineyard”- Don Melchor (Concha Y Toro)**

This is the top of the line bottling of cabernet sauvignon from Concha Y Toro in Chile and I did not really know where to place the note in the newsletter, so an article on North American wines includes one from South America. The wine comes in at 14.5 percent octane and is composed of a blend of ninety-two percent cabernet sauvignon and eight percent cabernet franc. The wine sees sixty-five percent new oak, with the remainder of the barrels second year. The bouquet of the 2014 delivers a ripe and complex blend of cherries, cigar wrapper, a bit of lead pencil, gravelly soil tones and plenty of smoky, spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, new oaky and a bit hot on the backend, with a fine core and good soil signature, chewy tannins and impressive length and grip on the complex finish. I would love to see this wine picked at a lower octane to allow a bit more vibrancy to the fruit expression, not to mention take away the bit of backend heat. It could also do with a bit less new oak, as there is good *terroir* here and I cannot see any logical reason to mask it with so much new wood influence. This is a wine of promise unfulfilled, but I would love to see other vintages of it in the future. 2023-2045. **84**.

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon- Pied à Terre (Sonoma County)**

The 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon from Pied à Terre comes in at 14.1 percent alcohol, which is quite low octane for this ripe, drought vintage. The wine was sourced from several different vineyards in Sonoma and aged in twenty percent new oak. The bouquet is deep and nicely youthful in profile, wafting from the glass in a fine mix of red and black cherries, lovely soil tones, cigar smoke, a bit of tobacco leaf, a discreet touch of cedary oak and gentle spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and quite old school in profile, with a fine core, lovely soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and impressive length and grip on the balanced and nascently complex finish. This is outstanding cabernet that is going to age very well indeed, and offers truly exceptional value, as it retails for around thirty dollars per bottle! Kudos to Richard Luftwig for crafting a superb, old school cabernet and selling it for a more than fair price! 2022-2055+. **92**.

**2014 Cabernet Sauvignon- White Rock Vineyards (Napa Valley)**

White Rock Vineyards cabernet sauvignon bottling is made entirely from this varietal. The 2014 vintage comes in at 14.7 percent alcohol and was aged in thirty-five percent new oak. The wine delivers a ripe and deep nose of black cherries, Cuban cigars, allspice, a bit of chocolate, spicy new oak and lovely notes of mint in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely polished on the attack, with a good core of fruit, ripe tannins and fine length and grip on the slightly warm finish. This wine carries its octane quite well and I



think it will age gracefully. Give it some time in the cellar to blossom, as there are good things promised on the nose and I imagine the palate is going to deliver on that promise with sufficient bottle age. 2024-2050+. **90+**.

**2013 Cabernet Sauvignon “Esploso”- Andrew Will Cellars (Columbia Valley)**

The 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon “Esploso” from Will Camarda comes in at 14.5 percent alcohol and delivers superb aromatic complexity in its constellation of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, dark soil tones, cedar and a fine, smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is complex, full-bodied and very classy, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil signature, ripe, chewy tannins, and excellent focus and grip on the ripe and well-balanced finish. This carries its octane very well and is going to be a stellar bottle with a bit more bottle age. Very impressive! 2022-2055. **92**.

**2013 Cabernet Sauvignon “Mays’ Discovery Vineyard”- Andrew Will (Horse Heaven Hills)**

The 2013 vintage of Mays’ Discovery Vineyard Cabernet from Andrew Will Cellars is a bit riper than the gorgeous 2014 version, coming in at 14.5 percent octane, but this is the differing natures of the two vintages. The wine offers up a complex and nicely precise bouquet of sweet dark berries, cassis, a whisper of mint, dark soil tones, cigar smoke and a nice touch of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full and nicely sappy at the core, with fine focus and grip, good, nascent complexity, ripe tannins and a long, chewy and slightly warm finish. This will age very nicely, but it is not quite as seamless and complex out of the blocks as the cooler, 2014 version. That said, this is still a very good bottle in the making, but the difference of one percent alcohol between the two vintages has taken a bit of the refinement away in the 2013 that is so self-evident in the 2014 version. 2020-2045. **90**.

