

VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

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RECENTLY-TASTED SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE WINES APRIL 2022



I always look forward to writing my two bi-annual reports on the beautiful wines from Spain and Portugal. There is such a classical reawakening going on in the wine regions of both countries right now, as a younger generation is pushing quality ever higher levels in the vineyards and cellars by looking back past the speed bump of powerful, extracted and overtly modern wines that had their day in the sun in the twilight of Robert Parker's career to the era before, when the two countries produced some of the wine world's most refined and elegant wines. As we have discussed previously, there were many very important "torch bearers" who kept alive the old school approach to wines in both Spain and Portugal during the modernist phase, so that iconic estates like López de Heredia, Bodegas Riojanas or Cuné could be counted on for classically proportioned wines during the darkest of days and could serve as inspiration when a younger generation of talented wine producers such as Envinate, Filipa Pato, Laura Lorenzo and their co-conspirators could come along and reignite the search for the new and better expression of classicism in winedom on the Iberian Peninsula. Along the way, great old, abandoned vineyards have been reclaimed, marvelous traditional grape varieties have grown exponentially in prominence and the global wine market is once again awash with stunningly beautiful options from Spain and Portugal that offer great quality and value, at a time where so

many other wine regions around the globe have been consumed by the flames of runaway wine pricing and market speculation. Spain and Portugal's wine renaissance could not have been timed better!

In my last report on the Iberian Peninsula I was able to taste and write about the absolutely beautiful wines from Filipa Pato in the Bairrada region of Portugal. I mentioned at that time that her father, Luis Pato, has long been considered one of the finest producers in the region and I was very happy to be able to taste a wide range of Luis' wines for this article. One of the great services that Luis Pato has provided to all of his fellow winegrowers in Bairrada is in championing the Baga grape that is indigenous to the region and such an important part of Bairrada's viticultural heritage. Baga was long considered a grape that produced big, brawny red wines that aged beautifully, but started out life rustic and chewy and demanded very long aging before softening up enough to be really drinkable. Hence the tradition of holding wines for a long time in cellars at places like Caves São João before releasing the wines into the market, as they were deemed simply to not be particularly drinkable until they were at least ten to fifteen years of age. Luis Pato reasoned that this was not necessarily an inherent quality of the grape's tannic structure, but more a reflection of not getting the tannins fully ripened with the then prevailing philosophy of relatively generous yields in the vines, so he started the practice a couple of decades ago of doing a green harvest each year to try and more fully tame Baga's tannins prior to harvesting the grapes. The practice has paid marvelous dividends for his wines.

The other major contribution Luis has brought to the viticultural landscape of Bairrada during the course of his career is his championing of single vineyard bottlings, arguing that Baga can be every bit as adroit at picking up its underlying signature of *terroir* as other top red grape varieties and that the wines from single vineyard bottlings are inherently more complex than those made from blends from a wide array of vineyard sources and soil types. Consequently, for many years now, he has made several single vineyard bottlings, including his beautiful Quinta do Moinho and Vinha Pan cuvées. He still continues to make a blended bottling from old parcels scattered throughout his various vineyards, which he calls his Vinhas Velhas (Old Vines) cuvée. I had a chance for this article to taste the 2000 vintages of Vinhas Velhas and Quinta do Moinho side by side to compare a single vineyard bottling of Baga versus a blended, old vine example, and I am very much in Luis' camp in preferring the single vineyard expression. One can only imagine that as more growers start to adopt a philosophy of crafting single vineyard bottlings, the reputation and quality of the wines of Bairrada will continue to rise.

I also had the pleasure for this report to discover the wines of another new (to me) estate in the heart of Ribeira Sacra, Adega Damm in the beautiful Amandi sub-region. The proprietor, Martin Damm, is Danish and to my understanding, continues to live in Denmark full-time and commutes to Ribeira Sacra to make his wines. He has the help of a marvelous winegrower in the region, Jorge Carnero, whose winery of Viña Cazoga I had the pleasure to visit a few years back during my trip to the region. Jorge helps look after Martin's small parcels of vines in the region when Martin is back in Denmark, and in this efficient manner Martin is able to harness his love for the wines from the Amandi region in a manner that most of us other wine lovers only dream about. Adega Damm's small cellars are located in the parish of Amandi, only about a mile from Viña Cazoga, so the logistics work out very well for both Martin and Jorge. The vines Martin works with are all very old, with several parcels over one hundred years of age, planted on very

steep, typically pure slate soils, though there is one parcel planted on granite. He ferments his wines with indigenous yeasts in stainless steel, practices malolactic fermentation in barrel and typically ages his wines around a year in cask prior to bottling without filtration. The casks are used Burgundy barrels, sources from either Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey or Denis Bachelet. The vineyard parcels are farmed organically, with the gnarled old vines produce a typically very meager crop and the wines are all truly exceptional. I was so happy when I received an email from a New York importer saying that they had a bottle from Adegam for me to taste for this report, as they were about to start carrying Martin's wines here in the market. Subsequently, Martin carried four more bottles in his luggage over during a family vacation to New York in late April, so I was able to taste a fair bit of his range of wines from the 2019 vintage. They are all truly exceptional and will be well worth trying to tuck away in the cellar once they are released.

The following report is organized in my customary manner. I start by grouping all of the Sparkling Wines together in their own section, regardless of their place of origin in either Spain or Portugal. This is followed by a section on Rosado, again, with everything grouped together and just listed alphabetically by producer. After these two sections, the wines are listed geographically by D.O., with an attempt made to start in the northwest corner in beautiful Galicia and working across the peninsula from west to east across the northern reaches of Spain. Reaching the east coast, the regions are then listed again from west to east across the more central section of Spain and concludes trying to do the same in the more southerly wine growing regions of the country. The wines from Portugal complete the sections of tasting notes. As I did not taste all that many Portuguese wines for this article, I have simply listed them chronologically by vintage and alphabetically by producer. Readers will find a fairly deep section on Rioja in this report, as I had the pleasure to attend a fine tasting of mature Rioja wines with some of my friends in the city while I was working on this article. Given that some of the most important Rioja estates, such as Bodegas Riojanas and La Rioja Alta are not really covered in this article, as their new releases were caught in the maelstrom that is trans-Atlantic shipping at the present time, they will appear in Part Two on the wines from the Iberian Peninsula in a couple of issues, so there will be plenty more Rioja coverage coming in the near future.

Spanish and Portuguese Sparkling Wines

Cava "1+1=3" Brut NV (Font-Rubí Barcelona)

The new release of Cava "1+1=3" non-vintage Brut is made from a blend of forty percent Xarel-lo, thirty-five percent Parellada and twenty-five percent Macabeo. The vineyards are all farmed organically and the grapes are hand-harvested. The wine is from the base year of 2019 and was disgorged in October of 2021, after a bit more than a year and a half on the fine lees. The finishing *dosage* was 8.5 grams. The wine offers up a bright and nicely precise nose of lemon, lime, wild fennel, salty minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is zesty, fullish and nicely balanced, with a good core and soil signature, pinpoint bubbles and a sneaky long and complex finish. This is a very tasty bottle and a fine value. 2022-2035. **89.**

Cava "1+1=3 Brut Rosé Selecció NV (Font-Rubí Barcelona)

The *cépages* of the Cava "1+1=3" Brut Rosé Selecció is a fifty-fifty blend of Garnaxta and Pinot Noir, with the vines averaging twenty years of age. The vines are farmed organically. It is from the base year of 2019 and was disgorged also in October of 2021 and finished with a *dosage* of 8.5 grams per liter. It is a lovely, pale salmon color and delivers a vibrant nose

tangerine, white cherries, salty soil tones, rose petals and a hint of sumac in the upper register. On the palate the wine is tangy, fullish and complex, with good mineral undertow, good, but slightly coarse bubbles and good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is lovely aromatically, but the regular Brut bottling has a bit more textural polish to it on the backend. 2022-2035. **88.**



Cygnus “Albireo” Cava Brut Reserva NV- Bodegas Cava “1+1=3 (Font-Rubí Barcelona)

The Cygnus “Albireo” bottling is crafted from a combination of thirty-five percent each of Parellada and Xarel-lo, coupled with thirty percent Macabeo. The vines are a bit older for this bottling than in the regular Brut NV, with the Macabeo vines nearly fifty years of age now. The wine is from the base year of 2019 again and was disgorged in October of 2021, with 8.5 grams of finishing *dosage*. The wine shows more depth on the nose than the regular bottling, offering up scents of green apple, fresh lime, a touch of menthol, lovely, salty soil tones and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied, focused and nascently complex, with an excellent core of fruit, fine mineral signature, frothy *mousse* and a long, crisp and beautifully balanced finish. This has the depth in the mid-palate to repay aging and is an excellent value! Altogether, just a touch more serious than the regular bottling. 2022-2045+. **90+.**

Cygnus “Sador” Cava Brut Nature Reserva NV- Bodegas Cava “1+1=3 (Font-Rubí)

The Cygnus “Sador” cuvée has a slightly different *cépages* from the Albireo, as here the blend is forty percent each of Xarel-lo and Parellada and twenty percent Macabeo. Like the previous examples, the wine is from the base year of 2019 and this cuvée was disgorged in

November of 2021 and is non-*dosé*. The bouquet is beautifully precise and expressive, hopping from the glass in a mix of lemon, pink grapefruit, very salty minerality, dried flowers and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, mineral-driven and snappy, with a fine core, frothy *mousse* and a long, youthful and complex finish. Without its bit of finishing *dosage*, I would be inclined to tuck away the Sador in the cellar for just a year or two and let its acids relax a bit more before drinking it. However, as I often find is the case with Brut Nature bottlings of top flight Cava, the aromatic and flavor precision here is exemplary. 2023-2045+. **90+**.

Maria Casanovas Brut de Brut Reserva NV (Sant Jaume Sesoliveres)

The Maria Casanovas Brut de Brut Reserva is crafted from a *cépages* of thirty percent each of Macabeo and Xarel-lo and forty percent Parellada, with these vines again farmed organically. The new release is from the base year of 2019 and was disgorged at the end of October 2021, without any finishing *dosage*. The wine delivers a sophisticated bouquet of tart orange, fresh lemon, salty minerality, wild fennel and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of fruit, lovely mineral undertow, pinpoint bubbles and a long, well-balanced and vibrant finish. This is excellent Cava and a fine value. 2022-2050. **90**.

Paloma Mínguez Cava Brut NV (Requena)

The Paloma Mínguez Cava Brut is made from a blend of eighty percent Macabeo and twenty percent chardonnay, with these vines fifteen years of age. It was given twelve months aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and a finishing *dosage* of 8.5 grams per liter. The wine offers up a pretty nose of breadfruit, limepeel, menthol, a fine base of white soil tones and a touch of dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and nicely balanced, with a good core of fruit and soil signature, zesty acids, frothy *mousse* and good length on the finish. As this wine does not hail from Catalunya, its soil signature is quite different from most examples of Cava. But, it is very well-made and quite a good example. 2022-2035+. **88**.

2018 Cava “1312” Reserva Brut- Mestres (Sant Sadurní d’Anoia)

The 1312 bottling from Mestres is composed from a *cépages* of thirty-five percent each of Macabeo and Parellada and thirty percent Xarel-lo in the 2018 vintage. It was aged two and a half years on its fine lees (under cork, rather than crown cap) and disgorged in August of 2021. The wine offers up a superb bouquet of lime peel, tart orange, a lovely base of minerality, wild fennel, a touch of *fleur de sel* and a topnote of raw almond. On the palate the wine is crisp, complex and full-bodied, with elegant *mousse*, fine mineral drive and bounce, bright acids and a long, beautifully balanced and complex finish. This is first class sparkling wine! 2022-2045. **92**.

2016 Cava “Coquet” Gran Reserva Brut Nature- Mestres (Sant Sadurní d’Anoia)

The 2016 vintage of Coquet Gran Reserva Brut Nature from Bodegas Mestres was disgorged in March of 2021, after four years aging on its fine lees. The wine is comprised from a blend of thirty percent each of Macabeo and Parellada and forty percent Xarel-lo this year. The bouquet is bright, deep and refined, delivering scents of baked apple and nectarine, dried flowers, fresh-baked bread, a lovely foundation of salty minerality and an incipient hint of nuttiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core and soil signature, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and a long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is lovely. 2022-2050. **93**.

2015 Informal Brut Rosé- Luis Pato

This is the first sparkling wine I have ever tasted from Luis Pato and it is lovely. It is made entirely from his beloved Baga grape and it became a staple of his wine lineup a decade or more ago, due to his viticultural practices to try and refine the quality of tannins in the Baga grape. Luis wanted his vineyard team to start doing a second “green harvest” in August of each year, just to get the physiological ripeness of the tannins in the grapes over the finish line to perfection, and his vineyard workers thought he was certifiably insane! When they protested to him that they were about to cut down perfectly lovely bunches of grapes, he said he would make a sparkling wine from the August-harvested bunches and the beautiful Informal bottling was born. His 2015 version spent four years aging *sur latte* and is a lovely, vivid salmon color. It offers up a bright, complex nose of bitter cherry, blood orange, chalky soil tones, smoke and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully frothy, with fine focus and grip, elegant *mousse* and a long, very well-balanced finish. This is delicious! 2022-2040. **92.**

2013 Cava “Visol” Gran Reserva Brut Nature- Mestres (Sant Sadurní d’Anoia)

The 2013 Visol bottling of Brut Nature Gran Reserva from Mestres has a slightly different *cépages* from the 2016 Coquet, as here the blend is forty percent Xarel-lo, thirty-five percent Macabeo and twenty-five percent Parellada. The wine spent six and a half years *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in October of 2020. The bouquet here is beautifully refined, wafting from the glass in a complex constellation of green apple, lemon peel, buttered biscuits, white soil tones, wild fennel, a hint of hazelnut and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and soil-driven, with a lovely core, impressive complexity and grip, refined *mousse* and a long, poised and very elegant finish. This is such a great value! 2022-2045. **93+.**

2009 Cava “Clos Nostre Señor” Gran Reserva Brut Nature- Mestres (S. Sadurní d’Anoia)

Mestres’ 2009 Clos Nostre Señor is a simply stellar bottle of sparkling wine. This wine was also disgorged in October of 2020, giving it ten and a half years aging on its fine lees! The blend is weighted more to Xarel-lo for this cuvée, with this grape comprising sixty percent of the *cépages*, augmented by twenty percent each of Parellada and Macabeo. The bouquet here is beautifully complex, offering up a mix of tart orange, lemongrass, ocean breeze, hazelnut, a beautiful base of soil, smoke and fresh-baked bread. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and tertiary in its complexity, with superb mineral drive, a fine core, refined *mousse* and a long, crisp and superbly balanced finish. This is more aromatically complex than the 2013 Visol, but perhaps not quite as long on the backend. Choosing a favorite between the two will be difficult, but drinking one after the other, as I am doing here, comes very highly recommended! 2022-2040. **93+.**



Rosado

2021 Rioja “Clairette”- Bodegas Alegre Valgañón (Rioja Calificada)

The 2021 Rioja “Clairette” from Bodegas Alegre Valgañón is composed from a fifty-fifty blend of Garnacha and Viura. It is a very pale salmon color and offers up an expressive bouquet of melon, orange peel, salty soil tones, dried rose petals and a lovely, savory topnote of wild fennel. On the palate the wine is crisp, focused and full-bodied, with a good core and soil undertow, lovely balance and a long, gently vinous and complex finish. This is most emphatically a food wine, rather than a sipping Rosado. Good juice. 2022-2035. **90.**

2021 Bovale Rosado (Utiel-Requena) screwcap

The Bovale Rosado is made entirely from the lovely grape variety of Bobal, with these vines fully forty years of age. The 2021 Bovale Rosado delivers lovely aromatics of white cherry, casaba melon, rose petal, salty white soils and a lovely touch of spice in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and succulent, with a fine core, good framing acids and grip and a long, impressively complex finish. I really like the backend lift here. Fine juice. 2022-2025. **89.**

2021 Rosa de Arrocal (Ribera del Duero)

The 2021 Rosa de Arrocal is composed entirely from tempranillo. It was given twelve hours of skin contact prior to racking off for fermentation and is a beautiful watermelon red in color. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of rhubarb, cherries, orange peel, salty soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, medium-full and succulent,

with a good core, sound framing acids and lovely bounce on the fairly long backend. Quite tasty and very good with food. 2022-2025. **87.**

2021 Rosado- Legado del Moncayo (Campo de Borja) screwcap

The 2021 Rosado from Legado del Moncayo is composed entirely from the estate's fine Garnacha holdings. The wine is a very pretty salmon color and offers up a vibrant nose of tangerine, melon, salty soil tones, dried flowers and a bit of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely succulent at the core, with good acids and grip and a long, bouncy finish that is just a touch pinched by its closure, so decant the wine prior to serving to let it stretch out a bit. A good bottle. 2021-2025. **88.**

2021 Rioja Rosado- Viña Otano (Rioja) screwcap

Viña Otano's 2021 Rioja Rosado is also made up entirely from Garnacha. The wine is a fairly pale salmon color and delivers a bright bouquet of melon, white flowers, a touch of bubble gum and a nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, zesty and easy-going, with a touch of fluidity in the core, sound acids and a wide open, rather short finish. This is okay, but it does not taste like there was a lot of conviction behind its addition to the lineup here, though of course, it may just be suffering from its choice of closure. 2022-2024. **85.**

2021 Solarce "Viño Rosado" Rioja- Casa La Rad (Rioja)

The 2021 Solarce Rosado is composed of a blend of thirty percent Tempranillo, twenty percent each of Mazuelo, Garnacha and Graciano and ten percent of Viura. It is a very pale salmon color and offers up a pretty and quite complex bouquet of strawberries, white cherries, orange peel, spring flowers, discreet spice tones and a nice base of soil. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and nicely balanced, with excellent mid-palate depth, bright acids and a long, nascently complex finish. This is tasty out of the blocks, but it has the structure to age nicely and I would be more inclined to give it a few years in the cellar to allow its secondary layering to emerge. Good juice. 2022-2030+. **89.**

Rías Baixas Blanco y Tinto

2021 Albariño "Nessa"- Adegas Gran Vinum (Rías Baixas)

Adegas Gran Vinum makes such excellent Albariños. What I find most impressive is that their "entry level" bottlings always over-deliver in terms of quality. The 2021 Nessa is a lovely example of this phenomenon, delivering a bright and complex bouquet of lime, green apple, sea salts, stony minerality and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish and complex, with a good core, zesty acids, fine focus and grip and a long, bouncy finish. This is really very good Albariño for a bargain price! 2022-2030. **89+.**

2021 Albariño "Mar de Viñas"- Adegas Gran Vinum (Val do Salnés)

The 2021 Albariño "Mar de Viñas" from Adegas Gran Vinum is very refined for its price level, as the nose delivers a nicely floral blend of apple, pear, spring flowers, a hint of wild fennel, salty soil tones and a touch of ocean breeze in the upper register. On the palate the wine is tangy, focused and fullish, with lovely complexity, perfectly respectable depth at the core and a long, minerally and vibrant finish. This is one of those wines where you imagine sitting on the terrace in Cambados deciding to order another bottle and more broiled scallops and just let the evening take you where it will! 2022-2030. **89+.**

2021 Albariño "Esencia Diviña"- Adegas Gran Vinum (Rías Baixas)

I love that the winery is now making magnums of their entry level Albariños available in the American market (please see below). The 2021 Esencia Diviña bottling shows a bit more depth on both the nose and palate than the fresh as a daisy Nessa bottling in this vintage, jumping

from the glass in a fine aromatic constellation of lime, tart pear, lemongrass, salty minerality, a gentle touch of leesiness from some aging on its fine lees and a topnote of Chablis-like straw tones. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and shows good mid-palate depth, with lovely acids and grip, fine focus and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. Another fine, fine value. 2022-2030+. **91.**

2021 Albariño “Selección Especial”- Adegas Gran Vinum (Val do Salnés)

The Albariño “Selección Especial” from Adegas Gran Vinum is from the estate’s Miranda Aurosa vineyard, with the vines now fully fifty years of age. The wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel tank and is given four months of extended aging on its fine lees. The 2021 vintage offers up a beautiful bouquet of fresh lime, green apple, salty minerality, lemongrass, a hint of smokiness and a lovely array of floral tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a lovely core, fine mineral undertow and grip, impressive focus and a long, perfectly balanced finish. This is very serious Albariño! 2022-2035+. **93+.**



2020 Albariño “Tête de Cuvée”- Envidia Cochina (Rías Baixas)

The 2020 Albariño “Tête de Cuvée” bottling from Envidia Cochina is really a lovely wine. The bouquet is deep, complex and just starting to show a bit of secondary complexity in its aromatic combination of pear, fresh lime, raw almond, salty minerality and a topnote of orange

zest. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and wide open in personality, with good acids and grip, fine balance and a long, complex finish. Good juice. 2022-2027. **91.**

2020 Albariño “Nessa”- Adegas Gran Vinum (Rías Baixas) Magnum

This magnum of the 2020 Nessa bottling of Albariño from Adegas Gran Vinum is the same wine as the regular-sized format that was released last year, but just given an additional year of bottle aging in the cellars prior to release. The wine today is drinking splendidly out of magnum, offering up scents of fresh lime, tart orange, salty minerality, lemongrass and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, pure, medium-full and complex, with lovely mineral signature, bright acids and lovely length and grip on the well-balanced finish. Readers may recall that the regular-sized bottle last year was under screwcap and it is so nice to see the real wine out of magnum, as it is texturally so much more precise and suave under natural cork! Good juice. 2022-2032. **90.**

2020 Albariño “Mar de Viñas”- Adegas Gran Vinum (Val do Salnés) Magnum

The 2020 Mar de Viñas Albariño out of magnum is another very pretty bottle. This is made entirely from estate-grown fruit from Gran Vinum, with the vines averaging thirty years of age and hand-harvested. The wine delivers a vibrant and nicely floral bouquet of green apple, lemon, ocean breeze, a beautiful base of salty, wet stone minerality, a hint of leesy tones and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and more defined by its underlying minerality than the Nessa bottling, with a good core, bright acids and lovely focus and grip on the complex finish. This is very good Albariño and a fine, fine value. 2022-2032. **90+.**

2020 Albariño “Esencia Diviña”- Adegas Gran Vinum (Val do Salnés) Magnum

The 2020 Esencia Diviña from Adegas Gran Vinum is the next step up in their fine portfolio of Albariño bottlings, with these estate vines averaging fifty years of age. The wine is given an additional three months aging on its fine lees prior to bottling and the 2020 version out of magnum is simply singing today. It delivers a very refined aromatic constellation of lemon, tart orange, beautiful salty soil tones, gentle leesiness, citrus zest and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and zesty, with a lovely core, excellent transparency and backend bounce, bright acids and a long, complex and very classy finish. Fine juice, particularly in magnum! 2022-2036. **92.**

2020 Fontecón Tinto- Bodegas Zarate (Val do Salnés)

As I mentioned in my note on the 2019 Fontecón Tinto, this bottling is made from a *cépages* of Caiño Tinto and Espadeiro. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised for twelve months in large, used casks prior to bottling. The 2020 Fontecón Tinto is low octane, coming in at 11.5 percent and delivering a black fruity and peppery bouquet of dark berries, bitter cherry, pepper, herb tones, chicory and a fine base of stony minerality. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and tightly-knit, with modest ripeness, lovely soil signature and grip, gentle tannins, tangy acids and good length and grip on the still quite youthful finish. This is a wine of very modest ripeness and it will need some bottle age before it starts to blossom. At this early stage, my gut instinct is that it will develop nicely with bottle age and be a lovely wine once it is ready to drink, but it is on the cusp of underripeness and will not be particularly charming until it has had some aging. But, these types of wines have a sneaky way of blossoming into something very interesting to drink with five or ten years' worth of cellaring. I would bet on it to evolve into a lovely middleweight with bottle age. 2028-2045. **89.**

2020 Albariño “Balado”- Zarate (Val do Salnés)

The Balado vineyard bottling of Albariño from Eulogio Pomares’ Zarate winery is aged for six months in its fine lees prior to bottling, to allow the wine to gently nurture and add depth and complexity. The 2019 version delivers a beautifully classical bouquet of lime, green apple, white flowers, a touch of gently nutty leesy nuances, a complex base of soil tones and a nice note of ocean breeze in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, snappy and mineral-driven in personality, with a full-bodied, deep and complex format, zesty acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, poised and vibrant finish. Dynamite juice! 2022-2040. **94.**

2019 Albariño “Tras da Viña”- Zarate (Val do Salnés)

The 2019 Albariño “Tras da Viña” from Zarate is crafted from vines that were planted in 1970, so they are rounding into a lovely old age these days. Eulogio lets this wine age a full year longer in its fine lees than the Balado bottling and in most vintages, it also goes through malolactic fermentation, giving it a different textural signature than most examples of Albariño. The wine delivers a beautifully refined and complex aromatic constellation of lime, pear, gentle leesy tones, dried flowers, a touch of oceanic brininess, a beautifully complex base of white soil tones and just a hint of menthol in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely mineral drive and grip, bright acids and a long, classy and well-balanced finish. First class Albariño! 2022-2040. **94.**

2016 Albariño “Frore de Carme” Doble Lías- Eladio Piñeiro

The 2016 single vineyard bottling of Frore de Carme Albariño from Eladio Piñeiro is sealed up with a Vinolok, which I have zero experience with how wines age under this closure. However, at age six, it seems to have worked marvelously well, as the wine is drinking with style and grace and shows no side effects from not being sealed under a natural cork. The excellent bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of fresh lime, tart orange, wet stone minerality, gentle leesy tones of straw, citrus peel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and beautifully complex with bottle age, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil undertow, sound framing acids and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. I love aged Albariño and this wine makes me want to go digging down in my cellar and start pulling out some of the bottles I have down there that I have been aging for a while, to see if they are evolving as gracefully. A lovely wine. 2022-2030. **92.**

Monterrei

2020 Godello “Sobre Lías”- Fraga do Corvo

The 2020 Godello “Sobre Lías” from Fraga do Corvo is an excellent wine. It comes in at 13.5 percent octane in this vintage and is a fairly ripe example of the varietal, but balanced and classy at the same time. The bouquet is bright and complex, jumping from the glass in a mix of orange, lime peel, lovely minerality, fruit blossoms, a touch of sea salts and a topnote of wild fennel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core of fruit, fine soil signature, good framing acids and a long, wide open and beautifully balanced finish. This is drinking at its peak to my palate and is probably best drunk up over the next couple of years, but Godello has a good track record for aging and it may well last quite a bit longer than that. Good juice. 2022-2025+? **92.**

Ribeiro

2020 Blanco- Casal de Armán (Ribeiro)

The 2020 Blanco bottling from Casal de Armán is a blend of ninety percent Treixadura, augmented by five percent each of Albariño and Godello. The bouquet is bright and classy, offering up scents of green olive, tart orange, wet stones, a touch of grassiness and orange peel. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and long, with a good core of fruit, fine complexity and grip and a long, gently grassy and complex finish. This is loaded with personality. 2022-2030. **92.**

2020 Eira Dos Mouros Blanco- Casal de Armán (Ribeiro)

The Eira Dos Mouros Blanco bottling from Casal de Armán is composed entirely from Treixadura. The 2020 version tips the scales at a svelte 12.5 percent and offers up a beautiful bouquet of lemon, green apple, wet stone minerality, citrus peel, a touch of green olive and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a superb core of fruit, excellent mineral drive, bright acids and a long, balanced and very classy finish. A terrific Treixadura! 2022-2030+. **92.**

2019 Eira Dos Mouros Tinto- Casal de Armán (Ribeiro)

The 2019 Eira Dos Mouros Tinto from Casal de Armán is a very interesting, old school blend, as it contains no Mencía in the *cépages*, with the blend being fifty percent Sousón, forty percent Caiño Longo and ten percent Brancello, with the vines planted on a combination of granite and slate. Usually, these grapes are minor components in old-fashioned field blends in Galicia. The wine is aged in stainless steel tanks for eleven months and the 2019 version comes in at a svelte 12.5 percent octane in this vintage. The wine offers up a complex young nose of dark berries, bitter cherry, smoked meats, coffee bean, tree bark, discreet botanicals and a lovely base of stony soil tones. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and complex, with tangy acids, good focus and grip and a long, moderately tannic and well-balanced finish. This has a botanical streak running through the palate today, which I assume is related to the drought conditions of 2019, but which I think will become buried in the wine with bottle age and just add an additional layer of complexity. For those wary of pyrazines in wine, this will not be your cup of tea, but for those who are not dissuaded by a botanical touch, this is going to be a lovely wine once the tannins soften up a bit more. 2027-2050. **89+.**

Ribera Sacra Tinto

2019 Cardia “Cepas Centenárias”- Adega Damm (Pombeiras)

The Cardia bottling is Martin Damm’s “young vine” cuvée, as these vines are only forty years of age! They are planted on pure slate and the wine includes about a quarter whole clusters, is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged for eleven months in used Burgundy casks sourced from either Pierre-Yves Colin or Denis Bachelet, depending on the vintage. It is almost entirely Mencía, though Martin feels there are a few other varieties co-planted here in trace amounts in the vineyard. The wine offers up a deep and complex nose of cassis, dark berries, tree bark, graphite, a hint of licorice and a beautiful base of slate. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant in profile, with a fine core of fruit, excellent mineral undertow and grip, ripe tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. This is excellent young wine. 2029-2075. **93.**

2019 Clos Ladredo “Viñas Viejas”- Adega Damm (Amandi)

The 2019 Clos Ladredo “Viñas Viejas” from Adega Damm is produced from an old vineyard that is at least eighty years of age. It is planted to ninety percent Mencía and ten percent Garnacha Tintorera (Alicante Bouschet). Martin bought it from the eighty-five year-old

previous owner who told him that he could remember being a four year-old boy when his father planted the younger half of this vineyard, with the other half already having been planted before he was born! He gives the wine an *elevage* of eleven months in used Burgundy barrels. The bouquet of the 2019 is deep, pure and sappy, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, pomegranate, cigar smoke, slate minerality, tree bark and a lovely array of sweet Ribeira Sacra botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure, full-bodied and complex, with a great core of black fruit, superb transparency and grip, ripe, buried tannins and impeccable balance on the long, focused finish. This is a beautiful wine in the making! 2032-2085. **94.**

2019 Cazoga “Cepas Centenárias”- Adega Damm (Amandi)

Martin Damm purchased the fruit for this bottling from Jorge Carnero, whose Viña Cazoga wines I have covered in past vintages. This particular parcel of vines in the vineyard were all planted between 1890 and 1910, so even though they are primarily Mencía, I am sure that this is a field blend that also includes some of the other Ribeira Sacra varieties co-planted in small percentages, as this was how winegrowers tried to minimize risk back a hundred-plus years ago. The 2019 Cepas Centenárias comes in at 13.5 percent octane and starts out just a touch reductive when first opened, but eventually blossoms to deliver a very promising young bouquet of dark berries, coffee bean, slate, tree bark, cigar smoke, a touch of pepper and a lovely framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with fine mineral drive and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, balanced and tightly-knit finish. This is going to be an excellent wine, but it will need some time in the cellar to uncoil. 2030-2085. **94.**



2019 La Cabaña de Cazoga “Cepas Centenarias”- Adega Damm (Amandi)

The La Cabaña de Cazoga is also crafted from vines over one hundred years of age, but this parcel is planted on pure granite, rather than the slate found in most of the parcels owned by Jorge Carnero at Cazoga. Like all of Martin’s other bottlings, it is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged eleven months in used French oak, with little or no filtration at the *mise*. The 2019 La Cabaña de Cazoga is a great bottle in the making, delivering a deep aromatic constellation of blackberries, pomegranate, tree bark, stony soil tones, a touch of peonies, beautiful Amandi botanicals, stony minerality, chicory and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and mineral-driven, with a fine core of black fruit, excellent focus and grip and a long, ripely tannic and beautifully balanced finish. Great juice. 2030-2085. **94.**

2019 La Viña que en Su Dia Era de la Casa - Adega Damm (Tinto Sin)

This is a very unique bottling for Amandi, as it was owned by the Cantina de Amandi, who sold it to Jorge Carnero of Viña Cazoga, as the parcel was encircled by Jorge’s vines. All of the vines are over one hundred years of age! However, as the parcel is planted to ninety-five percent Garnacha Tintorera and only five percent Mencía, it is not entitled to the Ribeira Sacra D.O., as the regulations require that no more than twenty-five percent of the blend can be made up of Garnacha Tintorera. It is raised exactly the same as the Mencía-based wines Martin produces. The bouquet of the 2019 is deep, complex and pure, wafting from the glass in a blend of sweet dark berries, tree bark, slate, fresh nutmeg, sweet botanicals, anise, a touch of Alicante Bouschet’s fallen leaf aromatics and a topnote of pepper. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and transparent in personality, with a good core, fine focus and grip, ripe, moderate tannins, tangy acids and a long, complex finish. This wine does not have quite the same mid-palate stuffing as the bottlings based on Mencía, but it has the same excellent structural chassis and should prove to be nearly as long-lived. Fine, fine juice and a very, very rare wine, given that I cannot think of any wine that is almost entirely Alicante Bouschet made from hundred-plus year-old vines! 2027-2065+. **93.**

Bierzo Blanco

2021 Godello- Bodegas Luna Beberide

Luna Beberide’s Godello bottling is made from a parcel of sixty year-old vines, with the vineyard farmed organically. The wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel prior to bottling. It offers up a very pretty and classic bouquet of nectarine, orange, chalky soil tones, a touch of beeswax, citrus peel and gently musky floral tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and zesty, with a good core, fine balance and a long, nascently complex finish. Good juice. 2022-2030. **89.**

Bierzo Tinto

2021 Mencía- Bodegas Luna Beberide

The 2021 Mencía Luna Beberide arrived just before I finished up this article, and it was a most welcome late arrival to the remaining pile of Spanish wine samples. The wine is a touch cooler in profile than the fine 2020 version, tipping the scales at thirteen percent alcohol and delivering a beautifully refined bouquet of cassis, pomegranate, lead pencil, a complex foundation of soil elements, hints of tree bark and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and beautifully soil-driven, with a superb core of fruit, tangy acids, fine focus and balance, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex finish. This is more tightly-knit than the

2020 version was out of the blocks, but every bit as high in quality and once again, a superb value. 2028-2055. **92.**

2020 Mencía- Bodegas Luna Beberide

The 2020 Mencía bottling from Bodegas Luna Beberide comes in again at 13.5 percent octane this year, the same as was the case with the lovely 2019 version. Readers may recall that this wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised entirely in stainless steel, with the vines ranging from thirty to forty-plus years of age. The 2020 version is again just a touch reductive when first opened (as was the 2019), but a bit of swirling in the glass allows it to open up nicely to reveal scents of sweet dark berries, pomegranate, coffee bean, a lovely base of dark soil tones, graphite and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and vibrant, with lovely, sappy mid-palate depth, good soil signature, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is excellent juice and a stunning value at \$19 per bottle here in the US! 2026-2055. **92.**

2020 Mencía “Finca Luna Beberide”- Bodegas Luna Beberide

As I have mentioned before, the Finca Lune Beberide bottling is crafted from sixty to eighty year-old vines, planted on soils of clay and slate. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts in stainless steel and undergoes malo and aging for ten months in used French *barricas*. The 2020 Finca comes in at the same 13.5 percent alcohol as the regular Mencía bottling in this vintage. The wine delivers a beautiful young bouquet of sweet dark berries, tree bark, woodsmoke, pomegranate, slate soil tones, a complex array of gentle botanicals and a nice touch of oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, young and complex, with a lovely core, excellent mineral drive and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a very long, tangy and impeccably balanced finish. This will need some extended cellaring to start to drink with generosity, but it will be excellent once it blossoms! 2030-2075. **93.**

2020 Mencía “Art- Viña la Recuperada”- Bodegas Luna Beberide

All of the vines used for the Art bottling from Luna Beberide are seventy to eighty years of age, planted on a hillside of chalky clay and decomposing slate over a base of hard rock. The wine is raised in a combination of five thousand liter *foudres* and five hundred liter casks for one year. The 2020 version is an absolutely superb young wine, offering up a very precise bouquet of sweet dark berries, bonfire, pomegranate, dark, stony soil tones, tree bark, discreet botanicals, espresso and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with a rock solid core of fruit, superb mineral drive, ripe, firm tannins, tangy acids and a long, nascently complex and soil-driven finish of impeccable balance. This is a great wine in the making, though it does have a bit of oak tannin on the backend that will need some hibernation time to integrate completely. 2030-2080. **94.**

2020 Mencía “Paixar”- Bodegas Luna Beberide

The Paixar bottling is Luna Beberide’s oldest vine cuvée, as these vines are all between eighty and one hundred years of age, planted on crumbling slate soils on a steep, south-facing hillside. If memory serves me correctly, this used to see some new oak during its *eleveage*, but these days it is raised all in one wine casks and used *foudres*. The 2020 Paixar is nicely ripe at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a beautifully refined bouquet of sweet dark berries, cassis, pomegranate, tree bark, graphite, a beautiful base of slate, a bit of smoked meats, black tea, discreet botanicals and a gentle framing of cedary oak from the one-used barrels. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and youthfully structured, with a great core of fruit, firm, chewy tannins, excellent focus and grip and a long, elegant, balanced and extremely promising finish.

Even though this is raised all in used wood, it still needs some bottle aging to integrate the oak completely here. Once it is ready to drink, it is going to be a great wine. 2033-2080+. **94+**.

2019 Mencía “Finca Luna Beberide”- Bodegas Luna Beberide

The 2019 vintage of Finca Luna Beberide comes in at the same octane level as the fine 2020 version, 13.5 percent, but the wine is more black fruity in personality than the 2020. The bouquet is deep, youthfully reticent and promising, offering up scents of cassis, cigar ash, pomegranate, coffee bean, a bit of spit-roasted game, dark soil tones, cola and a nice touch of French oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly powerfully-constructed for this bottling, with a fine core of black fruit, good soil signature, firm, chewy tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. I would guess that this more structured vintage of Finca is the result of the drought conditions of 2019. This is going to be a fine bottle in due time, but it is chewy and rather grumpy at the present time and needs to be left alone in the cellar for at least the next decade to allow it to blossom. 2032-2075. **91+**.



2020 Pétalos- Descendientes de J. Palacios

The 2020 Pétalos bottling from Ricardo Perez is a lovely bottle of Mencía. This wine is made from about a fifty-fifty split of estate-grown fruit that is primarily planted on slate soils in the hills around the village of Corullón, coupled with purchased fruit from nearby farmers whose vines are planted more often than not on clay. The wine comes in at 14.1 percent octane this year

and offers up a deep and youthfully complex bouquet of sweet dark berries, pomegranate, graphite, a hint of tree bark, a fine base of dark soil tones, a touch of coffee grounds and a gentle topnote of Bierzo botanicals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and moderately tannic, with an excellent core of fruit, fine soil signature, impeccable balance and a long, complex and very promising finish. Though the Pétalos is ostensibly crafted for early drinking, the 2020 vintage is going to want some bottle age to soften up its and drink properly. I remember drinking one of Ricardo's earliest vintages of Pétalos in a restaurant in Madrid many years ago and the distance this bottling has traveled in quality aspirations in that time is quite remarkable, as this is one stunningly beautiful wine in the making! 2026-2060. **93+**.

2019 Corullón “Vino de Villa”- Descendientes de J. Palacios

I believe that Ricardo Perez has tweaked his label for his Corullón bottling in the 2019 vintage, but as I did not taste it at the same time as the 2018 reviewed below, I have listed each wine as the labels stated, so that subscribers shopping for these beautiful wines will find a match on their local merchants shelves. This is Ricardo's “*villages wine*”, made from several different vineyard parcels he owns in Corullón. The 2019 is more transparent in personality out of the blocks than the slightly riper 2018 version, offering up a gorgeous young nose of pomegranate, coffee bean, slate, a touch of anise, a beautiful array of botanicals, woodsmoke and just a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core, superb mineral drive and grip, ripe tannins and a long, tangy and beautifully balanced finish. This is a superb wine in the making. 2029-2065+. **95**.

