

NAPA VALLEY & ITS WINES

The Epitome of Prestige & Excellence

LET LIM HWEE PENG, CERTIFIED SPECIALIST IN WINE (CSW) SHARES THE HERITAGE AND RECOMMENDS WINES FROM NAPA VALLEY FOR THE IMPORTANT OCCASIONS DURING THIS SEASON OF CELEBRATION AND ROMANCE.

It is true that American wines are under-profiled and hugely misunderstood in this part of the world. In my line of duty or wine duty to be precise, I have come to realise the cause of such seemingly dire situation. Many reasons were cited, main of which is the stiff competition from producers in Australia, Chile, New Zealand and South Africa. Those nations were able to proffer great quality wines with attractive pricing, which essentially decreased the demand for these American wines. However, with the current economy situation, the cited pricing factor could not hold much weight, as the currency exchange has made some of those affordable wines dearer. Ironically, now that the Singapore dollars has strengthened against US dollars, there is never a better time to stock up on American wines; also, with the less than rosy economy situation in the United States, there is urgency for many wineries to find owners for their handcrafted wines. Furthermore, choices and quality of America wines are aplenty; a case in point – on every visit to California, I have always been tempted to load more bottles than I can lug back to the island. Nevertheless, of the limited selection of American wines in the regional market, Napa Valley reds and whites seem to be the prized bottles for many wine lovers. Located within the state of California, Napa Valley is a small wine region (with its length-wise almost similar to Cote d'Or, Burgundy) contributing a mere four percent of the entire California wine production. Yet, Napa Valley offers a strong presence in the wine world.

The Napa Valley Trailblazers

Wine historians would have pointed to the momentous 1976 Paris tasting as the unanimous factor that puts California wines onto the international platform. Many, however, have overlooked the contributions by various early days' vintners, who were the driving force that built the momentum and played a crucial role in the current premium status of the region. Some of those pioneers, who left an indelible mark in the industry, include Andre Tchelistcheff, whom many regard as the dean of American winemakers; although at one time, Tchelistcheff has personally considered John Daniel, Jr, owner of Inglenook (present day – Rubicon Estate), as the greatest winemaker in Napa Valley. Both contributed tremendously to today's Napa Valley inimitable wine style.

The rebirth of the Napa Valley's wine industry, however, has to be credited to Robert Mondavi, who champions the concept of 'fine wine is an integral part of the good life'. Robert Mondavi wine estate, the first winery to be built in the post-prohibition era, was established in 1966 after the founder's decision to leave his family winery – Charles Krug to strike out on his own. With his drive and passion, it was inevitable that Mondavi wines became much admired. As the popularity of his wines head northwards, the repute of the region intensify. The quality of the Napa Valley wine asides, its environment-friendly regulation was the other pillar of this world renowned wine region. Such sensitivity in retaining and protecting the natural habitat started as early as 1968, when Jack Davies, of Schramsberg fame, together with many of the conscientious-minded vintners, kicked off initiatives in safeguarding the agricultural nature of the valley from being threatened by the increasing popularity of wines and repute of Napa Valley. In addition to keeping a delicate balance between growth and environment, the regulations have also indirectly led Napa Valley to be the proponent of sustainable, organic, and lately – biodynamic farming. Besides the individual and collective efforts by various vintners, institutions such as UC Davis had a hand in shaping the establishment and growth of the region, through the involvement in wine research and technology studies that enhance viticulture and vinification practices.



The Napa Valley Vintners Association (NVVA), founded in 1944, was another grassroots' establishment that assumed a leadership role in strengthening the region's competitiveness in the world market. NVVA also acts as a credible lobbyist to defend and protect the interest of Napa Valley vintners and wineries. Today, those platforms were further augmented by new initiatives of an enthusiastic bunch of new generations' winemakers and wineries. The establishment of focused wine movements, such as Rhone rangers and Meritage (both promoting Rhone and Claret wine style), as well as Zinfandel Advocates (ZAP) have spurred wineries and vintners to craft wines not only of international quality, but also continuously increasing the awareness and quality of those varietal and wines, respectively. The emergence of highly-rated cult wines was another development that has brought keen attention to the valley.

Napa Valley Wine Style

Even though Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay reign supreme in Napa Valley vine land, various international varietals can also be found in the 'Land of Plenty'. Some well-made Fume Blanc can resemble a fine Grave Bordeaux Blanc, a testament of an increasingly evolving wine style in the valley. Syrah is also progressively staking a presence in Napa Valley. Most aspire towards a northern Rhone style; it also offers typical Napa Valley character of massive fruit intensity with velvety texture. Not many wine regions in the world are able to emulate a luscious Merlot wines outside of St Emilion and Pomerol. I personally find Napa Valley Merlot a reliable choice as it confidently expresses a seductive fleshiness and silky character in Napa Valley, without the unpleasant green and unripe notes emitting from the glasses. As far as Napa Valley wine style is concerned, critics seem to have picked on the high alcohol content as an issue. However, is such concern really exclusive to Napa Valley? A little closer observation will reveal it is unsurprising to find wines hitting the higher-end and beyond 13 percent alcohol level. Doubters can simply revisit wines from the recent 2009 Bordeaux, southern Rhone, Barossa Valley, Sicily and Priorat, just to name a few. High alcohol wines would suddenly seem like a norm. Nevertheless, singling out alcohol as a 'culprit' in a glass of wine seems ignorant at best. Experienced wine critics will realise that such element can be managed if there were a conscious effort to craft a balanced wine. As a matter of fact, the Napa Valley wines that I have sampled, as part of the research for this article, exhibited not only signature Napa Valley flavour intensity, they were both refreshing and balanced in all its elements. LHP