**2013 Cabernet Sauvignon “Linda Falls Vineyard”- Heitz Wine Cellars (Howell Mountain)**

The 2013 vintage is the debut year for the Linda Falls Vineyard cabernet from Heitz Wine Cellars. The winery has owned the land for many years and planted it in 2002, with the first vintages’ fruit going into the Napa Valley bottling from the estate. In 2013, the cellar team here has decided that the wine is ready to stand on its own. The wine offers up a fine, quite black fruity nose of cassis, black cherries, lovely soil tones, cigar wrapper, a touch of allspice, really nice soil tones and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and nicely structured out of the blocks, with a fine core, excellent soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, nascently complex and promising finish. This is clearly not Valley floor fruit and it is really enjoyable to see the Heitz family winemaking sensibilities applied now to Howell Mountain fruit! This comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane, but seems quite cool and nicely precise on the backend. It will need some extended bottle age to blossom, but it should prove to be an excellent wine in the fullness of time. 2025-2075. **92+**.

**2013 Cabernet Sauvignon- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

The 2013 Mayacamas cabernet sauvignon is the first release to be made by the winery’s current winemaker, Andy Erickson, and the new owners here have been looking forward to its release for many years now. With the aging of cabernets here a five year affair, the winery has been offering up the last vintages of cabernet made by Bob Travers in the last few years. The wine is listed at 14.25 percent octane, but tastes a bit riper than this to my palate. The nose is deep, ripe, but also quite complex, offering up scents of cassis, cigar smoke, a good base of soil and just a whisper of bell pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and firm at the core, with ripe, well-integrated tannins and good length and grip on the slightly not finish. As this sat in the glass, it seemed that the perceptible alcohol became a touch more noticeable. The new owners are hoping to make this wine just a touch more accessible than was

the case under Bob Travers, when you had to wait at least a decade to see a Mayacamas cabernet start to soften, but without adversely affecting its ability to age long and gracefully. It is a challenge to be able to do both and it will be interesting to see what the next vintage looks like when it is released a year from now. The 2013 Mayacamas cabernet is a good, solid effort from a hot vintage, but the winery notes that the 2014 will be even more classical in style. Right now, it is hard to tell if this slight departure in style is a reflection of the vintage character, or the results of trying to make the wine drinkable at a bit younger age. 2022-2050+. **89.**

### **2003 Cabernet Sauvignon- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

Mayacamas has had a program of re-releasing their cabernets after ten years and this has continued under the new ownership. Therefore, the 2003 vintage made by Bob Travers is just coming back into the market again, and it is a stellar bottle. This is a classic Mayacamas cabernet in what was not a great vintage, but is certainly a great wine. The bouquet is blossoming and is flat out stunning, offering up a complex blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, a nice touch of bell pepper, great soil tones, smoky tones and a nice touch of incipient chipotle in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with moderate tannins, great focus and grip and a very, very long and perfectly balanced finish. This was probably a riper vintage than Bob Travers traditionally liked, as it is listed at 13.75 percent and this seems quite accurate, but Bob generally preferred his cabernets right around thirteen percent even. In any event, the wine is aging beautifully and is a classic Mayacamas. 2023-2085+. **94+.**

### **1985 Cabernet Sauvignon- Mayacamas Vineyards (Mount Veeder)**

I have to confess that I did not expect the 1985 vintage of Mayacamas to be drinking this well so early on in its evolution (thirty-three years out from the vintage seemed a tad on the early side to me for a classic Bob Travers wine in a structured cabernet vintage such as 1985), but the wine was drinking beautifully and was quite wide open when recently savored. The bouquet is truly stunning, soaring from the glass in a sappy blend of red and black cherries, a hint of chipotle pepper, sweet cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil, plenty of smokiness and just a whisper of residual bell pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and again, very sappy at the core, with outstanding focus and grip, plenty of complexity and a very, very long, perfectly balanced and meltingly tannic finish. This has just now reached its plateau of peak maturity, but still has probably another thirty or forty years of primetime drinking ahead of it. A legendary Mayacamas just hitting its stride! 2018-2060. **95+.**

### **1980 Cabernet Sauvignon “Vintage Selection”- Burgess Cellars (Napa)**

I do not know why, but I liked this wine significantly better the last time I tasted it back in 2010. Perhaps it was just this particular bottle, but it seemed both a bit less completely ripe (despite coming in at 13.5 percent alcohol) and the acids seemed to stick out a bit more and seem slightly coarse on the backend. Again, I may have just hit a less than pristine bottle, which offers up a complex nose of cassis, cigar ash, a bit of bell pepper, tarry undertones and a well done framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and still a touch tannic, with a good core and fine focus and grip, but a slightly disjointed impression on the backend from the acid adjustment and good, but not great length on the finish. The last bottle I drank was **92+**, but, this bottle was not showing quite in the same league. It was still tasty, but I was expecting a bit more. 2018-2040+. **89.**