2019 Las Lamas- Descendientes de J. Palacios

I had not tasted a bottle of the Las Lamas single vineyard bottling from Señor Perez since the 2016, and the 2019 has changed just a bit in personality, as it is no longer aged entirely in new oak in its most recent vintages. This is, of course, a change that is right up my alley! These are some of the oldest vines that the winery owns, with a majority over one hundred years of age, planted on soils of crumbling slate and clay. The 2019 Las Lamas is utterly refined on both the nose and palate, offering up a complex bouquet of pomegranate, sweet dark berries, espresso, licorice, spiced meats, graphite, a hint of tree bark, a very complex base of soil, a dollop of cedar and a lovely spread of Bierzo botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and transparent in profile, with full body, excellent mid-palate depth, great mineral drive and grip, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, vibrant, youthful and very energetic finish. This is still quite tightly-knit at this stage in its evolution and will demand plenty of bottle age before it reveals its full panoply of complexity, but it is already very easy to see just how brilliant this wine is going to be when it is fully ready to drink! 2033-2090. **97**.

2018 Villa de Corullón- Descendientes de J. Palacios

The 2018 Villa de Corullón from Ricardo Perez's Descendientes de J. Palacios is a stunning young wine. The bouquet is deep, black fruity and nicely ripe in this vintage, offering up a refined aromatic constellation of dark berries, pomegranate, tree bark, espresso, a complex base of dark soil tones, woodsmoke and just a touch of Bierzo botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with superb soil signature, ripe, fine-grained tannins, great balance and grip and a long, poised and supremely elegant finish. This is so refined that it is approachable already, though in reality this is still a young wine and it deserves a decade or more in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to truly

emerge. This may well be the finest (or at least the most refined) vintage of Villa de Corullón I have yet tasted from Ricardo Perez! Great juice. 2028-2065+. **96.**

Valdeorras Blanco

2020 Godello “Pagos del Galir”- Virgen del Galir

The 2020 Godello “Pagos del Galir” bottling from Cuné’s Virgen del Galir property is lovely this year. As I have mentioned in the past, this wine hails from the single vineyard of A Malosa, with the wine fermented and raised in stainless steel tanks. The 2020 is fairly ripe, coming in at fourteen percent octane this year, but impressively fresh and vibrant on both the nose and palate,. The bouquet offers up a refined blend of lemon, pear, a bit of raw almond, stony minerality, citrus blossoms and just a whisper of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core, lovely soil signature and grip, sound framing acids and a long, well-balanced and quite wide open finish. Like many 2020 whites, this does not have a ton of acidity, but plenty to carry it over the next ten to twelve years. 2022-2035. **92.**

Valdeorras Tinto

2020A Villeira- Virgen Del Galir

As I have mentioned before, Cuné’s new Bierzo project, Virgen Del Galir, produces several bottlings. The A Villeira single vineyard bottling is primarily made up of Mencía, but include a small percentage of Garnacha Tintorera, Brancellao, Merenzao and Sousón as part of the field blend. This is a terraced vineyards planted on granitic soils, with these old vines having been planted in 1958. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts, undergoes its malolactic fermentation in used five hundred liter *demi-muids* and then was raised in the same larger casks for one year. The 2020 A Villeira is a lovely wine, coming in at fourteen percent alcohol and offering superb complexity in its aromatic constellation of dark berries, coffee bean, a touch of pomegranate, cigar smoke, granitic soil elements, tree bark and a touch of classic Mencía botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, complex and full, with a superb core of fruit, fine mineral drive and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a very long, beautifully balanced and extremely promising finish. This will need at least a handful of years in the cellar to blossom, but it is going to be an excellent wine in due course. 2027-2065. **93.**

2019 Los Carismáticos- Virgen Del Galir

The Los Carismáticos bottling from Virgen Del Galir is composed entirely from the Merenzao grape variety. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts in used five hundred liter casks, with whole clusters, aged in the same barrels and bottled after one year of *elevage*. The 2019 Los Carismáticos also comes in at fourteen percent octane this year, but true to the style of this variety, the wine is more red fruity and transparent in personality than the Mencía-based bottling above. The refined bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of pomegranate, bitter cherry, bonfire, venison, stony soil tones, lovely botanicals, brown spices, a whisper of pepper and a topnote of chicory. On the palate the wine is bright, full and beautifully soil-driven in personality, with a very good core of fruit, modest tannins, tangy acids and fine focus on the long and complex finish. A lovely bottle. 2025-2065. **93.**



Getariako Txakolina

2021 Txakoli- Malda

The 2021 Txakoli from Malda is comprised entirely from the Hondarribi Zuri grape. The wine comes in at a svelte eleven percent octane this year and offers up an aromatic constellation of tart orange, ocean breeze salinity, green olive, stony soil tones and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is crisp, medium-full and complex, with good focus and grip and a long, tart and well-balanced finish. A good example. 2022-2027. **88.**

2020 Txakoli- Harria

The 2020 Txakoli from Harria is quite a classic example of this region, showing a high-toned, salty bouquet of green apple, menthol, salty minerality and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, bright and tasty, with good mineral drive and focus, sound acids and a long, well-balanced finish. This is not overly complex, but tasty. 2022-2027. **88.**

2020 Txakoli- Luzia De Ripa

The 2020 Txakoli from Luzia De Ripa is a lovely example, seeming to show a bit of added complexity from some time on its fine lees prior to bottling, as it offers up scents of lime peel, gooseberry, salty soil tones, straw and that gentle touch of leesiness. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish and complex, with zesty acids and good focus and grip on the long and balanced finish. Good juice. 2022-2027. **89.**

Rioja Blanco

2021 Rioja Blanco “Viura”- Viña Otano (screwcap)

The 2021 Rioja Blanco “Viura” from Viña Otano is already reductive from its choice of closure, which manifests itself by showing vegetal components on both the nose and palate, as well as a clipped finish. It is too bad, as there is a very nice wine under the screwcap reduction, with scents of lemon, pear, white soil tones and fruit blossoms fighting with the reductive elements from the screwcap. On the palate the wine is medium-full, slightly pinched and showing a bit of bitterness on the backend. The acids here are good and this would be a lovely bottle under natural cork. 2022-2024. **86.**

2020 Rioja Blanco- Bodegas Alegre Valgañón (Rioja Calificada)

The 2020 Rioja Blanco from Alegre Valgañón is composed from its customary blend of ninety percent Viura and ten percent Garnacha Blanco. The wine is bright and youthfully reticent today, but with some coaxing offers up a lovely bouquet of tart pear, lemon, white soil tones, spring flowers and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and impeccably balanced, with a fine core and soil undertow, lovely focus and bounce and a long, nascently complex and very promising finish. This is approachable today, but still very much a puppy and I would tuck it away in the cellar for five or six years and really let it blossom properly! 2022-2050. **91.**

2020 Rioja Blanco- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2020 Contino Blanco is composed of a blend of ninety percent Viura and ten percent Garnacha Blanco. The wine is quite svelte this year, tipping the scales at 12.5 percent octane and offering up a very refined, youthful nose of lemon, pear, very salty soil tones, a touch of beeswax, wild fennel and just a whisper of white flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is vibrant, focused and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, good soil tones, sound framing acids and very good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is really a lovely bottle of white Rioja. 2022-2045. **91.**

2019 Roja Blanco “Solarce”- Casa La Rad

The Solarce Blanco bottling from Casa La Rad is a modern version of Rioja Blanco, as this wine is made from a rather untraditional *cépages* of fifty percent chardonnay, thirty percent malvasia and ten percent each of viura and tempranillo blanco. The chardonnay is barrel-fermented and aged in casks, with the rest of the blend fermented and raised in stainless steel tanks. The 2019 Solarce offers up a very pretty nose of lemon, casaba melon, salty soil tones, white flowers and a deft touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied, focused and nicely light on its feet, with a good core and mineral drive, zesty acids and lovely balance on the long and youthfully complex finish. This is really a very well-made wine that is long on Rioja character, despite its fifty percent chardonnay in the blend. It is quite approachable today, though still a bit tightly-knit, and will be even better with a bit of bottle age. Impressive. 2022-2035. **92.**

2018 Rioja “Monopole Clásico” Blanco Seco- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The Monopole brand is the old white Rioja bottling from Cuné that they produced in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, with their 1915 being the very first Rioja Blanco ever commercialized. In the early 1970s, the winemaking team here started to add fifteen percent Manzanilla Sherry to the cuvée to give it more of an aged character right upon release. It was

produced this was for a few decades before the practice was discontinued, but a couple of vintages ago, the bodegas brought back this style of wine as Monopole Clásico. The 2018 version comes in at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a beautifully complex bouquet that shows a lovely sense of nuttiness from the inclusion of the Manzanilla in the blend, as it wafts from the glass in a mix of pear, lemon, lovely nuttiness, sea salt, green olive and a lovely base of white soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core, impressive balance and a long, vibrant and saline finish. There is no other wine like the Monopole Clásico in the world and the 2018 version is beautifully made! I would love to sip this during a tapas crawl in Haro some autumn evening! 2022-2050+. **92.**

2018 Rioja Blanco “Barrel Fermented”- Viña Otano

The 2018 Rioja Blanco “Barrel Fermented” from Viña Otano is composed of a *cépages* of seventy-five percent Viura and twenty-five percent Tempranillo Blanco, with the two varieties hailing from the same ninety year-old vineyard! The wine is barrel-fermented in new French oak casks and then aged in the same barrels for six months prior to bottling. The 2018 version comes in at a svelte 12.5 percent alcohol and offers up a lovely young nose of lemon, tart pear, a lovely base of white soil tones, raw almond and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and crisp, with a good core of fruit, fine soil undertow, good framing acids and a long, well-balanced finish. This is a good bottle that is tasty today, but is built to age and will gain in complexity with three to five years in the cellar. 2022-2040. **91.**

2017 Rioja Blanco- Casa La Rad

The Casa La Rad estate bottling of Rioja Blanco also utilized chardonnay in its *cépages*, with the blend here fifty percent chardonnay, thirty percent malvasia and twenty percent viura, with all of the varieties barrel-fermented and raised for a full year in new French oak casks. The 2017 version comes in at thirteen percent octane and delivers a lovely, new oaky bouquet of pear, apple, lemon blossoms, chalky minerality, citrus peel and a well-done foundation of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with excellent focus and balance, a lovely core, bright acids and a long, new oaky and complex finish. The new oak here is done with a very, very deft touch. Fine, fine juice. 2022-2045. **93.**

2017 Capellanía Rioja Blanco Reserva- Marqués de Murrieta (Rioja Alta)

The Capellanía Rioja Blanco Reserva from Marqués de Murrieta is made entirely from Viura, with the vines planted at the very highest elevation on the Ygay estate. The wine is aged for sixteen months in new French oak casks prior to bottling. The 2017 will be released shortly and offers up an excellent bouquet of pear, lemon blossoms, macadamia nut, white soil tones, honeysuckle and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core of fruit, excellent mineral drive and grip, impeccable balance and a long, refined and vibrant finish. This is a stunning young wine, which is a cross between traditional and modern styles of Rioja Blanco. It will certainly be drinkable when it arrives in the market, but it has the structure to age long and gracefully and I suspect it will be even better at ten or twelve years of age than it will be upon release. Great juice. 2022-2055+. **94+.**

2015 Rioja Blanco “Gran Reserva”- Viña Otano

Viña Otano’s 2015 Gran Reserva Rioja Blanco is comprised of a *cépages* of eighty-five percent Viura, ten percent Garnacha Blanca and five percent Maturana Blanca. The wine is starting to show a gentle golden hue to its color and offers up a beautiful, classical bouquet of fresh almond, pear, orange peel, salty white soil tones and coconutty oak. On the palate the wine

is deep, full-bodied, focused and still fairly youthful in its structural elements, with a fine girdle of acidity, lovely focus and balance and a long, complex and really very good finish. The oak here is still not quite seamlessly integrated, which further bottle age will take care of. This is like drinking a young vintage of Viña Tondonia Blanco, as there is clearly much more room for growth here if the wine is tucked away in the cellar for more hibernation. Fine juice. 2022-2050. 91+.



Rioja Tinto

2020 Rioja Cosecha- Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2020 regular bottling of Rioja from Señorío de P. Peciña is a lovely wine, offering up plenty of nicely ripe fruit and a fine underpinning of soil tones. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of black cherries, cigar wrapper, Rioja spice tones, a nice touch of soil and just a whisper of American oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and generous at the core, with good mineral drive and grip, moderate tannins and a long, juicy and very well-balanced finish. This is really good for an entry level bottling! 2022-2040. 89.

2019 Rioja Tinto- Bodegas Alegre Valgañón (Rioja Calificada)

The 2019 vintage of Rioja Tinto from Alegre Valgañón is a lovely young wine, coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol in this vintage. The wine delivers a precise and nascently complex bouquet of raspberries, cherries, cloves, a bit of smoked meats, cigar smoke, a lovely base of soil

tones and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core of red fruit that will get velvety with bottle age, firm, buried tannins, tangy acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, beautifully balanced finish. This is going to be a great wine, but it is going to need extended time in the cellar before it is ready to drink. 2034-2085. **94.**

2019 Rioja- Bakedder (Rioja Alavesa)

Bakedder is a new wine from Cuné, hailing from two of their vineyards in the village of Laguardia in the Rioja Alavesa region. It is made entirely from tempranillo and aged for only eleven months in cask, with all of the oak being French in origin. The 2019 comes in at 13.5 percent alcohol and delivers a beautiful young nose of red plums, raspberries, cherries, lovely Rioja spice tones, cigar wrapper, salty soil elements and a lovely framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, young and full-bodied, with a lovely attack, superb depth at the core, a fine foundation of soil tones, ripe, firm tannins and a long, focused and tangy finish. This is a superb young wine that will demand plenty of bottle age before it starts to drink with generosity, but it has all the constituent components in place for future excellence, once it has softened up its substantial tannins. 2034-2100. **93+.**

2019 Roja Tinto “Solarce”- Casa La Rad

The Solarce Tinto bottling from Casa La Rad is composed from a blend of sixty percent tempranillo, thirty percent garnacha and five percent each of maturana and cabernet sauvignon. The grapes are hand-harvested and undergo primary fermentation in stainless steel tanks. Malo takes place in five hundred liter oak casks and the wine is aged in two hundred-twenty-five liter new French oak barrels. The 2019 version comes in at an even fourteen percent octane and offers up a lovely aromatic constellation of raspberries, black cherries, cloves, cigar ash, a good base of soil and a nice, understated framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core, ripe, firm tannins and a long, well-balanced and complex finish. This is a very good bottle of Rioja in the making, but it will need plenty of bottle age to let its tannins soften up properly. 2029-2065. **92.**

2019 Rioja “Viña del Olivo”- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

Contino’s 2019 Rioja “Viña del Olivo” is composed from its customary blend of ninety percent tempranillo and ten percent graciano. The wine is already beautifully refined on the bouquet, which offers up scents of red and black cherries, cassis, cigar wrapper, a beautiful base of soil tones, a touch of *garrigue*, gentle brown spice tones and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant in profile, with a touch of velvetiness already defining the attack, a lovely core of fruit, ripe, seamless tannins and great focus and grip on the long, precise and complex finish. This is a young wine and will need a fair bit of bottle age to truly start to drink with generosity, but it is one of the most finely-tuned young vintages of Viña del Olivo that I have ever had the pleasure to taste and it seems likely that a generation down the road, the 2019 will be considered one of the greatest vintages of this wine ever produced! 2029-2100+. **95+.**

2018 Rioja “Imperial” Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2018 Rioja “Imperial” Reserva from Cuné is a beautiful and absolutely classic rendition of this important bottling. The wine comes in at fourteen percent octane in this warm summer and offers up stunningly pure aromatics of plum, black cherries, cigar wrapper, a beautiful base of soil tones, toasted coconut, a lovely array of Rioja spice tones and just a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with a great core of fruit, superb soil signature and grip, ripe, buried tannins, lovely focus and a very long, very complex finish. This

is still a puppy and deserves some bottle age to fully soften up its tannins and claim that classic, velvety Rioja palate impression. But, in due course, it is going to be stellar. 2027-2085. **93+**.

2018 Rioja Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2018 Rioja Reserva from Viñedos del Contino is primarily composed of Tempranillo, with about eighty-five percent of the *cépages* made up of this grape. The other fifteen percent this year is a blend of Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano. The 2018 Reserva comes in at fourteen percent octane and delivers a deep and complex nose of raspberries, cherries, lovely spice tones, a bit of cigar smoke, a fine base of salty minerality, dried rose petals and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of fruit, a very well-integrated chassis of ripe tannin, excellent balance and a long, poised and very promising finish. This is very cool and classy on the backend. 2028-2080. **93**.

2018 Rioja “Reserva”- Marqués de Murrieta (Rioja Alta)

The 2018 Reserva from Marqués de Murrieta has not been released yet, but the bodegas kindly sent me a sample for inclusion in this article. The wine is excellent on both the nose and palate, offering up a ripe and complex bouquet of black cherries, raspberries, cigar wrapper, clove-like spice tones, a beautiful base of soil, incipient notes of nutskin and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of fruit, lovely mineral drive and grip, fine-grained, buried tannins and a long, ripe and well-balanced finish. The ripeness of the 2018 vintage is evident here, but it is handled seamlessly and the wine is really going to be lovely. I suspect it will age very much like a top 1982 Rioja. 2028-2075. **93**.

2018 Rioja “Crianza”- Viña Otano

The 2018 Rioja “Crianza” from Viña Otano is composed from a blend of ninety percent Tempranillo and ten percent Mazuelo. The wine is aged for one year in cask prior to bottling and is plenty ripe in this vintage, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent octane. It delivers a ripe and youthful nose of black raspberries, cigar wrapper, Rioja spice tones, a bit of meatiness, a good base of soil and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and nicely sappy at the core, with good soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and gently warm finish. This is a good solid example of the 2018 vintage, but the 2017 version is more classical in style, due to the differences in their respective vintages. 2027-2060. **88+**.

2017 Roja Tinto- Casa La Rad

This is a single vineyard bottling from Casa La Rad, made from a *cépages* of forty percent each of tempranillo and garnacha, ten percent graciano and ten percent maturanana. The wine is fermented in eight hundred liter oak vats and aged completely in new French Bordeaux casks for fourteen months prior to bottling. The wine comes in at fourteen percent in 2017 and delivers a beautifully refined bouquet of red and black raspberries, Rioja spice tones, a touch of cigar smoke, a superbly complex base of soil, nutskin and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure, full-bodied and youthful, with a plush core of fruit, excellent soil signature and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. This is a superb bottle in the making. 2029-2065. **93**.

2017 Rioja “Crianza”- Viña Otano (magnum)

The 2017 Rioja “Crianza” from Viña Otano is composed from a blend of ninety percent tempranillo and ten percent Mazuelo. The fruit is all hand-harvested for this bottling, from vineyards that sit just under six hundred meters in elevation and are planted on sandy, calcareous clay soils. The wine is aged for a year in used, American and French oak barrels prior to bottling.

The 2017 Crianza offers up a ripe and complex nose of red and black raspberries, a touch of Rioja tomato, brown spices, a good base of soil, cigar smoke and a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core, fine tannins and a long, tangy finish. This is really a quite well-made bottle of old school Rioja, and at thirty-seven dollars a magnum here in the US, it is an excellent value! I would opt for aging it two or three more years, for out of magnum, it still has room to grow with a bit more bottle age. Good juice. 2024-2055. **90.**

2017 Rioja “Yjar”- Telmo Rodríguez (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2017 Rioja “Yjar” from Telmo Rodríguez hails from an old vine parcel of 3.8 hectares planted at an elevation between six hundred and eight hundred meters above sea level, in the foothills of the Sierra de Toloño Mountains in the Rioja Alavesa. It is made from a field blend of tempranillo, garnacha, graciano, granegro and rojal. The wine offers up a deep, nascently complex and black fruity nose of dark berries, black cherries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a touch of pepper, gentle savory tones (that remind one of Canary Islands’ reds), a touch of clove and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and youthful, with a fine core of fruit, lovely mineral undertow, ripe tannins and a long, beautifully balanced and very promising finish. This is a beautiful wine in the making, but it is still a puppy and will demand plenty of time in the cellar before it is properly ready to drink. 2032-2075+. **95.**

2016 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 2016 Imperial Gran Reserva from Cuné is a truly superb young wine. The bouquet is deep, precise and already beautifully complex, delivering scents of black cherries, black raspberries, cigar wrapper, cloves, a refined base of soil, sandalwood and a touch of toasted coconut in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, elegant and rock solid at the core, with fine soil undertow, great balance and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, complex and utterly classical finish. This wine will eventually be liquid velvet in the mouth, but it will need some cellaring time before it gets to that stage of its evolution. Great juice. 2032-2100+. **95+.**

2016 Rioja Gran Reserva- Viñedos del Contino (Rioja Alavesa)

The 2016 Contino Gran Reserva is made from a similar blend as the 2018 Reserva, with mostly Tempranillo augmented by smaller percentages of Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano. Though the wine is only six years of age, it is already stunningly beautiful and complex on the nose, soaring from the glass in a blend of sappy raspberries and cherries, woodsmoke, Rioja spices, a beautifully complex base of soil, cigar wrapper and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and svelte in personality, with a lovely core and soil signature, ripe, fine-grained tannins, great focus and grip and a very, very long, promising finish. This is still a baby and will need plenty of bottle age, but it is going to be stunning when it is ready to drink! 2032-2100+. **95+.**

2015 Rioja “Viña Real” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alavesa)

Cuné’s 2015 Rioja “Viña Real” Gran Reserva is an absolutely stellar example of the vintage, coming in at a svelte 13.5 percent octane and offering up a superb aromatic constellation of sweet dark berries, cassis, cigar wrapper, a beautiful base of soil tones, cloves, woodsmoke, just a touch of spiced meats and a deft framing of American and French oak seamlessly blended. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and velvety already on the attack, with a fine core, excellent mineral undertow, fine-grained tannins and superb focus and grip on the long, complex and very,

very classy finish. At seven years of age, this is still in climbing mode and I would be inclined to tuck it away in the cellar for at least another five to ten years and really let it reach its zenith, but it is already very easy to drink and I can imagine that a lot of bottles are going to be very happily consumed over this coming decade! It is an absolutely great vintage of Viña Real in the making! 2027-2080. **95+**.



2015 Rioja “Gran Reserva”- Marqués de Murrieta (Rioja Alta)

The 2015 Gran Reserva from Marqués de Murrieta is also not yet released, but we should be seeing it in the market in the not too distant future. The wine is going to be outstanding, as it delivers a complex and black fruity aromatic constellation of dark berries, black cherries, brown spices, cigar smoke, a touch of nutmeg, a refined base of soil, gentle notes of nutskin and a lovely foundation of oak, which seems to derived from a combination of American and a touch of French casks. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, tangy and complex, with outstanding depth in the mid-palate, fine focus and bounce, well-integrated, ripe tannins and a long, beautifully balanced and very complex finish. This is outstanding juice. 2027-2075+. **95**.

2015 Rioja “Crianza”- Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

I love that Señorío de P. Peciña is releasing their Crianza from 2015 today, while many estates are releasing Reservas from the same vintage. This is ripe in the style of the 2015 vintage, coming in at 14.2 percent, but utterly classical in its very expressive aromatic constellation of raspberries, cherries, gentle nuttiness, beautifully refined spice elements, cigar wrapper, a

complex base of salty soil tones and a lovely framing of the toasted coconut tones of seasoned American oak cooperage. On the palate the wine is bright, pure and full-bodied, with beautiful delineation and soil signature, a sappy core of fruit, fine-grained tannins and superb length and grip on the complex finish. This is a great, great bargain! 2022-2050. **92.**

2015 Rioja “Reserva”- Viña Otano (magnum)

The 2015 Reserva bottling from Viña Otano has a slightly different *cépages* than the 2017 Crianza, as the blend here is eighty percent tempranillo, fifteen percent graciano and five percent Mazuelo. The grapes are again hand-harvested and aged in a combination of older French and American casks, for eighteen months in this case, followed by three years of bottle aging in the cellars. The wine is really quite good on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of cherries, raspberries, cloves, cedar, a Chambolle-Musigny-like touch of mustard seed, a fine base of soil and a topnote of bonfires. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and starting to get nicely velvety on the attack, with a lovely core of red fruit, good soil undertow, still a bit of backend tannins and a long, well-balanced, tangy and complex finish. This is really very good Rioja! It is quite approachable today, but still shows some tannin on the finish and will drink even better with a bit more time in the cellar. 2022-2065. **92.**

2014 Rioja “Reserva”- Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2014 Rioja “Reserva” from Señorío de P. Peciña is another beautiful current release from this great bodegas. The wine is showing far more secondary complexity on the nose than the lovely 2015 Crianza bottling, wafting from the glass in an utterly refined blend of cherries, raspberries, cigar smoke, salty soil tones, cloves, allspice, incipient nutskin and a lovely foundation of coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and already nicely velvety, with a sappy core of fruit, lovely mineral undertow, suave, mellowing tannins and a long, complex and seamlessly balanced finish. Great juice. 2022-2065+. **93+.**

2011 Rioja “Gran Reserva”- Señorío de P. Peciña (Rioja Alta)

The 2011 Gran Reserva from Pedro Peciña is a tad riper than the beautiful 2014 Reserva, as this wine comes in at 14.5 percent octane. The wine offers up a lovely bouquet, with a black fruity blend of cassis, black raspberries, a bit of spiced meats, dark soil tones, cigar smoke, clove-like spice tones and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of ripe black fruit, moderate tannins, lovely balance and grip and a long, complex and classy finish. Stylistically, this reminds me of some of the great classical bottlings from the 1982 vintage when they were at a similar age. There is still some tannin here, but it is not obtrusive when served with appropriate fare today; further bottle age will see them fall away. 2022- 2065+. **93.**

2009 Rioja “Viña Tondonia” Reserva- López de Heredia (Rioja Alta)

The 2009 vintage of Viña Tondonia Reserva is a beautiful and utterly classical young wine. The bouquet is deep, complex and vibrant, wafting from the glass in a mix of raspberries, cherries, fresh nutmeg, a beautiful, salty base of soil tones, a touch of nutskin and a very refined framing of older American oak that is already hinting at notes of toasted coconut. On the palate the wine is pure, bright and quite svelte in personality this year, with lovely focus and grip, a good core of red fruit, fine soil signature and a long, well-balanced and bouncy finish. This is fairly low alcohol by recent, global warming standards, coming in at an even thirteen percent

octane. It is quite approachable already, but this is nicely knit and will be even better with a bit more bottle age. As always, lovely juice. 2022-2065+. **94.**

2009 Rioja Graciano- Viña Otano (magnum)

The Graciano bottling from Viña Otano is made from old bush vines of the variety that are more than fifty years of age. These old vines are hand-harvested, fermented in stainless steel tanks and aged for two years in all used French oak barrels. The 2009 Graciano comes in at fourteen percent octane and is drinking beautifully at age thirteen. The bouquet is deep, complex and quite refined, offering up a lovely blend of ripe cherries, red plums, cigar smoke, clove-like spice tones, a salty base of soil, a bit of celery seed, spiced meats and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with an excellent core of fruit, fine-grained tannins and lovely length and grip on the very nicely balanced finish. There is still a bit of backend tannin here, but the wine is getting nicely velvety on the attack and it is certainly not a crime to be drinking it already, though it has plenty of life still ahead of it. Fine juice. 2022-2065. **92+.**

2000 Rioja Castillo Ygay “Gran Reserva Especial”- Marqués de Murrieta (magnum)

I had previously tasted the 2000 Castillo Ygay “Gran Reserva Especial” from Marqués de Murrieta on only one occasion, back in 2011, where it had not really shown to its advantage. So, I was delighted to have a chance to revisit this wine out of magnum. Clearly, the bottle I tasted back in 2011 was not in pristine form, as this magnum was a significant step up. This is still a quite youthful wine out of magnum, but deep, pure and nascently complex as well, offering up a ripe and classy nose of black raspberries, cassis, cigar wrapper, a lovely array of Rioja spice tones, a fine base of soil and a well-done foundation of American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and fairly ripe in personality in this vintage, with a rock solid core of black fruit, fine-grained tannins, tangy acids and a very long, focused and beautifully balanced finish. Out of magnum, this is going to be a virtually timeless wine, but it still needs a bit more time in the cellar to blossom completely. 2030-2100. **94+.**

1995 Rioja “Viña Real” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 1995 Viña Real Gran Reserva is a beautiful bottle of wine that is still a few years away from fully blossoming to my palate, and I would be inclined to give it just a bit more bottle age before drinking it in earnest. The bouquet is already very refined, wafting from the glass in a lovely blend of red and black raspberries, cigar smoke, a beautiful base of soil, Rioja spices and a nice blending of toasted coconutty American oak and cedary French wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and focused, with a fine core, very good soil undertow, tangy acids and still a bit of backend tannin that will further fall away with just a bit more cellaring. Fine juice. 2025-2075. **93+.**

1991 Rioja “Viña Bosconia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia (Rioja Alta)

The 1991 Viña Bosconia Gran Reserva is such a beautiful middleweight example of Rioja, coming in at a svelte 12.5 percent octane and offering up truly beautiful transparency and precision on both the nose and palate. The vibrant bouquet delivers scents of raspberries, cherries, cloves, sweet nutskin, a touch of cinnamon, orange peel, woodsmoke and a vivid foundation of salty soil tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright, complex and intensely flavored, with lovely focus and grip, tangy acids, modest tannins and impeccable balance on the long, lifted finish. Great, understated juice. 2022-2055. **94.**



1981 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 1981 Imperial Gran Reserva is a stellar bottle of wine that perfectly captures the essence of this legendary vintage in Rioja. The bouquet is beautifully mature and complex, wafting from the glass in a blend of red and black cherries, toasted coconut, cigar smoke, nutskin, a gorgeous swath of Rioja spice tones, a fine base of soil and a touch of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with a velvety attack, a lovely core of fruit, beautiful focus and grip, still a bit of buried tannin on the backend and a very long, very refined finish. A stellar vintage of Imperial! 2022-2065. **95.**

1981 Rioja “Viña Bosconia” Gran Reserva- López de Heredia (Rioja Alta)

The 1981 Viña Bosconia Gran Reserva is a stunningly beautiful example of this great Rioja vintage. The gorgeous aromatic constellation delivers scents of raspberries, cherries, very salty minerality, orange zest, cigar wrapper, a touch of celery seed and a pungent topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very refined in profile, with a lovely core of red fruit, superb soil signature, melted tannins and a very long, vibrant and complex finish. This is cut in the same style as the 1991 Viña Bosconia, but with even better depth in the mid-palate and a longer, more complete finish. A stunning wine with decades of life still ahead of it! 2022-2065. **96.**

1978 Rioja “Viña Ardanza” Reserva- La Rioja Alta (Rioja Alta)

The 1978 Rioja “Viña Ardanza” Reserva from La Rioja Alta is drinking beautifully today at forty-three years of age, with a truly stunning bouquet and a slightly chunky, but still plenty

robust palate personality to go along with the aromatic fireworks. The excellent nose jumps from the glass in a mix of raspberries, cloves, smoked meats, a touch of celery seed, cigar wrapper, a lovely base of soil and a beautiful array of secondary spice elements (to augment the strong vein of clove) in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still plenty plush at the core, with melted tannins, lovely balance and grip and a long, complex and ever so slightly four-square finish. The garnacha component in the blend here adds sturdy shoulders and mid-palate amplitude to this nicely mature bottle, but perhaps also takes away just a touch of detail that a more heavily tempranillo-dominated blend might show at this age. But, that said, this is still a very tasty bottle with plenty of life still in it. 2021-2040. **90.**

1973 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

The 1973 vintage is one of my favorites for Imperial and the Gran Reserva version continues to drink at its apogee as it closes in on its fiftieth birthday. The utterly refined bouquet delivers scents of cherries, a touch of pomegranate, sweet nutskin, orange peel, cigar smoke, a lovely array of brown spices, a fine base of soil and a touch of toasted coconut. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and velvety, with a lovely core of fruit and soil signature, melted tannins, tangy acids, superb complexity and impeccable balance on the long, focused and utterly seamless finish. This is just the epitome of perfumed, velvety, old school Rioja at its apogee of peak drinkability! 2022-2055. **95.**

1970 Rioja “Viña Pomal” Reserva- Bodegas Bilbainas (Rioja Alta)

The 1970 Viña Pomal Reserva is a lovely bottle that still remains comfortably in its plateau of peak maturity and is drinking with style and grace. The lovely nose wafts from the glass in a very pretty combination of raspberries, cloves, cinnamon, a good base of soil, lavender and a touch of cedary oak tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and silky, with fine focus and grip, melted tannin and a long, complex and very enjoyable finish. This does not have quite the same breed as one might get from a similarly-aged bottle of Viña Bosconia or Monte Real, but it is still a lovely old bottle of Rioja with plenty of life in it. 2022-2045. **91.**

1970 Rioja- Marqués de Riscal (Rioja Alavesa)

This particular bottle was sold before the codification of the Reserva and Gran Reserva categories, so I have no idea how long it had been aged prior to its release back in the 1970s. However, the 1970 Marqués de Riscal Rioja is a lovely wine that is still drinking in its plateau of maturity and shows no signs of imminent decline. The refined and red fruity notes offers up a lovely blend of raspberries, cherries, cloves, orange peel, sweet nutskin, a fine base of soil and plenty of cigar smoke in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, complex and tangy, with melted tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, beautifully balanced finish. Fine juice. 2022-2050. **92+.**

1970 Rioja “Bordón”- Bodegas Franco-Espanoles (Rioja Alta)

The 1970 Rioja “Bordón” from Bodegas Franco-Espanoles is a very pretty, old school, middleweight bottle of Rioja. The wine has clearly been mature for decades, but continues to deliver a fine nose of desiccated cherries and raspberries, brown spices, dusty soil tones and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is bright, focused and medium-full, with good complexity and grip, a touch of old school Rioja tomato tones, little remaining tannin and a long, tangy and very tasty finish. This does not have the complexity of the top wines of the vintage, but it is still sweet and sound and a very pleasurable drink. 2022-2040+. **88.**

1966 Rioja “Imperial” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alta)

I had the pleasure to taste the 1966 Imperial Gran Reserva about fifteen minutes after drinking the 1973 version (yes, it was a very good tasting!), so they made for a very interesting comparison. Aromatically, the '66 is a tad more vibrant and precise than the lovely, mellowed and very complex '73, and I anticipated that I would have a slight preference for the 1966 as a result. The beautiful bouquet here offers up a vivid combination of cherries, black raspberries, cloves, cigar smoke, salty soil tones, a touch of cedary oak, celery seed and a topnote of orange peel. Just beautiful. However, on the palate, the 1966 is not quite as refined or seamless as the velvety 1973, delivering a deep, full-bodied and pure palate impression, with a good core and soil signature, tangy acids and still a bit of tannin perking up the long and complex finish. Without the utterly suave 1973 for comparison, the 1966 Imperial Gran Reserva might have been everything I hope for in a fully mature vintage of this iconic bottling, but in comparison to the '73, this wine is just a touch four-square in comparison! Still a very, very fine wine by any measure, on this particular evening, the 1966 finished just a half step behind the 1973 version. Perhaps I need to compare the two again? 2022-2055. **93.**

1964 Rioja “Viña Real” Gran Reserva- Cuné (Rioja Alavesa)

I have been fortunate to drink several vintages of great old Viña Real over the years, but somehow, I think the 1964 has always remained my favorite. This most recent bottle was simply stunning and still at the peak of its powers. It delivers a superb aromatic constellation of red and black cherries, cigar smoke, toasted coconut, a wisp of cedar, a gorgeous base of dark soil tones, cloves, a wisp of paraffin and a lovely topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still almost sappy at the core, with a velvety attack, fine mid-palate plushness, melted tannins, tangy acids and impeccable balance on the long, seamless and beautifully complex finish. A great, great bottle of Rioja! 2022-2060+. **96.**

1964 Rioja “Monte Real” Gran Reserva- Bodegas Riojanas (Rioja Alta)

It had been a few years since I last had the pleasure to drink a bottle of the 1964 Monte Real Gran Reserva and the wine remains at its apogee and is beautifully pure, precise and complex on both the nose and palate. The bouquet soars from the glass in a blend of cherries, raspberries, cloves, cigar wrapper, salty soil tones, a touch of celery seed, orange peel and a lovely array of Rioja spices in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and complex, with a full-bodied format, an excellent core of fruit, refined soil signature, still just a touch of backend tannin and a long, tangy, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is such a beautiful wine. 2022-2060. **96.**

Navarra

2019 Syrah “Paal 01”- Bodegas Caudalía

I have very much enjoyed the “Paal 01” bottling of Syrah from Bodegas Caudalía in the previous vintages that I have tasted, and the 2019 version is another ringing success. The wine is ripe, tipping the scales at 14.5 percent octane, but this is Navarra and is one of the warmer growing regions in Spain. The wine is beautifully precise on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of black raspberries, smoked meats, pepper, a hint of dark chocolate, black olives, a fine base of soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and meaty in personality, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature, ripe, chewy tannins and a long, well-balanced and youthfully complex finish. This is lovely Syrah. 2027-2050. **89.**



The beautiful barrel-aging room at Cuné in Haro.

2018 Garnacha “Xi’ipal”- Bodegas Caudalía (Baja Montaña)

The 2018 Garnacha “Xi’ipal” from Bodegas Caudalía is a single vineyard wine from the Las Bajadas vineyard. These vines are just under twenty-five years of age these days. The grapes are hand-harvested, fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged in used, four hundred liter French casks for a year prior to bottling. The wine is also given an additional year and a half of bottle aging in the cellars prior to release. The 2018 version comes in at 14.5 percent octane and offers up a vibrant bouquet of raspberries, cherries, *garrigue*, a lovely base of soil, cinnamon, a hint of celery seed and a nice touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with lovely transparency, a good core, fine-grained tannins and a bit of backend heat perking up the long and complex finish. I really like the aromatic and flavor complexity here, but the score is kept down just a tad because it really is a bit hot on the backend (at least to my palate). Add three points to my score if you are more of an intrepid Garnacha drinker and do not mind a bit of warmth on the finish. 2027-2050+. **88.**

2017 Tempranillo “Xi’ipal”- Bodegas Caudalía (Baja Montaña)

Bodegas Caudalía ‘s 2017 Tempranillo “Xi’ipal” bottling is also pretty ripe at 14.5 percent octane, but the wine is a bit cooler on the backend than the 2018 Garnacha. This wine is

also a single vineyard bottling, with the vines forty-five years of age in the La Abejera vineyard, where the soils are a mix of crumbled clay, limestone and sandstone. The wine is harvested and fermented similarly to the Garnacha, with the *elevage* for this wine also in used French barrels, for a period of twenty-two months, followed by a year of bottle aging at the bodegas. The bouquet is deep, complex and quite refined, wafting from the glass in a mix of black cherries, cassis, cigar smoke, a lovely array of spice tones, a fine base of soil and a fair bit of oak spice. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, good soil signature and grip and a long, fairly tannic finish. Even though this wine was raised entirely in used casks, there is still a bit of oak tannin on the backend that needs to still be absorbed into the wine, so give it some time in the cellar. There is plenty of stuffing to carry the oak in due course and this is going to be a very tasty bottle. 2027-2055. **90.**

2017 Syrah “Xi’ipal”- Bodegas Caudalía

The 2017 Syrah “Xi’ipal” from Bodegas Caudalía is composed of fruit grown in the stony La Celada vineyard, which sits at an elevation of five hundred meters above sea level. These vines are just about twenty years of age now. Like all of these offerings from Bodegas Caudalía, the bunches are hand-harvested, the wine fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged in used French barrels. However, for this bottling, the malo takes place in used four hundred liter casks and the *elevage* after is twenty-two months, followed by another year of bottle aging in the cellars. This is a lovely syrah in the making, offering up a bright bouquet of black raspberries, cassis, pepper, smoked meats, black olive and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely transparent in personality, with a good core, ripe tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. Good juice in the making. 2027-2055. **91.**

Toro

2020 Malvasía- Bodegas San Román

The 2020 Malvasía from Bodegas San Román is a lovely wine. It comes in at 12.5 percent octane in this vintage (how this is done in the torrid region of Toro is beyond me!) and offers up a nicely new oaky nose of nectarine, orange, beeswax, green olive, salty soil tones, honeysuckle and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely balanced, with a lovely core, good soil signature, sound framing acids and a long, complex and very classy finish. This is really good wine. 2022-2028. **92.**

2020 Tinto “Viñas”- Bodega Elías Mora

The 2020 Tinto “Viñas” from Bodega Elías Mora is one of the estate’s younger vine bottlings, with these tempranillo vines twenty years of age. The wine is given a three day “cold soak” prior to fermentation and aged six months new American oak casks. The 2020 version delivers a deep bouquet of black cherries, grilled venison, a bit of saddle leather, cigar smoke, a good base of soil and smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe, full-bodied and powerful in style, with a rock solid core, good soil signature, firm, buried tannins and a long, broad-shouldered and gently warm finish. This comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane, but might be just a tad higher. It is a well-made example of Toro in the age of global warming. 2027-2050. **89.**

2019 Tinto “Viñas”- Bodega Elías Mora

The 2019 Tinto “Viñas” bottling from Bodega Elías Mora comes in listed at the same octane as the 2020 version, but the extra year in bottle has mellowed it considerably on the nose and it presents a more polished veneer in its aromatic constellation of plums, black cherries,

cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a touch of violet and a judicious framing of new American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and plush at the core, with plenty of ripe fruit, good soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. Again, this has just a whisper of backend heat, but all in all, it carries its octane very nicely. The 2020, at this stage of its evolution, is the bigger bruiser of a wine, whereas the 2019 is far more suave in profile. Tasting a wine such as this, one can see why Vega Sicilia way back in the day used to source grapes in Toro for their Único bottling! This is an excellent wine. 2026-2050. **91+**.