Red Wines In Celebrating A Traditional & Romantic Occasions: Tasting Notes by Lim Hwee Peng, CSW

94 2006, Château Montelena Estate, Calistoga Cabernet Sauvignon

Mentioned about the Paris tasting, one of the wineries that were often highlighted is Château Montelena. Located in Calistoga, at the northern-end of Napa Valley, this winery burst onto the scene with its 1973 Chardonnay. Château Montelena, the Montelena Estate, Calistoga, Napa Valley, 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon however, steals the limelight from its counterpart. Exhibiting fresh, floral scent with slight mint note and restrained blackfruit aroma, this dry wine is firm, yet gentle, fresh and balanced on the palate. A wine that encapsulates success, highly recommended for a gathering of those who have made it in their profession. Retail price of S\$173 from www.ponticellars.com

93 Rubicon Estate Wines

Have a date with a movie buff? Check out wines from the Rubicon Estate of renowned movie director, Francis Ford Coppola. The two wines under the Rubicon label will gently tickle your palate with the right notes and flavours. 2003 Rubicon Estate Cask Cabernet Sauvignon may seem a tad old for its age, but it defies the ravage of time with an explosion of youthfulness on both the nose and palate; displaying ripe blackberry and blackfruit aroma and taste. Overall, it is a balanced and fresh wine to be enjoyed. Its premium sibling – 2004 Rubicon Estate, Rubicon stamps its authority with some austerity, nevertheless, still offers a typical Napa wine identity with its unmistakable fruit intensity; decant this wine to enjoy. Retail price of THB5, 400 and THB8, 800 respectively from www.wine.co.th.

92 2005 Arietta Napa Valley Clarets

When being patient is not one's virtue, hesitate not in uncovering the beauty of 2005 Arietta Napa Valley Clarets. Charmingly ripe and intense on the nose, with gently spicy scent; this full-bodied, rich and ripe flavoured wine displayed such a soft, gentle attractiveness; it begs to be included in a romantic occasion, candle lit dinner, or a seaside rendezvous. Retail price of THB5, 300 from www.wine.co.th.



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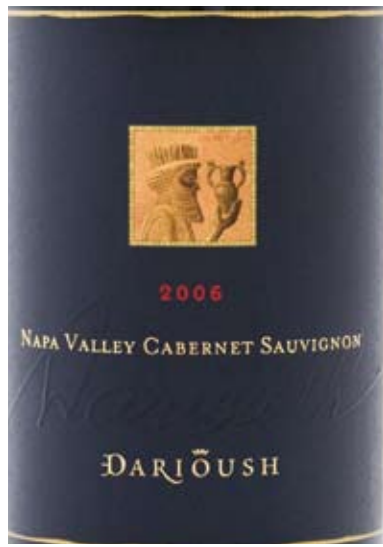
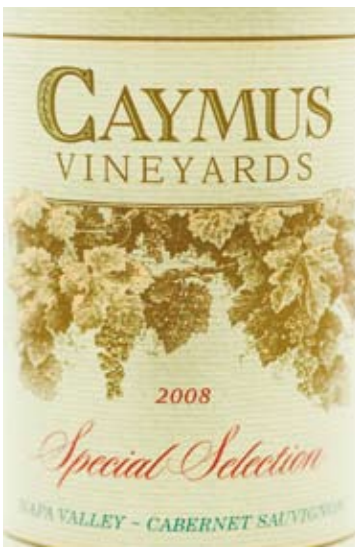
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Red Wines In Celebrating A Traditional & Romantic Occasions: Tasting Notes by Lim Hwee Peng, CSW

- 94 2005 Robert Mondavi, Oakville, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon**
 If waxing lyrical on a bottle of fine wine is much preferred, 2005 Robert Mondavi, Oakville, Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon fit the bill. Showing pleasant aged appearance, this wine is fresh with minimum aged nuances; emitting floral scent, spice note and a fresh burst of red and dark fruits in the glass. On the palate, this dry red wine impresses with its balanced flavours and clean purity! This Mondavi wine essentially represents what the founder has always advocates – handcrafting fine wines to accompany good food and great companion. Enjoy this elegant bottle over lunch with your loved ones, or an appreciation outing with your clientele in a Teochew cuisine eatery. Retail price of S\$95.70 from www.auric.com.sg
- 93 2008 Caymus Vineyards, Napa Valley, Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon**
 For Napa Valley wine fans, here is one reason to put a smile on your face. 2008 Caymus Vineyards, Napa Valley, Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon is a deep coloured wine from core to rim; unashamedly exhibiting its intense cassis aroma with a sweet fruit notes, pleasant jasmine bouquet and cinnamon scent. This wine continues to charm on the palate with rich, intense flavours supported by a full structure, while its silky texture keeps the wine intriguing. A much youthful and flavourful wine that will sustain love in the air. Retail price of S\$292 from www.culina.com.sg
- 94 2005 Shafer Napa Valley, Relentless**
 Constantly looking for love in the wrong places? Take heart, the 2005 Shafer, Napa Valley, Relentless will provide you with the necessary drive to achieve your desire. Offering a nice scent of truffles accompany with intense yet balanced fresh fruit aroma, this wine pleases further with an intense ripeness, and finishes lengthy with lingering fruit notes. Retail price of THB4, 950 from www.wine.co.th
- 93 2006 Darioush Signature, Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon**
 While preparing for the much awaited reunion dinner, enjoy a glass of 2006 Darioush Signature, Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon. This is an absolute delightful wine to enjoy at a dining table peppered with dishes exhibiting different flavours and texture. Though subtle and restrained on the nose, this soft, fresh and intense wine impresses with its persistent taste and ability to enhance many dishes. Retail price of S\$130 from enquiries@straitscellars.com