### **1978 Cabernet Sauvignon- Clos du Val (Napa)**

This most recent bottle of the 1978 vintage of Clos du Val cabernet sauvignon was every bit as impressive as the last bottle tasted as part of the big 1978 retrospective tasting back at the end of 2016. However, this bottle was served at a dinner with a few French wines on the table, and though the '78 Clos du Val was still excellent, it did not show quite the same refinement and Bordeaux styling as the comparable quality wines from France we drank that evening. That said, this is still a lovely example of a great vintage for North Coast cabernet, offering up a bright and focused bouquet of cassis, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a touch of chipotle pepper, cedar and a bit of petroleum jelly in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and at its apogee, with a fine core of black fruit, still a touch of backend tannin and fine focus and grip on the long and very well-balanced finish. Good juice, but I will drink my next bottle without any French wines at the table. 2018-2040. **92.**

### **1977 Cabernet Sauvignon- Cuvaision (Napa)**

Having only found two bottles of the 1977 Cuvaision at auction a few years ago, you would think I would have exercised better restraint after drinking the first one back in the summer of 2016, but my self-discipline only last eighteen months and I had to share this last bottle with some good friends around the table in early January! This was Philip Togni's last vintage at Cuvaision and it is one of his best vintages of cabernet at this winery, which is drinking beautifully at age forty-one and still has plenty of life ahead of it for those with bottles still in the

cellar. The bouquet is deep, complex and quite refined, offering up scents of cassis, residual bell pepper, new leather, cigar ash, dark soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, suave and *à point*, with fine focus and balance and a long, complex finish. Lovely juice in its prime. 2018-2035. **92.**

#### **1976 Cabernet Sauvignon “Bella Oaks Vineyard”- Heitz Wine Cellars (Napa Valley)**

The 1976 Bella Oaks Vineyard Cabernet from David and Joe Heitz is still quite a young wine and has decades of life still ahead of it. As the drought vintage of 1976 produced pretty tannic examples of cabernet, I suppose it is not surprising that the Bella Oaks still has a bit of backend tannin and really needs an hour or two in decanter to fully blossom and start to drink with generosity. Once it opens up, the wine is excellent, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of black cherries, cassis, cigar ash, a fine base of soil, a touch of eucalyptus and red curry, woodsmoke, cedar and a bit of petroleum jelly in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a sweet core of fruit, very good soil signature, fine focus and grip and a long, elegant and still modestly tannic finish. This has the nice, tangy acids of the Heitz cabernets (which do not go through malo) and this has kept the fruit fresh as can be at forty-two years out from the vintage! Believe it or not, this wine is still climbing and may well be even better with further bottle age. 2018-2040. **92+.**

#### **1975 Cabernet Sauvignon- Freemark Abbey (Napa)**

The regular bottling of 1975 cabernet sauvignon from Freemark Abbey is starting to slide down the far side of its plateau, but it is still quite tasty and not a bad drink for consumption over the next handful of years. This winery was one of the top in Napa in this era and I am sure that this wine was excellent up until about ten years ago, but it has been gently easing into decline in recent times and is in need of drinking up over the relative near-term. The bouquet remains lovely and is my favorite part of the wine today, offering up scents of cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of curry, dried fruit, cigar wrapper and a hint of mint in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, completely resolved and velvety, with a respectable core, just the memory of tannin and grip perking up the long, gentle and complex finish. It is not on death’s doorstep yet, but the end is coming. Drink up over the next eight to ten years. 2018-2028. **87.**

#### ***Dessert Wines***

##### **2017 North 42 Degrees Select Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc (375 ml.)**

The 2017 Select Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc from North 42 Degrees is very tasty, with just a bit of Eiswein character to it, as it was harvested on a cold October morning. The nose offers up a fine mix of gooseberry, melon, a touch of honey, citrus blossoms and a whisper of grassiness. On the palate the wine is fullish and nicely light on its feet, with good intensity of flavor, fine focus, sound framing acids and good length and grip on the succulent finish. This is a very pretty, lighter styled dessert wine. 2018-2025. **88.**