2019 Prima'- Bodegas San Román

The 2019 Prima' bottling from Bodegas San Román is their “young vine” cuvée, as these organically-farmed vines range from fifteen to fifty years of age! The *cépages* includes fifteen percent Garnacha to go along with the Tempranillo, and the wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in a combination of seventy-five percent French and twenty-five percent American oak vessels for fourteen months prior to bottling. The wine offers up a bit of smoked meat tones from the inclusion of the Garnacha, with scents of dark berries, black cherries, a touch of leather, meaty elements, cigar smoke and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and complex, with a fine core of fruit, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, balanced finish that shows a bit of backend heat on the close. This is a very well-made bottle of Toro, but it strikes me as perhaps a touch higher in octane than its stated 14.5 percent. 2030-2075. **91+**.

2019 Garnacha- Bodegas San Román

The 2019 Garnacha from Bodegas San Román arrived just before I finished up this article and I am very happy it made it in ahead of the deadline. The wine is produced from sixty year-old bush vines, which are farmed organically and situated at just over seven hundred meters above sea level. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts, entirely whole cluster in 2019 and aged for just over a year and a half in five hundred liter, French oak casks. This is only the second vintage of pure Garnacha released by the winery, as it was only approved for the Toro DO in 2018. The 2019 is a big boy, coming in at a full fifteen percent octane and delivering a superb bouquet of red and black raspberries, smoked meats, beautifully refined spice tones, a fine base of soil, woodsmoke and a lovely framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with very good balance for its octane level, a lovely core of fruit, good mineral drive and grip, ripe tannins and a long, complex and gently warm finish. This is a very, very well-made wine, which is a bit high in octane for my palate, but which is really quite impressively balanced for this level and I am sure that most modern-day Châteauneuf du Pape drinkers will not even notice that it is fifteen percent! It needs some cellaring time to soften up, but it should drink beautifully for many decades. 2029-2065+. **92**.

2019 San Román Tinto- Bodegas San Román

The old vine San Román Tinto bottling comes in at 14.5 percent octane in the 2019 vintage. These organically-farmed bush vines range up to one hundred years of age. The wine's *elevage* is done in twenty-five percent new oak for two full years, with the casks a mix of French and American wood. The 2019 is deep, refined and complex aromatically, wafting from the glass in a blend of black cherries, a hint of pomegranate, dark soil tones, cigar wrapper, a touch of chocolate and a beautifully refined foundation of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, ripe and really quite beautifully balanced for its octane level, with a great core, fine soil signature and a long, ripely tannic and complex finish that closes with a trace of heat. This is still a big boy in terms of octane, but it is a stellar example of Toro. 2034-2080+. **93+**.

2018 Tinto “Crianza”- Bodega Elías Mora

The Crianza bottling from Elías Mora is made from much older vines than the regular Tinto, with these bush-trained vineyards fully fifty years of age. The wine is aged in a fifty-fifty blend of French and American oak casks, but for this bottling, the barrels are one year of age. The 2018 vintage was a hot one in Toro, so this wine comes in at a full fifteen percent octane, but is impressively fresh and vibrant on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of black cherries, plums, chocolate, cigar wrapper, a superb base of soil and a combination of vanillin and spicy oak tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave in personality, with a plush core of fruit, good soil undertow, ripe, firm tannins and a long, complex and really quite well-balanced finish. This is a top flight example of Toro! 2030-2080. **93.**

2018 San Román Tinto- Bodegas San Román

The flagship bottling from Bodegas San Román is made entirely from Tempranillo vines, bush-trained and ranging from sixty to fully one hundred years of age. They are farmed certified organic and are in transition to biodynamics. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged for fully two years, in twenty-five percent new oak. The wood is a mix of French and American oak in origin. The 2018 San Román comes in at 14.5 percent alcohol and delivers a deep and very refined nose of black cherries, plums, cigar wrapper, a touch of bitter chocolate, dark soil tones, gentle spice tones and a well-done framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a beautiful core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, firm tannins and a long, ripe and complex finish of impressive backend polish. This is one of the best bottlings of Toro that I am aware and the 2018 is excellent. It is a big, ripe wine, as this is Toro in an age of growing heat all over the planet, but it is impeccably balanced and quite sophisticated in style. 2030-2080+. **95.**



2016 Cartago Paraje De Pozo- Bodegas San Román

The Cartago Paraje De Pozo bottling from Bodegas San Román is made from an ungrafted, forty-five year-old vineyard that is composed of ninety percent tempranillo and ten percent other varieties, co-planted in a field blend. The vines are farmed by certified organic principals and are in conversion to biodynamics. It is handled similarly to the above wine in the cellars, with indigenous yeasts, but is aged fully three years in a combination of American and French oak casks. It again tips the scales at 14.5 percent octane. The nose is deep, complex and quite expressive at six years of age, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, black plums, cigar smoke, gentle spice tones, just a hint of expensive new leather, dark soil elements and a judicious framing of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with a lovely core, excellent soil signature and grip, ripe, firm tannins and a long, complex and gently warm finish. The ungrafted vines here give the wine a different textural polish than in the above wine, with a more delicate palate impression, despite it being equally ripe and powerful. This too is an immensely impressive bottle of Toro! 2030-2080+. **95.**

Rueda

2021 Verdejo “Egeo”- Isaac Fernandez Selection

The 2021 Verdejo “Egeo” is really a lovely example of this vastly underrated varietal. It offers up that grassy aromatic blend that recalls top flight sauvignon blanc, delivering scents of green apple, gooseberry, cut grass, salty soil tones, green olive and a topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is bright, medium-full and complex, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature, good acids and a long, well-balanced and gently grassy finish. This is a fine example of Verdejo and a lovely alternative to Sancerre. 2022-2030. **90.**

2021 Sauvignon Blanc- Mantel Blanco

The 2021 Sauvignon Blanc from Mantel Blanco is a very extroverted and complex example of this lovely varietal. The bouquet simply leaps out of the glass in a mix of gooseberry, fresh lime, loads of fresh-cut grass, citrus blossoms and a lovely base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core and soil signature, zesty acids and a long, vibrant and flashy finish. This is a wine that does not try to hide any of sauvignon blanc’s grassy character, but simply revels in it! Fine, fine juice. 2022-2024. **91.**

2021 Verdejo “Sobre Lías”- Mantel Blanco

Mantel Blanco’s 2021 Verdejo “Sobre Lías” is also a terrific wine, with loads of complexity on both the nose and palate, but not quite the same flashiness of the estate’s sauvignon blanc bottling. The deep and complex bouquet offers up scents of pear, white lilies, salty soil tones, raw almond, green olive and wild fennel. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a good core, fine focus and grip and a long, zesty finish. This is a lovely bottle of Verdejo that has the capacity to gain complexity with some bottle age. 2022-2030. **91+.**

2020 Verdejo “Nosis”- Buil & Giné

The 2020 Nosis from Buil & Giné is a pretty ripe wine for this varietal, coming in at 14.1 percent octane in this vintage. It offers up a simply beautiful, vibrant nose of gooseberry, lime zest, sea salts, spring flowers, white soil tones and a topnote of fresh almond. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and wide open in personality, with a good core of fruit and soil signature, fairly modest acids for Verdejo, good focus and grip and a long, complex and ever so

slightly warm finish that closes with a touch of grassiness. This is a good, solid example, but I like this varietal even better when it has more cut and lift on the backend. 2022-2023. **87.**

2020 Verdejo- Elías Mora (screwcap)

Nothing makes me sadder than to see a serious wine closed under screwcap, but happily, the 2020 Verdejo from Elías Mora is not showing any strong ill effects from its closure right now, though there are some gentle reduction issues already nipping at its heels. The bouquet is bright and complex, with just a touch of reduction's vegetal aromas starting to emerge (though these are fairly well submerged in Verdejo's pretty grassy character), offering up scents of lime, Granny Smith apple, white soil tones, dried flowers, a hint of green olive, gentle grassiness and just a whisper of reduction's overcooked asparagus starting to emerge. On the palate the wine is vibrant, fullish and nicely balanced, with a good core and soil signature, good acids and a long, complex finish that is just hinting at screwcap pinching on the backend. For drinking over the next year, this should be just fine, particularly if decanted for fifteen minutes prior to serving. But, one has to imagine that the reduction issues will get more strident as time goes by. 2022-2024. **89.**

Castilla y León

2021 Verdejo- Sotomonte (screwcap)

Sotomonte's 2021 Verdejo is a very, very good example and at the present time, shows no ill effects on the nose from its choice of closure. The bouquet is bright and beautifully expressive, hopping from the glass in a mix of gooseberry, lime peel, wild fennel, salty soil tones, a touch of green olive and plenty of fresh-cut grass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and complex, but already egregiously pinched by the reduction brought on by the screwcap; with vigorous swirling, it unlocks a fair bit. The wine is long, crisp and well-balanced, and under cork, I am sure it would be terrific. Under screwcap, it is not bad once the reduction has been unlocked as much as it can be, but this is a perfect example of a wine that would be great under an agglomerated cork, but which is partially compromised by its screwcap, with reductive constriction on the palate and a bit of reductive vegetable elements on the finish. 2022-2025. **87.**

Ribera del Duero

2020 Aptus Tinto- Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz

The 2020 Aptus Tinto from Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz is produced from a *cépages* of ninety-five percent Tempranillo and the other five percent a mix of Garnacha. The 2020 vintage comes in at 14.5 percent octane this year and delivers a lovely, complex nose of red and black cherries, dark chocolate, cigar wrapper, a good base of soil and a nice framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with a fine core of fruit, firm, buried tannins, good focus and a long, well-balanced and gently warm finish. This is a good bottle in the making, which I would love to have seen just a touch lower in alcohol, but that is the nature of global warming in Ribera del Duero these days. 2028-2055. **90.**

2020 Arrocal Tinto- Bodegas Arrocal

The regular bottling of Tinto from Bodegas Arrocal is composed entirely from Tempranillo, with the vines ranging from twenty to twenty-five years of age. These vines sit at eight hundred and thirty meters above sea level, so there is a good diurnal temperature swing in the summer. The grapes are hand-harvested, destemmed, fermented with indigenous yeasts and the wine is aged in three year-old French casks for nine months prior to bottling. The 2020

Arrocal comes in at fourteen percent alcohol and delivers a deep and youthful nose of cassis, cigar smoke, pretty spice tones, a good base of soil and a bit of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, young and full-bodied, with a fine core of fruit, very good focus and balance and a long, ripely tannic finish. This will need some cellaring time to blossom, but the constituent components here are excellent. 2027-2050+. **90.**

2020 Antídoto Tinto (Bertrand Sourdais)

Bertrand Sourdais is the fine winemaking hand behind the Domaine de Pallus Chinon bottlings from his family's estate in Cravant-les-Coteaux, but he also produces some superb wines in Spain as well. His Antídoto bottling hails from the Coria region of this region, which sits up river and is cooler than most of the vineyards one finds down towards the city of Valladolid, two hundred kilometers to the west. Bertrand works with vines that are at least fifty years of age and many are ungrafted, as the sandy soils here in Coria keep phylloxera at bay. The 2020 Antídoto shows its cooler microclimate in its lightness of step on the palate and very precise, youthful bouquet. The nose offers up scents of black cherries, plums, cigar wrapper, lovely spice tones, a nice touch of soil and just a whisper of cedar from the used casks in which the wine is raised. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and youthful, with a good core and fine soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and a long, vibrant and promising finish. This is still quite adolescent and needs bottle age to unlock its secondary layers of complexity, but it is going to be a fine bottle once it blossoms. 2027-2060. **91.**

2020 Rios De Tinta (Isaac Fernández Selección)

The 2020 Rios De Tinta comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane this year and delivers a really lovely nose of red plums, cherries, cigar wrapper, refined spice tones, a good base of soil and just a hint of nutty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite ripe in personality, with a good core, modest tannins and a long, complex and fairly warm finish. This is a good, solid wine, but it shows its octane a bit on the backend. 2025-2040. **87.**

2020 Finca La Mata (Isaac Fernández Selección)

Finca La Mata is an old vine cuvée, with the tempranillo used here ranging from sixty to eighty-five years of age and grown at nine hundred meters. It is fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised entirely in used barrels for ten months prior to bottling. The 2020 Finca La Mata delivers a quite refined bouquet of cherries, plums, roses, lovely spice tones, a fine base of soil, cigar smoke and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely red fruity in personality, with a good core, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. Though this wine too comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane, it is cooler on the backend and seems fresher than the Rios De Tinta in this vintage. Good juice. 2025-2040. **89.**

2019 Aptus Tinto- Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz

Like the 2018 vintage of Aptus, the 2019 comes in listed at a full fifteen percent alcohol in this vintage, which is a bit out of my comfort range, but this is from a severe drought year and a bit more concentration is to be expected as a result. The wine has really turned out quite well, given the challenges of the vintage, but it reminds me a bit of a 2010 Bordeaux in its concentration of fruit, sugars and acids from the desiccated fruit. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of baked black cherries, cigar wrapper, a bit of new leather, lovely balsamic tones, chocolate, a good touch of soil and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, powerful and quite tangy from its good acids, with a rock solid core of fruit, a hint of *sur maturité*, firm chewy tannins and very good length and grip on the gently warm finish. This manages its alcohol level

very well indeed for such a vintage, but it is also quite a bit more tannic than the lovely 2020 version, as the concentration of sugars and acids were accompanied by a concentration of tannins as well. The wine will need plenty of bottle age to soften up, but it should emerge nicely eventually and will offer a bold, complex and broad-shouldered version of this fine bottling. I am sure some tasters will love its extroverted style from the drought more than I do (witness how many folks swear the 2010 vintage in Bordeaux is top flight!), but for me, I prefer the more classic lines of the 2020 Aptus to the flashy 2019 bottling. 2031-2055. **87+**.

2019 Arrocal “Crianza”- Bodegas Arrocal

The 2019 Crianza bottling from Bodegas Arrocal is produced entirely from Tempranillo again this year, with these vines thirty years of age in the township of Gumiel de Mercado, which sits above eight hundred meters above sea level. The wine is fermented with native yeasts and aged for one year in used French oak barrels. The 2019 Crianza comes in at 14.5 percent octane and delivers a ripe and complex nose of black cherries, a touch of plum, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil, gentle spice tones and a discreet framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a plush core of fruit, firm, buried tannins and excellent length and grip on the focused and very well-balanced finish. This is going to be an excellent wine in due course. 2029-2065. **91**.

2019 Arrocal “Selección Especial”- Bodegas Arrocal

The Arrocal “Selección Especial” bottling is a single vineyard wine from the Los Astrales parcel, with these tempranillo vines forty-five years of age. It is raised in a fifty-fifty mix of new and older French oak casks for eighteen months prior to bottling. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a refined blend of black plums, black cherries, a bit of raw cocoa, cigar wrapper, an excellent base of soil and well-done spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and full, with a plush core of fruit, fine soil signature and grip, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. Fine, fine juice in the making. 2030-2075. **92+**.

2019 Flor De Pingus- Dominio De Pingus

The 2019 vintage of Flor De Pingus comes in at 14.6 percent octane, as the team here decided to pick a bit later than many of their neighbors. The wine has turned out very nicely aromatically, offering up a youthful blend of baked black cherries and plums, cigar wrapper, coffee bean, a touch of salty minerality and framing of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, tannic and really fairly light on its feet, with a good core, firm tannins and just a bit of backend heat perking up the long finish. This is a young wine that needs time to integrate its oak component, as there are still some uncovered oak tannins on the backend today, but it has the stuffing to do so with cellaring and should evolve into a very good bottle. It is not as powerfully constructed as early vintages of this wine that I have tried, and I very much like the wine better for the change. 2029-2055+. **91**.

2018 Arrocal “Reserva de Familia”- Bodegas Arrocal

The Reserva de Familia is the oldest-vine cuvée from Bodegas Arrocal, with these seventy-plus year-old vines hailing from the vineyard of Guardavinas, which sits at an altitude of eight hundred and sixty meters. The soils here are a thin mix of sandy and clay and the old vines produced very small yields, so that there were only a bit more than forty-four hundred bottles produced in the 2018 vintage. The wine undergoes malo in barrel and is aged in a combination of seventy percent French casks and thirty percent American oak barrels for two years prior to bottling. It is then given another six months of bottle aging in the cellar before release. The 2018 delivers a refined aromatic constellation of plums, black cherries, Cuban cigars, a complex base

of soil tones, just a hint of nutmeg-like spice tones, a touch of dark chocolate and a classy oak framing of both vanilla and spicy wood notes. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with already a nice sense of plushness on the attack, a great mid-palate core, superb focus and grip and a long, ripely tannic and complex finish of lovely balance. This still has a bit of backend wood tannin to absorb (probably from the American oak casks), but it will easily do so with bottle age. I do not know what percentage of the barrels here are new, but this is a wine of such stunning old vine personality that it would not be a crime to age it solely in one, two and three wine barrels in the future! Stylistically, this reminds me a lot of the vintages of Vega Sicilia from the decades of the 1980s, except that it is obviously being released at a much younger age than those vintages of Vega. But, the wine has enormous potential and will be an absolute treasure once it has seen enough time in the cellar. A great, great wine! 2032-2100. **95.**

2018 Garmón- Bodegas Garmón

The flagship bottling from Bodegas Garmón includes plenty of old vines in the mix here, as the vines range from thirty to fully one hundred years of age! The vines sit at nine hundred meters of elevation, are farmed organically and the wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged for twenty months in French oak barrels. The wine comes in at 14.5 percent alcohol and is deep, pure and very classy on the nose, wafting from the glass in a mix of plums, black cherries, raw cocoa, a touch of fresh nutmeg, lovely soil tones, violets and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush at the core, with fine soil signature, ripe, buried tannins, impressive focus and grip and a long, well-balanced and nascently complex finish that closes with just a bit of heat. This is a serious bottle of Ribera del Duero, but it will need a solid decade to start to soften up and drink with generosity. Fine juice. 2032-2080. **93+.**

2016 Carravid Tinto- Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz

The 2016 Carravid Tinto from Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz is composed of a blend of eighty-five percent Tempranillo and fifteen percent Garnacha. The wine is raised in French oak casks, eighty percent of which are renewed each year. The wine is plenty ripe for a 2016, coming in at a full fifteen percent octane, but seems cooler on both the nose and palate and manages its alcohol admirably. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a very nicely new oaky blend of black cherries, plums, chocolate, cigar wrapper, lovely spice tones and a generous, but very classy framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very elegant on the attack, with a plush core of fruit, lovely focus and balance, firm tannins and a long, complex and slightly warm finish. This is a very classy bottle of wine, with a bit of backend heat from its octane, but also plenty of refinement and complexity. For those who do not mind a touch of alcohol on the backend, add three points to me score, as the other attributes here are truly exceptional. 2028-2065. **91.**



Priorat

2020 Camins Del Priorat- Alvaro Palacios

The 2020 Camins Del Priorat is the entry level bottling from Alvaro Palacios. The 2020 is composed from a blend of fifty-five percent garnacha, fifteen percent syrah, twelve percent cabernet sauvignon, ten percent merlot and eight percent cariñena. The wine comes in at 14.5 percent octane in this cooler vintage in Priorat and offers up a bright and complex nose of red and black raspberries, fruitcake, *garrigue*, a fine base of soil tones, peonies and just a whisper of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely delineated, with a good core and soil signature, fairly moderate tannins (for Priorat) and good length and grip on the gently warm finish. I like this wine quite well, but would definitely tuck it away in the cellar for at least four or five years before drinking, as its tannins tend to build a bit with aeration and clearly the wine will improve with some middle-term cellaring. 2027-2055. **91.**

2019 Giné-Giné- Buil & Giné

The Giné-Giné cuvée is the entry level bottling from Buil & Giné and is surprisingly well-priced for this generally rather pricey DO. The wine is composed from a fifty-fifty blend of Garnacha and Carignan. The 2019 version tips the scales at fifteen percent octane and happily, has been bottled under a natural cork, in comparison to the screwcapped 2018. The wine offers up an excellent aromatic constellation of dark berries, a bit of fruitcake, woodsmoke, coffee grounds, spit-roasted game, a fine base of soil tones and a topnote of *garrigue*. On the palate the

wine is deep, full-bodied, chewy and complex, with a good core, firm tannins and fine length and grip on the impressively well-balanced finish. The aromatics and flavors on the 2019 version are a touch deeper-pitched than is the case with the 2018, which makes me wonder if the 2019 might have been subject to drought conditions at some point during the growing season. But, like its 2018 counterpart, this wine is impressively cool in the mouth for its octane level. 2027-2045. **88+.**

2019 Blanco- Joan Giné

The 2019 Blanco from Joan Giné is composed from a blend of Garnaxta, Macabeu, Viognier and Pedro Ximénez, all grown on the beautiful slate soils of Priorat. The wine is barrel-fermented and comes in at 14.5 percent octane in the 2019 vintage. It delivers a deep and complex nose of pear, green olive, tart orange, raw almond, a touch of grassiness, spring flowers and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and new oaky in personality, with a good core of fruit, sound framing acids for the near-term and a bit of oak tannins perking up the long, slightly warm finish. This is one of the best white wines I have ever tasted from Priorat, but it has enough new oak to it that I think one will be well-served to drink it on the younger side, as the wood may get a bit obtrusive with bottle age. 2022-2025. **90.**

2018 Giné-Giné- Buil & Giné (screwcap)

The 2018 Giné-Giné cuvée comes in listed at fifteen percent alcohol and offers up a deep and complex nose of dark berries, smoked meats, bonfire, juniper berry, *garrigue* and a good base of slate soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full, with a good core of fruit, fine soil undertow, a bit of chewy tannin and good length and grip on the impressively fresh finish for its octane level. There is a trace of backend heat here, but for a fifteen percent alcohol wine, this is downright cool. It deserves a natural cork of some sort (maybe an agglomerated cork to keep its price reasonable?), as the wine could do with a couple of years in the cellar to further soften up its tannins, but who knows how it will evolve under the screw. But, this is a very good wine for its price-point. Happily, this is exactly what the winery decided with the 2019 version! 2024-2040+? **88+.**

2018 Tinto- Finca Dofi

The 2018 Finca Dofi is made from a *cépages* of ninety percent garnacha, eight percent cariñena and two percent white grapes co-planted with the red varieties. The wine comes in listed at 14.5 percent octane in this vintage and offers up a deep, complex nose of desiccated black raspberries, sultana raisins, licorice, *garrigue*, a good base of minerality, a touch of botanicals and a whisper of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full, with an excellent core of fruit, good soil undertow, ripe buried tannins and fine length and grip on the youthful finish. I like the balance of this wine on the palate, which carries its octane level very nicely, but the raisiny aspect to the nose is certainly quite pronounced and may not be to everyone's taste. I am sure it will age well. 2028-2065. **92.**

2015 Joan Giné- Buil & Giné

The 2015 Joan Giné is crafted from a *cépages* of forty-five percent Garnacha, forty percent Carignan and fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon and merlot. It is raised in a combination of French and American oak barrels for twelve months prior to bottling, with the wine tipping the scales in this vintage at fifteen percent alcohol. It offers up a deep and complex nose of raspberries, dark berries, woodsmoke, a bit of pepper, spiced meats, a fine base of slate minerality, cloves and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nicely

balanced, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature and grip and a long, complex and ripely tannic finish. This still needs a fair bit of time in the cellar to further soften up, but it carries its alcohol level beautifully and really shows no signs of heat on the backend. Good juice in the making. 2030-2075. **91+**.

2012 Pleret- Buil & Giné

The Pleret bottling from Buil & Giné is composed of a blend of ninety percent Garnaxta and Carignan. The remaining ten percent of the *cépages* is made up of small percentages of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. The Garnaxta and Carignan vines are all one hundred years of age! The wine is aged in French barrels for fourteen months. The 2012 Pleret comes in at a full fifteen percent alcohol in this vintage, with the wine offering a deep and complex nose of red and black raspberries, pretty spice tones, a touch of fruitcake, spit-roasted game, slate minerality and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, complex and showing lovely secondary evolution, with a good core, fine soil undertow, ripe tannins and a long, focused and slightly warm finish. This manages its fifteen percent alcohol level quite admirably, but it is truly a shame it was not a full point lower in octane, as the heat does get in the way a bit (of at least my enjoyment of the wine). 2022-2045. **91**.

Campo de Borja

2021 Garnacha Blanca- Legado del Moncayo

The white garnacha bottling from Legado del Moncayo hails from the same volcanic, poor soils as the red wines from this fine estate. The wine comes in this year at 13.5 percent alcohol and delivers a bright bouquet of peach, melon, citrus blossoms, stony soil tones and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and focused, with a fine core of fruit, good soil signature, sound framing acids and a long, youthfully complex finish. This is a fine example of Garnacha Blanca and a very good value. 2022-2027. **89**.

2020 Garnacha- Legado del Moncayo

I really liked the 2019 version of this wine and the 2020 is a fine follow-up. As readers may recall, this wine hails from vineyards that sit at the foot of an extinct volcano, with the average age of the vines twenty-five years of age. The soils are a combination of volcanic gravel and chalky loam. The 2020 bottling comes in at an even fourteen percent and delivers a fine bouquet of black raspberries, fruitcake, smoked meats, a good base of stony soil. pepper, *garrigue* and a topnote of bonfire. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and moderately tannic, with an excellent core of fruit, tangy acids (from the volcanic soils), fine focus and a long, complex and nicely balanced finish. The 2020 Legado del Moncayo is approachable today if you do not mind a bit of youthful tanning, but will be even better five years down the road. Yet again, this is a terrific value! 2022-2040. **90**.

2020 Garnacha “Montaña” Vendimia Seleccionada- Legado del Moncayo

The 2020 vintage of “Montaña” Vendimia Seleccionada bottling from Legado del Moncayo hails from vineyards growing up the side of the volcano, with the vines between forty to sixty years of age. The Montaña is raised in used French casks for eight months prior to bottling and the 2020 version is a touch riper than the regular bottling, coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol this year. The wine is deeper on the nose from the older vines, offering up scents of dark berries, spit-roasted venison, dark soil tones, coffee bean, a hint of the autumnal shadings to come with bottle age, woodsmoke and *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe, full-bodied

and chewy, with an excellent core of fruit, fine soil inflection, firm tannins and a long, complex and promising finish. There is just a whisper of backend heat here, but overall the wine is nicely balanced and will be a fine drink once it softens up a bit. Unlike the regular bottling from Legado del Moncayo, this old vine cuvée will demand a bit of time in the cellar before it drinks with generosity. 2027-2050+. **90+**.

La Mancha

2021 Pago de La Jaraba Blanco (Sauvignon Blanc)

The 2021 Pago de La Jaraba Blanco is made from Sauvignon Blanc, hailing from a stony vineyard planted at seven hundred meters, with a subsoil of limestone. The wine is fermented and raised in stainless steel and the 2021 vintage comes in at a svelte twelve percent octane. The wine is very pleasantly grassy on the nose, wafting from the glass in a bright blend of gooseberry, lime peel, chalky soil tones and plenty of cut grass. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish and nicely balanced, with a good base of soil, sound acids and a long, grassy finish. This is not bad at all and a good value, but one has to be enamored of the grassy side of this grape. 2022-2025. **87**.

2020 Viña Jaraba “Cosecha”- Pago de La Jaraba

The 2209 Viña Jaraba “Cosecha” from Pago de La Jaraba is composed from its customary *cépages* of eighty percent tempranillo and ten percent each of cabernet sauvignon and merlot. The wine this year comes in at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a complex and classy nose of red and black raspberries, smoked meats, cloves, complex soil tones, cigar smoke, a touch of cedar and a lovely array of gentle, sweet botanicals (that recall the Canary Islands) in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of fruit, modest tannins and a long, well-balanced and gently raisined finish that closes with a touch of backend bitterness (again recalling the reds from Gran Canaria). The combination of a touch of raisin on the backend and the lovely botanicals may not be to everyone’s taste, but I really like this wine, which is very versatile at the table. 2022-2030+. **89**.

2019 !EA! Cencibel- Manuel Manzaneque (La Mancha)

Cencibel is the local name for Tempranillo here in La Mancha, with these vines ranging from forty of fully seventy years of age. The vineyard sits at eight hundred meters on a base of limestone and clay. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged six to eight months in used French and American oak casks. The 2019 !EA! offers up a really pretty nose of red and black cherries, cigar wrapper, chalky soil tones, a nice touch of spice and a mix of cedary and coconutty American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and solid at the core, with good soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, gently warm finish. This comes in listed at fourteen percent octane, but there is a hint of raisiny fruit tones on the palate here that suggests that drought may have been a bit of an issue in 2019. But, all in all, a good bottle. 2025-2045. **88**.

2019 Viña Jaraba “Selección Especial”- Pago de La Jaraba

The 2019 Viña Jaraba “Selección Especial” is composed from seventy percent tempranillo, twenty percent cabernet sauvignon and ten percent merlot. As I have mentioned in the past, half of this cuvée goes through malolactic fermentation in five thousand liter French oak *foudres*, with the other half undergoing malo in tank. The wine is barrel-aged for twelve months in one wine vessels, of which fifty percent are American oak and fifty percent French oak. The 2019 version is excellent, wafting from the glass in a precise and complex nose of black

raspberries, smoked meats, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a touch of cola and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core and soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, classy finish that again closes with touch of raisin. 2026-2045. **90.**

2019 Pago de La Jaraba Tinto- Pago de La Jaraba

The 2019 Pago de La Jaraba Tinto bottling is composed from a blend this year of seventy percent tempranillo, twenty percent cabernet sauvignon and ten percent merlot. The wine is aged for one year in new French oak *barricas*. The vintage comes in at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a lovely, new oaky blend of red and black raspberries, complex spice tones, a touch of cola, dark soil tones, cigar smoke and a lovely framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and nicely sappy at the core, with fine focus and balance, ripe, buried tannins and a long, complex finish. In past vintages, I have found this wine a touch too “modern” for my palate, but the 2019 is superbly-crafted and a great, great value! 2026-2050. **92.**

2018 Cencibel “Mil Cepas”- Manuel Manzaneque (Tierra de Castilla)

The Mil Cepas bottling of Tempranillo from Manuel Manzaneque is a single vineyard cuvée made from forty year-old vines. It is aged in “one wine” French oak barrels for fourteen months prior to bottling. The bouquet is bright and complex, jumping from the glass in a refined blend of raspberries, cherries, a bit of smoked meats, a fine base of soil, cloves, cigar wrapper and spicy oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and already starting to get velvety on the attack, with a good core, impressive soil signature and grip, ripe, fairly firm tannins and a long, complex and nicely balanced finish. Fine juice. 2026-2055. **91.**

Valencia

2018 Bobal- Paloma Mínguez

The 2018 Bobal from Paloma Mínguez is a really excellent example of this underrated varietal. The wine comes in at an even fourteen percent this year and delivers a bright, impressively complex and sappy bouquet of black cherries, plums, dark chocolate, bonfire, cola, a touch of botanicals, licorice and a beautiful base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely plush on the attack, with a good core, well-measured tannins, fine focus and grip and a long, complex and light on its feet finish. The tannins here are quite buried in fruit, so though they firm up the finish a bit right now, the wine is eminently drinkable today with red meats. Tucking it away in the cellar for three to five years will also certainly be rewarded. Fine juice. 2022-2040. **91+.**

2017 Bobal “Mil Cepas”- Manuel Manzaneque

Manuel Manzaneque’s old vines of Bobal are planted in the vineyard of La Palomera, with these vines now fully sixty years of age. The wine is fermented in stainless steel and raised for fourteen months in one wine French barrels prior to bottling. The 2017 offers up a ripe and sappy nose of black cherries, sweet dark berries, a bit of roasted game, coffee grounds, bonfire and a fine base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and spicy, with a plush core of fruit, fine focus and balance and a long, complex finish that shows a bit of backend chewy tannin. This wine comes in at 14.5 percent, but carries its alcohol very nicely. Even though these casks are not new, there is still a bit of oak tannin poking out on the backend, which will either want a bit of bottle age to be absorbed, or serve the wine now with fattier red meats that will help smooth those tannins. There is plenty of stuffing here to eventually soak up the wood completely. A very good example of Bobal. 2022-2050. **91+.**



Calatayud

2020 Acentor Garnacha- Isaac Fernandez Selections

I always like the Acentor bottling of Garnacha, which is made from high elevation, old bush vines, with the wine fermented in stainless steel and aged for four months in oak casks. The 2020 version comes in at 14.5 percent octane and delivers a lovely nose of raspberries, orange peel, *garrigue*, stony soil tones, bonfire, pepper and a lovely array of baking spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, ripe and full-bodied, with a good core of red fruit, fine transparency and grip, ripe, chewy tannins and good length and grip on the complex finish. This is good juice and a fine value (as always). 2025-2045. **89.**

2020 Las Covitalas Tinto- Colás Viticultores

The 2020 Tinto “Las Covitalas” is made entirely from Garnacha, grown in organically-certified (and now biodynamically) farmed vineyards planted on primarily stony, clay and limestone soils. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts with thirty percent whole clusters, with half the wine undergoing malo in older French casks and then aged for six months in three and four year –old barrels. It is bottled without fining or filtration and the 2020 version comes in at 14.5 percent octane. It offers up a deep and ripe nose of black raspberries, fruitcake, pepper, roasted game and *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with firm tannins and good focus and grip on the long and gently warm finish. This has a ton of personality for its very reasonable price point (\$18 in the US), but will need a bit of bottle age to soften up its tannins before drinking. 2027-2050. **89.**

2018 Roque Colás Tinto- Colás Viticultores

The 2018 Roque Colás bottling from Colás Viticultores is composed from a *cépages* of fifty percent Garnacha and twenty-five percent each of Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon. These vines range from twenty to fully eighty years of age, with the vines having been farmed organically now for more than two decades. The soils are the same combination of stony, clay and limestone, with some sandy sections. All three varieties undergo malo in older casks and then are aged sixteen months before blending. The wine is again fairly ripe in 2018, coming in at 14.5 percent and delivering a deep and complex nose of black cherries, cassis, *garrigue*, cigar smoke, meaty tones, a fine base of soil and just a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with plenty of mid-palate stuffing, firm, chewy tannins, fine balance and grip and a long, focused and promising finish. This is Colás Viticultores' flagship bottling and it is built for the cellar, but it will be a fine drink once it has shed some of its tannins with bottle age. 2028-2060. **90+**.

Viños de Madrid and Sierra de Gredos Mountains

2020 Camino De Navaherreros- Bernabeleva (Viños de Madrid)

The Camino De Navaherreros bottling is the entry level cuvée from Bernabeleva, which is made entirely from Garnacha, with the fruit a combination of estate-grown and purchased grapes. The 2020 comes in at a ripe 14.5 percent octane and offers up a bright and complex bouquet of raspberries, smoked meats, coffee, stony soil tones and *garrigue*. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and juicy, with a good core and fine soil undertow, a bit of ripe tannin and a long, complex and very discreetly warm finish. This is a tasty bottle of Garnacha and a good value. I would be inclined, even though it is made to drink early, to tuck it away for two or three years in the cellar, as there is a bit of backend tannin here that could be softened up. 2024-2040. **89**.

2019 Navaherreros Garnacha- Bernabeleva (Viños de Madrid)

As I have mentioned before, the Garnacha vines here are more than eighty-five years of age, as this vineyard was purchased back in 1923 by Dr. Vincente Alvarez-Villamil. There was a long period where no wine was produced by his family from this parcel at the base of the Sierra de Gredos Mountains, but in 2006, two of his grandchildren restarted the Bernabeleva winery. The 2019 Navaherreros Garnacha is a fine follow-up to the excellent 2018 version. Coming in again at 14.5 percent alcohol. The wine delivers a beautifully expressive aromatic constellation of raspberries, cherries, orange peel, smoked meats, *garrigue*, lavender and a dusting of upper register spiciness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and precise, with excellent mineral drive, a good core of red fruit, ripe tannins and a long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This carries its octane level significantly better than the 2020 Camino de Navaherreros bottling. Fine, fine juice and one of my favorite bottlings from the Sierra de Gredos Mountains these days. 2029-2055+. **92+**.

