



REALISING THE *Californian Dream*

WHY ARE CALIFORNIAN WINES SO APPEALING AND FASCINATING?

BY LIM HWEI PENG

Even though it occupies an insignificant strip of land near the West Coast in North America, the wine-producing region in the sunny state of California produces more than 90% of wines in the United States. Sold in the domestic markets as well as the growing export market, Europe is a major market for wines produced in the States.

Statistics from the Wine Institute indicate that 95% of U.S. wine exports were from California with the total value of US\$876 million and volume of 404.5 million litres in 2006. These represented an increase of 30% in value terms and 4% bases on volume as compared to 2005.

US Wine exports to Europe surged 48% in value terms while the other major growth market was the Asia Pacific. These included China (which went up 53% in value terms) and Hong Kong (rising 19% in value terms). In Singapore, the value of Californian wines rose by 68% to

reach US\$5.8 million. Volume-wise, it has increased 79% to 2.6 million litres. (Source: Wine Institute, data from U.S. Dept. of Commerce, USA Trade Online)

Wines from California may be wildly popular but the sunny state is still considered a relatively young wine producing country as compared to those in Europe which have centuries of wine producing experience.

Three decades back, California wines were probably in no man's land and it would have taken even more years to arrive at where they are today had it not been for one particular tasting event held in Paris in 1976.

During that eventful day, a blind tasting of the best wines from California and France was organized by Steven Spurrier, who was then a young British wine retailer (and is now considered a luminary in the wine world). To ensure proper and fair results, Spurrier invited some

of the best palates in France to judge in this competitive tasting event.

The California wines emerged tops at the competition. The judging panel was totally surprised and the French went berserk. The organizer was spurned by the French for years and the Californians celebrated!

That particular event was a major milestone for the Californian wine industry; it gave the American winemakers a strong dose of confidence in their wine quality and their winemaking skills.

Since that judgment in Paris, the dynamics of the Californian wine scene has altered with many movements initiating specific themes. However, all the interest groups have the common aim of producing higher quality wines.

CULT WINES is a celebrated term referring to a small selection of Californian wines made with a specific group of wine lovers in mind. On the palate, cult wines, which mainly use the Cabernet Sauvignon grape, offer intense ripe fruit concentration. It is massive in structure and is usually inky purplish in appearance. The well-demanded wines are available only in minute quantities due to the stringent selection process.

Naturally, due to the small production, most, if not all, of cult wines are very costly as market demand regularly outstrips supply. The more renowned examples of California cult wines include Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate.

With many other winemakers showing similar ambitions, California looks set to increasingly craft new non-mainstream wines giving the phrase "small is beautiful" its very own connotation.

JOINT VENTURE WINES is a new catch-phrase among many Californian wineries. It has resulted in the production of quality wines beyond the sunshine state. Vintners look further than the state to create their dream wines, resulting in the birth of joint venture wineries. One

such example, and also possibly the first of such a cross-continent project is Opus One. Opus One is a joint effort between Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe Rothschild of the Chateau Mouton fame in Bordeaux, France. The synergies between those two passionate vintners created an unprecedented wine that maximises the existing resources and leverages on the strength of both wineries. The final product is a new world wine with old world nuances that is marketed with passion.

ZAP is an acronym for a non-profit organization that thrives on their love for the Zinfandel grape among consumers. Zinfandel or Zin is a versatile red grape that is



Source: Benziger

synonymous with Californian wines. It has been garnering the deserved limelight since the 1990s. Zinfandel is a grape varietal that can be made into various wine styles ranging from rose or blush wine, light to heavy-bodied red wine, as well as fortified wines, pleasing many connoisseurs with various preferences. The rise and fall of Zinfandel has made this grape so endearing to the Americans, and captivated its fans with its full fruit flavour and heady impression.

Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP) was founded in 1991 by wine lovers and winemakers that were enthralled by its nuances. It has now grown to become a non-profit educational organization dedicated to advancing the public's knowledge and appreciation for Zinfandel. However, Zinfandel is not the only celebrated grape in California.

In recent years, there has been another movement with the aim of popularising Rhone style wines. It is a group of wine lovers and winemakers that are obviously big fans of Rhone wines who are determined to see the popularity of wines fashioned from the Rhone varietals.

THE RHONE RANGERS, whom they are affectionately called, gather annually to celebrate the birth of Rhone style wines. In California, wineries craft wines from Rhone varietals such as Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Viognier imbuing a twist of the Californian imprint in the resulting wines. Californian wine regions may have been once a mediocre wine producing zone, but within a short space of three decades, it has proven to be an acclaimed wine appellation and continues to fascinate wine lovers all over the world with their magical wines. With the current evolution and effort being invested in the industry coupled with support from trade boards and governmental initiatives, the wine quality and standards of Californian wines are set to improve.

WINES FROM THE SUNNY STATE

There is a good representation of Californian wines in Singapore, where fine wines from the sunny state are available in most restaurants and retail outlets. Generally, the response from restaurateurs, wine trade professionals and journalists on Californian wines are positive; such as its premium quality and the wines' ability to age; however,



Source: Joseph Phelps Vineyards

such positive elements have a downside, too. The most common grouse is its less than friendly pricing despite the more favourable exchange rate between the US dollar and Sing dollar.