##### **2017 North 42 Degrees Late Harvest Gewurztraminer (375 ml.)**

The 2017 North 42 Degrees Late Harvest Gewurztraminer is beautifully expressive on the nose, offering up scents of pineapple, orange peel, lovely spice tones, a bit of meatiness and a floral topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly low in acidity, with a good core, fine focus and a touch of backend bitterness on the fairly long finish. This has some pretty elements, but I like the more delicately styled Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc a bit better this year from North 42 Degrees. 2018-2022. **86.**

## DOMAINE HUËT'S STELLAR LINEUP OF 2017s



The season of 2017 in the Loire Valley was once again a vintage affected adversely by spring frosts, as an early budbreak was undone in the last two weeks of April when frosts struck and again played havoc with potential crop sizes. However, as was the case the year before, when severe frosts in the spring damaged regions across the Loire to varying degrees, the appellation of Vouvray was again spared the worst of the freeze and damage was far less than was the case further to the west in appellations such as Muscadet and Savennières, where in the latter fully seventy percent of the potential crop were lost in the last fortnight of April. However, the central Loire fared a bit better than those to their west, so in Vouvray, the early shoots withstood the frosts better and yields were far more robust than was the case in Savennières. Happily, after the blast of frost in the back half of April, the rest of the growing season of 2017 throughout the Loire was really quite lovely and made a dramatic contrast to the wet and difficult weather winegrowers in the region faced post-frost in 2016. The summer months were warm, sunny and quite uneventful for producers, with the bunches ripening at a nice, even pace and reaching optimal ripeness on the early side, with most producers picking on average about two weeks ahead of a normal growing season. With beautiful weather at harvest time in Vouvray, the team from Domaine Huët was able to make multiple passes through the vineyards and select grapes without any pressure from potential inclement weather.

The resulting wines have turned out truly beautiful at Domaine Huët, with every cuvée showing superb depth of fruit, lovely precision and minerality and excellent structural integrity for long and productive lives in bottle. There is a refined sense of elegance to the entire lineup of 2017s at Domaine Huët that can be attributed to the lovely summer growing conditions and the perfect weather at harvest time, as the picking teams could be extremely relaxed in making sure to bring in the grapes for each style of wine at the absolute perfect peak of maturity. With pristine autumn conditions for the harvest, the grape sugars in the resulting wines allowed for excellent purity and depth of fruit, while the underlying *terroirs* of each vineyard take center stage and show to beautiful advantage in this top quality vintage. From what I could taste in the wines, it is not a particularly heavy botrytis vintage at Domaine Huët for the Moelleux bottling from Le Mont, which struck me as finding the majority of its concentration and sweetness from beautifully desiccated berries from *passerillage*, rather than high levels of botrytis. Only the Clos du Bourg Moelleux Première Trie shows a generous glaze of botrytis to its aromatic and flavor profile, but with the botrytis extremely clean in this vintage. At the Sec and Demi-Sec level, the wines are truly stunning, with the purity of the vintage very much in evidence and the elegant balance that will come to define 2017 at Domaine Huët very much in evidence in each and every wine. The acids of the 2017s here might be a touch on the low side in comparison to some vintages, but hardly low in overall terms, and given the stunning balance of the vintage here, there will be no issues with the longevity of these beautiful wines. Stylistically, the two previous top vintages that came to mind as I was tasting the Domaine Huët 2017s were 2002 and 1989—two of my all-time favorite vintages for this iconic estate. I am not sure how the technical details of the wines in 2017 would compare with those two previous years, but tasting through the lineup, the truly elegant and pure style of this most recent vintage from Domaine Huët shines through and really makes one think of some of the most recent great, great years at this estate.

### **2017 Vouvray “Le Haut Lieu” Sec- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Vouvray “Le Haut Lieu” Sec from Domaine Huët is absolutely classic in profile, coming in at an even thirteen percent and offering up beautiful precision on both the nose and palate. The lovely nose wafts from the glass in a youthful blend of quince, apple, chalk dust, lanolin, a hint of honeycomb and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full and focused, with a rock solid core, great soil signature, excellent balance and a very long, bright and complex finish. This is a very, very elegant young vintage of Le Haut Lieu Sec and the wine will age very long and very gracefully. Fine, fine juice. 2018-2021; 2028-2060+. **93+**.