Utiel-Requena

2020 Bovale- Isaac Fernández Selección

I always like this bottling of Bobal from Isaac Fernández and the 2020 version is no exception, but the wine is a bit of an outlier stylistically from recent releases. The wine seems a bit riper than customary in this vintage, coming in at a stated 14.5 percent octane and offering up a complex nose of raspberries, a touch of sultana raisin, dark soil tones, lovely spice tones, a touch of violet, coffee grounds and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex

and a bit raisiny in personality this year, with good acids, buried tannins and a long, complex and gently warm finish. This has good balance for its ripeness level, but I would guess that hydric stress came into play in the vines this year for this wine, causing a bit of raisining of the bunches, concentrating acids, sugars and tannins, so that some of the customary charm of this bottling is not to be found here. It is still well-made, but not in my sweet spot stylistically in this vintage. 2022-2035. **87.**

Jumilla

2020 Monastrell “Altos de la Hoya” Ungrafted Old Vines- Bodegas Olivares

The 2020 Monastrell “Altos de la Hoya” from Bodegas Olivares actually includes ten percent Garnacha in the blend. The wine is aged in French oak, in a combination of *barricas* and *foudres*, with only a very small percentage of the barrels new in any given vintage. The 2020 version comes in at 14.5 percent octane and delivers a deep and complex nose of cassis, black raspberries, bonfire, a touch of licorice, a good base of soil, a bit of cedar and a lovely array of spices in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and a long, complex finish that closes with just a touch of raisiny fruit tones. A very good Jumilla and a fine value. 2022-2040. **90.**

2020 Monastrell “5 Meses Barrica”- Porto Regia

The 2020 vintage bottling of 5 Meses Barrica from Porto Regia is a really lovely wine. It delivers fine aromatic complexity in its blend of dark berries, smoked meats, lovely spice tones, a fine base of soil tones, woodsmoke, celery seed and just a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core of fruit, moderate tannins, lovely balance and grip and a long, tasty finish. This comes in at the same 14.5 percent octane as the Old Vines bottling did in 2019 (which I covered a year ago), but it seems fresher and better balanced to me by quite some measure. This is very good wine. 2022-2040. **90.**

2019 Monastrell “12 Meses Barrica”- Porto Regia

Porto Regia’s 2019 bottling of 12 Meses Barrica is another excellent bottle of Monastrell, which is one of the most under-appreciated red varieties in Spain as far as I am concerned. This wine too comes in at 14.5 percent alcohol, but comes off nicely precise on the nose, delivering scents of red and black cherries, spiced meats, a hint of *garrigue*, a lovely base of soil tones, gently savory notes, bonfire and a nice foundation of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, modest tannins and a long, balanced and classy finish. This seems a touch lower in acidity than the 2020 “5 Meses Barrica” bottling, which takes away the nice backend lift of the former wine. But, this still has admirable depth and complexity. 2022-2040. **89.**

2017 Dulce de Monastrell “Ungrafted Old Vines”- Bodegas Olivares (500 ml.)

The Dulce de Monastrell from Bodegas Olivares is made from very late-harvested grapes that dehydrate on the vine and concentrate sugars before they are picked. The wine is fermented in stainless steel and stops at sixteen percent octane, with still plenty of residual sweetness left to produce this Port-like sweet wine. The bouquet of the 2017 is outstanding, jumping from the glass in a mix of black cherries, black raspberries, licorice, cloves, sweet botanicals, dark soil and a load of upper register spice tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a great core, beautiful focus and balance, ripe tannins and a long, classy finish. This is flat out delicious! 2022-2065. **93.**



Portugal

2020 Lisboa Tinto Castelão- Hugo Mendes (Lisboa)

The 2020 Castelão from Hugo Mendes is a beautifully svelte red wine, coming in at 12.5 percent octane. It offers up a beautifully precise and complex nose of cassis, espresso, sweet botanicals, cola notes, a complex base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and intensely flavored, with a good core of black fruit, superb mineral drive and grip, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and quite complex finish. This is delicious wine that is already fairly approachable and tasty, but will be even better with a few years in the cellar, which, of course, I would be inclined to give it! 2025-2045+. **91+**.

2020 Maria Gomes- Luis Pato (Beira Atlântico)

The 2020 Maria Gomes bottling from Luis Pato is composed almost entirely from this varietal, with these thirty-five year-old vines planted in his limestone-based vineyard of Formal, but with a touch of Sercialinho blended in (a grape that is a cross of Sercial and Alvarinho and which retains beautiful acidity, even in the face of global warming). The wine is fermented and raised in stainless steel. The 2020 Maria Gomes comes in at 12.5 percent octane and delivers a very bright bouquet of fresh lime, green peach, chalky soil tones, white flowers and a touch of sea salt. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright, complex and impressively succulent in the core, with sound framing acids, good focus and grip and a long, well-balanced finish. A very stylish middleweight and an excellent value. 2022-2030. **89**.

2020 Vinho Branco- Qunita do Ribeirinho (Bairrada)

The Quinta Do Ribeirinho was the family winery of Luis Pato, which fell into disuse after his grandfather's retirement and which Luis set out to reclaim several years ago. The vineyards here are further west from his own vines in Bairrada, where the clay and chalk soils start to give way to far more sand in the composition as one approaches the Atlantic Ocean. His Vinho Branco is made entirely from the Sercialinho grape (a cross of Sercial and Albarinho), which were originally planted by Luis' grandfather. The 2020 version is a cool 12.5 percent octane and delivers a refined bouquet of pear, beeswax, a hint of green olive, lovely minerality, citrus peel and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil signature and cut, zesty acids and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. I love the finish on this wine, which has lift, grip and superb intensity. Great juice and a completely unique flavor and aromatic profile from this rare grape variety. 2022-2040+. **93.**

2019 Lisboa Branco- Hugo Mendes (Lisboa)

Hugo Mendes started his second career as a winemaker in 2004, first working for others in cellars across Portugal, before finally striking out on his own in the 2016 vintage. His vines are located just north of Lisbon, with his white wine made from a *cépages* of forty-five percent each of Arinto and Fernão Pires and ten percent Vital. The grapes are co-fermented with indigenous yeasts in stainless steel and a third of the cuvée is then aged in used oak, while the rest finishes up its *elevage* in tank. The 2019 version is twelve percent octane and offers up of tart pear, lime peel, menthol, chalky soil tones and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, focused and complex, with fine mineral drive and grip, lovely balance and a long finish that closes with a note of backend citrus peel. Good juice. 2022-2035. **91.**

2019 Casteloão- Baías e Enseadas (Lisboa)

Daniel Afonso's Baías e Enseadas winery is located only a couple of kilometers outside of the Colares *appellation*, but here the soils are chalky and clay, instead of the sandier soils of Colares. His 2019 Casteloão was fermented entirely whole cluster in stainless steel tanks, prior to aging for six months in older French oak *barriques*. The wine comes in at 12.5 percent in this vintage and delivers a youthful and complex nose of dark berries, bitter cherry, bonfire, chicory, a fine base of soil tones and a topnote of botanicals that remind me many reds from the Canary Islands. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and tangy, with a good core of fruit, excellent soil signature, suave tannins and a long, vibrant and nascently complex finish. This is already quite a tasty drink, but clearly it will develop more complexity with bottle age. Fine, fine juice! 2022-2050+. **92.**

2019 Parcela Cândido- Luis Pato (Bairrada)

This wine takes its name from a Doctor Cândido, who was the previous owner of the Formal Vineyard prior to the Pato family purchasing it. The wine is made entirely from the Cercial grape, with the wine fermented and aged for six months in thousand liter Portuguese chestnut casks. The 2020 tips the scales at a svelte 12.5 percent alcohol and offers up a refined aromatic constellation of tart orange, lemon, beeswax, dried flowers, chalky soil tones, a whisper of chestnut and a touch of limepeel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and zesty, with a lovey core of fruit, excellent soil signature and grip and a long, complex and flawlessly balanced finish. This is outstanding juice. 2022-2040+. **93.**

2018 Fernão Pires Branco “Reserva”- Baías e Enseadas (Lisboa)

This bottling from Daniel Afonso is made entirely from the Fernão Pires grape, with the wine fermented in stainless steel and aged six months in used Burgundy barrels. The 2018 version offers up a vibrant and beautifully complex nose of fresh pineapple, blood orange, chalky soil tones, balsam bough, fern, paraffin and a hint of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with fine focus and grip, a lovely core of fruit, sound acids and a long, balanced and soil-driven finish that closes with a touch of citrus peel bitterness on the backend. This is unique and absolutely outstanding wine! 2022-2030+. **92.**

2018 Quartzo Vinho Branco- Cabeças do Reguengo (Alentejo)

Cabeças do Reguengo is João Alfonso's project in the northern hinterlands of the Alentejo, in a sub-region called Portalegre. Portalegre sits at an elevation above five hundred meters, with small plots of very old vines the norm here (and which is the polar opposite of most of Alentejo's large and fairly recently-planted estates). Many of the old vines here predate phylloxera. His Quarto Vinho Branco is made from a very old field blend that includes Bical, Fernão Pires, Arinto and several other grapes, with the vines in excess of one hundred years of age! The wine was fermented in a single, thousand liter *foudre* and aged in three two hundred and twenty five liter barrels for nine months prior to bottling without fining or filtration. It offers up a deep and complex bouquet of tart orange, paraffin, dried flowers, wild fennel, a complex base of soil tones and a topnote of lime peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core, excellent mineral drive and grip, sound acids and fine focus and balance on the long finish. This is a lovely wine, with a bone dry personality and a closing note of gentle bitterness that is very attractive and works beautifully with food. Completely unique in personality and quite compelling. 2022-2035. **92.**

2017 Verdelho Reserva- Barbeito (Madeira)

This is the first table wine that I have had the pleasure to taste from Barbeito and it is lovely. The blend includes nine percent Sercial as well, with the wine having been aged for one year in used French and Hungarian oak casks prior to bottling. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a refined blend of lime, white peach, very salty soil minerality, a hint of raw almond, dried flowers and a delicate touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, young and full-bodied, with fine focus and grip, a lovely core of fruit, fine framing acids and a long, youthful and promising finish. This has lower acidity than I anticipated, given Madeira's volcanic soils, but it has lovely balance and seems destined to age long and gracefully. Fine juice that could do with a few years in the cellar to further blossom. 2024-2045. **90.**

2017 Seiva- Cabeças do Reguengo (Alentejo)

João Alfonso's Portalegre project in the tiny highlands section of the Alentejo has unearthed some great old vines with which work, including this old field blend of pre-phylloxera, centenarian vines from which he crafts his Seiva bottling. The 2017 vintage is a beautiful young wine, offering up a black fruit nose of sweet dark berries, black cherries, hung game, dark soil tones, dried eucalyptus, brown spices and a bit of charred wood like a campfire after it has been extinguished. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with an excellent core, ripe tannins and a long, well-balanced and very promising finish. This is an outstanding wine in the making, but it will need at least a few more years in the cellar before it really starts to drink with generosity. 2027-2060. **93.**

2017 Vinha Pan- Luis Pato (Bairrada)

Vinha Pan is the single vineyard bottling from Luis Pato's Panasqueira vineyard, which sits on a south-facing slope just to the north of Bairrada's town of Ois de Barrio. Much of this vineyard was replanted in 1980, but it still contains many much older vines as well. The 2017 version is composed entirely from Baga, with the wine aged for fully two years in older French casks prior to bottling. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a complex blend of bitter cherry, pomegranate, menthol, cigar wrapper, a beautiful base of chalky soil tones and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and tangy, with a lovely core of fruit, excellent mineral drive and grip, ripe tannins and a long, complex and impeccably balanced finish. This is a very, very elegant rendition of Baga, with a structural bounce and backend energy that reminds me a bit of old school Ausone! Excellent juice. 2022-2060. **93+**.

2016 Malvasia de Colares "Reserva"- Baías e Enseadas (Lisboa)

Daniel Afonso also makes a fine example of Malvasia de Colares from his vineyard parcels only a handful of kilometers inland from the Atlantic Ocean. This wine is fermented and aged the same as his Fernão Pires, with fermentation in stainless steel followed by six months aging in older French *barriques*. The 2016 Malvasia offers up a beautifully floral nose of pear, lemon, acacia blossoms, honeysuckle, fresh rosemary, chalky soil tones, a hint of green olive and a gentle whisper of vanillin oak from the older casks. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with sound framing acids, excellent soil signature and depth at the core, excellent balance and a long, complex finish. There is not a ton of acidity here, but the wine is so beautifully balanced that I would not be surprised to see it cruise along for longer than my projected window of drinkability. Fine juice. 2022-2027+. **91**.

2016 Vinha Pan- Luis Pato (Bairrada)

The 2016 Vinha Pan is from one of the riper vintages in recent times for Luis, so the wine comes in at an uncharacteristic 13.5 percent octane. It delivers a refined bouquet of bitter cherry, bonfire, lovely botanicals, a complex base of soil tones and a nice touch of new leather in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and soil-driven in personality, with an excellent core of fruit, modest tannins and a long, tangy and beautifully focused finish. This is a lovely wine that drinking well at six years of age, but clearly has more complexity to unfurl if given more bottle age. It is very good juice, but I like the 2017 version even better! 2022-2050+. **91+**.

2000 Quinta do Moinho- Luis Pato (Bairrada)

Luis Pato replanted his Quinta do Moinho vineyard in 1989, so these are some of the youngest Baga vines that he works with in Bairrada. The vineyard is surrounded by tons of eucalyptus trees, like Martha's Vineyard in Napa Valley, and one does get a bit of their influence in the wines from this vineyard. His 2000 bottling is a current release and just starting to drink well, offering up a deep, black fruity and complex bouquet of dark berries, black cherries, dried eucalyptus, cigar smoke, gentle savory tones and a super base of dark soil elements. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and shows off excellent mid-palate depth, with impressive focus and grip, still a fair bit of mellowing backend tannin and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. Fine juice. 2022-2060. **93+**.

2000 Vinhas Velhas Tinta- Luis Pato (Bairrada)

The 2000 Vinhas Velhas Tinta from Luis Pato is another excellent wine, but even though these vines are all in excess of sixty years of age, I miss the singular soil signature here that is found in the 2000 Quinta do Moinho bottling, despite that wine having been produced from vines that were only eleven years of age at the time. The bouquet here is excellent, offering up scents of dark berries, grilled meats, a bit of pepper, bonfire, a touch of botanicals and a good base of soil tones that somehow seem slightly anonymous in comparison to Luis' single vineyard wines. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with moderate, chewy tannins and fine length and grip on the balanced and complete finish. This is more "old-fashioned" in personality from the blend of different parcels, but also a fine, fine bottle of Baga entering into its plateau of maturity. 2022-2060. **93.**

THE STUNNING 1998 VINTAGE ON BORDEAUX'S RIGHT BANK



The beautiful entrance of Château Figeac in St. Émilion- in 1998 one of the region's bastions of tradition.

The 1998 vintage on the Right Bank in Bordeaux is one of the great, classic vintages of the last fifty years in the region. In fact, this is the finest vintage in Pomerol and Saint Émilion between 1989 and 2005 (though I do also have a soft spot for the few 2001s I have tasted from these communes), and may well be superior to either of those two vintages! However, it was nowhere near as good on the Left Bank, as late season torrential rains arrived in the Médoc before the cabernet sauvignon was ripe and could be harvested and it rained heavily from September 26th through October 1st and dramatically compromised the potential quality on the Left Bank. The wines from both the Right and Left Banks were characterized by a high level of tannins, but this large crop was very different on each side of the Gironde in terms of how much ripe fruit was available to buffer the considerable tannins found in the wines. On the Right Bank, the beautiful first three weeks of September, following some salving rains that unlocked drought conditions from a blistering August, allowed the merlot here to ripen up beautifully and ended up producing wines of outstanding depth, fleshy, ripe and pure fruit tones, fine soil signature and a firm chassis of buried tannin to carry the wines far into the future. On the Left Bank, the delayed ripening in the drought and heat spikes of August found the cabernet sauvignon not yet fully ripe

going into the last week of September, and the heavy rains that closed out the month put the damper on hopes for an equally great vintage in the Médoc. Proprietors on the Left Bank simply had to pick up the pieces when the rains ended at the start of October and bring in the grapes still loaded with underripe tannins, but with the density of fruit washed away by the rains.

The growing season itself left a lot to be desired in its early stages in 1998, as both April and May of this year were unseasonably cool in temperature and rainy, so early progress in the vine was slow and the vintage started to fall behind modern day scheduling right from the outset. This was a disappointment for the *Bordelais*, who had been buoyed by a very warm and precocious March which had seen the sap start to rise on the early side. Happily, June's weather improved a bit over the previous two months and flowering was at least able to take place under sound conditions, with temperatures fluctuating a bit but with the rain staying away during the *floraison* and the crop was able to set with promise. However, as things were already lagging a bit behind, good weather was going to be needed throughout the rest of the growing season to ripen up this potentially generous crop and bring in a high quality harvest. The month of July remained unseasonably cool and stormy, so it was not the solution the *Bordelais* were looking for and things were looking a bit dour for the potential of the 1998 vintage by midsummer. However, August did finally provide sun and warmth (far more of the latter as temperatures soared), but the very high temperatures of August were accompanied by severe drought conditions, so ripening was now being affected adversely by heat stress, with some sunburn to the still green bunches and plenty of falling leaves on the vines. The August of 1998 was often downright scorching and temperatures topped out over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit several times during this month, which was hardly an ideal situation for the vines, which benefited immensely from the return of the sunshine, but were not all that happy in the torrid temperatures and drought conditions of August. To further complicate things, there was also a hail storm in the prime vineyards on the plateau of Pomerol in August, which sent vineyard teams scurrying out into the vines in its aftermath to cut away any damaged bunches and led to an unanticipated "green harvest" for several top properties in the commune.

September was the make or break month for the Bordeaux vintage of 1998, and it ended up making the splendid quality of the wines on the Right Bank, but did not quite get over the finish line on the Left Bank. The first three weeks of the month were sunny, warm and provided the ideal Indian Summer everyone was hoping for to finish off perfect ripening of the grapes in Pomerol and Saint Émilion, allowing for beautiful bunches to be brought in under ideal weather conditions. Picking generally took place on the Right Bank between September 17th and 25th, just ahead of the rains. However, over the Left Bank, the cabernet sauvignon was not yet fully ripe, as the lagging nature of the cold, wet conditions of April, May and the cooler temperatures of July still found the grapes underripe and in need of further good, sunny weather into early October to get the grapes to full maturity. Sadly, it was not to be. Heavy rains arrived in Bordeaux on September 26th and stayed fully five days, dumping a boatload of precipitation on the still not fully ripe cabernet sauvignon in the Médoc and ending the potential for this bank of the Gironde to match the potential realized by the top estates on the Right Bank, who already had their bunches safely in, crushed and starting their fermentations when the deluge arrived in Bordeaux on the 26th. Proprietors on the Left Bank tried to make the best of a bad situation, starting picking once the rains stopped on October 2nd and managed to bring in the crop by the

9th of the month, racing against rot pressures and willing to live with bunches that had not quite reached ideal maturity before the rains came.

While the 1998 vintage has turned out magnificently on the Right Bank, it is not a year of plush, precocious and immediately approachable wines, as the considerable tannins that built up in the skins of the grapes in the blistering heat of August have given the 1998s in Pomerol and Saint Émilion plenty of structural conviction that has demanded patience from those lucky enough to have put wines away in their cellars. So, even though the wines are now nearly a quarter century old, the vast, vast majority of the successful wines on the Right Bank remain still fairly chewy and adolescent, with their greatest drinking days still somewhat out in the future. But, despite their still considerable tannic clout, there is little doubt that the 1998 vintage is one of legendary proportions on the Right Bank and they will be spoken about with great admiration for generations to come. While the cabernet franc grapes ripened up nicely in most locations on the Right Bank in 1998, it is really the exceptional quality of the merlot crop that caused all of the praise in the very early days after the picking, as several *vignerons* expressed their opinion that this variety had achieved absolutely perfect ripeness during the Indian Summer of September and the fame of the vintage would rest on just how successful the merlot crop was in 1998. In fact, in the aftermath of the harvest, Jean-Claude Berrouet, long-time Cellar Master at Château Pétrus commented that he had never, ever seen more perfect merlot grapes than those that came into the cuverie at Pétrus in 1998! Keep in mind that Monsieur Berrouet's first vintage at Pétrus was 1964, so he hit the ground running here and he has seen plenty of great vintages prior to the arrival of the bunches from 1998!

For my personal career, the 1998 vintage on the Right Bank was one of the big tasting holes in my experience prior to this past month, for when these wines were first released, I was working for a rare wine broker based in Switzerland, whose specialty was the wines of Burgundy and Piemonte, so though I was absolutely awash in great wines at the time, we were not selling young Bordeaux at all and I largely missed tasting this vintage in its early days. As the years have gone by, I have tasted quite a few of the 1998s from Pomerol and Saint Émilion, but always as fortune allowed, on a wine by wine basis, and I had never previously had the opportunity to taste a large number of wines from the vintage in a single tasting. For that reason, I was extremely excited when David Hamburger of Acker-Merrall's Wine Workshop here in New York asked if I would be available to speak at a tasting of the 1998 Right Bank wines at the end of April of this year. David had assembled a truly exceptional lineup of Pomerol and Saint Émilion for the tasting, with virtually all of the very top wines represented (other than Château Le Pin) and it promised to be a magical evening. The wines turned out to be everything that I expected, as my fondness for this vintage had grown over the previous years with each subsequent example of the vintage that I tasted and it has been crystal clear to me for quite some time that the wines of the Right Bank in 1998 are one of the groups of legendary Bordeaux that have been crafted over the course of my lifetime.

It is interesting to note that though, the 1998 Right Bank wines are now widely recognized for their greatness, they were not greeted with all that much excitement by the wine trade when they were first released at the start of the new millennium. There were several factors involved in the market at this time that had dampened relative enthusiasm for the best of 1998 when the wines were first released. First and foremost, Bordeaux often has difficulty with market

perceptions when the quality is uneven on the Left and Right Banks of the Gironde, as is so evidently the case in 1998. There are several superb vintages of the past where the quality on the Right Bank was significantly superior to the Left Bank, with years such as 1964, 1971, 1975 and 1981 immediately coming to mind, and all of those years, to a greater or lesser degree, remain somewhat underrated because the big names of the Médoc did not realize anywhere near the same level of quality in those vintages as did the top estates in Pomerol and Saint Émilion. Another key factor in the market's very lukewarm reception for the 1998 Right Bank wines when they were first released had to do with the pricing strategies of the *Bordelais* during the middle and latter half of the decade of the 1990s. The proprietors and *négociants* of Bordeaux had just run through the most successful single decade in the long and illustrious history of wine production on the Gironde with the close of the decade of the 1980s, as there had been an unprecedented number of outstanding vintages during that ten year span and world-wide thirst for the wines of Bordeaux was at its historical apogee as the fine 1990 vintage made its way through the pipeline. However, fortune was about to turn its other cheek to the *Bordelais*.

It probably makes sense to review a bit the central place that the wines of Bordeaux found themselves in at the close of the 1980s in the global wine market, as they had never been as important nor as coveted previously as they were at this moment (and are nowhere near as central to the market today). Unlike regions such as Burgundy, where general scarcity of the best wines had always made them relatively expensive in the market, due to their truly small production figures for so many of the top bottlings, and they were very much wines primarily for specialists through much of the decade of the 1980s, while Bordeaux was at its zenith of popularity in the marketplace. This was beginning to shift at the outset of the 1990s, as the Burgundians had also seen a spate of high quality vintages during the bountiful 1980s, but their place in the international wine market was dwarfed by that of Bordeaux at the time. The reason for this was quite simple, as Bordeaux had made its exalted reputation for being the region of very high quality wines that were also available in excellent quantity, so that throughout the decade of the 1980s, and for many centuries previously, Bordeaux was the region that provided the finest combination of quality, quantity and value in the market! This is a concept that younger wine drinkers today can hardly imagine even existed, given how ingrained the perception is today that Bordeaux wines are very expensive and seldom (if ever) offer up "value" in the market. But, this was most emphatically not the case as the decade of the 1990s dawned, for many very savvy wine collectors had loaded up their cellars with the vintages of the 1980s in Bordeaux, given what relative bargains the wines represented during this unprecedented string of top flight vintages.

At the start of the 1980s, the *Bordelais* probably had underpriced their wines a bit, particularly when offering the wines on futures, as they were coming off an extremely difficult ten year span of vintages in the decade of the 1970s and had seen their market absolutely collapse with the high pricing of the utterly mediocre 1973 and 1974 vintages. It was a catastrophe for many of the most important merchants and châteaux owners at the time, as both vintages failed to sell with any meaningful success, having been very much overpriced for rather poor quality wines and the backlash from customers brought many a mighty merchant house to its knees. Even a rather good 1975 vintage (which again, was brilliant on the Right Bank, though less so on the Left) could not really rectify the dire economic circumstances of so many in the Bordeaux trade in the second half of the 1970s. Many long-standing business closed as a result

of the crisis, or were sold to different owners, and many important châteaux changed hands in the nadir of the region's more recent history. However, by the outset of the 1980s, the Bordeaux market had again stabilized reasonably well and the spate of great vintages that were soon to unfold across the region would solve many of the systemic problems that had been exposed by the crash of the Bordeaux market in the second half of the 1970s.

From the *Bordelais*' perspective, the decade of the 1980s held only one major drawback, and this was that as the market prices for these top vintages marched inevitably upwards after the wines were released and continued strong demand pushed up prices for the most sought after wines, the *Bordelais* were not sharing in the vast majority of this increase in value, as for several of the top vintages, they had sold most of their stocks early on at *En Primeur* prices and were not getting all that much of the subsequent windfall as prices glided upwards with apparently insatiable thirst in the market. Though the merchants on the Quai and the estate owners were awash with cash as the decade of the 1980s came to a close with the release of the 1990 vintage into the market, and were really at a level of affluence not known in this region for hundreds of years, too many others in the trade had also shared in the largess of rising claret prices over the course of the decade and the percentage of profits retained close to the source was not nearly as high as the *Bordelais* might think ideal during this period. They set out to rectify this in the coming decade of the 1990s. However, Mother Nature did not cooperate for the first few years of the decade, as the 1991, 1992 and 1993 vintages were a significant drop off in quality from the great run of vintages of the 1980s and there was not a ton of demand for the wines from the region. The indifferent quality of these wines certainly made it impossible to ratchet up pricing. 1994 was a bit better vintage, though hardly exceptional, so it was really not until the 1995 vintage came on the market that the *Bordelais* saw their opportunity to correct some of the pricing imbalance in the market that they thought they saw from the previous decade of the 1980s. Consequently, they raised prices dramatically for the 1995 vintage.

The market was far from sanguine about the rather stiff new pricing levels for the 1995 vintage in Bordeaux (though the wines would still seem like bargains by today's pricing), but as this region was still the preeminent one in the global wine bazaar at this time, the wines managed to sell sluggishly through the market. However, Bordeaux's dominant position in the market in the first half of the decade was primarily based on the strength of sales in the continued trade in vintages from the 1980s, rather than the wines from the poor vintages of the early 1990s, so when the *Bordelais* again raised prices for the 1996 vintage, the foundation of the region's unprecedented success of the 1980s started to crumble. In many ways, it was a self-inflicted wound. The 1996 vintage was potentially quite high in quality on the Left Bank, albeit a brutally tannic and structured vintage, so perhaps a further increase in prices over the stiff tariffs for the 1995s could be rationalized on some level. But, truth be told, the 1996 Médoc wines remain quite tannic to this day, and it remains to be seen if their initial hype will be justified by great wines at maturity, as that is still many years off into the future. In any case, no matter how the 1996s eventually turn out, the following vintage of 1997 was certainly not the stuff that legends are made from, as it is quite a mediocre vintage, but incomprehensibly, the *Bordelais* decided to raise prices yet again over the high levels demanded for the 1995s and 1996s. The pricing miscalculation of the 1997 vintage in Bordeaux certainly harkened back to the stupidity of prices for the 1973s and 1974s which had led to the absolute collapse of the market a quarter century earlier, and it was probably with the release of the expensive 1997s that Bordeaux effectively

gave up its preeminent place in the global market- that had been so very well-deserved only a decade previous. It was with the pricing of the 1997s that many of the wine merchants and wine drinkers who had been so devoted to the wines of Bordeaux over the previous fifteen years started to look for greener pastures. It was only the rise of large-scale speculative purchasing on the part of institutional finance market buyers when the 2000 vintage was trotted out that kept the thousands of cases moving (at least into warehouses) as the new millennium dawned, but Bordeaux had effectively ceded its position at the top of the wine market with its pricing policies in the decade of the 1990s.



Into this market cauldron came the 1998 vintage, with its bipolar personality of mediocrity on the Left Bank and truly legendary greatness on the Right Bank. In hindsight, it is not all that surprising that the beautiful 1998s from Pomerol and Saint Émilion travelled relatively under the radar when they were first released and it took some time for consumers to start to search out these wines. It was the type of opportunity that I would have loved in my previous merchant days, as the 1998s on the Right Bank probably represented the same sort of clandestine potential for merchants that the 1987 red Burgundies had done at the outset of the decade (when virtually no one in the trade wanted these truly beautiful and complete middleweights), but my business then was selling older vintages of Henri Mayer, Bruno Giacosa and the like, not young vintages of Pomerol, so my contact with the best of these wines in their infancy was virtually non-existent. However, over time, the 1998 Right Bank wines have been able to separate themselves from the less than stellar wines on the Left Bank and capture the attention of Bordeaux lovers and the wines today are properly respected and not surprisingly,

plenty expensive. But, market considerations aside, these are truly stunningly beautiful wines and worth every ounce of adulation that they now receive.

However, unlike several of the great Right Bank vintages that preceded 1998, such as 1982, 1985 and 1989, the wines from the '98 vintage are fairly powerful, structured wines that have demanded extended bottle aging from their earliest days before they are going to be truly prepared to show all of their considerable charms. Their enormous potential has always been self-evident, but 1998 is a seriously tannic vintage of impeccable balance that has positioned itself to be one of the Right Bank's greatest long-distance runners since its very earliest days. In many regards, though we are looking at two very different eras in Pomerol and Saint Émilion, the 1998s share some similarities with the superb 1975 Right Bank vintage. The 1998s are generally still not all that close to ready to drink at age twenty-four, and for many of the top wines here, another decade in the cellar is going to be mandatory before the wines truly blossom and drink with unbridled generosity. But, they most emphatically will be worth the wait! It is not that the wines are not starting to be approachable today, but they still have a fair bit of tannin buried in their copious depth of fruit, and they are still really quite adolescent in terms of their secondary developmental complexity and clearly there is so much more to unfold in so many of these wines if they are given a bit longer bottle age.

As I mentioned at the outset, the bruising heat of August and the drought conditions of that month both contributed to the tannin level and muscular depth of fruit of these wines. Particularly as regards the drought conditions of August of '98, the deeper soils of the Right Bank and particularly, the clay of Pomerol, were greatly beneficial to the vines during the most stifling moments of the month, and the more advanced maturity of the bunches leading into the month of September on the Right Bank *vis à vis* the Left Bank certainly can be partially attributed to the soil differences of the finest vineyard sites on the two sides of the Gironde. The great gravel mounds of the Médoc are nowhere near as good at retaining subterranean moisture as the clays of Pomerol and the heat and hydric stress generation in August of this year were certainly felt far more sharply on the Left Bank. One can also speculate that the hail in August on the plateau of Pomerol was also, at least to some degree, beneficial, as proprietors had to do a "green harvest" to cut away any damaged bunches after the storm had passed, which lowered yields and probably hastened the ripening perfection of the merlot bunches in the beautiful weather of the first three weeks of September. The bunches on the Right Bank ended up coming into the *cuvées* with relatively thick skins and plenty of tannin, but the tannins were perfectly ripe and there was plenty of glorious fruit in the wines as well to balance the considerable skin tannins in the berries, at least as long as *vignerons* were careful not to let new oak tannins get in the way of the equation.

We discussed above some of the market conditions that were prevalent at the time that the 1998 Right Bank wines were released into the market, and there is another historical crossroads on the Gironde that was also being crossed at this time and bears its own discussion. That has to do with the prevailing styles of wines produced in the region, as by the late 1990s, the rise of the "modernist school" of Bordeaux wines was in full bloom and, though not as pronounced as it is today, certainly another factor in determining the quality of the various wines in Pomerol and Saint Émilion. In 1998 we had not yet reached today's saturation point where it seems that the vast majority of major properties' wines are made by either Michel Rolland's or

Stéphane Derenoncourt's vast consulting businesses, but they were certainly on the rise at that time and there were more "modern" wines being produced here in 1998 than was the case back in the glory decade of the 1980s. It was really properties like Clinet and Angélus who started to usher in the modern era when they greatly changed how they vinified their 1987 wines and earned some notice from Robert Parker for their efforts in that more difficult vintage. They followed suit with the same cellar strategies for their 1988s and subsequent vintages and quickly became important wines in the market. Neither wine had been particularly sought after in the market from the end of World War II up until the release of their 1988s (I remember how many years it took us to sell a few cases of 1982 Angélus back in the day), and once these estates started to realize financial success with their more modern-styled wines, others who had been lagging behind a bit in quality on the Right Bank also took notice and more and more wines began to be crafted in this style during the decade of the 1990s and on into the twenty-first century.

By the time of the 1998 vintage, the modernist camp on the Right Bank had grown considerably from the seminal success of the '88s from Clinet and Angélus, and there were several more estates who had moved over to this more extracted, powerful and far more new oaky style of wine than those which had made the communes of Pomerol and Saint Émilion so famous and popular in the decade of the 1980s. By 1998, one of the great champions for safeguarding the traditional style of Right Bank wines was Christian Moueix, who refused to be seduced by the seeming success of the modernists and continued to insist that the wines his family's firm controlled would remain made in a very classical style. It really is one of the great, great accomplishments of Christian's career and one of the most important successes to be realized in all of Bordeaux in the period after the second world war. Given the Moueix firm's antipathy for the modern style first championed at Clinet and Angélus, a great many of the most important addresses on the Right Bank in 1998 continued to prefer to share the sentiments of the Moueix family and were still making wines in their great traditional styles in this vintage, which is yet another reason that the 1998 vintage on the Right Bank is of such historical importance. By the time the next great Right Bank vintage would come along in 2005, many more estates had fallen from the ranks of the traditionalists in search of more money and "Parker points", regardless of how it affected the actual quality of their wines. And today, the roster of estates who have switched to the modern, "flash in the pan" camp of Bordeaux winemaking is depressing to those of us who loved Bordeaux wines as they used to be.

So, David Hamburger's tasting of the 1998 wines from Pomerol and Saint Émilion was important as a barometer for how the two camps of winemaking styles in Bordeaux had fared in such a great vintage, now that the wines were closing in on a quarter century of age. The roster for his tasting included some of the most exalted Right Bank wines of the modernist camp at that time, with châteaux such as Angélus and Clinet augmented by important additions such as Pavie, Ausone, l'Église-Clinet, Beauséjour-Duffau, Pavie-Macquin and Troplong-Mondot. Balancing them off in the lineup were the finest wines from the "traditionalist" camp at this point in time in Bordeaux's history: Vieux-Château-Certan, La Conseillante, Lafleur, Figeac, Cheval Blanc, Canon and the entire roster of great Moueix family properties, including Pétrus. It was interesting to watch the reactions of the other attendees at this tasting to the two competing camps of winemaking on display within the ranks of the 1998s, many of whom were not even aware that there was a rivalry between the two styles of winemaking in Bordeaux at this time, as

the continued ascension of the modernist camp over the subsequent two decades now makes the traditionalist producers almost outliers to the general style of claret today and most Bordeaux-centric commentators in journalistic circles do not even bother to differentiate between the two styles of wine anymore. Which is certainly better for the journalists' bank accounts. I will leave it for readers to ponder whether or not ignoring the continued huge stylistic differences among the modernists and the shrinking camp of traditionalists on the Gironde implies a bit of obtuse intellectual dishonesty on the part of other Bordeaux commentators, as this is happily not for me to decide.

In any case, getting back to our recent tasting of the 1998 Right Banks, it was clear that the two camps of winemaking styles are aging on different curves in this vintage, and many of the modernists are on the cusp of facing structural problems with their 1998 wines. Before I go into what I found to be the issues with many of the modernist wines in 1998, let me first say that I did not anticipate this being the case at all going into the tasting, as the strictures of the 1998 growing season would have seemed to have obviated the need for some of the more extreme approaches that are routinely taken up by the modern school of Bordeaux. For one thing, much like in the 2008 vintage a decade later, the *fin de saison* weather on the Gironde did not allow for the modernists on the Right Bank to increase hang time to attain greater ripeness in their bunches, as it would have been absolute folly to leave the bunches out for higher sugars and softer tannins as the rains descended like a biblical plague on the Bordeaux region on September 26th. So, even if a proprietor of a modern-styled estate might have been tempted to go for more ripeness in a different year, the forecast of huge storms precluded this possibility in 1998. As a consequence, the 1998 Right Banks are impressively low in octane for a top global warming vintage. Secondly, the 1998s had such splendid depth of natural fruit already, from the style of the growing season and the perfection of the ripeness of the merlot grape in particular, that it was not going to be all that necessary to “pump up” the impression of mid-palate fruit by micro-oxygenation techniques championed by the most important consultants in the modernist camp. No doubt some chose to do so anyway, but it really was not necessary, as there was no shortage of depth of fruit in any of these wines just from the style of the grapes. There was also plenty of “stuffing” inherent in the wines to theoretically stand up to however much new oak winemakers wanted to throw at the wines in the modernist camp. So, going in, I expected a truly exceptional crop of “modern” 1998s in our tasting- perhaps not able to stand up to the quality of the traditionalist camp's wines, but less egregiously flawed than one would find with a similar lineup of modernist wines from a vintage like 2009 or 2010.

However, what I found was that many of the modernists in 1998 seem to have crafted “stillborn” wines in this great vintage and one really has doubts that they will ever develop the complexity of top flight claret. Most of the wines were still amply endowed with solid cores of fruit, albeit it was quite noticeable that many of these wines also got disconcertingly marked by uncovered, backend wood tannins as they sat in the glass, which was most emphatically not the case with any of the wines from the traditionalist camp. Wines like Beauséjour-Duffau, Clinet, l'Église-Clinet, Pavie and Ausone still have not shortage of fruit in their mid-palates and seem plenty capable of continuing to carry their tannins without difficulty far into the future. But, other than Ausone, absolutely none of these wines shows any developmental complexity and they are seemingly just stuck in adolescence like a twenty-something modern day American male still playing video games and excessively drinking like the perpetual myopic frat boys that

too many of them remain well into their alleged adulthood. Most of these wines are really quite extracted in style in 1998 (though again, I point out that they are nowhere near as extracted as such estates' wines came out in 2009 or 2010, and also decidedly lower in alcohol in '98), and as they sat in the glass, these rather lifeless wines also started to get astringent as their oak tannins rose up to dry out the finishes of the wines. Most of them are still okay for current drinking, and I would be inclined to drink them up for the most part, as I see no likelihood at all that they will develop further complexity with bottle age (having developed none over their first quarter century) and it seems likely that they will always be rather tannic wines. Waiting another ten or twenty years for them to soften up further seems more than likely to find their fruit starting to lose out the balance war within against their tannic structures, rather than softening up into velvety, truly mature Right Bank claret. I could, of course, certainly be wrong about this, but at age twenty-four, it seems that most of the modernist wines from 1998 will be better off drunk over the next decade or two, rather than gambling on some sort of miraculous metamorphosis with extended further bottle aging.



Looking out at Pomerol's church across the vineyards at Château Lafleur.

I should take a moment to single out Château Ausone for comment here, for though this wine is unmistakably a modern-styled example, it was also by a wide margin the most complex wine of this camp of 1998s. The Vauthier family had only finally paid off the complete purchase of Ausone in 1997 (having won their lawsuit in 1995 over Madame Dubois-Challon and thus

blocking the sale of her half of the estate to François Pinault, who had already gobbled up Château Latour in 1993). So, in many ways, this was the first great vintage at Ausone that the Vauthiers could craft in their preferred style at the estate, which is really quite modernist. I had never tasted the wine previously and it holds a very high reputation. It was really quite lovely in its modernist style, with a bit of soil signature poking through the winemaking and generous serving of new oak, and it is a wine that I would be happy to drink ten or twenty years down the road, as it strikes me as very well-balanced and likely to continue to drink well for many decades to come. However, it is still not particularly complex compared to many of the traditionalist camp's wines in 1998, and despite its sophisticated front, I have a hard time imagining that it will ever be able to match the inherent quality and complexity found in wines such as Cheval Blanc, La Conseillante, Pétrus, Figeac or even Magdelaine. And it certainly pales in comparison to the truly great, old school wines made at Ausone by the gifted Pascal Delbeck during his long run as cellar master here before the Gauthiers were able to rest full control of the estate.

Another estate whose wines merit being singled out for discussion of the 1998s is Château Figeac. As readers may recall from my feature a few years ago on Figeac, back in this era the estate was still a staunch bastion of classical winemaking on the Right Bank. Château Figeac had come to its greatest period of prominence under the extremely gifted Thierry Manoncourt's long period of direction of the property, and Monsieur Manoncourt had only officially retired after the 1997 vintage and handed over the reins at Figeac to his son-in-law, Eric d'Aramon. Monsieur d'Aramon, having a well of wisdom (not to mention a decade's worth of experience working alongside of his father-in-law), changed absolutely nothing at Figeac for the 1998 vintage and crafted one of the most brilliant wines here in this year in the long and illustrious history of the estate. It towered over the Ausone, Pavie and Angélus in the same flight as it at our tasting- erstwhile superior properties to Figeac if one is to take the current Saint Émilion classification for anything more than its present day worth (which is absolutely zero for anyone who knows anything about the commune's wines), and again fully demonstrated the absolute stupidity to turn over this historically great property into the hands of Michel Rolland and his consulting team of "modernist" winemaking Neanderthals. In any event, it was Eric d'Aramon's inaugural vintage solely at the helm of Figeac and will stand testament to his great period of stewardship of this property on into the next century!