Moreover, despite the wines' attractiveness, consumers are generally not well informed of these gems. Notwithstanding the quantum jump in export figures to the Singapore market in 2006, most trade professionals interviewed felt that Californian wines can do much better with more profiling and exposure. Nonetheless, the following are an excellent sampling of Californian wines, which, in my opinion, present the true qualities of wines they represent from the sunny state.

Chardonnay

1. St Francis Chardonnay 2004 (available at Culina). Toasty, ripe pear aroma. Tropical fruit ripeness at entry; a medium bodied wine with loads of ripe fruitiness at mid-palate. Clean finish. Enjoyable now.
2. La Crema, Sonoma Coast, Chardonnay 2004 (available at Culina). A favourite white wine of mine. This Chardonnay is rich yet emits minerality, freshness and well integrated oak notes. Impresses on the nose and palate. A food wine that can also charm on its own.
3. Groth, Napa Valley, Chardonnay 2004 (available at Straits Cellars). Rather restrained on its nose probably due to the cold serving temperature. On the palate, it offers pears, peaches with vanillin nuances. Clean in its finish.

Pinot Noir

4. Benziger Giusti Pinot Noir 2004 (available at Hai Choo Wines & Spirits) A classy and restrained Pinot Noir from the famed Russian River appellation. On the palate, it resembles a young Volnay, except this wine comes with richer flavours and softness. Aerate to enjoy its fullness. Excellent wine!

Zinfandel

5. Seghesio Sonoma Zinfandel 2005 (available at Hock Tong Bee). A product from a Zin specialist. Seghesio Zinfandel is reliable in expressing the varietal's characteristics. This Zin offers fine ripe black and red fruit concentration. On the palate, it's absolutely balanced in its flavours and nuances. Approachable and enjoyable now. An excellent representation of how Zinfandel has evolved to its present fine style.



Source: Whitehall Lane Winery

Merlot

6. Merryvale Reserve Merlot 2001 (available at Hock Tong Bee). This wine is already showing aged notes with a beautiful claret colour. Secondary nuances showing on the palate, too. A medium-bodied wine with soft red fruit flavours and herbs, mushroom notes at the back palate.
7. Whitehall Lane, Napa Valley, Merlot 2003 (available at Straits Cellars). Obvious toastiness on the nose. Medium to full bodied wine with fine red fruit concentration, herbs and approachable tannin. Concentration of fruit flavours flows from entrance to mid-palate and ends cleanly at the finishing.

Cabernet Sauvignon

8. Beringer Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 (available at Certain Cellars). A serious and dry wine that oozes more aristocracy than immediate charm. Claret-like in its personality, with immense restraint in its aroma and flavours. Needs to aerate to coax its full flavours out. Impressive silky texture. This wine needs a big piece of Wagyu beef to match with its taste.
9. Hahn Estates Smith & Hook Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (available at Top Wines). Deep-coloured wine with perfume aroma and leafy nuance. Loads of ripe blackcurrant and red berry on the palate with chewy tannins. A full-bodied wine with dry and firm structures. This wine tasted better with an hour of aeration prior to tasting. Another wine requiring a slab of beef to fully enjoy its flavours.
10. Geyser Peak Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 (available at Maxxium). Deep ruby red appearance. Pleasant aroma of vanillin notes, red and black berry aromas. Pleasant

concentration of ripe black berry. A varietal-focus wine, enjoyable now.

Rhone Blend

11. Joseph Phelps Le Mistral 2004 (available at Culina). Initial aroma was rather toasty, with ripe black berry fruit notes. Ripe fruity entry with rich concentration of black fruit flavours. Smooth on the palate with apparent freshness to accompany the fruit ripeness. Overall, balanced in its structure. One of my favourites.

Bordeaux Blend (Meritage)

12. Benziger, Sonoma Mountain Red, Oonapais 2004 (available at Hai Choo Wines & Spirits). A big and luscious wine deserving of its super-premium status. Produced in minute quantity at Benziger, this small production wine oozes concentration, softness and loads of ripeness. Aerate it for hours and it continues to offer its charming quality on the palate. A fabulous wine!
13. Geyser Peak Reserve, Alexander Valley, Meritage 2001 (available at Maxxium). This dry wine was showy on the nose rather than on the palate which was restrained and shy. A slight resemblance to a St Estephe-style Claret. This wine needs time to open up.

Dessert Wine

14. Deloach Late Harvest Gewurztraminer 2001 (available at Top Wines). Almost deep amber in its appearance. Obvious ripe lychee aroma with touch of over-ripe pear. A very good dessert wine with a good balance in its ripeness and fresh acidity. Clean and fresh, this is an excellent dessert wine!

Wine Availability (this applies to wine distributors and retailers in Singapore only):

Hai Choo Wines & Spirits. Tel: 6273 5825. Contact: Kelvin Tan
Straits Cellars. Tel: 6469 7633. Contact: Sueann Smith (by appointment only)
Top Wines. Tel: 6468 3866. Contact: Flora Loh
Culina Retail outlets at Park House & Bukit Timah. Tel: 6735 8858 (Park Hopuse) & 6468 5255 (Bukit Timah)
Hock Tong Bee. Tel: 6749 8944 (for enquiries)
Maxxium. Tel: 6559 1155. Contact: Riche Lim
Certain Cellars. Tel: 6270 3230. Contact: Mandy Toh