### **2017 Vouvray “Le Mont” Sec- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Sec bottling from the Le Mont vineyard is another gem from Domaine Huët. The bouquet is bright, pure and nascently complex, offering up scents of lemon, apple, quince, bee pollen, chalky soil tones and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and more closed in personality than the Le Haut Lieu Sec, with a bit of the backend dustiness of shutdown young Vouvray already starting to throw its weight around, but with excellent depth at the core and impressive focus. The finish is long, beautifully balanced and intensely flavored, with great energy and grip. This is dynamite wine in the making but unlike the Le Haut Lieu Sec, I would be tempted to tuck this away in the cellar right away and not drink any bottles during its first couple of years, as I have the sense that this is going to shut down quite briskly and it will be pointless to waste bottles early on, particularly given how much potential there is here for down the road! 2028-2060+. **94**.



### **2017 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Sec- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Clos du Bourg Sec from Domaine Huët is a superb young wine and probably the slight favorite of these three beautiful dry Vouvray bottlings. The wine delivers a lovely aromatic constellation of apple, quince, a whisper of fresh pineapple, beautiful limestone minerality, white flowers, a hint of citrus oil and a topnote of bee pollen. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with bright, ripe acids, excellent focus and grip and a very long, nascently complex and perfectly balanced finish. Great juice. 2018-2020; 2028-2065. **94+**.



### **2017 Vouvray “Le Haut Lieu” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Le Haut Lieu Demi-Sec from Domaine Huët is excellent on both the nose and palate, offering up a classic bouquet of quince, apple, chalky soil tones, bee pollen, lanolin and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core, fine transparency, bright acids and very impressive length and grip on the still quite youthful finish. This is quite approachable in its early youth, but will no doubt close down into a dusty and reticent adolescence in a few years and then be quite unapproachable for a decade, but it looks destined to be quite classically proportioned and will age long and gracefully. 2018-2020; 2030-2080. **93**.

**2017 Vouvray “Le Mont” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët**

Domaine Huët’s 2017 Le Mont Demi-Sec bottling is just a touch more honeyed on the nose than the Le Haut Lieu Demi-Sec, but as this wine is often more mineral as well (in comparison to the more chalky Le Haut Lieu), the combination works beautifully in this vintage. The nose jumps from the glass in a fine, youthful blend of apple, quince, fresh pineapple, stony soil tones, incipient notes of honeycomb, spring flowers and just a touch of youthful chenin wildness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full and a bit more powerful in personality than the Le Haut Lieu, with impeccable balance, a great core, superb backend mineral drive and a very long, very refined and nascently complex finish. This is an outstanding wine in the making! 2018-2020; 2030-2080. **94.**

**2017 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Demi-Sec- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Clos du Bourg Demi-Sec is a stunning wine in the making. The bouquet offers up a superb constellation of apple, pineapple, quince, very complex minerality, honeycomb, orange blossoms and lanolin. On the palate the wine is pure, nascently complex and full-bodied, with superb depth at the core, bright, seamless acids, laser-like focus and outstanding grip and balance on the long, vibrant and stunning finish. This too will be approachable for a few years and then shut down for an extended period of hibernation, but unlike the Le Haut Lieu Demi-Sec, where early sampling would be perfectly understandable, to waste bottles of the 2017 Clos du Bourg Demi-Sec drinking it in its early window of accessibility would border on a crime! This is a legend in the making. 2018-2020.2030-2090. **95+.**

**2017 Vouvray “Le Mont” Moelleux- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Le Mont Moelleux is a beautiful wine in the making, with less overt botrytis in evidence and more of a concentrated bouquet from *passerillage* and perfect ripening. The nose drifts from the glass in a very refined and classy blend of sweet quince, pineapple, apple chalky minerality, hints of honeycomb and a lovely topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, racy and full, with superb mid-palate depth, outstanding focus and grip, a very youthful personality and a very, very long and classy finish. This is extremely 1989-like in personality and a great wine in the making. 2027-2075+. **95+.**

**2017 Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Moelleux Première Trie- Domaine Huët**

The 2017 Clos du Bourg Moelleux Première Trie from Domaine Huët shows a nice touch of botrytis on the complex bouquet of peach, quince, tangerine, honeycomb, lovely soil tones and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and beautifully glazed, with a superb core, excellent focus and balance, bright acids and lovely length and grip on the refined, elegant and very promising finish. This is obviously very, very early days for this superb wine, but in due course, this is going to be pure magic in the glass. Just be patient! 2026-2085. **95.**