As the tasting notes below will demonstrate, the 1998 vintage is a great, great year for all of the traditionally-minded estates on the Right Bank and one of the greatest years for the stable of thoroughbreds for the Moueix family. There are truly so many stunning wines to be found amongst the biggest stars in Pomerol and Saint Émilion in 1998 that one is easily apt to overlook how relatively unsuccessful the modernists were in this vintage, which seemed tailor-made to lead them to unparalleled success for the reasons enumerated above. But, it is truly an embarrassment of riches for the old school producers on the Right Bank and many have crafted extremely long-lived, complex and refined wines in this vintage that will undoubtedly remain as one of their vineyard and cellar teams' greatest achievements far, far into the future. And almost all of them will certainly outlive me by many decades (I am presently sixty-one years of age), as these are perfectly balanced wines of great depth of fruit, beautiful soil signatures and still not insignificant levels of tannins. The wines are nicely ripe, but not overripe, suavely tannic and very deep at the core, with impeccable balances, often quite impressively zesty acidity levels, and for many, they will clearly see out the close of the twenty-first century while still drinking

brilliantly! For those who might think this is hyperbole, consider that wines from 1928 still have some tannins to them at nearly one hundred years of age and show no inclination of slowing down anytime soon. The best 1998 wines from the Right Bank most assuredly also possess that type of potential longevity!

I have decided to list the wines below in the order that we served them at our tasting at the end of April, so that readers can get some idea of how the evening unfolded and where the wines were placed amongst their neighbors. As I was graciously allowed to put the flights together, which were four flights of four wines each, followed by two flights of three wines each, I chose to go back and forth between communes for each flight, rather than putting wines from Saint Émilion and Pomerol together in the same flight. This seemed to make sense to me, as every bit of commentary I could read on the 1998 vintage on the Right Bank particularly singled out how splendidly the merlot grape did in this vintage, so it did not seem fair to place Pomerols in the same flights as Saint Émilion wines, as the former are so much more dominated by merlot in their respective *cépages*. I think that this ordering of the wines did justice to all of them, as they tended for the most part to be slotted alongside wines of similar expectations of quality going into the tasting. A couple of attendees to the tasting asked me at the outset about my placing Magdelaine alongside of Ausone and Cheval Blanc in the very last flight of Saint Émilions, as they expected (particularly based on the most recent classification in the commune) that either Pavie or Angélus should have been given that slot in the penultimate flight, rather than the Magdelaine. There were no questions amongst the tasters that Magdelaine had been placed correctly after we had tasted the three wines in question! I should also mention that our bottle of Château Lafleur fell victim to a bad cork and was oxidized and not tasted. Given how many wines we had, we were lucky to have only one truly “off” bottle, but needless to say, all of us regretted that it happened to be the Lafleur!

First Flight

1998 Chateau La Dominique

The 1998 Chateau La Dominique is a very good wine and one that strikes me as still straddling the line between the modernist and traditionalist camp for this vintage. It is not as deeply red fruity or complex as the beautiful wines made here in the 1982 and 1986 vintages, but neither is it as overtly powerful as the 1989 or more recent vintages. The bouquet is deep and complex, wafting from the glass in a fine blend of black cherries, menthol, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, nutty new oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a good core of ripe fruit, still some firm tannins and good length and grip on the complex and well-balanced finish. The perception of tannins on the backend here builds with air, so if one is inclined to drink the wine now, I would not leave it overly long in decanter prior to serving. It is a very good vintage for La Dominique. 2022-2055. **90.**

1998 Chateau Beauséjour-Duffau

Beauséjour-Duffau is one of those properties that was quick to pick up on initial the success of Angélus and Clinet with their 1988 wines and was fully into the modernist camp by the time their 1990 was released, to loud applause by Robert Parker. I sold the 1990 Beauséjour-Duffau back in my wine merchant days and had the chance to taste the wine several times in those days; I was delighted when we had finally sold the last bottle, as I always found the wine a bit of a ham-fisted dullard. The 1998 is a bit superior to the 1990, but no great shakes, as it offers up a deep and extracted nose of dark berries, black cherries, cigar ash, some resinous tones (I

assume from the new oak) and plenty of smoky new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly dense from extraction at the core, with firm tannins and a long, youthful and adolescent finish. I have zero expectations that this wine will ever develop any secondary complexity, but it is pretty well-balanced and will certainly not fall of the cliff anytime soon. How much pleasure it will ever deliver is really a matter of personal taste. 2030-2070. **88.**

1998 Chateau Pavie-Macquin

I was very curious how the 1998 Chateau Pavie-Macquin would show at our tasting, as I had never tasted this vintage from the estate and had liked the wines they made here in 1989 and 1990, which were my introductions to the property. The 1998 is not in the same league as those earlier wines, but not as top heavy as the wines are here today. The nose is quite appealing, offering up a sumptuous blend of ripe plums, chocolate, cigar smoke and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and nicely plush on the attack, but surprisingly, already seems to be thinning out a bit in the mid-palate. Perhaps this is one of those wines where micro-oxygenation was utilized by bubbling in the gas into the barrels in the Rolland method? In any case, the wine has fairly modest backend tannins today, tangy acids and good length and grip. Pavie-Macquin is never one of the commune's most complex wines and this is certainly the case with the 1998 version, but it is a tasty wine done in the modern school, but which is now drinking nicely and has far more charm than a wine such as the '98 Beauséjour-Duffau. That said, it will also be short-lived by the standards of the vintage. 2022-2040. **89.**

1998 Chateau Troplong-Mondot

The Troplong-Mondot was the most new oaky wine in our first flight of Saint Émilions, though it was well-balanced and had plenty of stuffing to carry the wood. The bouquet is quite attractive in its new oaky guise, wafting from the glass in a blend of black cherries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, a touch of menthol and smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly extracted in style, with a good core, quite fine balance and a long, moderately tannic finish. This has quite a bit more stuffing than the Pavie-Macquin and will last longer, but is essentially a wine at the same level of quality. It is well made in its style, but I have a warmer spot in my heart for the La Dominique in this vintage. It is approachable now, but I might give it just a few more years to let a touch more tannin soften up on the backend. 2025-2050. **90.**

Second Flight

1998 Chateau Nénin

Chateau Nénin was purchased by the Delon family of Leoville Las Cases fame just ahead of the 1997 harvest, so the 1998 was their first top vintage with which to work. Having just drunk bottles of the 1982 and 1970 Nénin a month ago, the step up in quality for the 1998 under its new ownership is self-evident. One of Nénin's issues back in its less than illustrious past is that the former proprietors happily machine-harvested everything here and this clearly affected quality in an adverse direction. The 1998 Nénin is a deep, new oaky wine that offers up scents of black plums, bitter chocolate, dark soil tones, smoky new oak and a touch of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly extracted stylistically, with a rock solid core, ripe tannins and a long, youthful finish. Given that the winemaking team at Las Cases used concentrators for their own wine back in this era, one assumes they were also used at Nénin in 1998, so the wine is still very adolescent in personality. I think it will be a pretty good wine once it blossoms, but it may always lack a bit of inherent complexity from the way it was crafted. Still I would take concentrators over machine-harvesting here any day! 2026-2055. **89.**

1998 Chateau Clinet

As I alluded to in the introductory section of this article, the 1998 Chateau Clinet is a modern, extracted example of the vintage. It is okay in its style, but rather limited in terms of complexity and potential charm and I would have to say that it is one of the more overrated wines of the vintage. The powerful bouquet delivers scents of black cherries, dark berries, balsam bough, cigar smoke and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and chewy, with a firm core of fruit, ripe tannins, tangy acids and a long, blunt and brooding finish. The tannins built here in the glass, making for a bit of conundrum as to when to drink this wine. It is still quite tannic, but will the oak tannins eventually subsume the fruit here over the long haul? 2030-2060+? **89?**

1998 Chateau l'Église-Clinet

As I shared with the attendees to the tasting, I had been a big fan of Chateau l'Église-Clinet back in the 1980s and had bought and happily drunk cases of both the 1985 and 1986 here. However, by the time I started covering *En Primeur* campaigns with the 2009 vintage, the style at the property had gotten more overtly modern and the quality had slipped in my opinion. So, I was very curious to taste the 1998, which had never crossed my path previously, to see if the more modern house style was already well ensconced here by 1998. Sadly, this seems to have been the case. The wine is still nicely flamboyant on the nose, jumping from the glass in a mix of plums, black raspberries, a bit of tariness, chocolate, violets, a modicum of soil tones and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly extracted in style, with a fair bit of well-integrated tannins, good focus and grip and a long, fairly four-square finish. This is solid, respectable example of 1998, but it is not materially better than wines such as Pavie-Macquin or La Dominique, despite being far pricier and having loftier ambitions. 2030-2070. **90.**

1998 Chateau Latour à Pomerol

When we got to the 1998 Chateau Latour à Pomerol, we finally had an unabashedly old school example of the vintage and the wine was absolutely superb. To my palate, this wine could do with at least another five years in the cellar before drinking, but if anyone serves it to me before that time, I am most assuredly not refusing a glass! The bouquet is deep, complex and lovely, offering up scents of black cherries, black plums, smoky overtones, a fine base of dark soil tones, a touch of cigar ash, tobacco leaf and a nice framing of toasty oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, developing a velvety attack and nicely plush at the core, with fine-grained tannins, lovely focus and balance, impressive complexity and grip and a long, refined and simply lovely finish. This is a great young vintage of Latour à Pomerol. 2028-2085. **94.**

Third Flight

1998 Chateau Angélu

I had quite high expectations for the 1998 Chateau Angélu, for the reasons I mentioned above about how the *fin de saison* on the Right Bank in this vintage left little wiggle room for later harvesting. Not that Chateau Angélu is particularly egregious in this respect, as they tend to aim for one of the most elegant examples of “modernist” Bordeaux. The wine turned out to be quite good, but not quite as good as I hoped, as it was plagued by the build-up of oak tannins on the finish as the wine sat in the glass over time. This probably suggests that drinking up over the relative near-term will be rewarded, as it may one day devolve into as un-fruited a wine as the 1995 version has become in the last few years. In any case, the 1998 offers up a pretty nose of black cherries, dark berries, cigar wrapper, smoky overtones, a nice touch of soil and slightly resinous new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely solid at the core in the

style of the vintage, with good focus and grip, ripe tannins and a long, fairly complex finish. This is not one of the stars of the vintage by any stretch of the imagination, but a good, solid wine that should drink well for several decades. However, given how the oak tannins started to poke out rather aggressively while the wine sat in the glass, I would strongly recommend decanting and serving this wine immediately, to not let those pesky oak tannins get in the way of the enjoyment of the bottle. Given what this wine sells for though, there are many other options on the Right Bank in 1998 that I would much rather have in my cellar. 2028-2065. **91.**

1998 Chateau Canon

Chateau Canon had been purchased by the Wertheimer family, who owns Chanel, in 1996, so the 1998 vintage presented the first great Right Bank year for the new owners to craft the wine. Happily, the very able management team of David Orr and John Kolasa had been installed here in '96 and had changed virtually nothing here stylistically from the previous regime. The 1998 Canon is an excellent wine, offering up a beautifully classical bouquet of sweet dark berries, menthol, cherries, cigar ash, an excellent base of chalky soil tones and a nice touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with a rock solid core of fruit, still plenty of ripe tannin and a long, beautifully balanced and properly reserved, old school-styled finish. This is going to be a refined, complex and marvelously soil-driven example of the vintage, but it is still quite youthful and in need of further bottle age before it starts to drink with generosity. It reminds me of an even more suave version of the 1982 Canon! 2030-2100. **93+.**

1998 Chateau Figeac

Eric d'Aramon's affinity for the 1998 vintage at Château Figeac is quite understandable, as this was the first vintage where he had risen to take over the title of Director of the property, with the retirement of his father-in-law, Thierry Manoncourt after the 1997 vintage. However, as Monsieur d'Aramon had worked alongside of Monsieur Manoncourt for fully a decade before the latter's retirement, it was very much "business as usual" at Figeac in 1998 and the property made a simply splendid wine. Several tasters on this night, after hearing the story of how Eric d'Aramon was forced out of his position and the reins of this great property were handed over to Michel Rolland in the 2011 vintage, were simply appalled, as the 1998 Figeac was one of their absolute favorite wines in this stellar lineup. The bouquet here is deep, complex and stunningly beautiful, soaring from the glass in a blaze of plums, black cherries, tobacco leaf, gravelly soil tones, cigar smoke, incipient notes of hazelnuts and a refined foundation of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and seamlessly balanced, with a sappy core of fruit, excellent focus and grip, lovely soil signature and superb complexity, with fine-grained tannins and a very long, elegant finish. This is a great, great vintage at Figeac! 2030-2100. **96.**

1998 Chateau Pavie

Current proprietor Gérard Perse had just purchased Château Pavie in 1998, so this was his first vintage at the estate. For his inaugural vintage, he brought in Alain Reynaud to make the wine at Pavie, before eventually shifting gears in the cellar and hiring Michel Rolland. I had been reasonably impressed with this wine the last time I drank it, where it was served blind and I guessed it to be a more modern Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon. This time around it was still solid, but had not developed any further complexity since that previous sighting several years ago and one has to wonder if this wine has anywhere to go during its time in bottle? The bouquet is deep, ripe and fairly powerfully-extracted in personality (but still extremely restrained in comparison to a wine such as the 2010 here), delivering scents of black cherries, dark berries, a bit of creosote, cigar wrapper, road tar and smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-

bodied and very well-balanced for modern Pavie, with a good core, firm tannins and a long, ripe and focused finish. This is a pretty good wine, but it truly lacks any vestiges of developmental complexity on either the nose or palate. Following in the flight after Canon and Figeac, the 1998 Pavie makes a pretty convincing argument for the startling superiority of the old school over the modern in Saint Émilion. 2030-2060+. **91.**

Fourth Flight

1998 Chateau Certan de May

The 1998 Chateau Certan de May is a stellar young wine and probably vies with the 1982 as the greatest wine made at this property in the last fifty years. The bouquet is deep, precise and a beautifully classic expression of this unique *terroir*, soaring from the glass in a blend of cassis, sweet dark berries, tobacco leaf, dark soil tones, a touch of fresh herbs, cigar ash and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and already beautifully plush on the attack, with a lovely core of fruit, excellent soil signature and grip, ripe tannins and a long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. A great vintage at Certan de May, which seems to have slipped back below the market's radar a bit after the acclaim for the 1982 all those years ago. This gorgeous wine is certainly starting to be approachable today, but I would hesitate to open it now, as it is still very clearly in climbing mode and more bottle age will be richly rewarded. 2030-2100. **95.**

1998 Chateau La Conseillante

The 1998 La Conseillante is another absolutely stellar example of this vintage. The wine delivers an utterly refined aromatic constellation of red and black raspberries, plums, gravelly soil tones, a nice touch of fresh herbs, cigar smoke, just a hint of tariness and a suave framing of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with a sappy core of fruit, lovely soil undertow, fine-grained tannins and a very long, complex and velvety finish. This is a tad more forward in personality than the Certan de May or Trotanoy right now, and if one has more than a few bottles in the cellar, it is hardly a crime to drink it today. However, my gut instinct is that it is still on the youngish side and it will be an even more complete glass of wine with another five years in the cellar. This is clearly a step up from the lovely wines made here in the 1989 and 1990 vintages. 2027-2085. **95.**

1998 Chateau l'Evangile

I am not sure that our bottle of the 1998 Chateau l'Evangile was one hundred percent pristine, as I have never had the wine before and it seemed like there could be even better examples out there. Not that this was bad by any stretch of the imagination, but it showed just a touch of brett on the nose and seemed just a tad unstructured *vis à vis* many of the other top Pomerols in this tasting. In any case, the bottle we had offered up a complex nose of black plums, cigar smoke, dark soil tones, a touch of fresh herbs, cigar ash and nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush on the attack, with building complexity, a lovely core of fruit, suave tannins and very good length on the well-balanced finish. This seemed just a touch easy-going structurally compared to some of these other wines, with slightly lower acidity and not quite the same grip and backend precision as the best that Pomerol has to offer in 1998. I am not certain if this is the wine or if our bottle was slightly diminished in its performance. The touch of brett here did not bother me particularly, but I am less sensitive than some. 2027-2070. **92+?**

1998 Chateau Trotanoy

I had not had the pleasure to drink a bottle of the 1998 Chateau Trotanoy since the vertical tasting I spoke at for this property several years ago, in preparation for my historical

profile of this great estate. Our host on that evening had again been David Hamburger of the Wine Workshop! The wine has seemingly not budged in its evolution since that tasting back in 2013, and this bottle offered up a deep and still fairly youthful bouquet of black plums, black cherries, cigar wrapper, gravel, chocolate, a hint of Trotanoy's nutty overtones and a deft framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, fine soil signature and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, plush and still quite youthful finish. The wine remains still fairly tannic, but it has loads of pure fruit and is absolutely seamless in its balance, so all that is required is a bit more patience! 2030-2100.
96.



Fifth Flight

1998 Château Ausone

The period of internecine struggle among the owners here ended in '97, so the 1998 can be said to be the first vintage wholly produced under the auspices of the Vauthier family's sole ownership of Château Ausone. It is a good wine, but clearly a dramatic stylistic departure from what was produced here previously under Pascal Delbeck's stewardship. The wine is aging nicely, but like so many "modern-styled" Bordeaux, it is not developing any meaningful complexity from the passage of time, though, fortunately for the Vauthiers, at least it has Ausone's glorious *terroir* to draw upon. The bouquet is quite refined for a modern wine, offering up scents of plums, black cherries, chocolate, chalky soil, cigar ash, new oak and a topnote of

menthol. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite tightly-knit, with a fine core of pure fruit, tangy acids, suave tannins and a long, polished and classy modern finish. For those who know the wildly complex and soil-driven wines of Ausone before the stylistic shift came, this is highly disappointing. However, for those who have no idea what has been lost at Ausone, this is a very good bottle of wine. It is certainly one of the most well-made modern-styled Bordeaux I have ever tasted. But, I would never trade a bottle of the '83 Ausone for it. 2030-2080+. **93.**

1998 Chateau Magdelaine

The 1998 Chateau Magdelaine, along with Vieux Chateau Certan, are probably the two examples of this outstanding vintage that I have drunk most often in the last decade. Both wines are truly stunning bottles, but both remain youthful and I would still give both wines several more years in the cellar before expecting them to be drinking into their plateau of maturity. The '98 Magdelaine showed brilliantly at our tasting, offering up a truly stunning nose of black cherries, plums, menthol, woodsmoke, a glorious base of limestone minerality, tobacco leaf and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and also quite tightly-knit today, with a beautiful core of fruit, marvelous transparency and grip, fine-grained tannins and a very long, very complex finish. This property sits right on the plateau near Ausone, and though both wines are complex today, the Magdelaine will grow exponentially in its expressions and nuances of complexity as the decades unfold, but the '98 Ausone is likely to simply soften up its tannins with the passage of time, but remain in its current stage of complexity for its remaining life cycle. In the old days, Magdelaine always played second fiddle to Ausone, but this was not the case from 1998 on until Magdelaine's untimely demise in 2012. 2030-2100. **96.**

1998 Chateau Cheval Blanc

While the money-changers in the temple promote Pavie and Angélus to the bureaucratic summits of Saint Émilion in the classification of the commune's wines, tastings such as this one definitively show that Cheval Blanc no longer has any real rival for quality. The 1998 Cheval Blanc is an utterly brilliant wine, delivering a refined and very complex aromatic constellation of black cherries, sweet dark berries, menthol, gravelly soil tones, cigar smoke and a suave framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and full-bodied, with a velvety palate impression beginning to develop, a sappy core of glorious fruit, marvelous soil signature, fine-grained, seamless tannins and a very, very long, complex and effortless finish. The '98 Cheval Blanc is certainly a very, very enjoyable glass of wine today, but it is still climbing and I would try to leave it alone for at least a handful more years. Sheer brilliance. 2030-2100. **98+.**

Sixth Flight

1998 Vieux-Château-Certan (Pomerol)

The 1998 Vieux-Château-Certan is one of the finest wines of the vintage and it gets better and better each time I am lucky enough to try it. The bouquet is beautifully expressive today, offering up a seductive black fruity nose of black cherries, plums, sweet cassis, bitter chocolate, cigar smoke, gentle herb tones, a beautiful base of dark soil elements, discretely nutty new oak and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and utterly refined in profile, with a beautiful core of fruit, great soil undertow and grip, ripe, buried tannins, impressive complexity and a very, very long, utterly complete finish. One of the wines of the vintage! 2027-2100. **96.**

1998 Chateau Lafleur

As I mentioned in the introduction, our bottle of 1998 Lafleur had a bad cork and was oxidized. I only mention it here again because the bottle appears in a couple of the photos included in this article and I did not want readers to think I had forgotten to type up my note on the wine. I had never previously tasted the 1998 from this great property, so it remains on my bucket list!

1998 Chateau Pétrus

Prior to this Wine Workshop tasting, I had also never previously tasted the 1998 Chateau Pétrus. Not surprisingly, the wine is utterly brilliant in this great Right Bank vintage, but it is also the most backward wine we tasted on this evening and it remains more than a decade away from starting to stir from behind its formidable structural chassis and begin to drink with generosity. However, all of the constituent components are already in place here and this will grow into one of the great legendary vintages of Pétrus once it starts to blossom. The bouquet is deep, pure and still fairly primary, offering up scents of black raspberries, plums, raw cocoa, cigar ash, a nice touch of Pomerol herb tones, a great base of soil and a lovely, refined foundation of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a clear indication that the wine will become sumptuously sappy once it is ready to drink. It has a formidable foundation of ripe, buried tannins that still need to soften up, coupled with the vintage's very good acidity, laser-like focus and the nascent complexity that hints at the greatness to come. This is a magical wine in the making, but patience is still required! 2037-2100. **98+**.

RECENTLY-TASTED CHAMPAGNE AND SPARKLING WINES SPRING 2022



This issue's feature on Champagne and Sparkling Wines is not as broad as customary, as the continued issues with shipping across the Atlantic Ocean and other attendant logistical bottlenecks caused several anticipated Champagne samples not to materialize in time for this newsletter. Given how many other wines I had to work through from other regions, this probably proved to be a benefit, though it is hard to come to terms with the concept that I was better off with less Champagne and Sparkling Wine samples to taste! In any case, what this article may lack in intended breadth of producers is more than made up with the depth of a few of the tastings that I am able to report on, as I was able to attend a tasting to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Roederer Estate in Anderson Valley, which is Maison Louis Roederer's longstanding California sparkling wine house. We tasted seven vintages of the winery's flagship vintage-dated bottling, l'Ermitage, which I had always believed was one of America's most ageworthy sparkling wine bottlings, but had never had the chance to prove it empirically. Seven vintages later, dating back to the first vintage-dated release from the 1989 vintage, and I can happily confirm that my gut instinct was correct in this regard. This report also includes notes on a vertical tasting of Maison Krug's beautiful Grande Cuvée bottling, stretching all the way back to the Base Year 2004 release (*160ème Édition*), as well as a vertical of Champagne Corbon's

vintage-dated Blanc de Blancs bottling from their estate vineyards in the village of Avize. Coupled with a goodly number of serious new releases, this report should be able to stand on its own in the company of some of the other wider-reaching articles on sparkling wines in the last few years.

One of the great pleasures I had in preparing this report (beyond the very obvious pleasures of those vertical tastings) was being introduced to the wines from a new Champagne producer to me, Davy Dosnon, who is based in the Aube village of Avirey-Lingey. Davy started his small *négociant* house in the Aube back in 2004, after earning his degree in viticulture and doing *stages* at several important domaines in Burgundy. He started with a partner in 2004, Simon-Charles Lepage, so the original name for his enterprise was Dosnon et Lepage, but he has been on his own since 2014 and the wines are sold under his name alone now. Back in 2004, he inherited some vineyards parcels in his home village from his grandfather, and these two hectares formed the base for his new enterprise. He has subsequently contracted for fruit from some of his neighbors, so he now produces wines from seven hectares-worth of vines. His wines are barrel-fermented in used casks he sources from one of the domaine he worked for in Puligny-Montrachet, using indigenous yeasts. He sells his wines under two labels now, with the wines he produces from the fruit he sources from his neighbors labeled for his grandfather, Henri Dosnon. The wines he produces from the family vineyards he inherited are sold under the Champagne Dosnon label. While I liked all of his wines, I found that the wines made from his own estate-grown fruit are a step up and these were the ones that really caught my attention, as they were absolutely superb in quality. Monsieur Dosnon has been crafting Champagne now for close to twenty years, but these were the first wines I had tasted from him, and given how beautifully the Champagne Dosnon bottlings in particular showed, I felt it was worth taking a bit of time to single them out in the introduction.

This article starts out with the report on the fortieth anniversary tasting from Roederer Estate in Anderson Valley, with a brief sketch of its history leading into the notes from the vertical tasting. After the report on the l'Ermitage tasting, the remainder of the notes here are listed in their customary sections of Coteaux Champenois Bottlings, Non-Vintage Non-Dosé Wines, Non-Vintage Blanc de Blancs Brut and Extra Brut, Non-Vintage Blends, Non-Vintage Rosé, Vintage-Dated Blanc de Blancs, Vintage-Dated Blends and finally, Vintage-Dated Rosé. The notes from the other vertical tastings that I mentioned in the introduction are simply included within their section of their particular category of wine.

Roederer Estate's Top Of the Line l'Ermitage Cuvée

Roederer Estate in Anderson Valley is celebrating their fortieth anniversary this year, as the property that has become the home of America's finest sparkling wine was first purchased by Jean-Claude Rouzaud in 1982. The Rouzaud family is best-known for owning Champagne Louis Roederer in Reims, but over the years they have added to their lineup of outstanding wine properties- which has grown to include Diamond Creek Vineyards and Château Pichon-Lalande amongst a host of others in more recent times. But, back in 1982, this was the Rouzaud family's first foray outside of the comfort of the Champagne region and it has proven itself over the last four decades to have been a very prescient move on the part of the *maison*. Monsieur Rouzaud and his team selected the two hundred and thirty-five hectare parcel in Anderson Valley after a few years of research into various winegrowing regions in California, looking for a properly cool

location to plant vineyards dedicated to the production of sparkling wines. The first vines went into the ground in 1984 and the winery was constructed in 1986 on the property. Two years later, the first release of Roederer Estate Brut NV was released from the winery and the direction of sparkling wine production in California changed forever. Prior to the arrival of Roederer Estate, other French Champagne houses had come to till the fertile soils of California for their own sparkling wine projects, with Domaine Chandon and Piper-Sonoma two of the best known earlier arrivals in the state. However, these projects tended to focus on more “entry level” quality wines, seeking to compete and supplant brands such as Korbel that had already realized mass market success with their California sparkling wines. With Roederer Estate, the emphasis has always been on a higher level of quality, more aligned with one might expect from Champagne itself. In 1993, Roederer Estate would release their vintage-dated “l’Ermitage” bottling, which is their very top of the line wine. The 1989 vintage was the first for l’Ermitage.

Back in 1982, the only sparkling wine producer in the United States that I can think of that aspired to this higher level of quality was Schramsberg, which already had a couple of decades’ worth of experience in producing top level sparkling wines in the state of California at this time. Beyond the team at Schramsberg, there were really few producers making California sparkling wine seeking to create wines at the same level of quality as Champagne; in this era, very quietly, Frances and Terry Leighton were already crafting some equally high quality sparkling wines at their Kalin Cellars, though in such small quantities that they were (and remain) virtually impossible to find in the marketplace. The Reims-based *maison* of Taittinger would soon eventually break ground on a new sparkling wine project in the Carneros Valley in 1987, Domaine Carneros, which would also set the bar a bit higher quality-wise than was the case with the earlier-arriving French proprietors at Domaine Chandon and Piper-Sonoma. From the outset, continuity has been one of the bywords of Roederer Estate, as the team here was happy to lean upon the several centuries of tradition already in place at the mother ship in Reims, so that the winery has only had two head winemakers since its inception in 1982. Michel Salgues was the first to patrol the cellars of this Anderson Valley winery, opening the doors here in 1982 and eventually retiring in 2002. His talented successor, Arnaud Weyrich remains at the helm of the estate as it celebrates its fortieth anniversary, having first worked at Roederer Estate all the way back in 1993 during a two year internship following his graduation from the University of Montpellier with Masters degrees in both Viticulture and Oenology. Arnaud returned to work in France after his initial internship, but came back to work at Roederer Estate again in 2000, as Monsieur Salgues’ assistant winemaker and eventually would take over the reins of the winemaking here completely in 2002.

I know that there are a lot of extremely good sparkling wines now made in the United States, but to my palate, the Roederer Estate “l’Ermitage” bottling remains the finest. Part of the reason that I place this beautiful wine at the head of the class here in the US is that it has a marvelous, innate ability to age long and gracefully and improve with its time in the bottle. Up until this spring, my conviction that this was the case with the l’Ermitage bottling was based primarily on assessing younger vintages of the wine and their impeccable structures, as despite my occasional attempts to put a few bottles away in the cellar to see how it would age, I always seem to manage to pull the bottles to drink before they had seen any significant time in my cellar! However, during the vertical tasting that Arnaud Weyrich and winery President, Nicole Carter kindly invited me to in April, I now have plenty of empirical evidence to support my long-

standing supposition that the Roederer Estate l'Ermitage is a very long-lived wine. Given that the inaugural vintage of 1989 l'Ermitage remains fresh as a daisy, beautifully complex and vibrant and still with a couple of decades of life ahead of it, there is little doubt that l'Ermitage can age just as beautifully as any bottling from the Champagne region itself!

As I mentioned above, Roederer Estate produced its first bottling of the vintage-dated l'Ermitage in 1989. This first bottling was aged *sur latte* just under three and a half years prior to disgorgement and preparation for release in the market, and it has been the standard bearer for California sparkling wine potential since its very first vintage. Over the years, the technical team here at the winery has extended the time spent by this cuvée aging on the fine lees quite a bit, as they have had opportunity, so that the most recent release, which is the beautiful 2015 vintage, was given fully five years aging *sur latte* before its disgorgement. The wine always includes a few percentage points of reserve wines in the blend (under five percent of another vintage is allowed in any vintage-dated wine in California), with the reserve wines included usually being aged chardonnay from Roederer Estate's now deep selection of reserve wines. As is the case at Champagne Roederer in Reims, the reserve wines here are aged in very large, neutral oak *foudres* in the cellars, which gives the l'Ermitage just a bit more roundness from the mellow oak influence from these giant casks. Arnaud Weyrich notes that each year of l'Ermitage usually starts out as a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay, but that the addition of the small amounts of reserve wines included usually ends up tipping the scales to fifty-two percent chardonnay versus forty-eight percent pinot noir in the finished wine. As is the case with the Cristal bottling crafted back in Reims, the l'Ermitage bottling is always a non-malo wine, unless on the very rare occasion where Mother Nature intervenes and some of the *vins clairs* end up going through malolactic fermentation at the same time as the alcoholic fermentation is taking place.

Keeping the *vins clairs* from undergoing malolactic fermentation is a logical decision, as the warmer growing conditions one finds in California wine country demand that the winemaking team here safeguards the wine's acidity as much as possible to produce sparkling wines. This is true in the cooler Anderson Valley, as well as in regions such as Carneros and the Sonoma Coast, where other top sparkling wine producers are based. All of the Roederer Estate wines are produced from estate-grown fruit, with certain parcels now earmarked each year as potential contributors to the l'Ermitage bottling, if the quality is deemed sufficient to merit the production of this vintage-dated wine. As I mentioned above, l'Ermitage is now given at least five years aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and preparation for release, but the house has also started a program to make a small quantity of previous vintages also available to their Club Members. Currently, the 2006, 2004 and 2003 vintages of l'Ermitage can be purchased from Roederer Estate if one joins their wine purchasing club. Both the 2004 and 2003 version for sale are recently-disgorged, though some of the library selections available are the original disgorgements. The *dosage* level has gone down just a touch over the years with the l'Ermitage bottling, which Cellar Master Arnaud Weyrich notes is really a reflection of global warming giving them riper fruit to work with today than was the case back in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. But, as the *vins clairs* do not go through malolactic fermentation, the acids here tend to be a bit sharper than wines that do go through malo, so the *dosage* numbers need to be a touch higher to better buffer the acids when the wines are on the younger side. The recently-released 2015 vintage of l'Ermitage was given a *dosage* of eight grams per liter; the earliest vintage

releases of this cuvée would typically be in the twelve grams per liter range. Given that the inaugural release of the 1989 l'Ermitage remained fresh and vibrant when we drank it at the vertical tasting, it is safe to assume that easily fifty years or more of potential longevity for this bottling is well within reach. It truly is California's most long-lived and highest quality sparkling wine.



2015 Roederer Estate “l’Ermitage” Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

The 2015 vintage of l’Ermitage has continued to open up nicely over the course of the last eight months since I last had the pleasure to drink the wine. It is certainly going to be one of the more powerful and long-lived vintages of this flagship bottling, but it is already quite open and enjoyable to drink in its relative youth. As is customary, the wine’s *cépages* is slightly tilted to chardonnay, with the blend being fifty-two percent chardonnay and forty-eight percent pinot noir. It was finished with a *dosage* of eight grams per liter in this vintage. The wine remains youthfully complex on the nose, offering up scents of apple, pear, a lovely base of soil tones, gentle smokiness, warm bread and a bit of incipient nuttiness just starting to show in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and soil-driven, with a superb core, elegant *mousse*, excellent focus and grip and a long, complex and utterly refined finish. Fine, fine juice in the making. 2022-2070. **94.**

2011 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

Arnaud Weyrich describes the cool 2011 vintage as perhaps the “most Champagne-like growing season that I have experienced in the Anderson Valley,” with the *fin de saison* rains not affecting the quality of the crop here at Roederer Estate, as the grapes need to be harvested early to make sparkling wine in any case. So it is not surprising that he chose to craft a l'Ermitage bottling in this vintage and it has turned out so beautifully. The wine is made from its customary blend of fifty-two percent chardonnay and forty-eight percent pinot noir and was finished in this vintage with a *dosage* of eleven grams per liter. Today the 2011 is drinking splendidly, offering up a deep and very elegant bouquet of apple, walnut, fresh-baked bread, classic l'Ermitage smokiness, a lovely base of salty minerality, a hint of menthol and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and precise, with a lovely core of fruit, fine mineral drive and grip, elegant *mousse* and a long, zesty and seamlessly balanced finish. I love this vintage of l'Ermitage! 2022-2060. **94+**.

2006 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

The 2006 vintage at Roederer Estate was the result of a big, generous and perfectly mature crop and the wine shares this easy-going personality. The *cépages* is its customary fifty-two to forty-eight percent split of chardonnay to pinot noir, with the wine finished with a *dosage* of eleven grams per liter. The wine is at its apogee today (though still with decades of life ahead of it), with the nose jumping from the glass in a wide open mix of tangerine, peach, warm bread, a lovely base of soil tones, incipient nuttiness and just a bit of salinity in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with pinpoint bubbles, lovey focus and grip and a long, classy finish. This is a touch broader-shouldered than the 2011, reflecting the abundance of sun and good weather during the 2006 growing season. 2022-2050. **93**.

2004 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

The 2004 l'Ermitage vintage is an outstanding wine and one of my favorites in the range that we tasted at our vertical in April. Arnaud reports that it was a fairly moderate-sized crop, but quite classical in style and the wine has turned out beautifully. The *cépages* is the same as the 2006, with the *dosage* this year 12.5 grams per liter. The bouquet at age eighteen is exceptional, delivering a refined constellation of apple, nectarine, nutskin, salty soil tones, a touch of orange peel, bread dough and a nice touch of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, focused and full, with a superb core of fruit, lovely soil signature and grip, elegant *mousse* and great length and grip on the poised, complex and impeccably balanced finish. Great juice. 2022-2065. **95**.

1999 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

The 1999 vintage of l'Ermitage strikes me as one of the first of the “mature” phase of this bottling, as by this time there was a full decade history of crafting this cuvée at the estate and one can see a most complete portrait of the wine. At twenty-three years of age, the wine is drinking splendidly, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of baked apple and peach, a superb base of soil, warm bread, macadamia nut, gentle smokiness and a delicate topnote of caraway seed. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, precise and *à point* today, with a superb core and soil undertow, refined *mousse*, bright acids and beautiful balance and focus on the long, complex and utterly delicious finish. Great juice at its peak, but with decades of life still ahead! 2022-2055+. **95**.

1993 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

The 1993 vintage of l'Ermitage was the only one in our vertical lineup that was perhaps not one hundred percent on form. It was not corked *per se*, but as Arnaud Weyrich noted, there seemed to be just a touch of cork influence in the wine which kept it slightly leaner than any of the other vintages that we tasted. There was no overt TCA taint here (and we drank the wine over several hours), but perhaps a bit of amplitude was sacrificed by the older cork not being perfect. In any case, the wine was still quite good, offering up a rather high-toned nose of apple, lemon peel, salty soil tones, sweet walnut, dried flowers and gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, complex and still with plenty of life in it, with pinpoint bubbles, zesty acids and excellent length and grip on the well-balanced finish. Figure the cork took a point away from this wine, but no more. 2022-2040+? **92+?**

1989 l'Ermitage Brut Vintage (Anderson Valley)

And how was the inaugural vintage of l'Ermitage drinking at thirty-three years of age? Just fine, thank you! The wine has entered a beautifully mellowed, tertiary stage of development on both the nose and palate, but with plenty of *mousse* remaining and absolutely no signs of imminent decline. The 1989 was disgorged in August of 1993 and given a finishing *dosage* of 11.3 grams per liter in its first vintage. Today, the complex bouquet wafts from the glass in a classy blend of baked peach, macadamia nut, a lovely base of soil tones, *patissière*, just a whisper of caramel, wheat toast and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and still quite vibrant, with no shortage of *mousse*, lovely balance and grip and a long, complex and very classy finish. This still has years and years of life ahead of it! Most impressive. 2022-2040+. **93.**

Coteaux Champenois

2019 Étienne Calsac Coteaux Champenois Blanc (Avize)

Étienne Calsac's 2019 Coteaux Champenois Blanc is composed from a very unique *cépages* of fifty percent chardonnay, twenty-five percent pinot blanc, twenty percent petit meslier and five percent arbanne. The wine was bottled unfiltered and comes in at a svelte twelve percent octane in this vintage. It delivers a lovely, complex and gently exotic bouquet of pear, fresh papaya, hazelnut, chalky soil tones, honeysuckle, a touch of iodine, buttery oak and a bit of natural wine wildness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and racy, with good mid-palate depth, sound focus and grip and a long, complex and nicely lean finish. I do not know the specifics of how this wine was vinified and bottled, but it seems likely to have been a very low SO2 bottling and aimed to appeal to the natural wine crowd specifically. It is quite well made and tasty, albeit, perhaps just a touch under-nourished in style. 2022-2030+. **89.**

2018 Emilien Feneuil "les Dres le Moutier" Pinot Noir Coteaux Champenois (Sermiers)

The 2018 les Dres le Moutier pinot noir from Emilien Feneuil is an excellent wine. The wine comes in at 13.9 percent octane in this warm summer in Champagne, but has retained beautiful freshness in its complex aromatic constellation of black cherries, smoked meats, black raspberries, coffee bean, a lovely base of soil, woodsmoke, cedar and a touch of black tea in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and youthfully chewy out of the blocks, with a fine core of fruit, excellent soil undertow and grip, moderate tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. Good juice. 2028-2050+. **92+.**

2018 Emilien Feneuil “les Goulats” Pinot Noir Coteaux Champenois (Sermiers)

The 2018 les Goulats seemed just a touch more marked by the torrid growing season than the les Dres le Moutier bottling. Like the wine above, the fruit was completely destemmed for this bottling this year and raised in fifty percent new oak. It offers up a ripe and complex nose of sweet dark berries, black raspberries, chalky soil, bonfire and spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush at the core, with more of an overtly ripe personality today than the les Dres le Moutier, with ripe, firm tannins, a touch of backend tariness and a long, complex finish that shows just a whisper of heat. This is a good bottle, but tasting the more delicately-styled 2015 version immediately after this, one can really sense just how warm it was in the Champagne region in 2018. 2026-2050. **89.**

2018 Bouzy Rouge Coteaux Champenois- Benoît Marguet (Ambonnay)

Benoît Marguet makes excellent still wines these days, in addition to his superb lineups of Champagne. I was disappointed to hear that he has now become such a superstar in other markets that he has cut back his most important US importer’s allocations by fifty percent, so there is going to be less of his wines in the American market. It is too bad. In any case, his 2018 Bouzy Rouge is a fine bottle of pinot noir, offering up a classy, black fruity bouquet of dark berries, bitter chocolate, *pigeon*, chalky soil tones, violets and just a touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, young and very well-balanced, with a fine core of black fruit, good soil signature and grip, ripe tannins and a long, complex finish. Good juice. 2028-2055. **93.**

2016 Emilien Feneuil “les Puits” Petits Meslier Coteaux Champenois (Sermiers)

Emilien Feneuil seems to take every bit as much pride in his various Coteaux Champenois bottlings as he does with his sparkling wines, and with good reason, as they are clearly some of the finest examples being made in the region in recent times. This 2016 was a first for me, as I had never tasted a still wine made entirely from Petit Meslier. The wine is outstanding, offering up a complex nose of fresh pineapple, rhubarb, a beautiful base of chalky soil tones, orange peel, a touch of butterscotch and a gentle framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a lovely core, nice framing acids and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. Emilien only made a tiny amount of this wine, so it will be difficult to come across, but if you do, it is well worth trying a bottle! 2022-2040. **94.**

2015 Emilien Feneuil “les Goulats” Pinot Noir Coteaux Champenois Magnum (Chamery)

I did not note the alcohol level on the 2018 les Goulats, but this magnum of the 2015 version came in at 12.5 percent octane in this vintage and is quite different in personality as a result. The wine is far more transparent in profile, with the nose delivering a complex blend of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, fresh herb tones, a great base of chalky soil elements, gamebird and a nice touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and tangy, with lovely mineral drive and grip, suave tannins and a long, tangy and beautifully complex finish. In magnum, the 2015 les Goulats Coteaux Champenois could do with a few more years bottle age to let a bit more backend tannin fall away, but this is not too far from peak drinkability and is a stellar wine! I should mention that there was tiny tickle of CO2 on the palate when this wine was first poured, which may or may not be an issue for long-term cellaring, as Monsieur Feneuil likes to bottle his still wines with a very minimal level of SO2. But, at least for the moment, the wine is drinking beautifully. 2025-2055. **93+.**

Non-Vintage Champagne Non-Dosé

Étienne Calsac “Les Revenants” Brut Nature NV (Avize)

I reported on Étienne Calsac Les Revenants bottling in Issue 95 and was very happy to be able to taste another bottle five months down the road and see how it is blossoming, which turns out to be, very well indeed. As readers may recall, this is Monsieur Calsac’s Brut Nature cuvée, made from a unique *cépages* of fifty percent Pinot Blanc, forty-three percent Petit Meslier and seven percent Arbane! The wine is the 2018 base year, with the *vins clairs* aged seven months in cask prior to bottling up and aging under cork. It was disgorged in January of 2021. The wine has really started to open up nicely with a bit more time, offering up a complex and very classy nose of lime, apple, fresh-baked bread, a nice touch of nuttiness, a fine base of chalky minerality and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and really starting to relax structurally, with a lovely core and mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a long, focused and beautifully balanced finish. Fine juice. 2022-2045+. **92.**



Blanc de Blancs Brut and Extra Brut Non-Vintage

Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Avize) Base Year 2018

Agnès Corbon’s relatively new bottling of non-vintage Blanc de Blancs, made from the family’s vineyards in the village of Verneuil, is simply terrific in its new iteration, which is from the base year of 2018. The wine includes a fair bit of reserve wine in the blend, which is taken from their solera for Brut Autrefois. The wine was finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter

and delivers an excellent bouquet of pear, delicious apple, fresh almond, chalky soil tones, pastry cream and a topnote of white lilies. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a lovely core of fruit, fine grip and length, refined *mousse* and a vibrant, zesty and wide open finish. This now has to be one of the great non-vintage bargains out there in the market! 2022-2045+. **92.**

Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut NV Magnum (Avize) Base Year 2011

I have reported on this wine previously, which is not crafted from the Corbon family's vines in Verneuil, but rather from their holdings in the village of Avize, which are usually dedicated to their vintage-dated wines. Agnès decided to declassify everything in 2011, as she felt the vintage was simply not up to the quality she expects for her vintage-dated wines, so the Avize crop was sold off as non-vintage Blanc de Blancs. The label is the same as the above wine, but as the 2011 Avize-based NV is now sold out in regular-sized bottles, only the magnums today are still made from the 2011 fruit. The wine may well be even a hair better out of magnum in any case, as it offers up a lovely nose of pear, passion fruit, limestone minerality, spring flowers, brioche and just a whisper of its incipient smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and very elegant in profile, with a fine core, pinpoint bubbles, bright acids and impeccable focus and balance on the long, complex and delicious finish. This is so good and such a steal! 2022-2050. **93+.**

Champagne Dosnon "Recolte Blanche" NV (Avirey-Lingey)

Davy Dosnon is the winemaker at the family Aube estate these days, after having cut his teeth working at a handful of Burgundy domaines in the Côte d'Or. His Recolte Blanche is his Blanc de Blancs cuvée from his own family's vineyards. The wine is barrel-fermented and aged in two and three year-old casks sourced from a domaine in Puligny-Montrachet that Davy used to work with. This bottling is from the base year of 2018, was given two and a half years aging *sur latte* prior to its disgorgement in August of 2021 and finished with a *dosage* of six grams per liter. The wine delivers excellent complexity in its vibrant aromatic constellation of apple, lemon, fresh almond, chalky minerality, just a hint of vanillin oak and a lovely topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core, excellent mineral drive and grip, snappy acids, elegant *mousse* and a long, balanced and very classy finish. I really like this wine, which shows its Aube personality in its quite *Chablisienne* minerality, coupled with a brisk and impeccably balanced palate impression. This is tasty already, but a few years in the cellar will let its girdle of acidity relax a bit more and the wine will be even tastier. Very fine Blanc de Blancs! 2022-2050. **92+.**

Suenen "C + C" Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Cramant)

I have loved Aurélien Suenen's wines from the very first that I tasted, but in recent times, he has often lowered the *dosage* of his various bottlings so much that they have absolutely demanded (at least to my palate) extended cellaring time before the fine acids of Cramant relaxed enough for the wines to loosen up structurally and drink with generosity. Happily, in recent times, he has increased the *dosage* just a touch, so that for example, this bottling from the base year of 2014 was finished at two grams per liter, but the current release, from the base year of 2018, carries four grams per liter. The wine was disgorged in October of 2021 and has really started to stretch its wings since I last tasted it in November of last year. It delivers a beautiful young bouquet of pear, golden delicious apple, white lilies, orange blossoms, complex limestone minerality and a hint of *crème patissière* starting to poke through in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, pinpoint

bubbles, excellent mineral drive and grip, zesty acids and a long, focused and supremely elegant finish. This is stellar. 2025-2055+. **94.**

Suenen “Oiry” Blanc de Blancs Brut NV (Cramant)

The current release of Aurélien’s Oiry bottling is also from the base year of 2018; it too was disgorged in October of 2021 and given a finishing *dosage* of three grams per liter. The wine has again started to blossom nicely since I had it six months ago, offering up its customary aromatic precision, jumping from the glass in a mix of pear, green apple, chalky minerality, white lilies, incipient notes of pastry cream and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with excellent mid-palate depth, refined *mousse*, and excellent focus and grip on the poised, seamlessly balanced and already quite accessible finish. Despite its new found sense of early generosity, I would still be inclined to tuck this excellent version of Oiry away for another three or four years, simply because there is another layer of complexity hovering just over the horizon and I would not want to finish my bottles off before it comes into view! Fine, fine juice. 2025-2055. **93+.**

Brut and Extra Brut Non-Vintage

Henri Dosnon “Brut Sélection” NV (Avirey-Lingey)

Davy Dosnon has two labels, with the Henri Dosnon line made from purchased fruit; this Brut Sélection is composed of ninety percent pinot noir and ten percent chardonnay. The wine is given twenty months aging *sur latte* and is finished with a *dosage* of nine grams per liter. The bouquet is bright and classic Aube, offering up scents of apple, dried flowers, warm bread, gentle smokiness and a refined base of Chablis-like soil tones. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven in personality, with frothy *mousse*, a good core and impressive length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is quite tasty, though not quite as complete as the wines Davy makes from his own estate grown fruit. 2022-2040. **89+.**

Champagne Dosnon “Recolte Noire” NV (Avirey-Lingey)

This is one of Davy Dosnon’s wines produced entirely from estate grown fruit (and which is differentiated by the different label from the above). It is comprised entirely of pinot noir and was barrel-fermented in three year-old casks sourced in Puligny-Montrachet. The wine is given two years aging *sur latte*, which makes this release from the base year of 2018, as it was disgorged in February of 2021. It was finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter and includes thirty percent reserve wines in the cuvée. This is a step up from Monsieur Dosnon’s wines made from purchased grapes, as it offers up a refined bouquet of white peach, fresh-baked bread, a touch of hazelnut, a complex base of limestone minerality and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, elegant and full-bodied, with lovely mid-palate depth, elegant *mousse*, bright acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, well-balanced and complex finish. Most impressive. 2022-2050. **92.**

Krug Grande Cuvée “170ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

The very soon to be released new “170ème Édition” of Krug Grande Cuvée is a stunning young wine. It is from the base year of 2014 and composed from a *cépages* of fifty-one percent pinot noir, thirty-eight percent chardonnay and eleven percent pinot meunier. In this vintage, a nearly unprecedented forty-five percent of the blend was made up of reserve wines. The reason so much of the blend this year was made up of reserve wines was the crop of pinot noir in 2014 was not stellar, as it had to contend with the infestation of Suzuki flies that damaged the quality of this grape in particular leading into the harvest of 2014. But, fortunately, there was plenty of pinot noir in the reserve wine library at Maison Krug, so the challenge was able to be overcome

beautifully. The “170ème Édition” of Grande Cuvée is strikingly floral this year, offering up a beautiful bouquet of pear, delicious apples, hazelnut, a complex base of soil tones, orange zest, *patissière* and a gorgeous array of floral scents in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and beautifully mineral in profile, with a fine core, refined *mousse* and a very long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is a beautiful rendition of this iconic wine. 2022-2065+. **95.**

Krug Grande Cuvée “169ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

It had been a year since I last tasted a bottle of the 169ème Édition of Grande Cuvée and the wine is starting to settle into a lovely stage of early drinkability. The bouquet today offers up a complex constellation of white peach, lemon, chalky minerality, fresh-baked bread, white flowers, fresh almond and incipient notes of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and still a bit wrapped up behind its girdle of snappy acidity, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, excellent focus and mineral drive and a long, complex and very classy finish. For those keeping score at home, the *cépages* of the 169ème Édition is forty-three percent pinot noir, thirty-five percent chardonnay and twenty-two percent pinot meunier. A lovely and quite classic rendition of Grande Cuvée. 2022-2065+. **95.**



Krug Grande Cuvée “166ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

I had not drunk a bottle of the 166ème Édition, which hails from the base year of 2010, since back in the autumn of 2018, so I was very curious to see how it was evolving in the bottle

over the three and a half years since I last tried the wine. The blend for this bottling was forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty-nine percent chardonnay and sixteen percent pinot meunier. The wine today is coming into its primetime window of peak drinkability, wafting from the glass in a refined mix of apple, pear, oven-warm bread, citrus zest, a complex base of limestone minerality, just a whisper of vanillin oak and a lovely topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and full-bodied, with a zesty, wide open personality, lovely depth at the core, pinpoint bubbles, impeccable balance and a long, complex and vibrant finish. This is a beautiful time to be drinking the 166ème Édition, though it still clearly has decades of life ahead of it. 2022-2060+. **94.**

Krug Grande Cuvée “164ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

I have loved the 164ème Édition of Grande Cuvée since its initial release, as this hails from the fine, fine base year of 2008 and it has always seemed like a special wine. However, I had not drunk a bottle of this side by side with other iterations of Grande Cuvée prior to this spring vertical tasting, and having now viewed the wine in the proper context, it seems quite clear that I underrated this wine on previous occasions! Today, the wine is drinking brilliantly, with its gorgeous bouquet soaring from the glass in a blaze of pear, white peach, almond, fresh-baked bread, chalky minerality, apple blossoms and a touch of passion fruit in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, deep and complex, with a seamlessly balanced, full-bodied format that sports a great core, laser-like focus, elegant *mousse* and a very, very long, complex finish of dramatic backend amplitude. The beauty of this wine lies in its perfect, effortless sense of ripeness to its fruit component, which delivers dramatic intensity of flavor without ever overstepping its proper place in the complete mosaic that is Grande Cuvée. Now fourteen years out from the base year, it is quite clear to me that I have never tasted a better rendition of Grande Cuvée! 2022-2065. **97.**

Krug Grande Cuvée “163ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

The Krug Grande Cuvée “163ème Édition” is another excellent wine, but following hard on the heels of the 2008 base year version, this lovely wine from the base year of 2007 comes across as more high-toned in style. The lovely nose delivers scents of lemon, apple, brioche, hazelnut, chalky minerality and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and well-balanced, with a fine core, lovely focus and a long, vibrant finish where the toast and mineral elements are now starting to take center stage over the very pretty fruit tones. This is moving into its stage of maturity and has decades of fine drinking still ahead of it, but it almost seems a touch shy on fruit today in comparison to the stunning “164ème Édition”. 2025-2065. **93.**

Krug Grande Cuvée “160ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

I have always enjoyed the “160ème Édition” of Grande Cuvée, which is from the racy 2004 base year. The *cépages* for this release is forty-four percent pinot noir, thirty-three percent chardonnay and twenty-three percent pinot meunier, with thirty-five percent of the blend made up of reserve wines dating back all the way to 1990. The wine is into its plateau of maturity today, but still retains that lovely spine of 2004 acidity, as it delivers scents of pear, apple, hazelnut, warm bread, a lovely base of soil, plenty of smokiness and a nice topnote of caraway seed. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and soil-driven, with a lovely core, good focus and grip, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish that closes with just a whisper of the green fruit element found in so many top examples from the 2004 vintage. Fine juice. 2022-2065. **94.**

Lanson “Black Label” Brut NV (Reims)

The new release of Lanson Black Label is from the base year of 2015. The wine is composed of a *cépages* of fifty percent pinot noir, thirty-five percent chardonnay and fifteen percent pinot meunier. It includes fully thirty percent reserve wines in the cuvée this year and was aged four years *sur latte*, prior to its disgorgement in September of 2020. It was finished with a *dosage* of eight grams per liter. The wine is lovely on both the nose and palate, offering up a complex nose of apple, tart orange, fresh-baked bread, gentle nuttiness, a fine base of soil and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and shows off very good mid-palate depth, with bright acids, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. This is very good. 2022-2040+. **91.**

Rosé Brut and Extra Brut Non-Vintage

Henri Dosnon Brut Rosé NV (Avirey-Lingey)

Davy Dosnon’s Brut Rosé made under his Henri Dosnon label is made from a similar *cépages* as the Brut Selection, with just a bit of added still pinot noir giving the wine its beautiful salmon color. The wine is aged at least twenty months *sur latte* and was finished with a *dosage* this year of ten grams per liter. It delivers a lovely bouquet of raspberries, blood orange, rye bread, chalky soil tones and a discreet topnote of brown spices. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and youthfully snappy, with a good core and mineral undertow, frothy *mousse* and a long, fairly vinous finish. This is best with food, where it shows itself quite well. 2022-2035+. **89.**

Gosset Grand Rosé Brut NV (Épernay)

The new release of Grand Rosé non-vintage Brut from Champagne Gosset is absolutely stellar. The bouquet is deep, precise and complex, offering up a vibrant blend of tangerine, blood orange, rye bread, a touch of clove, a beautiful base of chalky minerality, orange peel and a touch of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is brisk, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a superb core, excellent mineral drive and cut, very refined *mouse* and a long, complex and utterly refined finish. This is about as good a bottle of non-vintage Rosé as one can find in the market today! 2022-2045+. **93+.**

Krug Rosé “26ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

The soon to be released Krug Rosé “26ème Édition” is from the base year of 2014. Given the long history of Maison Krug, sometimes it seems impossible that this beautiful bottling of Rosé has only seen twenty-six renditions. The blend this year includes one-third of reserve wines, running back to the 2005 vintage. The *cépages* is forty-four percent pinot noir, thirty percent chardonnay and twenty-six percent pinot meunier and the wine is once again its very pale, salmon color. It offers up a beautifully refined nose of tangerine, white cherries, wheat bread, chalky soil tones, a touch of citrus peel, gentle notes of brown spices and a discreetly smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is young, full-bodied and displays excellent depth in the mid-palate, with elegant *mousse*, lovely focus and grip, bright acids and a long, complex and very well balanced finish. Fine, fine juice, but this is still a puppy and deserves at least a few years in the cellar to blossom. 2027-2060. **95.**

Krug Rosé “25ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

The “25ème Édition” of Krug Rosé (base year 2013) is starting to stir nicely as it gets a bit of distance out from its original release date. The cuvée is composed from a virtually identical lineup to the 2014 base year version, with forty-five percent pinot noir, thirty percent chardonnay and twenty-five percent pinot meunier, but this version was made up of fully fifty percent reserve

wines. It is delicately light in color, in the tradition of this bottling, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a mix of strawberries, cherries, rose petals, gentle spice tones, a complex base of chalky soil and a topnote of orange peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and poised, with a lovely core, excellent focus and balance, refined, pinpoint bubbles and excellent backend lift on the long, zesty and complex finish. Great juice. 2026-2060. **95+**.

Krug Rosé “20ème Édition” Brut NV (Reims)

The Krug Rosé “20ème Édition” is starting to take full flight, as this marvelous wine from the base year of 2007, has had a chance to stretch out a bit as its structural elements have relaxed and it is now drinking with marvelous generosity. The *cépages* for this wine is forty-seven percent pinot noir, thirty-seven percent chardonnay and only sixteen percent pinot meunier, with roughly a third of the wines included in its make up being reserve wines. Today the wine is wide open and lovely, offering up a constellation of strawberries, cantaloupe, tangerine, chalky soil tones, plenty of smokiness, cinnamon, cardamom and a beautiful topnote of orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, bright and full-bodied, with a generous personality, exceptional depth at the core, refined *mousse* and a long, zesty and seamlessly balanced finish of lovely complexity and breed. Great, great juice. 2022-2060. **96**.



Vintage-Dated Blanc de Blancs

2017 Emilien Feneuil “Cuvée Totum” Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature (Sermiers)

Emilien Feneuil’s 2017 “Cuvée Totum” Blanc de Blancs is a lovely bottle in the making. Like so many Champagnes I taste these days without *dosage*, this wine will demand some time in the cellar to soften up its acids, but it is going to be excellent once it is ready to go. The wine

was disgorged in December of 2020 and offers up a refined bouquet of pear, fresh almond, chalky minerality, just a whisper of oak, white flowers and a touch of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a lovely core, fine mineral drive and backend bounce, refined *mousse* and a long, complex and nicely balanced finish. This wine has an interesting *cépages* this year, as it is eighty-five percent Chardonnay and fifteen percent Petit Meslier. A lovely wine. 2025-2045. **92.**

2017 Emilien Feneuil “Cuvée Mix” Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature (Sermiers)

The 2017 Cuvée Mix from Monsieur Feneuil is essentially the same wine as the Cuvée Totum, as it hails from the same seven plots of white grapes as the Totum, but it is crafted in the cellars with an eye towards making the Cuvée Mix a touch more approachable in its youth. The wine was also disgorged in December of 2020 and is showing beautifully today, with the nose wafting from the glass in a refined blend of apple, pear, raw almond, chalky soil tones, a touch of *crème patissière* and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied, beautifully focused and frothy in personality, with a lovely core of fruit, good soil signature, zesty acids and a long, well-balanced and very classy finish. I have no issues with drinking this wine right out of the blocks, though it will clearly gain in complexity with bottle age. 2022-245. **92+.**

2015 Suenen “la Coclulette” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Cramant)

The la Coclulette single vineyard bottling from Oiry was first produced by Aurelien Suenen in the 2013 vintage. His 2015 version is his finest yet that I have tasted from this parcel of old vine chardonnay. As readers may recall, the *vins clairs* here are principally barrel-fermented and given fully nine months of *elevage* in cask prior to bottling up for secondary fermentation. The 2015 was disgorged in October of 2021 after five years on the fine lees and finished with a *dosage* of five grams per liter, which is two grams higher than the racy 2014 received. The wine is utterly stunning out of the blocks, with the bouquet soaring from the glass in a complex blend of pear, passion fruit, a hint of tangerine, a superb base of limestone minerality, bread dough and just a whisper of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off stunning depth at the core, with laser-like focus, elegant *mousse*, impeccable balance and a very, very long, complex and utterly seamless finish. This is finest wine I have yet tasted from Aurelien Suenen! 2025-2075. **96.**

2015 Suenen “la Mont-Aigu” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Cramant)

The 2015 la Mont-Aigu single vineyard bottling from Chouilly is also a brilliant young wine and is really not far off the quality level of the la Coclulette. It was treated similarly to that wine in the cellars, with nine months aging in cask, native yeast fermentation, five years *sur latte* and was disgorged also in October of 2021, with a finishing *dosage* of five grams per liter. The wine is aromatically beautiful, offering up scents of pear, lemon, a hint of fresh pineapple, chalky soil tones, *crème patissière*, orange blossoms and a gentle framing of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with excellent complexity and grip, impeccable balance, pinpoint bubbles and great length and grip on the zesty finish. This is just a touch more reserved out of the blocks than the La Coclulette, so will ask for a bit more time in the cellar, but it too is going to be superb. 2027-2065. **95+.**

2015 Suenen “les Robarts” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Cramant)

The *lieu à dit* bottling of les Robarts from the village of Cramant is also absolutely stunning, with this vintage having been finished with three grams per liter of *dosage* in 2015. The wine received a similar *elevage* of nine months in cask prior to bottling for secondary

fermentation and was also disgorged in October of 2021. The bouquet here is already beautifully expressive, wafting from the glass in a mix of pear, apple, hazelnut, chalky minerality, gentle smokiness, brioche and delicate oak tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a great core, superb mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a long, classy and mineral-driven finish. This is going to demand a bit more time in the cellar before its acids relax and the wine starts to drink with generosity on the palate. 2029-2065. **95+**.

2010 Champagne Corbon “Grande Millésime” Blanc de Blancs Brut (Avize)

Agnès Corbon has made one of the most beautiful examples of the 2010 vintage in Champagne that I have had the pleasure to taste. The wine just blossoms a bit more each time I return to it, with this most recent bottle showing a refined aromatic constellation of golden delicious apples, pears, brioche, a hint of passion fruit, chalky minerality, lemon peel and a topnote of citrus blossoms. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and full, with an excellent core of fruit, fine soil undertow and cut, refined *mousse* and a long, racy and beautifully balanced finish. Though this is a non-malo bottling (like all of the Corbon vintage-dated wines), the *maison*’s practice of giving the wine fully ten years aging *sur latte* prior to disgorgement allows the acids to relax beautifully, so that a finishing *dosage* of six grams per liter perfectly balances the wine. Great juice. 2027-2075+. **95**.

2009 Agrapart “Minéral” Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Millésime (Avize)

The 2009 Minéral from Agrapart is a very good bottle of Blanc de Blancs, with a fine spine of acidity for the warm 2009 vintage. The wine was aged five and a half years *sur latte* and disgorged in October of 2015, with a finishing *dosage* of five grams per liter. Today, it delivers a refined bouquet of pear, fresh baked bread, a touch of nectarine, hazelnut, chalky minerality and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a very good core of fruit, fine mineral undertow, brisk acids and just a hint of coarseness to the *mousse* that keeps the score down just a touch. But, the wine is long and nicely focused on the backend and is really quite tasty. 2022-2045. **92**.

2004 Taittinger “Comtes de Champagne” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Reims)

The 2004 vintage of Comtes de Champagne remains so youthful at age eighteen that the wine is actually still a touch reductive when first opened and needs to be allowed to sit a bit in the glass before it starts to stir aromatically! I had not tasted a bottle of this wine in more than seven years and was quite surprised to see it still so youthful, eventually offering up a bright and complex nose of pear, apple, brioche, smoke, a beautiful base of chalky minerality, almond and a deft touch of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and has excellent mid-palate depth, with lovely minerality, bright, zesty acids, very elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and still fairly snappy finish. To my palate, another five years in the cellar is really *de rigueur* for those who wish to start drinking this wine once it has properly blossomed! It is a beautiful vintage of Comtes de Champagne in the making, but I would be in no hurry to open bottles now. 2027-2060+. **95**.

2003 Champagne Corbon “Grande Millésime” Blanc de Blancs Brut (Avize)

I had only previously tasted the 2003 vintage of Grande Millésime from the Corbon family on one occasion five or six years ago, and the wine has continued to age gracefully and is a lovely bottle. The bouquet shows the ripe fruit of this hot summer, but also the mineral spine

that defines the family's wines, as it wafts from the glass in a blend of pear, apple, *crème patissière*, chalky minerality, spring flowers and gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and just a touch four-square by the standards of the *maison*, but with a good core, elegant *mousse*, lovely balance and a long, zesty and complex finish. This is very good for an '03! 2022-2055. 91.



2002 Champagne Corbon “Gr. Millésime” Blc de Bles Brut (Avize) Recently-Disgorged

This particular bottle of 2002 Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime was disgorged in January of 2022 and part of a shipment of recently-disgorged bottles that Agnès Corbon sent to her importers for a second release of the wine. The 2002 is drinking beautifully today, with the nose wafting from the glass in a complex blend of pear, hazelnut, plenty of smokiness, a fine base of chalky soil and a lovely topnote of acacia blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and precise, with a lovely spine of acidity, good depth at the core, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and wide open finish. At age twenty, this vintage is just entering into its plateau of peak maturity and drinking with enthusiastic generosity. But, it still has decades of life ahead of it- at least for the recently-disgorged examples. 2022-2055. 93.

2002 Champagne Corbon “Gr. Millésime” Blc de Bles Brut (Avize) Original Disgorgement

For comparison's sake, Madame Corbon also shipped a bottle of the original disgorgement of the 2002 vintage-dated Blanc de Blancs, which would have been disgorged in 2013. The wine is, not surprisingly, quite a bit more evolved aromatically today, offering up a lovely blend of apple, toasted almond, wheat toast, a lovely base of chalky soil, smokiness and a

topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully resolved today, with tertiary layers of complexity, a good core, still lovely acidity and grip, pinpoint bubbles and a long, elegant and well-balanced finish. This is drinking beautifully today, but has much more of the mature Champagne character than the recently-disgorged release. 2022-2045. **92.**

2002 Ployez-Jacquemart Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut Vintage (Ludes)

The 2002 Ployez-Jacquemart Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut is drinking splendidly at twenty years of age. The bouquet is deep, complex and beautifully refined, wafting from the flute in a blend of apple, peach, caraway seed, warm bread, chalky soil tones, walnut and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and at its apogee, with a fine core, elegant *mousse*, lovely mineral drive and a long, crisp and perfectly balanced, complex finish. This had quite a low *dosage* and was fairly brisk when it was first released at ten years of age, but an additional decade in the cellar has worked its magic, with the acids relaxing the wine coming into its prime. Fine, fine juice from one of the most underrated producers in all of Champagne! 2022-2040. **93.**

2002 Taittinger “Comtes de Champagne” Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Reims)

In contrast to the still youthful 2004 Comtes de Champagne, the 2002 vintage of this wine is now fully into its apogee at age twenty and is drinking with spectacular generosity today. The bouquet is wide open, complex, vibrant and compelling, delivering scents of pear, tangerine, fresh-baked bread, a refined base of chalky soil tones, sweet almond and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a great core of fruit, lovely mineral undertow, elegant *mousse* and a perfectly balanced, long and precise finish. I have loved this vintage of Comtes de Champagne since its initial release and it is now drinking at its peak, albeit still with decades of life ahead of it! 2022-2050. **96.**

1988 Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Avize)

The last time I had the pleasure to drink the 1988 vintage from the Corbon family was out of magnum at a party held in the region back in 2015, when Agnès Corbon kindly brought along several vintages to share with the other guests. This regular-sized bottle was every bit as fine as the magnum seven years ago, offering up a still bright and vibrant bouquet of baked apple and pear, warm bread, chalky minerality, hazelnut, dried flowers and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, zesty and at its apogee, with a lovely core, excellent mineral drive and grip, refined *mousse* and a long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. This is *à point* today, but still has plenty of life ahead. 2022-2060. **94.**

1983 Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Avize)

I do not see too many example of the 1983 vintage from Champagne these days, but the Corbon Grande Millésime is cruising along so beautifully that one wonders if perhaps more producers might have been well-served to make a vintage-dated wine in this year. Today, the 1983 offers up a beautifully refined nose of apple, pear, brioche, pastry cream, almond, gentle smokiness, fruit blossoms and just a touch of butteriness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and complex, with a good core, a wide, wide open personality, pinpoint bubbles, lovely acids and a long. Balanced and complex finish. This is simply a delicious bottle today. 2022-2040. **92.**

1982 Champagne Corbon Blanc de Blancs Brut Millésime (Avize)

This was the first time I had ever drunk the 1982 Grande Millésime from Champagne Corbon and it is a superb example of this great vintage. The bouquet is right at its zenith and simply stunning, soaring from the glass in a mix of apple, pear, macadamia nut, plenty of smokiness, a touch of new leather, a gorgeous base of chalky soil tones and orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and supremely elegant, with a lovely core, fine transparency and grip, still beautifully persistent *mousse* and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. Great juice. 2022-2045+. **94.**

Vintage Dated Brut and Extra Brut

2017 Emilien Feneuil “les Ruisseaux” Blanc de Noirs Brut Nature (Sermiers)

The 2017 vintage of les Ruisseaux from Emilien Feneuil is an utterly beautiful young wine. This is the first vintage he has produced of this single vineyard bottling, which is composed entirely from pinot meunier from a small plot of vines in Sermiers and is already showing beautifully, with a sense of structural accessibility that makes it all too easy to drink at this young age! The bouquet is bright and elegant, delivering a lovely constellation of white peach, a touch of passion fruit, chalky soil tones, orange blossoms, *patissière* and just a whisper of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with fine depth in the mid-palate, lovely mineral undertow, elegant *mousse* and a very long, refined finish that closes with fine grip. This is impeccable juice. 2022-2045. **93+.**

2015 Suenen “la Grande Vigne” Blanc de Noirs Brut Millésime (Cramant)

Aurélien Suenen’s la Grande Vigne bottling is made entirely from ungrafted pinot meunier vines in the village of Montigny, north of Reims. These vines are now more than seventy years of age. Beginning in 2015, Aurélien has gotten his friend Alex Chartogne to tend these vines for him (as they are far closer to Alex’s village of Merfy than they are to Cramant!) and the greater hands on care during the growing season seems to have paid off, as this wine is brilliant! It is treated the same in the cellars as the *lieux à dit* bottlings here from Oiry, Chouilly and Cramant, with indigenous yeast fermentation, nine months cask *elevage* and five years on the fine lees prior to disgorgement. The finishing *dosage* for the 2015 la Grande Vigne was three grams per liter, which works just fine with my palate. The nose is simply gorgeous, wafting from the glass in an elegant blend of white peach, orange zest, chalky soil tones, bread dough, quite understated meunier floral tones and a touch of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and seamlessly balanced, with fine mid-palate depth, lovely soil signature, elegant *mousse* and a long, complex and vibrant finish. A beautiful wine. 2025-2060. **95.**

2014 Louis Roederer “Cristal” Brut Millésime (Reims)

The 2014 vintage of Cristal is another masterpiece in the making. The bouquet is young and utterly refined, wafting from the glass in a mix of apple, white peach, lemon, chalky minerality, *patissière*, white lilies and just a touch of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is pure, refined and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, beautifully complex soil tones, snappy acids, seamless balance and a long, nascently complex and utterly precise finish. This is quite a bit more tightly-knit structurally than the 2013 Cristal was a year ago, and this is clearly a vintage that is built for the cellar. It will be a stunning wine in due course, but it does not possess the same level of temptation as the 2013 to drink it on the early side! 2034-2085. **95.**

2008 Krug Brut Millésime (Reims)

The 2008 Vintage bottling from Krug just continues to get better each time I am fortunate enough to taste it. I last tasted this wine a year ago and it has not seemingly aged a bit since that time, as it remains a glorious vintage here that will demand plenty of patience before it properly blossoms. The bouquet remains beautifully precise and bottomless, offering up scents of apple, tart pear, lemon, a beautiful base of chalky minerality, *patissière*, dried flowers, blossoming smokiness, just a touch of caraway seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and structured, with a snappy girdle of acidity, a rock solid core, great mineral drive and grip, elegant *mousse* and a very, long, bright and seamlessly balanced finish of enormous potential complexity. All this great, great vintage of Krug needs is more time alone in the cellar. 2030-2100. 98.



2005 Henriot Brut Millésime (Reims)

It had been nearly eight years since I last tasted a bottle of the 2005 Henriot Brut Millésime, as I had not opened a bottle of this wine since the summer of 2014. The wine has continued to age beautifully and at age seventeen is now fully into its plateau of peak maturity. The wine is composed of a fifty-fifty blend of pinot noir and chardonnay and was aged six years *sur latte* prior to disgorgement and finished with a *dosage* of 9.5 grams per liter. Today, the wine is beautifully complex and still vibrant on the nose, wafting from the glass in a refined blend of baked peaches and apples, macadamia nuts, warm bread, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness and

a touch of orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, brisk and full-bodied, with a fine core, lovely tertiary complexity, still a fine girdle of acidity, vigorous *mousse* and lovely focus and balance on the long and classy finish. This is aging beautifully and still has plenty of life ahead of it. 2022-2045. **93**.

2004 Philipponnat “Clos des Goisses” Brut Millésime

I had not tasted a bottle of the 2004 Clos des Goisses since the fall of 2014. As I mentioned at that time, this is a vintage that went through full malolactic fermentation, which is not customary with Clos des Goisses, but given the snappy acids of the 2004 vintage, I would never have known this if Charles Philipponnat had not mentioned it at a dinner. The wine is composed of a *cépages* of sixty-five percent pinot noir and thirty-five percent chardonnay. The wine was disgorged in February of 2013 and finished with a *dosage* of 4.5 grams per liter in this vintage. It has shown exceptional potential since it was first released, but it is still a young wine and a bit more bottle age will allow it to blossom more fully from behind its girdle of '04 acidity. The bouquet is beautiful already, wafting from the glass in a mix of white peach, apple, brioche, a superb base of soil tones, a lovely note of fresh almond and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite racy, with a gorgeous core of fruit, refined *mousse*, excellent mineral drive and cu and a very long, precise and perfectly balanced finish. This is a great vintage of Clos des Goisses in the making, but try to give it at least a few more years in the cellar to further soften up. 2026-265+. **95+**.

2002 Lanson Vintage Brut (Reims)

The 2002 Lanson Vintage Brut is drinking beautifully at twenty years of age. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a complex blend of apple, peach, hazelnut, chalky soil tones, pumpernickel and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and wide open in personality today, with a lovely core, elegant *mousse*, vibrant acids and lovely balance and grip on the long and complex finish. This has decades of life still ahead of it, but it is drinking splendidly at the present time, with lovely tertiary layers of complexity, coupled to a beautiful spine of acidity and impressive soil undertow. 2022-2060. **93**.

Vintage Dated Rosé

2017 Emilien Feneuil “les Puits” Rosé de Macération Brut Nature (Sermiers)

Emilien Feneuil’s Rosé de Macération bottlings are among my favorite Rosés in the Champagne region these days and both of his single parcel offerings from the 2017 vintage are exceptional. With both these bottlings, Emilien allows for twenty-four hours of skin contact to give them their color. The Les Puits bottling hails from this *lieu à dit* in the village of Chamery and is composed entirely from pinot noir. It was disgorged in December of 2020, is pale salmon in color and delivers an excellent bouquet of blood orange, rye toast, chalky minerality, an exotic touch of heather and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with bright, well-integrated acids, lovely soil signature and grip, frothy *mousse* and great length and grip on the impeccably-balanced and very complex finish. This is really lovely. 2022-2045. **93+**.

2017 Emilien Feneuil “les Goulats” Rosé de Macération Brut Nature (Sermiers)

The 2017 les Goulats Rosé de Macération is also composed entirely from pinot noir. The *vins clairs* for both of these bottlings are made from destemmed pinot noir, with the les Goulats just a touch lighter in color in 2017 than the les Puits. Disgorgement was done in December of

2020 and the wine today is showing beautifully, with the refined nose wafting from the glass in a blend of cherries, rhubarb, blood orange, chalky soil tones and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and just a touch more vinous in style than the les Puits this year, with a fine core, excellent transparency and bounce, elegant *mousse* and a long, classy and well-balanced finish. Fine, fine juice. 2022-2045. **93+**.

RECENTLY-TASTED AMERICAN WINES SPRING 2022



Beautiful Domaine Drouhin in Oregon, basking in the glories of an early spring day in 2022.

The new spring releases from many of the top American wineries are notable as much for what they do not include as what they do, as many top Oregon and California wineries are not offering some or all of their customary bottlings from the 2020 vintage, which was tragically altered by the massive wildfires at harvest time of that year. In Oregon winemaking country in 2020, rare atmospheric conditions started on September 8th, blowing smoke in from fires to the northeast with gale force winds and trapping the smoke from these fires in the valley with an inversion layer for a week and a half in the Willamette Valley. Most of the fires were off to the northeast in the Cascade Range (a few kindled in the valley itself during the course of the crisis), but the unrelenting winds whipped the smoke into the Willamette Valley from those distant fires and trapped it there for ten days. As Seth Long of Morgen Long Winery recalls of the time right after the smoke settled in the valley, “over the next few days,” the “ripening halted, and conditions were grim until rain came with west winds on September 16th and 17th to refresh the air.” As he notes of the fires of 2020, “it was a tragic week and a half, as millions of acres of land burned and thousands of families lost their homes, businesses, and in the worst cases, their lives.” Consequently, many Oregon producers were forced to not produce any wines at all in 2020, or to drastically alter what they did produce, due to the smoke damage that could be quite pervasive in many of the vineyards in this beautiful corner of west coast viticulture. For example, the Drouhin family decided to make no wines whatsoever from their properties of Domaine Drouhin in the Dundee Hills or Roserock in the Van Duzer Corridor, Kelley Fox made no pinot noirs at all in this vintage and an extremely limited range of other bottlings, trying to find some use for the bunches that were the least affected by the smoke. The fine new producer of OO Wines will also make no wines at all in 2020, and this also the case with many other producers.

In California wine country, the fire catastrophe was, if anything, even worse than in Oregon, for this was an epidemic of very large, widespread and ravenous wildfires leading into harvest

time in 2020 and which allowed smoke to hover over much of northern California for nearly two months. The fires in this state began almost a month earlier than those in Oregon, with flames erupting first on August 16th, 17th and 18th, through a very wide spate of lightning strikes accompanied by raging fifty mile an hour winds and searingly high temperatures; the deadly combination quickly spread to become the largest fire catastrophe ever in the history of California, with many of the peak days of fires also accompanied by a scorching heatwave that only exacerbated the crisis. Many of us can still vividly recall the photos of blood orange-colored skies over the widespread areas affected by these infernos, creating a hell-scape for those personally affected by the catastrophes. What became known as the LNU Lightning Complex Fire was one of the state's most damaging to wine counties in 2020 (it grew to ultimately comprise ten different fires, including the extremely damaging Wallbridge Fire on the Sonoma Coast); it was started through a series of lightning strikes on August 17th and eventually encompassed more than 363,000 scorched acres throughout several counties, including doing widespread damage in parts of Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. The massive August Fire complex which affected the coastal mountains of Mendocino and Lake Counties also negatively impacted wine production in 2020, and there were smaller fires this year also in Monterey and Marin Counties, as well as up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. In short, the fire season of 2020 is one that no one in California or Oregon hopes to ever have to live through again.

I have zero expertise with smoke damage to vineyards and have tried to get some sense of how these massive fires in both California and Oregon damaged or wiped out the crop by reaching out to some of the winegrowers in these affected regions. At the time the California fires started in mid-August, most vineyards in California wine country were not yet ripe and ready to pick, so often it was simply impossible to hustle picking crews out into the vines to gather fruit before the smoke damage took hold, as the grapes were simply not ready for harvesting. According to Jamie Kutch of Kutch Wines on the Sonoma Coast, "the smoke from the fires caused damage to the thin-skinned pinot noir grape" very briskly, and he felt very fortunate to at least have nearly ripe pinot noir at McDougall Ranch when the fires first started and to be able to pick his fruit here on the 21st of August, which was just ahead of the worst of the smoke arriving over that particular vineyard. As he noted, "had we picked one day later" the fruit from MacDougall, we would have lost that also "to smoke taint". He continued, "by the next day, the two other producers who purchase fruit from McDougall Ranch and had not yet picked, had lost the vintage to smoke-tainted fruit." However, despite being fortunate with MacDougall, he was not able to make wine from any other of his pinot noir parcels in 2020.

Joanna Castorani of Model Farm Wines in Petaluma was also very helpful in explaining some of the issues that revolve around serious smoke damage to vineyards and to the crop. Joanna and her husband Sean make wines from the Sonoma Coast, Petaluma Gap, Anderson Valley and Santa Cruz Mountains, so the couple has a very good feel for just how pervasive the smoke damage in northern California was during 2020 (and also kindly shared some of their photos from the disaster for inclusion in this article). As she noted about the problem in general, "there is a real lack of institutional knowledge in the science of smoke taint", and though, sadly, 2020 provided far more evidence to add to the labs researching the problem, this is just laying a foundation of better understanding for the future of how smoke damage impacts wine production

by damaging bunches out in the vineyards. It seems to me that quoting Joanna at length is useful on this issue:

“The smoke-derived compounds are absorbed through- not held in- by the grape skins and those smoke compounds then become bound with the sugars. Skin thickness is not related to the impact of smoke taint on grapes, so Syrah, Cabernet, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are just as susceptible as Pinot Noir. White wines and rosés are equally as susceptible to smoke as reds. Because the compounds are chemically bound up with the sugars, you cannot taste or smell smoke taint in unfermented juice. During and after the fermentation process, as the sugars are converted to alcohol and CO₂, those compounds are released into the wine. You really don't know how much the grapes were affected until weeks or months later, post-fermentation.”



Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains on August 18th of 2020, as the smoke plume starts to move in at the start.

David Jeffrey of Calluna Vineyards in the Chalk Hill AVA in Sonoma County also added another important consideration regarding smoke taint when I asked him about the issue, and this has to do with the proximity of the grapes to the actual fires; the closer the vines are to the source of the smoke, the worse the taint. Recall that in both California and Oregon wine country, the freak atmospheric conditions in both states caused smoke to be held in the atmosphere for weeks on end, often in areas that were not all that proximate to the actual fires. As David noted, “while it is important how long grapes are exposed to smoke, apparently what is also very important is how new the smoke is”, as for example, “if the fire is raging right near a vineyard, it is getting more new smoke with a higher concentration of the problematic compounds” that find their way from smoke into the finished wines. To return to Joanna Castorani’s comments, which she notes do not speak to conditions in Santa Barbara or Oregon, but which are reflective of the regions of northern California where she and Sean makes wine, “it is hard to overstate just how much smoke was in the air, everywhere, and for how long”, as “fog held smoke in at the extreme

coastal sites, pushed smoke up to the high elevation sites, and smoke settled in the valleys for weeks and weeks on end.”

Keep in mind that laboratories were absolutely inundated with requests for sampling analyses of possible smoke taint in grapes, so it quickly became an impossible situation as winegrowers were frantic to find out if the crop, or some portion of it could be saved. With California’s wildfire crisis having ignited three weeks ahead of the crisis in the Willamette Valley, Oregon producers were faced with even more impossible factors, as most labs were already completely overwhelmed by analysis requests from California wine producers and wait times were going to prove to be untenable in terms of making decisions in the vineyards and cellars about whether or not to produce wines and what might be the best course of action to take during fermentations if one was going to attempt to produce wines. As Kelley Fox observed, “the wine labs like ETS (in Sonoma) were already inundated with samples for smoke impact from California vineyards, and even the labs that offered uncertified assistance in the northwest had turnarounds of at least two weeks, while ETS was stating results for their existing customers would be in November at the earliest.” In California, where so many wildfires were relatively close to vineyards, there was more likelihood that smoke damage would be extensive, but it was less certain in Oregon wine country, where most of the massive fires were quite some distance away in the Cascade Range to the northeast, though the prevailing winds throughout the crisis had funneled the smoke right into the Willamette Valley, where it hung like a shroud over the valley during the ten days before the rains cleansed the air. Kelley Fox notes that “there was no way to predict the impact before making picking decisions.” So Oregon producers really had no idea how extensive the smoke taint would be and most went ahead and picked the crop, just in case they might get lucky with minimal smoke influence in the wines.

As the wildfires started earlier in northern California, with the lightning strikes from August 16th through the 18th, and did not have the good fortune to have smoke cleared out by rains after ten days, as was the case further north in the Willamette Valley, we are looking at a period of insanely smoky conditions that lasted from mid-August into the month of October and are quite unprecedented in the history of California. Hopefully it will prove to be a singular crisis of epic proportions, but with global warming so pervasive and accelerating at such a brisk pace, coupled with the galactic stupidity of governmental and corporate inaction on a global scale, one fears that this will not be the case. The other thing to consider about the vintage of 2020 is that for the several days at the outset, the massive fires in California were also accompanied by furnace-like temperatures, which dehydrated and baked fruit on the vines and the scorching heat would have been problematic in its own right, even if the smoke had not been such a huge issue as well. It seems quite likely that without the wildfires and baking heat spikes, California would have had a brilliant vintage in 2020, but this was not to be the case and we will be lucky to have a small percentage of good wines produced in this year from those lucky enough to escape the worst aspects of the smoke damage. But, as damage was hardly consistent from vineyard to vineyard or region to region, there is hope that there will be some excellent wines that manage to emerge in 2020 against these unprecedented long odds.

To return to David Jeffrey at Calluna Vineyards, he makes an important point in noting that lab analysis of “offending compounds” from smoke taint “come in both free and bound forms” and “you cannot smell the bound forms, but it is believed that, over time, the bound will

become free and cause problems” in finished wines. During the most urgent period for the labs trying to analyze grapes, they were not able to even test for the “bound forms” of the smoke compounds (referred to as “Glycosylated Markers” in lab reports) and were only able to analyze the “free forms”, which fortunately were considered adequate proof of smoke damage for producers insured against such issues and which allowed for many grape growers to be covered by insurance companies in 2020. At Calluna in the Chalk Hill AVA, where smoke was less pervasive in the windy hillside vineyards than in many other places, David decided to wait and see what could be made from his grapes and picked and fermented when the grapes were ripe. He noted that “at Calluna, while we did see a fair amount of smoke, our wines seemed to taste clean” out of cask and he has some reason for cautious optimism. As he reminded me, back in 2017, one of his blocks of cabernet sauvignon also had to endure plenty of smoke from the wildfires that year and he picked that plot of vines after the smoke had cleared out and sequestered it from the rest of his production in 2017, which had been picked before the wildfires began. The 2017 wine, which he called Block One Cabernet Sauvignon and bottled on its own, turned out to be very good. Just recently, as labs now have time and better techniques for analyzing smoke taint, he submitted his 2020 Estate Cabernet alongside of a bottle of his 2019 Estate Cabernet (which was a completely smoke-free vintage), just to see how the two vintages stacked up against one another. He reports that “ETS and other firms now do more complete panels of testing- which now include both free and bound compounds” and “the results, thankfully, showed that the 2020 has not materially more of these compounds than the 2019.” So there is some hope for some of the 2020s.

Without the fires in mid-September, Oregon would have had a small crop of very, very high quality wines in 2020. Spring here was out of the blocks briskly, as the weather was warm and dry and budbreak was a week earlier than had been the case in the previous two vintages. However, it turned cool and wet at the outset of June and stayed that way for the first three weeks of the month, adversely impacting the flowering and severely cutting back the potential size of the harvest. July dried out and warmed up during the days, but with evening temperatures remaining quite cool and eventually leading to even, well-measured ripening of the bunches and it looked like it was going to be a very good vintage, at least in terms of quality, though yields were going to be tiny from all of the problems at *floraison*. As Kelley Fox observed about the quality of the fruit hanging as she walked through her vines right before Labor Day in 2020, “the yields were relatively miniscule, especially in my Dundee Hills vineyard sources, but the clusters with their tiny berries and compact shapes looked perfect.” And then the smoke started to blow in from the northeast on September 8th, just as everyone was thinking about getting started picking grapes. Soon there were also wildfires broken out within the Willamette Valley, as well as the continued dark skies from the smoke that had blown in from the east, and Oregon was every bit as trapped in a catastrophe of fire and smoke as the one in California that had started three weeks earlier. As I mentioned above, a great many red wine producers were forced to simply not produce any wines at all in this vintage, fearing the taint from the smoke would make the crafting of high quality wines impossible.

As the smoke damage was wildly different from region to region, vineyard to vineyard and even from parcel to parcel within a single vineyard, each winegrower had to make decisions on their own and I do not know the extent to which producers abandoned the option of making wines, sold off wines in bulk that were not up to their standards, crafted different types of wines

(such as Kelley Fox's Phoenix bottling of white wine made with seventy-five percent pinot noir!) or simply made wines and waited to see how strident the smoke influence might end up being. Sending wines over to labs to analyze after they were in cask was also not always an option, for as Jamie Kutch noted about smoke damage in the 2020 wines, "I have found it difficult to test for smoke taint though a laboratory, as the same smoke taint compound is also found in toasted oak barrels." So, lab analysis can have a hard time discerning between smoke taint and the influence of charred barrels once the wines have been in cask for some time. It is just an extremely challenging year, with the tragedies of these massive wildfires throughout the states of California and Oregon producing far more suffering beyond the realm of wine production, as so much property was destroyed and so many people lost their lives during these fires, while Covid was raging across the globe and Nero was fiddling in the White House. That we are able to have some very beautiful wines come out of this inferno of a vintage is a small miracle in and of itself, and in these times, maybe small miracles are all we should be hoping for.



Working under the browned, blood orange skies in Sonoma on September 9th, 2020, as the fires continued to rage.

Seth Long, of the chardonnay-only producer of Morgen Long Wines in the Willamette Valley, opted to ride out the period of extreme smokiness and then see if his bunches would finish up their ripening under the return of blue skies. As Seth contracts for his fruit from a number of different growers, he was faced with the prospect of not buying the grapes and losing

his contracts with the vineyards, or harvesting the grapes and seeing what could be made from them in the cellar with some improvisation in his winemaking techniques. With chardonnay, and other white wine varieties, the issue may not be quite as severe as it is with red wines, as the juice is crushed and removed from the skins promptly (though as Joanna Castorani noted, the compounds pass through the skins and become bound with the sugars of the grapes), which potentially can mitigate to some degree smoke taint in the finished wines. However, as Seth Long noted with his altered cellar methodology for his chardonnays, “what I did in 2020 was lower my juice yield targets and minimized time in the press” and then “settled nearly all the 2020 pressings for twelve hours with Bio-Clear, which is a highly refined organic yeast hull product” and “left most of the solids behind.” In most years, Seth will rack his juice to barrel with a fairly high degree of turbidity, as he likes what the lees material adds to the fermentation kinetics, but he avoided this in 2020. As he barrel-ferments all of his chardonnays, he opted to use only new, second and third fill puncheons this year for the wines, steering clear of older casks that will normally be part of the rotation, and once the first fermentation was done, he inoculated with malolactic bacteria (“first time ever”) so that malos would not drag behind in this unique vintage, “as I wanted to get the wines sulfured as soon as possible so I could begin to see the wines.”

Having now tasted the entire roster of the Morgen Long 2020s, I have to say that the wines have turned out remarkably well to my palate. Seth feels his clients will be best off drinking his 2020s on the earlier side, as he really has no idea how these changes in his cellar techniques might affect their potential longevity, but based on the wines that I have tasted, all of his 2020s certainly seem capable of fairly long lives in bottle. Of course, we then get back to the difference between the “bound” and “free” compounds of smoke taint in wines, that David Jeffrey mentioned above. It is possible that the Morgen Long 2020 chardonnays may show some smoke issues with extended bottle age, given that the “bound” compounds are now known to become “free” with aging, so the wines which taste perfectly clean today could get a bit smoky down the road. As Joanna Castorani noted, no one really knows how the wines will evolve. So, though I have given projected windows of drinkability for all of Seth’s wines based on how they are structurally balanced at this point in time, it may be prudent to drink them fairly young. However, given that Seth’s grapes were picked starting on September 19th, after the smoke finally cleared out of the Willamette Valley with the arrival of rains and westerly winds on September 17th, what he has been able to accomplish in this vintage is truly remarkable and if we have to end up drinking his wines on the young side, that is a small price to pay, given all of the attendant suffering that went along with the inferno of the wildfires in California and Oregon in 2020.

Beyond the myriad of loss and tragedy that surrounded the 2020 vintage on the west coast of the US, this report contains plenty of wines from either side of that extremely difficult vintage, with tons of notes on wines from 2019 included. As readers may recall, in Oregon wine country, the 2019 growing season harkened back to those from the pre-climate change era in the region, with far cooler general temperatures and long hang time for the bunches, which has produced a beautifully lithe, elegant and vibrant vintage of wines with beautifully measured fruit density, good tannic structures in the reds and bouncy, tangy acidity. It is one of my absolute favorite recent vintages in the region. Early reports are that the 2021 vintage is also going to be outstanding in Oregon wine country, so at least the catastrophe that was the wildfires of 2020 has

been flanked on either side by superb vintages, which will at least make up for a little bit of the loss. And, as I mentioned above, some isolated producers may well have found a way to produce good wines from the 2020 vintage, if they were fortunate enough to be able to navigate through all of the fires and still manage to bring in reasonably unaffected grapes by the smoke taint. Given all of the discussions above about the little bit that is none about smoke taint in wines, I will be leaning towards drinking successful 2020s from California and Oregon on the early side, just in case those “bound” forms of taint start to throw their weight around with extended bottle aging. But, it is also a vintage that I will seek out to buy when I see it from trusted producers, in the hopes that my buying a few bottles might somehow help offset some of the huge weight of suffering that occurred during the epidemic of wildfires in California and Oregon in the late summer of 2020.

This report is broken up in its customary fashion by varietals, with the wines from both Oregon and California grouped together and listed chronologically by vintage and alphabetically by producer. While it is made up primarily of old school estates that have featured prominently in past reports of this kind, it also includes a few noteworthy new (to me) producers whose wines I had never previously tasted, but were very fine new additions to the firmament of traditionally-styled American wines. Thanks to the kindness of a subscriber (who strongly recommended these wines as ones that I would like stylistically), one of these new producers who I was introduced to and able to taste a nice range of bottlings from are the husband and wife team of Akiko Shiba and Chris Wichern of Shiba Wichern Cellars in the Willamette Valley. Akiko told me when I contacted her that the couple had sold out of all their currently available white wines, but she would be amenable to sending me a range of pinot noir bottlings that they still had in stock. I absolutely loved the wines and recommend them highly! The Shiba Wichern pinot noirs that I tasted are sourced from a range of different vineyards, including the biodynamically-farmed Momtazi Vineyard in McMinnville that I first became acquainted with through the wines made here by Kelley Fox and Brianna Day, and the Akiko Shiba’s version is another stellar example of this fine *terroir*. The wines are fermented with indigenous yeasts, raised all in used casks and offer up impressive complexity, precision, mineral signature and fruit purity. I am already looking forward to tasting Akiko’s and Chris’s white wines in the not too distant future.

I was also introduced to a couple of new cabernet sauvignon producers for this report and was very impressed with the quality of the wines from each estate. Winemaker Adolfo Hernandez had seen some of my previous reviews of old school producers in California and hoped I might enjoy the style of his cabernet bottlings at Monroy Wines in the Chalk Hill AVA of Sonoma County, which certainly proved to be the case. Adolfo barrel-ferments his cabernet in the casks that he is going to age the wine in later, opening up one end, measuring in the grapes, crushing and the re-sealing the barrels and laying them on their sides. He manages the maceration and moistening of the cap in each barrel by rolling them several times a day; once the maceration period is completed, the casks are drained, opened, the pomace is removed and pressed, the casks cleaned, re-sealed and re-filled with the young wine for aging. Adolfo gets one cask of wine from each pair of barrels he has fermented the wine in previously. The wines are racked and blended once at roughly the one year mark in barrel and bottled without fining or filtration after twenty months in cask. The Monroy cabernets do not see any acidity adjustments, nor water additions, with their octane levels reflective of their sugar accumulation at harvest. Both the 2018 and 2019 vintages that I tasted were excellent and quite old school in personality.

The other new, primarily cabernet sauvignon producer whose wines I was introduced to for this article is Lanthanide Wines, who markets their cabernet bottlings under the Ad Coelum label. The project is a joint venture between winemaker Diane Wu and viticulturist Philippe Venghiattis. Since earning her degree in Enology from UC-Davis, Diane has worked in Burgundy, the Rheinpfalz in Germany and at several California wineries, including the (former) old school bastion of tradition, Heitz Wine Cellars. Philippe spent a decade working in auction houses in New York prior to decamping for sunnier climes on the west coast of the US, earning his degree in Horticulture and Agronomy at UC-Davis. The two craft both Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings, with the former varietal bottlings sold under the Lanthanide Wine Group label and the cabernets under the Ad Coelum moniker. All the wines were very good, with the cabernets just a touch higher in octane than I would find ideal, and perhaps a bit too oaky, but impressively complex, fairly well-balanced and built for the long haul. As this is a very young project, I like the potential here and would expect the wines to gain as the two proprietors add experience and they are very much worth keeping an eye on in the coming years. It is refreshing to see young proprietors tackle cabernet sauvignon without simply wishing to cash in on another Screaming Eagle copycat bottling, usually made under the auspices of the same one or two high-priced cabernet sauvignon consulting winemakers out there who do not even deign to drink the wines they craft.



Chardonnay

2020 Chardonnay “Russian River Valley”- Bravium Wines (Russian River Valley)

The 2020 Russian River Valley bottling of chardonnay from Derek Rohlffs at Bravium is a lovely bottle. The wine comes in at a nicely measured 13.8 percent octane and delivers a youthful nose of apple, pear, a hint of fresh pineapple, spring flowers, just a hint of savory elements, a lovely base of soil and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, vibrant and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, good soil undertow, zesty acids and a long, still quite primary finish. This wine is fairly ripe, but carries it very nicely and retains plenty of the refined aesthetic sensibilities for which Bravium is so well-known. Fine juice. 2022-2030+. **91.**

2020 Chardonnay “Trout Gulch Vineyard”- Kutch Wines (Santa Cruz Mountains)

The 2020 Trout Gulch Vineyard chardonnay from Jamie Kutch was raised in twenty percent new oak in this vintage and comes in at an even thirteen percent octane. These vines were planted in 1977, so they are now over forty years of age- ancient by contemporary California standards. The wine is young and beautifully precise on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a mix of pear, apple, almond, white soil tones, spring flowers and a deft touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and nascently complex, with a good core, fine balance and grip and a long finish. This is a very nice bottle and a near miracle, given all of the challenges thrown up in the face of winegrowers in California in 2020. I normally like to age Jamie’s chardonnays several years before drinking them, but in 2020, I might be inclined to drink this wine in its relative youth, as one really has no idea how wines from this vintage are going to evolve in bottle. 2022-2030+. **92,**

2020 Chardonnay “Wildcat Mountain Vineyard”- Model Farm (Sonoma Valley)

This is the first vintage from Sean and Joanna Castorani from the Wildcat Mountain Vineyard, which they have long wished to buy fruit from. The vineyard was planted in 1998 and sits at the top of a windy crest of a hill of volcanic rock separating Petaluma from the Sonoma Valley. It is cold, windswept, stony and foggy and a perfect place to grow chardonnay in this era of global warming. The couple was extremely lucky to be able to make wine from here in 2020, as they harvested their fruit on August 17th, the same day the fires started, and it is probable that if they were not picking early, there would have been no wine from here in this vintage. The Castoranis’ 2020 chardonnay from Wildcat comes in at 13.3 percent octane and delivers a beautifully refined bouquet of apple, pear, orange zest, a touch of almond, stony soil tones, fruit blossoms and just a whisper of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with a superb core, great mineral undertow and cut, zesty acids and a long, elegant and beautifully precise finish. This is outstanding chardonnay that will be even better with a few years in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to rise to the surface! 2022-2040. **93+.**

2020 Chardonnay “Willamette Valley”- Morgen Long

The 2020 Willamette Valley bottling of chardonnay from Seth Long has turned out beautifully. This is composed from fruit from three top vineyards: sixty percent Yamhill Vineyard, twenty-five percent X Omni Vineyard and fifteen percent Durant Vineyard. The wine is clean and pure on the nose, offering up a complex blend of pear, apple, acacia blossoms, a touch of beeswax, a lovely base of soil and a nice framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with lovely acids, fine focus and grip, a very good core of fruit and a long, soil-driven and beautifully balanced finish. This will drink beautifully from release and is really a lovely bottle. 2022-2035+. **91.**

2020 Chardonnay “Marine”- Morgen Long (Willamette Valley)

The 2020 Marine bottling of chardonnay from Seth Long hails entirely from the Loubejac Vineyard this year, with the wine raised in a pair of used three hundred and fifty liter puncheons and one four wine cask. The various barrels were blended back into stainless steel tank prior to their second winter and then bottled the following spring. The wine comes in at 13.3 percent this year and a pure and refined nose of pear, white peach, hazelnut, a refined base of soil, white flowers and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and wide open in personality, with fine mid-palate depth, a nice sense of oakiness, zesty acids and lovely balance and grip on the long and complex finish. This is really drinking beautifully out of the blocks! 2022-2035+. **91+**.

2020 Chardonnay “Eola-Amity Hills”- Morgen Long

Seth Long’s Eola-Amity Hills bottling of chardonnay is composed from a fifty-fifty blend of fruit from the X Omni Vineyard and the Seven Springs Vineyard. The wine was barrel-fermented in older casks and after malolactic was completed (which took much longer for the X Omni portion of the cuvée), the two lots were blended and aged in new, Damy five hundred liter puncheon for eight and a half months prior to bottling. The wine comes in at a svelte 12.5 percent octane this year and delivers a beautiful aromatic constellation of pear, apple, almond, a lovely base of white soil tones, dried flowers, a hint of fresh nutmeg and a refined foundation of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully structured, with a fine core of fruit, a superb girdle of acidity, precise focus and grip and a long, complex and vibrant finish. There were only fifty-two cases produced of this beautiful chardonnay! 2022-2040+. **93**.

2020 Chardonnay “Seven Springs Vineyard”- Morgen Long (Eola-Amity Hills)

The 2020 vintage of Seven Springs Vineyard chardonnay from Morgen Long was raised in sixty percent new oak this year (new Damy five hundred liter puncheon) and forty percent in a one wine three hundred and fifty liter cask. The wines comes in at 13.2 percent this year, with ninety cases produced. It offers up a beautifully gentle oak shading in its bouquet of pear, almond, chalky soil tones, chamomile, spring flowers and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and rock solid at the core, with lovely mineral drive and grip, zesty acids and lovely length and grip on the complex and very nicely balanced finish. This is a new oaky example of chardonnay that is also long on soil signature. Fine juice. 2022-2035+. **92+**.

2020 Chardonnay “Seven Springs Vineyard” Grey Label- Morgen Long (Eola-Amity Hills)

The primary difference between the 2020 Grey Label Seven Springs chardonnay from Seth Long and the wine above is that this bottling was not chapitalized, whereas the above was chapitalized a half a degree. So, the Grey Label comes in at 12.7 percent alcohol this year, and its *elevage* was essentially the same, with the wine raised in two three-hundred and fifty liter puncheons, with one of them new oak. The bouquet is pure and precise, offering up scents of pear, almond, spring flowers, chalky soil tones, fresh nutmeg, chamomile and a gentle base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, excellent transparency and grip, snappy acids and a long, beautifully balanced finish. This is a touch more tightly-knit out of the blocks and may be just a touch more precise on the backend than the white label bottling of Seven Springs. But, not surprisingly, the wines are very close in personality, as they hail from the same vineyard, with vines of the same age and clonal selection and both were picked on September 22nd in this vintage. 2022-2040. **92+**.

2020 Chardonnay “X Omni Vineyard”- Morgen Long (Eola-Amity Hills)

I first became aware of the high quality of the densely-planted X Omni Vineyard during a visit to Walter Scott Wines a few years ago. These vines are still on the young side, but this is

going to be one of the best sites for chardonnay on the west coast in coming years and is already producing really beautiful fruit. Seth Long picked his parcel here on September 20th, the day after the smoke cleared out of the Willamette Valley. The wine was barrel-fermented and aged for eleven and a half months in one new five hundred liter puncheon and a “one wine” three hundred and fifty liter cask. The wine was assembled in stainless steel to spend its second winter and then bottled in the February of 2022. It tips the scales at a svelte 12.5 percent alcohol this year. The wine is gently new oaky on the nose, wafting from the glass in a refined blend of apple, almond, lime blossoms, a beautiful base of soil, an exotic touch of fresh mint and a beautiful framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, complex and full, with a superb core of fruit, marvelous soil signature, zesty acids and a very long, complex and intensely flavored finish. 2022-2045+. **94.**

2020 Chardonnay “Durant Vineyard”- Morgen Long (Dundee Hills)

The 2020 Durant Vineyard bottling of chardonnay from Seth Long is from vines that were planted in 1999 and 2000, so they are really starting to come into their prime today. The wine comes in at 13.2 percent octane this year and was aged in forty percent new oak for eleven and a half months prior to *assemblage* in stainless steel for its second winter and bottling in the following spring. The bouquet is simply stunning this year, wafting from the glass in a refined blend of apple, pear, salty minerality, apple blossoms, fresh almond and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and beautifully precise, with zesty acids, a superb core of fruit, great mineral drive and balance and a long, complex and vibrant finish. This is truly stunning. 2022-2050. **95.**

2020 Chardonnay “The Eyrie Vineyard”- Morgen Long (Dundee Hills)

These old vines, planted in 1968 on their original, ungrafted *franc de pied* roots, were the first that Seth Long commenced picking after the smokes cleared on September 19th. The must was chapitalized a half point this year and still only reached 12.4 percent octane, so this is an old school chardonnay that harkens back to the ripeness levels of white Burgundy back in the 1960s. The wine was raised entirely in a new oak barrel for eleven and a half months, prior to be racked into stainless steel to winter over prior to bottling. The bouquet is beautiful, offering up a gently oaky blend of apple, pear, hazelnut, acacia blossoms, lemon blossoms and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish, long and complex, with great intensity of flavor, vibrant acids, excellent focus and grip and a long, poised and seamlessly balanced finish. An understated beauty of the first degree! 2022-2050. **94.**

2019 Chardonnay “VGW”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

The 2019 vintage of VGW chardonnay from the Hermann family is excellent. It comes in at an even thirteen percent octane in this classic vintage and offers up a beautifully precise bouquet of pear, apple, almond, white lilies, a touch of iodine, a fine foundation of soil tones and a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and tightly-knit, with a lovely core of fruit, fine mineral undertow, zesty acids and impeccable balance on the long, focused and complex finish. Fine, fine juice. 2022-2045. **93.**

2019 Chardonnay “EGW”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

The 2019 EGW bottling from OO’s winemakers Wynne Peterson-Nedry and Pierre Milleman is another very refined bottle of young chardonnay. This wine too is very classically proportioned, tipping the scales at a svelte 13.2 percent and offering up beautiful floral aromatics in its nose of lemon blossoms, honeysuckle, acacia blossoms, pear, a hint of fresh pineapple, raw almond and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with a

lovely core, great soil signature, bright acids, precise focus and a long, complex and seamlessly balanced, bouncy finish. This is very high class chardonnay! 2022-2050. **94.**

2019 Chardonnay “Kathryn Hermann Cuvée”- OO Wines (Chehelam Mountain)

The 2019 Kathryn Hermann Cuvée hails from the Chehelam Mountain Vineyard this year, with the parcel all planted to Wente clones of chardonnay. The wine is a touch riper than the VGW and EGW, coming in at a still quite civilized 13.7 percent octane and delivers a superb aromatic constellation of apple, pear, a touch of passion fruit, iodine, chalky soil tones, hazelnuts and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a plush core of fruit, good acidity and focus, lovely balance and a long, complex and already quite delicious finish. It is interesting, as this bottling shows a touch more reductively on the nose than the VGW and EGW cuvées, but with its slightly larger-scale personality, is already drinking every bit as well on the palate! A superb chardonnay. 2022-2050. **94.**



2019 Chardonnay “Richard Hermann Cuvée”- OO Wines (Eola-Amity Hills)

The Richard Hermann Cuvée in 2019 is crafted from fruit sourced in the vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA. The wine is absolutely gorgeous on both the nose and palate, with the very precise bouquet offering up scents of pear, white peach, lemon blossoms, chalky minerality, fresh almond, acacia blossoms and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, precise and the most youthful of the four chardonnays I tasted, with a full-bodied and seamlessly balanced format, a great core, superb mineral drive and cut and a long, zesty and nascently complex finish

of superb potential. This is the lowest octane wine of the four chards in this vintage, coming in at 12.9 percent alcohol and offering the promise of a very long, beautiful life in bottle, but I would be inclined to give this lovely bottling at least a handful of years in the cellar before I start pulling corks on it, as to drink it too soon is just to waste some of its inherent potential! 2026-2055. **95.**

2019 Chardonnay “Coastview Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Monterey County)

The 2019 Coastview Vineyard bottling of chardonnay from Big Basin comes in at 13.5 percent octane. The vineyard is located at 2200 feet above sea level in the Gabilan Mountains, with the vines now twenty-one years of age. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and aged for a year in cask and six months in tank prior to bottling. The nose jumps from the glass in a vibrant blend of fresh pineapple, pear, buttered almonds, acacia blossoms, a good base of soil and a deft framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a succulent core of fruit, a fine girdle of acidity, lovely balance and grip and a long, gently new oaky and classy finish. This is delicious chardonnay that reminds me a bit of those old school Chalone chardonnays from the 1970s. 2022-2040. **92+.**

2019 Chardonnay “Howard Family Vyd.”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

The 2019 Howard Family Vineyard chardonnay from Big Basin is somewhat unique in the annals of the winery, as due to a weak marine layer during the 2019 growing season, this Santa Cruz Mountain vineyard was picked ahead of the Coastview in this year, which is extremely rare. The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane and was fermented and raised in the same manner as the Coastview. It offers up a lovely bouquet of nectarine, apple, orange peel, honeysuckle, a fine base of stony soil tones and buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a bit more reticence out of the blocks than the totally disarming 2019 Coastview. The wine has fine depth at the core, good acids and balance and a long, promising and well balanced finish. This wine is certainly approachable out of the blocks, but I have the sense that it will unfurl nicely with a bit of bottle age and deliver more complexity if a bit of patience is exercised. 2024-2040. **92.**

2019 Chardonnay “Heintz Vineyard”- Reeve Wines (Sonoma Coast)

The Reeve Wines bottling of Heintz Vineyard chardonnay is once again lovely in 2019. The wine comes in listed at an even thirteen percent alcohol this year and delivers a refined aromatic constellation of pear, nectarine, hazelnut, a very pretty base of soil tones, a touch of honeysuckle and a refined framing of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, gently new oaky in style and vibrant, with a good core of fruit, zesty acids and lovely balance on the long and complex finish. I like the Meursault-like sensibilities of this wine this year. 2022-2035. **92.**

2014 Chardonnay “Johan Vineyard”- Holden Wine Company (Willamette Valley)

The 2014 Johan Vineyard bottling of chardonnay from Holden is aging beautifully and remains fresh and youthful in its outlook, albeit, with just a whisper of natural wine mousiness around the edges. The wine comes in at 12.5 percent octane and offers up a vibrant nose of pear, hazelnut, lemon peel, a lovely base of soil tones, lanolin, dried flowers, a hint of fern and a gentle foundation of oak. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish and politely-styled, with a fine core, very good soil signature, zesty acids and lovely focus and grip on the long and bouncy finish. I really like this wine, which is a touch idiosyncratic, but also a discreetly proportioned chardonnay with plenty of complexity. It still has loads of life ahead of it, but is drinking beautifully at the moment. 2022-2030+. **91.**

2013 Chardonnay “Coastview Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Monterey County)

The 2013 vintage of Coastview chardonnay from Big Basin Vineyards is a touch riper in profile than the 2019 version, as in this year the wine came in at 14.2 percent. The wine is aging beautifully and is drinking at its peak at nine years of age, wafting from the glass in a complex blend of pear, fresh pineapple, acacia blossoms, a nice foundation of soil tones, a touch of nutmeg, vanillin oak and orange blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and *à point*, with a lovely core and balance, sound acids and very good length and grip on the complex finish. There is just a wisp of backend heat here today, but it is very modest and hardly noticed with food. Good juice. 2022-2030. **90.**

Off the Beaten Path White Wines

2020 Willamette Blanc “Phoenix”- Kelly Fox Wines

The 2020 Phoenix white wine from Kelly Fox is made from one of the more unique blends that I have tasted for a non-sparkling white wine, as its *cépages* is thirty percent chardonnay and seventy percent pinot noir! Obviously, the pinot was crushed and then removed from the skins immediately, so as not to impart any color or tannin to the wine and I am sure that this wine was crafted due to the smoke issues incumbent with much of the pinot noir in the Willamette Valley, caused by the wildfires of that early autumn. Rising from the ashes, the wine offers up a complex and quite unique bouquet of lemon, grapefruit, salty soil tones, lime peel and a discreet topnote of Sherry-like nuttiness. On the palate the wine is crisp, fullish and complex, with fine focus and grip, bright acids, a good core and a long, zesty and well-balanced finish. This is a very pretty and unique wine that will age long and gracefully. 2022-2040. **90.**

2020 Picpoul “Milk-Fed Three” Shergill Vyd- Sabelli-Frisch Wines (Mokelumne River)

The 2020 Picpoul from Adam Sabelli-Frisch is bottled unfiltered and is not cold stabilized, so its touch of cloudiness is normal. This is a grape that one seldom sees in America and is a lovely changeup, offering up a vibrant, extroverted nose of green apple, lime peel, tart pineapple, a lovely base of soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish and nicely soil-driven, with a good core of fruit, bright acids and fine focus and bounce on the long and complex finish. This almost has a touch of backend tannin to it, but I really like the grip here. Adam’s wines really march to the beat of a different drummer, and I love the beat! 2022-2030. **91.**

2020 Riesling “Obie” Curtis Vineyard- Sabelli-Frisch Wines (Santa Ynez)

Adam Sabelli-Frisch barrel-ferments and vinifies his Riesling in a bone dry style and was bottled without filtration. The wine comes in at thirteen percent octane this year and offers up a very pretty, gently new oaky nose of apple, beeswax, discreet notes of petrol, citrus peel, a nice touch of soil and a suave veneer of smoky oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core of fruit, a fine girdle of acidity and a long, well-balanced and impressively complex finish. This wine has excellent backend lift and grip. Very good juice. 2022-2035. **93.**

2019 Bianco “Centennial Mountain Vineyard”- Aeris Wines (California)

The 2019 Bianco from Aeris is produced entirely from Carricante, but the team here labels this wine differently as it is crafted with an eye towards earlier drinking than the varietally-labeled cuvée, which is given further aging in the winery’s cellars prior to release. The 2019 Bianco from Aeris comes in at a refined twelve percent alcohol in this vintage and delivers a beautiful bouquet of green olive, tart orange, beautiful soil tones, lemon peel, a touch of fresh

rosemary in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, vibrant and full-bodied, with an effortless sense of balance, a fine core, bright acids and a long, complex and extremely classy finish. I really love this wine! 2022-2040. **94.**

2018 Carricante “Centennial Mountain Vineyard”- Aeris Wines (California)

The 2018 Carricante bottling is a touch riper than the 2019 Bianco, coming in at 12.5 percent octane, though I am not sure if this is reflective of the grapes having been picked a touch later than those designated for the Bianco, or if they just hail from a slightly sunnier section of the vineyard. In any case, the wine is outstanding on the nose, wafting from the glass in a very complex blend of fresh lime, green olive, citrus peel, stony minerality, bergamot, raw almond, wild fennel and a discreet framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a rock solid core of fruit, bright acids, outstanding balance and grip and a long, poised and utterly complete finish. This is already starting to show signs of its secondary layers of complexity emerging. It is a stunning young wine. 2022-2050+. **95+.**

2018 Riesling Dry “Birch and Cane”- Lanthanide Wine Group (Napa Valley)

The 2018 Birch and Cane Riesling from LWG comes in at thirteen percent octane and is fermented and raised in neutral oak *foudres*. The soils here are volcanic and the wine shows lovely soil signature in its nose of apple, tart orange, a touch of leesiness, a fine base of minerality and a topnote of lavender. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and focused, with a good core and fine balance and grip on the long and bone dry finish. This is very tasty. 2022-2035. **89.**

2018 Riesling Dry “Sonnenfrost”- Lanthanide Wine Group (Napa Valley)

The 2018 Sonnenfrost bottling of Riesling from LWG hails from a parcel of vines grown on sandstone. The wine is raised in combination of stainless steel tanks and neutral oak prior to bottling. The wine offers up a lovely nose of apple, white cherry, a complex base of soil tones, lilacs, lavender and a touch of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, fullish, focused and complex, with a lovely core, vibrant acids and lovely length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is a step up in complexity from the very good Birch and Cane bottling. Fine juice. 2022-2035. **91.**

Off the Beaten Path Red Wines

2020 Zweigelt “Milk Fed 4” Makalumne Glen Vineyard- Sabelli-Frisch Wines

Zweigelt is an Austrian grape that is a cross between Blaufrankisch and Saint Laurent, which produces a wine that is quite dark in color, but quite light on its feet. The 2020 version from Adam Sabelli-Frisch comes in at an even twelve percent octane and offers up a lovely nose of sweet dark berries, black cherries, woodsmoke, gentle botanicals, coffee bean and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and tangy, with a good core, lovely bounce and grip and a long, moderately tannic and very nicely balanced finish. This is quite tasty out of the blocks, but it will be even better when the tannins have softened up a bit more with bottle age. 2022-2045+. **91+.**

2018 Mission “El Aliso” Angelica- Sabelli-Frisch Wines

The 2018 Mission “El Aliso” Angelica from Adam Sabelli-Frisch is a lightly fortified wine that comes in at eighteen percent octane. It offers up a beautifully complex and expressive bouquet of sultana raisins, desiccated cherries, sumac, cloves, cinnamon, a beautiful array of botanicals and licorice. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and complex, with tangy

acids, modest tannins and a long, generous and beautifully balanced finish of gentle sweetness. In terms of sweetness, it reminds me of a sixty or eighty year-old Port, but with far different aromatics. It is an utterly unique and stunning wine! 2022-2100. **95.**



Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux Blends

2019 Cabernet Franc “Sunbasket Vineyard”- Corison Winery (Napa Valley)

I love Cathy Corison’s Cabernet Franc bottling and her 2019 from the Sunbasket Vineyard is another stellar wine. It comes in at 13.8 percent octane this year and offers up a refined, complex bouquet of cassis, currant leaf, cigar wrapper, a lovely base of soil tones, a touch of menthol and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a fine core, lovey transparency and grip, fine-grained tannins and a long, seamlessly balanced and very classy finish. The Cheval Blanc of Napa Valley. 2029-2080. **93+.**

2019 Cabernet Sauvignon “Sunbasket Vineyard”- Corison Winery (Napa Valley)

The 2019 Sunbasket Vineyard bottling of Cabernet Sauvignon is outstanding this year. The wine is so polished on both the nose and palate, with the bouquet wafting from the glass in a combination of black cherries, sweet cassis, tobacco leaf, allspice, refined soil tones and a deft touch of new oak that is both spicy and nutty in personality. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and elegant in profile, with a good core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, complex and properly youthful finish. Fine juice in the making. 2034-2100. **93.**

2019 Cabernet Sauvignon- Corison Winery (Napa Valley)

The 2019 vintage of the Napa Valley bottling of Cabernet Sauvignon from Cathy Corison will be released in the autumn of this year and will be well worth keeping an eye out for once it is available, as it is going to be stellar. The wine comes in at 13.8 percent and offers up an

absolutely classical, Rutherford Bench nose of red and black cherries, cigar wrapper, a hint of eucalyptus, Rutherford Dust soil tones, peonies and nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and nascently complex, with superb mid-palate depth, great soil signature, fine-grained tannins and impeccable balance on the long, focused and utterly seamless finish. This wine is a synthesis of old school aesthetic cabernet sensibilities the refined touch of a winemaker with plenty of experience to get everything just absolutely perfect! 2033-2100. **95.**

2019 Cabernet Sauvignon- Monroy Wines (Chalk Hill)

The 2019 vintage of cabernet sauvignon from winemaker Adolfo Hernandez at Monroy Wines hails from twenty-two year-old vines planted at the top of a rocky, hillside vineyard in Chalk Hill. The parcel sits at an elevation of six hundred feet above sea level, with the vines on volcanic soils. Adolfo brought in the grapes on October 15th in 2019, which was ten days before the Kincade Fire swept through the region, scorched the vines and wiped out the harvest for anyone leaving grapes out for extended hang time. The wine was racked only once at its *assemblage* in February of 2020 and bottled without fining or filtration. It comes in at 14.1 percent octane in this vintage and delivers a beautifully refined nose of sweet cassis, black cherries, tobacco leaf, dark soil tones, a touch of violets, a very judicious framing of new oak and just a wisp of youthful cabernet leafiness in the upper register that is totally beguiling. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and complex, with excellent mid-palate depth, most impressive soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and a very long, poised finish that shows just a whisper of backend heat. I love the style of this wine, which shows old school complexity and restraint in personality. It is plenty structured out of the blocks and will need extended cellaring to blossom, but it is going to be lovely. 2034-2090. **93.**

2018 Cabernet Sauvignon “Hill”- Ad Coelum (Napa Valley)

The 2018 Ad Coelum “Hill” cuvée of cabernet is sourced entirely from the Pritchard Hill Vineyard in Napa. The wine comes in listed at 14.5 percent alcohol in this vintage and delivers a beautifully refined bouquet of red and black cherries, allspice, cigar smoke, gentle floral tones, a touch of tobacco leaf and a nice array of new oak notes of spice and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite elegant in profile, with a good core, buried tannins and fine focus and grip on the long, youthfully complex and fairly well-balanced finish. This is just a touch lower in octane than the very good Peak bottling covered below, but it seems to help with the backend integration of the oak tannins here, as there is no potential issue I can see with how this wine will evolve with extended bottle aging. Quite impressive, albeit, with just a hint of heat on the finish. 2030-2075. **92.**

2018 Cabernet Sauvignon “Peak”- Ad Coelum (Napa Valley)

The 2018 Peak bottling of cabernet sauvignon from Ad Coelum is composed from seventy percent fruit grown on Atlas Peak and thirty percent from Pritchard Hill Vineyard. The wine is a bigger and more powerful iteration of cabernet than I usually cover, tipping the scales at 14.8 percent octane in this vintage. However, the wine is bright and fresh on the nose, offering up scents of red and black cherries, violets, a touch of cocoa powder, gentle savory notes that hint at fresh sage and a gentle mix of spicy new oak tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core of fruit, lovely lightness of step, ripe, buried tannins and a long, poised and really quite well balanced finish that shows only a touch of backend warmth. I really like this wine’s inherent complexity, but there is just a touch of backend rigidity to its tannins that seems to hail from the casks and the facility of leeching out wood tannins at higher octane levels. At the moment, these oak tannins are buried in the lovely fruit of the wine, but I am not

certain whether or not they may become a bit more prominent with extended bottle age. But, that said, one does have to admire the complexity and elegant profile of this wine; I would love to try a vintage at a half point or more lower in octane, which would no doubt demand a bit more cellaring before being approachable, but would obviate any potential issues with wood tannins. If my concerns with the tannins here ultimately prove unfounded, add two points to my score. 2028-2075. **90.**

2018 Cabernet Sauvignon “Kronos Vineyard”- Corison Winery (Napa Valley)

The 2018 vintage of Kronos Vineyard cabernet from Cathy Corison is a lovely young bottle in the making. The wine comes in listed at 13.6 percent octane this year and delivers a refined, nascently complex bouquet of plums, red and black cherries, Rutherford Dust, violets, sweet cigar wrapper, a lovely base of soil and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and svelte, with excellent mid-palate depth, beautiful soil signature, ripe, fine-grained tannins and a very long, complex and impeccably balanced finish. Just a stunning young wine. 2033-2100. **95+.**

2018 Cabernet Sauvignon- Monroy Wines (Chalk Hill)

Adolfo Hernandez’s 2018 cabernet sauvignon hails from the same vineyard parcel in the Chalk Hill AVA as his 2019, and the wine also comes in at 14.1 percent alcohol in the 2018 vintage. It was handled identically in the cellar, with no acid or water adjustments, barrel fermentation and aging in a mix of French oak for twenty months, with only a single racking and no filtration or fining prior to the *mise*. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a refined blend of cassis, sweet dark berries, cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, just a faint whisper of mint, incipient notes of cigar ash and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core, fine soil signature, lovely balance and grip and a long, fine-grained and very promising finish. Though the 2018 is listed at the same octane as the 2019, it seems just a touch cooler on the backend. It is a young wine that will need plenty of time to resolve its tannins, but it is going to be excellent in due course. 2033-2090. **93.**

2014 Cabernet Sauvignon “Monte Bello”- Ridge Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

I had not previously tasted the 2014 vintage of Monte Bello and was quite impressed with this young wine. This is a moderately ripe vintage for this fine cuvée, coming in at 13.5 percent octane and being composed this year from a *cépages* of seventy-five percent cabernet sauvignon, eighteen percent merlot, five percent cabernet franc and two percent petit verdot. The wine is very refined on the nose, offering up an adolescent blend of sweet cassis, black raspberries, cigar wrapper, a fine base of dark soil tones, a touch of fresh dill and a judicious framing of American oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack for a young Monte Bello, with a fine core of fruit, good soil undertow and grip, ripe, firm tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. It is still very early days for this fine bottle, but it should prove to be a very long-lived and classy wine once it starts to properly blossom. 2035-2100. **93.**

1986 Cabernet Sauvignon “Bella Oaks Vineyard”- Heitz Wine Cellars (Napa Valley)

Though I have been fortunate to taste an awful lot of Heitz cabernet sauvignon bottlings over the years, this was the first time I had ever drunk a bottle of the 1986 vintage of Bella Oaks cabernet and it turned out to be superb. The wine delivers beautifully precision and depth in its aromatic constellation of black cherries, very pretty spice tones, a lovely base of soil, incipient notes of chipotle and a deft touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, focused and full-bodied, with a lovely core of fruit, fine soil undertow, seamless, modest tannins and lovely

balance on the long, complex and tangy finish. This is a lovely bottle that is just getting to its plateau of peak maturity and will drink well for decades and decades to come. 2022-2060. **93.**

1974 Cabernet Sauvignon- Clos du Val (Napa)

I had only previously tasted the 1974 vintage of cabernet sauvignon from Clos du Val on one previous occasion and, based on how beautifully this most recent bottle performed, it is quite clear that the last bottle was not at the top of its game. The bouquet here is deep, refined and perfectly *à point* today, delivering notes of cassis, black cherries, gentle notes of eucalyptus, a touch of paraffin, cigar smoke, dark soil tones and a topnote of chipotle pepper. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and complex, with a still nicely plush core, fine soil signature, buried, moderate tannins and outstanding length and grip on the poised and beautifully balanced finish. A beautiful example of this excellent vintage. 2022-2060. **94.**

Rhône Varietals and Blends

2020 Syrah “Harris” Knowles Vineyard- Sabelli-Frisch (Makelumne River)

The 2020 Syrah from Adam Sabelli-Frisch is a fine bottle in the making, but it is young, structured and will need plenty of time in the cellar before it starts to soften up. The bouquet is deep and complex, offering up scents of sweet dark berries, pepper, black olive, hung game, woodsmoke, cedar, sinsimilla and a superb base of soil tones. Aromatically, this reminds me a lot of some of Sean Thackrey’s early Orion bottlings, but with very different soil signature. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core of fruit, firm, chewy tannins, excellent soil signature and a long, ripe and well-balanced, chewy finish. This comes in listed at fourteen percent octane and is fairly ripe (and just a touch warm on the backend), but also quite classically structured and it will be a fine bottle in due course. 2030-2075. **90.**

2019 Gibson Ranch “Field Blend” Red- Reeve Wines (McDowell Valley)

The 2019 Gibson Ranch “Field Blend” Red from Reeve Wines is primarily composed of syrah, with the wine tipping the scales at a hefty 14.9 percent this year. The wine offers up a deep and ripe nose of cassis, dark chocolate, pepper, smoked meats, a bit of *garrigue* and a deft framing of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely precise on the attack, with a good core of fruit, firm, chewy tannins and a long, nascently complex finish that shows a bit of backend heat, but much less than one might suppose. It is really quite a good wine for such a lofty alcohol level, without any signs of overt blowsiness. I do not really know how it will age, as I have no experience with wines at this octane over the long haul, as they do not find their way into my cellar. But, it is really not a bad wine and I could imagine it actually aging pretty well. It will certainly need some bottle age to soften up its chewy tannins. 2029-2055+? **88.**

2019 Syrah “Petrichor Vineyard”- Reeve Wines (Fountaingrove District)

The 2019 Syrah “Petrichor Vineyard” from Reeve Wines hails from the organically farmed vineyard in the Fountaingrove District of Sonoma County, in the volcanic foothills of the Mayacamas range. There is grenache also planted in Petrichor, but to my knowledge, this bottling is entirely based upon syrah. The 2019 comes in at 13.8 percent alcohol in this vintage and delivers a superb young nose of black raspberries, cassis, pepper, black olive, smoked meats, a good base of soil and a judicious framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely soil-driven for its octane, with a fine core of black fruit, good mineral undertow, ripe tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. This is going to be a fine example of syrah. 2031-2070. **91+.**

2013 Syrah “Rattlesnake Rock”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

The 2013 vintage of Rattlesnake Rock Syrah from Big Basin is pretty ripe for this bottling (at least by contemporary standards), tipping the scales at 14.4 percent octane. However, the wine is aging quite nicely and now offers up a lovely bouquet basking in secondary layers of complexity in its mix of black raspberries, cassis, smoked meats, pepper, bonfire, black olive, a fine base of stony soil and a touch of new leather in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with still moderate tannins, good balance and a long, soil-driven and chewy finish that shows just a touch of backend warmth. Though this is just a touch higher in octane than I would ideally like, the wine is precise, complex and quite pure and is none the worse for a bit more ripeness; it is aging very gracefully and is just now starting to soften up nicely and drink with generosity. 2022-2050. **92.**



Italian Varietals and Blends

2019 Barbera- Aeris Wines (California)

The 2019 Barbera from Aeris Wines is from their Centennial Mountain Vineyard. It comes in at 14.2 percent octane this year and offers up a lovely nose of bitter cherry, leather, woodsmoke, lovely soil tones, a hint of nutskin, peonies and a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and tangy, with a sappy core of fruit, lovely mineral drive and grip, ripe tannins and a long, complex, ripe and still fairly youthful finish. This is certainly

approachable today, but I would love to leave it alone in the cellar for just a couple of years and let it soften up just a bit more on the backend before drinking it in earnest. 2024-2040. **90.**

2019 Bricco Rosso- Aeris Wines (California)

I do not have the exact *cépages* information for the 2019 version of Bricco Rosso from Aeris, but assume it is similar to last year's blend of fifty percent Nebbiolo, fifteen percent each of Nerello Mascalese, Primitivo and Carignan and five percent of Barbera. In any event, the wine is superb, offering up a very complex bouquet of red and black cherries, bonfire, nutskin, brambly spice tones, stony soil and just a touch of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with an excellent core of fruit, impressive complexity and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, soil-driven and ripely tannic finish. This is a gorgeous young wine, with the structure of a proper Nebbiolo, but some of the expansiveness in the mid-palate that I associate with Nerello Mascalese. 2030-2080. **94.**

2019 Nerello Mascalese- Aeris Wines (California)

Sometimes I feel bad that my favorite example of this great Sicilian varietal these days is grown in California! The 2019 Nerello Mascalese from Aeris is a big boy this year, coming in at 14.5 percent octane and offering a broad-shouldered, properly chewy and potentially very long-lived example. The bouquet is deep, expressive and complex, jumping from the glass in a blend of red and black cherries, smoked meats, a bit of black tea, beautiful spice tones, rocky soil, bonfire and a topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with plenty of chewy tannin, a great core of fruit, fine soil undertow and a long, youthfully complex and extremely promising finish. This is nicely cool in the mouth for its ripeness level, with a core of fruit that is going to be expansive once the tannins peel back a bit and the wine comes into its own. Very impressive juice! 2035-2100. **93+.**

2018 Nebbiolo- Aeris Wines (California)

Not surprisingly, Kevin Harvey and his talented team at Aeris model their Centennial Mountain Nebbiolo on the great traditionalist Barolo estates, with this wine fermented in open top oak vats, with a submerged cap, and then aged for fully two years in large, neutral oak *foudres* like the old school Piemonte specialists of yesteryear. The 2018 version comes in at an even fourteen percent alcohol and delivering a deep and refined bouquet of cherries, rose petals, fresh oregano, a fine base of minerality, gamebird, a hint of onion skin, leather and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and chewy, with a fine core, excellent transparency down to its stony soil, firm, well-integrated tannins and a long, complex and youthful finish. This is a classic example of Nebbiolo and is going to demand plenty of patience before it starts to drink with generosity, but it will be lovely once it is ready to go. 2038-2100+. **93.**

Zinfandel

2019 Zinfandel- Aeris Wines (California)

This is the first Zinfandel I have tasted from Aeris and their fine mountaintop vineyard of Centennial Mountain. The vines are bush-trained on these stony soils, with the 2019 version coming in at a very manageable (for zinfandel) 14.5 percent octane this year. The wine delivers a classic bouquet of raspberries, dark berries, brambly spice tones, woodsmoke, roasted game, stony soil and some herbal notes in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite generous at the core, with a plush palate feel, tangy acids, ripe tannins and a long,

complex and really very well-balanced finish. A fine, ageworthy zinfandel for the adults in the room. 2027-2055+. **92.**

2005 Simi Vineyards “Sonoma County” Zinfandel

The 2005 vintage of zinfandel from Simi comes in listed at a quite svelte 13.5 percent octane. The wine has aged very nicely and today offers up a mellowed and complex bouquet of dark berries, bonfire, smoked meats, a lovely array of brambly spice elements, gently autumnal soil, cedar, some savory tones and plenty of bonfire smoke in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with a good core, still a bit of backend tannin, good acids and really quite impressive focus and balance on the long and complex finish. This is really very good and far more serious than my expectations are for a Simi wine from this era! 2022-2035. **91.**



Pinot Noir

2021 Pinot Noir “Sans Soufre”- Kutch Wines (Sonoma Coast)

Jamie Kutch’s 2021 Sans Soufre bottling of pinot noir comes in at a suave twelve percent octane in this vintage and included one hundred percent whole clusters in its fermentation. The wine is a beautiful ruby red and offers up a youthfully complex nose of cherries, pomegranate, sweet stem tones, gamebird, woodsmoke, a lovely base of soil and just a touch of oak spice. On the palate the wine is bright, tangy and full, with a lovely core of fruit, good soil signature, chewy, well-integrated tannins and a long, promising finish. This is a beautiful young wine,

which was raised with a very minimal amount of SO₂ and should advance briskly as a result, so I would anticipate it starting to drink generously by the end of this year or early next. A lovely example of a very low sulfur pinot noir, but part of me thinks it was a shame not to take these four casks, sulfur them traditionally, and craft a wine that would cruise along for forty or fifty years in bottle! 2022-2035+? **92.**

2020 Pinot Noir “Anderson Valley”- Bravium Wines (Anderson Valley)

Derek Rohlfs has crafted a very, very pretty Anderson Valley bottling of pinot noir in 2020, with this svelte, red fruity middleweight coming in at 12.6 percent alcohol this year. The nose jumps from the glass in a very refined constellation of strawberries, cherries, woodsmoke, a fine base of soil tones, a lovely touch of Anderson Valley fresh herb tones, peonies and just a whisper of cedar. The wine is bright, tangy and medium-full on the palate, with lovely intensity of flavor, excellent focus and grip, moderate tannins and a long, balanced and beautifully complex finish that closes with excellent backend lift. This is outstanding. The wine is certainly quite approachable out of the blocks, but more complexity will emerge with further bottle age. 2021-2045+. **92+.**

2020 Pinot Noir “McDougall Ranch”- Kutch Wines (Sonoma Coast)

As I mentioned at the outset, this was the only pinot noir Jamie Kutch was able to bottle in the inferno vintage of 2020. This is one of the warmest vineyard sites that Jamie works with, which is probably why the grapes were ready to be picked before the smoke really got bad on the Sonoma Coast. The 2020 McDougall bottling comes in at thirteen percent octane and included fifty percent whole clusters this year. It offers up a beautiful bouquet of red and black cherries, beetroot, peonies, roses, a hint of blood orange, gamebird, a complex base of soil tones and a gentle foundation of oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a lovely core of red fruit, bouncy acids, suave tannins and lovely balance and grip on the long, classy and very promising finish. This has really turned out well! 2030-2075. **94.**

2019 Pinot Noir “VGR”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

The 2019 Pinot Noir “VGR” bottling from OO Wines comes in at a svelte 12.9 percent octane in this classic vintage and delivers a gorgeously complex bouquet of cherries, plums, just a hint of beetroot, complex soil tones, gentle notes of mustard seed and fresh thyme, woodsmoke and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and tangy, with a lovely core, bouncy acids, well-measured tannins and a long, complex and tightly-knit finish of outstanding potential. This is nicely reserved in personality out of the blocks and will demand some bottle age before it starts to drink with generosity, but it is going to be excellent wine once it has unfurled. 2028-2075. **92.**

2019 Pinot Noir “Chehalem Mountain”- OO Wines (Chehalem Mountain)

The 2019 Pinot Noir “Chehalem Mountain” bottling from OO Wines is a beautiful example of the vintage, coming in at an even thirteen percent alcohol this year and delivering a marvelous aromatic constellation of red berries, cherries, spiced meats, beetroot, sweet stem tones, a gorgeous base of soil, peonies, just a hint of mustard seed and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is pure, transparent and full, with a gently sappy core of red fruit, great soil signature and grip, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. This has more out of the box generosity than the VGW this year and will not demand quite as long in the cellar to start to stir, though it also has more inherent complexity, so it probably will deserve just as long aging, just to let its secondary layers emerge fully. Great juice! 2028-2085. **93+.**

2019 Pinot Noir “Hyland Vineyard”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

OO Wines’ 2019 Hyland Vineyard cuvée of pinot noir is yet another stellar young wine. The bouquet is a touch more black fruity than the Chehelam Mountain bottling, wafting from the glass in an elegant blend of red and black cherries, gamebird, a touch of raw cocoa, dark soil tones, peonies, gentle stem tones, woodsmoke, mustard seed and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with an excellent core of fruit, fine-grained tannins and a long, beautifully balanced and promising young finish. Like the VGW, this is pretty tightly-knit out of the blocks and will insist on some time alone in the cellar before it starts to drink with generosity. 2032-2985. **93+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Shea Vineyard”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

The 2019 Shea Vineyard bottling is one of the low octane pinot noirs from OO in this vintage, tipping the scales at 12.6 percent alcohol in this cool and classic Willamette Valley vintage. The bouquet is very expressive in its youth, jumping from the glass in a mix of red berries, blood orange, pomegranate, fresh herb tones, bonfire, gamebird, an exotic touch of dried eucalyptus, gorgeous soil tones and cedary oak. On the palate the wine is fullish, tangy and tightly-knit, with a nice touch of mid-palate sappiness, excellent mineral drive and backend bounce, ripe tannins and a long, youthfully complex and perfectly balanced finish. Like several of these other 2019s from the Hermann family, the Shea Vineyard bottling will need time to blossom, but it is going to be excellent. 2032-2085. **93**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Richard Hermann Cuvée”- OO Wines (Willamette Valley)

The 2019 Richard Hermann Cuvée pinot noir is just a whisper riper than the Shea Vineyard bottling, coming in at a svelte 12.7 percent. The bouquet is nicely black fruity and smoky in personality, wafting from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, dark berries, woodsmoke, gamebird, black tea, beautiful soil tones, a hint of sweet stems, raw cocoa and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and intensely flavored, with a lovely core of black fruit, superb soil signature, ripe, seamless tannins, bright acids and impeccable balance on the long, focused and beautifully complex finish. This is stunning juice. 2032-2085. **95**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Coastview Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Monterey County)

The 2019 Coastview Vineyard pinot noir from Big Basin is a beautifully perfumed and refined example of the varietal. It comes in at 13.5 percent alcohol this year, is one hundred percent whole clusters and was raised for eighteen months in cask, prior to bottling without fining or filtration. It is nicely light ruby in color and offers up a very expressive bouquet of cherries, pomegranate, stony soil tones, a touch of mustard seed, woodsmoke, lovely spice tones and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full and tangy, with fine mid-palate depth and transparency, ripe, buried tannins and a long, soil-driven and complex finish. This is lovely juice. 2029-2080. **92+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Alfaro Family Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

The Big Basin Alfaro Family Vineyard bottling of pinot noir is really fine this year, tipping the scales at 13.2 percent and offering superb precision on both the nose and palate. Like the Coastview, this is one hundred percent whole clusters this year, fermented with indigenous yeasts and was given a year and a half of *elevage* in cask prior to being bottled without fining or filtration. The bouquet is beautifully red fruity and shows its whole clusters in its constellation of cherries, beetroot, rose petals, sweet stem tones (that will turn to cinnamon with bottle age), a lovely base of soil, peonies and cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, tangy and full-bodied, with beautiful transparency, a fine core of red fruit, suave tannins and a long, vibrant and

nascently complex finish. This has beautiful Chambolle-Musigny-like sensibilities, coupled to Santa Cruz Mountain *terroir*. Fine juice. 2029-2075. **92**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Lester Family Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

Like the Alfaro Family Vineyard, the Lester Family Vineyard is planted in the Corralitos foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, about five miles from the Pacific Ocean. The combination of coastal fog and cooling ocean air allows for perfect ripening of pinot noir, as evidenced by the 2019 version, which comes in at an even thirteen percent octane. The wine is handled identically to the other Big Basin pinots in the cellar and delivers a beautifully transparent bouquet of strawberries, cherries, a touch of beetroot, woodsmoke, incipient cinnamon from the whole clusters, roses, a refined base of soil and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is red fruity, soil-driven and full-bodied, with tangy acids, lovely focus and grip, ripe, buried tannins and a long, complex and very well-balanced finish. Fine juice. 2029-2075. **92+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Old Corral”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mountains)

The vineyard parcels that go into the Old Corral bottling are located up in the heart of the Santa Cruz Mountains, rather than in the southern foothills of Corralitos. These are three extremely rocky vineyards and the wine shows plenty of minerality as a result. This too is fermented with indigenous yeasts, one hundred percent whole clusters and was given eighteen months in cask prior to bottling without fining or filtering. It weighs in at an even thirteen percent octane and delivers an excellent young nose of red and black cherries, sweet stem tones, gamebird, stony soil tones, a touch of mustard seed, fresh herb tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, youthful and full-bodied, with a fine core of fruit, lovely soil undertow and grip, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, tangy and nascently complex finish. This is the most tightly-wrapped of these four excellent 2019 pinot noirs, but may well end up the finest of the lot with sufficient bottle age. 2031-2080. **92+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Kiser Vineyard” Lower Block- Reeve Wines (Mendocino County)

Reeve’s 2019 Kiser Vineyard Lower Block bottling of pinot noir is a touch riper than the lovely 2018 version, coming in at 13.2 percent this year, but still right in the sweet spot of ripeness for pinot noir (in my book). The bouquet is refined, deep and very promising, wafting from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, gamebird, a fine base of soil, incipient notes of cola, a touch of mustard seed, gentle floral tones and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is focused, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with a fairly tightly-knit personality out of the blocks, lovely mid-palate depth, very good soil signature, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and vibrant finish. This is a superb bottle in the making, but to capture all of its potential, try to keep your hands off of it until it is at least ten years of age! Most impressive. 2029-2070. **93**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Kiser Vineyard” Upper Block- Reeve Wines (Mendocino County)

Last year, the Lower Block bottling from the Kiser Vineyard was quite a bit lower in octane than the Upper Block bottling (perhaps reflecting some blocked maturation?), but in the 2019 vintage, the two are quite similar, as the Upper Block tips the scales at 13.3 percent alcohol this year. The gorgeous bouquet is just a touch more black fruity than the Lower Block version, offering up scents of black plums, black cherries, raw cocoa, a superb base of soil, woodsmoke, gamebird, discreet oak tones and a topnote that seems likely to get quite black truffley with bottle age. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and gently sappy at the core, with lovely structure and focus, ripe, buried tannins, good acids and grip and a long, complex and marvelously precise finish. This is a bit tighter out of the blocks than the Lower Block pinot and

will need just a few more years to unwind, but it seems likely to be the slightly more complex wine when it is fully ready to drink. Great juice. 2031-2070+. **93+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Kiser Vineyard” Suitcase Block- Reeve Wines (Mendocino County)

The 2019 Suitcase Block from Kiser Vineyard is again, riper than was the case with the wine in the 2018 vintage. This year it comes in at a much more typical 13.4 percent alcohol (as opposed to 12.4 percent last year) and delivers a superb aromatic constellation of cherries, pomegranate, raw cocoa, *pigeon*, dark soil tones, a dollop of fresh herb tones and a discreet foundation of new oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and fairly powerful in style, with an elegant structure absolutely packed with depth of fruit and mineral drive. The finish is long, youthfully complex and well-balanced, with well-integrated tannins, tangy acids and a long, promising finish. 2031-2070. **92+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Wendling Vineyard” North Slope- Reeve Wines (Mendocino County)

Reeve’s 2019 Pinot Noir from the Wendling Vineyard comes in listed this year at 13.9 percent octane and delivers a lovely, red fruity bouquet of cherries, red plums, beetroot, a touch of cocoa powder, fresh herb tones, a fine base of dark soil elements, gentle notes of cedar and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and youthfully complex, with a good core, fine transparency and grip, suave tannins and lovely length and grip on the well-balanced finish. I would guess that this is just a touch higher than its stated alcohol level on the label, but it carries its ripeness very well indeed and is a fine bottle in the making. 2029-2065+. **91+**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Special Reserve”- Reeve Wines (Anderson Valley)

The 2019 Pinot Noir “Special Reserve” from Reeve Wines is a barrel selection of some of the finest and more powerful casks in the cellar in this vintage. There were only six barrels selected and blended together, with the wine finishing at 13.6 percent octane. The nose is lovely and quite red fruity, offering up scents of cherries, beetroot, cocoa powder, a hint of Nuits St. Georges-like nutskin, woodsmoke, pretty soil tones, a dollop of fresh herbs and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and quite refined on the attack, with a full-bodied personality, firm, well-integrated tannins, fine focus and balance and a long, complex finish. This is lovely. 2030-2070. **93**.

2019 Pinot Noir “Willamette Cuvée”- Shiba Wichern Cellars

Akiko Shiba’s 2019 Willamette Cuvée bottling of pinot noir is a lovely young wine, being comprised of fruit from the Bellevue Cross and Momtazi vineyards in the McMinnville AVA, Havlin Vineyard in the Van Duzer Corridor and Nuestro Sueño Vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA, all of which she also crafts single vineyard bottlings. The 2019 Willamette Cuvée comes in at 13.9 percent octane and offers up a very pure and red fruity bouquet of cherries, red plum, a lovely base of soil tones, hints of mustard seed and raw cocoa, rose petals and just a dollop of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with ripe tannins, good acids and fine focus and grip on the long, nascently complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is still young and will need some bottle age to unfurl, but it is going to be lovely. 2027-2065+. **90+**.

2018 Pinot Noir “Bellevue Cross”- Shiba Wichern Cellars (McMinnville)

The 2018 vintage was the first that Akiko Shiba and Chris Wichern produced a pinot noir from the Bellevue Cross vineyard in McMinnville. The couple tends their own rows of vines in the vineyard and raised this wine in three year-old and older casks. The wine comes in at 13.5 percent octane and delivers a refined aromatic constellation of black cherries, red plums, raw

cocoa, a lovely base of dark soil tones, gentle smokiness, roses and a touch of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, tangy and full-bodied, with a beautiful core of fruit, excellent soil undertow, ripe, buried tannins and a very long, complex and seamlessly balanced finish. Great juice in the making! 2031-2075. **93.**



2018 Pinot Noir “Havlin”- Shiba Wichern Cellars (Van Duzer Corridor)

The 2018 Havlin Vineyard bottling from Shiba Wichern Cellars is very lovely and quite a bit more red fruity in personality this year than these other single vineyard cuvées. The wine comes in at 13.8 percent this year, but is very precise and aromatically expressive out of the blocks, delivering scents of cherries, pomegranate, mustard seed, lavender, fresh bay, a lovely base of soil tones, rose petals and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely structured, with lovely transparency and grip, a fine core of fruit, tangy acids, fine-grained tannins and a long, vibrant and complex finish. When this is ready to drink, it is going to be stellar. 2030-2075+. **93.**

2018 Pinot Noir “Momtazi”- Shiba Wichern Cellars (McMinnville)

I have been fortunate to taste some beautiful examples of pinot noir made from the biodynamically-farmed Momtazi Vineyard from several talented winemakers, and Akiko Shiba’s 2018 version is certainly another stellar example of this lovely *terroir*. Her parcel of vines is up at the top of the vineyard in a very steep section, planted to a combination of Wadenswill and Pommard clones. The wine was fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in neutral casks,

with the 2018 coming in at 13.9 percent octane, but also quite high in acidity in this vintage. The wine offers up that classic black fruity signature of Momtazi fruit, wafting from the glass in a mix of sweet dark berries, black plums, raw cocoa, dark soil tones, fresh thyme, woodsmoke and a touch of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with excellent mineral signature and grip, ripe, buried tannins, tangy acids and a long, focused and nascently complex finish. Lovely potential. 2033-2075+. **93+**.

2018 Pinot Noir “Nuestro Sueño”- Shiba Wichern Cellars (Eola-Amity Hills)

Akiko Shiba’s 2019 Nuestro Sueño Vineyard bottling of pinot noir is a lovely example of the vintage, coming in again at 13.9 percent alcohol in this warm summer, but tempered by lovely acidity and impressive precision on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is nicely black fruity, offering up notes of black plums, blueberries, dark chocolate, gamebird, peonies, dark soil tones, fresh thyme and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a plush core of fruit, excellent soil signature, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, complex and tangy finish. 2030-2075+. **92**.

2017 Pinot Noir-Domaine Drouhin (Dundee Hills)

Looking back through the database, I see that I had not previously tasted the 2017 vintage of DDO pinot noir before, but did enjoy the 2017 Cuvée Laurène last fall. I am not sure how I missed covering the regular bottling, but was very happy to have a chance to drink it for this report. The wine is beautifully fragrant today at age five, wafting from the glass in a pure mix of cherries, strawberries, rose petals, peonies, a refined base of soil tones, woodsmoke, cedar and a delicate touch of mustard seed in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and starting to get nicely plush on the attack, with a lovely core of fruit, ripe, seamless tannins and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. There is just a touch of torrefaction to the fruit flavors here that show off the sunny side of the 2017 vintage in the Willamette Valley. Lovely wine. 2022-2075. **92+**.

2017 Pinot Noir “Willamette Cuvée”- Shiba Wichern Cellars

The 2017 Pinot Noir “Willamette Cuvée” from Shiba Wichern Cellars is starting to blossom nicely on both the nose and palate. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a precise and complex blend of red and black cherries, raw cocoa, woodsmoke, a fine base of soil, gamebird, violets, peonies, a touch of fresh thyme and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and soil-driven, with a fine core of fruit, tangy acids, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and beautifully balanced finish. This is still in climbing mode and needs a bit more bottle age, but it is going to be a lovely bottle when it is ready to drink. 2027-2065. **91**.

2016 Pinot Noir-Caballus (Willamette Valley)

The 2016 vintage of Caballus pinot noir from Véronique Drouhin-Boss and Isabelle Dutartre is a beautiful wine. It is nicely ripe in the style of the vintage, coming in at 14.1 percent in this year, but also pure, complex and very suave in personality. The lovely bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of red plums, cherries, beetroot, gamebird, mustard seed, complex soil tones, a touch of cocoa powder and a lovely framing of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and sappy at the core, with fine-grained tannins, lovely focus and grip and a long, balanced and very promising finish. This is still a puppy and needs a few more years in the cellar to properly soften up its backend tannins and start to drink with the velvety complexity that is already starting to peak over the horizon. 2028-2075. **94**.



Robert and Véronique Drouhin tasting the first vintage, 1988, of Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir back in 1989.

2016 Pinot Noir-Domaine Drouhin (Dundee Hills)

The I had not tasted a bottle of the 2016 Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir since the depth of the pandemic, back in November of 2020, so it was nice to revisit the wine with a bit better prospect hanging on the horizon. The wine is aging very gracefully, offering up a predominantly black fruity nose of black cherries, sweet dark berries, raw cocoa, a refined base of soil, violets, a hint of fresh thyme, *pigeon* and a suave framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and still fairly youthful in personality, with a beautiful core of fruit, great soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and lovely balance and grip on the long, nascently complex and very promising finish. I would certainly choose to drink the lovely 2017 DDO pinot today, over this slightly more reserved 2016 version, but in the long run, this may well end up being the slightly superior vintage of this fine bottling. 2027-2065. **93.**

2016 Pinot Noir “Cuvée Zépherine”-Roserock (Eola-Amity Hills)

The 2016 Cuvée Zépherine from the Drouhin family’s Roserock winery is a beautiful bottle in the making. The wine comes in at 14.1 percent octane in this vintage and delivers a beautifully refined bouquet of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, gamebird, plums, a touch of bitter chocolate, a classy base of soil tones, roses and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is vibrant, full-bodied and sappy at the core, with beautiful transparency and grip, fine-grained tannins, impeccable balance and a long, focused and complex finish. This is just a superb pinot noir that is already starting to drink with generosity, but still has layers left to unfold with further bottle age. I would be inclined to let it sleep another five years and really enjoy the fireworks! 2027-2080. **94.**

2014 Pinot Noir “Johan Vineyards”- Franny Beck Wines (Eola-Amity Hills)

The 2014 Pinot Noir “Johan Vineyards” from Michael Sterling’s Franny Beck Wines is really starting to drink beautifully at eight years of age. The bouquet is bright, deep and refined, wafting from the glass in a lovely blend of black cherries, plums, woodsmoke, gently autumnal soil tones, still a touch of sweet stem tones, fresh thyme and a topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and beautifully delineated, with excellent mid-palate depth, tangy acids, fine balance and grip and a long, complex and black fruity finish. This still has decades of life ahead of it and will not really reach its plateau of peak maturity for another four or five years, but if you have more than a bottle or two in the cellar, this is a lovely time to pay a visit to the wine. 2022-2055. **93.**

2014 Pinot Noir “Estate”- Johan Vineyards (Eola-Amity Hills)

The 2014 “Estate” bottling of pinot noir from Johan Vineyards is a beautifully red-fruited and transparent example of the vintage. The wine is more delicately styled than Michael Sterling’s version from this vineyard’s fruit, offering up scents of cherries, pomegranate, a beautiful base of soil tones, fresh thyme, mustard seed, woodsmoke, sarsaparilla, apple blossoms and a delicate framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, medium-full and complex, with a sappy core, lovely soil undertow, modest tannins and fine focus and grip on the long and beautifully balanced finish. This is not into its peak period of drinkability and is showing very well indeed. 2022-2040. **92.**

2013 Pinot Noir “Alfaro Family Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mtns.)

The 2013 vintage of pinot noir from the Alfaro Family Vineyard is a svelte and aromatically lovely middleweight, tipping the scales at 12.4 percent octane in this vintage. The wine included forty percent whole clusters in 2013 and was handled in the cellars in the time honored Big Basin method- native yeast fermentation, fifteen months aging in cask and bottling without fining or filtration. At nine years of age, the wine is starting to show beautifully secondary layering in its aromatic constellation of dark berries, woodsmoke, a touch of beetroot, gamebird, a superb base of forestall soil tones, brown spices, dried rose petals and just a whisper of cedar. On the palate the wine is bright, tangy and medium-full, with a lovely core, great transparency and complexity, a lovely girdle of acidity and great focus and grip on the long, complex finish. This is a beautiful middleweight. 2022-2050+. **93.**



2013 Pinot Noir “Coastview Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Monterey County)

The 2013 Coastview Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Big Basin is a bit riper than the Alfaro Family Vineyard cuvée, coming in this year at 13.6 percent octane. This wine was thirty percent whole clusters in 2013 and today is starting to close in on its plateau of peak drinkability, with the bouquet offering up a deep and complex blend of black cherries, dark berries, grilled meats, a touch of black tea, vinesmoke, dark soil, sweet stem tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core of black fruit, excellent soil signature, fine-grained tannins and a long, complex and well-balanced finish. This is drinking very well indeed, though there is still a bit of backend tannin to resolve and it will be more velvety with another five years in the cellar. But, it is certainly not a crime to be drinking it today! 2022-2050+. **92.**

2013 Pinot Noir “Lester Family Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mtns.)

The 2013 vintage of pinot noir from the Lester Family Vineyard is very Burgundian in aromatic and flavor profile today. The wine comes in at a well-measured 12.8 percent alcohol in this vintage and included fully three-quarters whole clusters. The wine is evolving beautifully with bottle age and offers up scents of desiccated dark berries, black cherries, a lovely base of autumnal soil tones, black tea, bonfire, hung game, a touch of sweet stems, coffee grounds and a discreet framing of oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with tangy acids, excellent focus and grip, a fine core of black fruit, impressive soil signature and a long, moderately tannic and very classy finish. This is really good, but it is one of the 2013s from

Big Basin that I would be inclined to give just a few more years in the cellar before drinking it in earnest, as it is still in climbing mode. 2025-2055. **93.**

2013 Pinot Noir “Woodruff Family Vineyard”- Big Basin Vineyards (Santa Cruz Mtns.)

The Woodruff Family Vineyard’s pinot noir vines were thirty-six years of age back in 2013 and they have produced a really lovely bottle of wine in this vintage. The wine included seventy-five percent whole clusters in 2013 and tips the scales at a very refined 12.6 percent octane. The bouquet is bright, superbly complex and gently autumnal in profile today, wafting from the glass in a mix of red and black cherries, a bit of beetroot, forest floor, pretty stem tones that are starting to get cinnamony, spiced meats, a touch of acorn and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and complex, with a good core of black fruit, fine soil signature, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and very well balanced finish. This is a lovely wine. 2022-2050. **92+.**