

## 2014 NAPA REDS SIGNAL A NEW ERA OF CLASSICISM

January 27th, 2017

Last week I drank a bottle of 1979 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve with Robert Mondavi Jr., the grandson of the late Robert Mondavi, the world-famous vintner. The wine was striking, and it immediately reminded me of some of my experiences earlier in the month when I tasted more than 250 Napa reds — mostly cabernet sauvignon from the excellent 2014 vintage. It's a year that proves Napa is now entrenched in a new era of classicism, whereby wines expand on the linear definition of reds of the past while drawing on the precision and fruitiness of today. I've been watching (and tasting) this change unfold over the last few vintages, but maybe now, at last, we can finally proclaim that Napa Valley jam — most evident in the high-octane and overly fruity, sweet reds of the 2000s — is a thing of the past.

I like the way Helen Keplinger, a young and dynamic winemaker who also consults for a number of wineries in the Valley, describes her 2014 Grace Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley: "It's like a knife edge. The wine has focus."

Indeed, this is an excellent summary of many of the top-scoring wines in my tastings so far. Winemakers say that they benefited from a very warm but constant growing season. In the words of Cathy Corison, one of the veteran winemakers of the region, "Our hand was not forced by heat spikes in 2014."

The 2014 Napa Valley reds have wonderful fruit character in aroma and flavor, yet there's always a freshness, firmness and linear edge to the wines to give them focus and figure. They are less opulent than the bold and structured 2013s, perhaps the greatest vintage ever for Napa Valley. Even so, at the moment they tend to be more complex and approachable than the 2013s, which makes them extremely attractive to taste and drink now. "The 2014s are really ethereal, whereas the 2013s are concentrated and structured," explained Tod Mostero, the head winemaker of Dominus and Ulysses. "The 2012s are more juicy."

I am sure we will debate which vintage is the best for a long time, and this itself adds to the attraction of the three vintages. I would rank them today as follows: 2013, 2014 and 2012. If ageability is your thing, then 2013 is hard to beat, but don't believe that the bright and sophisticated 2014s or luscious 2012s won't age.

Perhaps what distinguishes 2014 above all is that all the reds show their true character driven by respective terroirs and microclimates. In other words, the wines are not dominated by a particular character of the vintage — namely late ripening and high sugar levels. It's interesting to note that the 2014 vintage was also marked by a massive earthquake in the valley on August 24 that caused some serious damage. Some winemakers believe it had an almost magical effect by releasing groundwater in many areas not seen for years, event decades. "Many of the vineyards had green leaves through the harvest, and dry creeks of the past rain with water," said one winemaker.

It's hard to say if the earthquake made a difference, but certainly 2014 is turning out to be a special vintage for the region. Below are my first set of tasting notes. Stay tuned for more very soon. —James Suckling, CEO/Editor

<b>TOR CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY TO KALON VINEYARD 2014</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Score</b>	This has incredible length and intensity. Aromas of oyster shells, truffles, herbs and wet earth. Blackcurrants, too. Subtle. Exciting energy and length to this wine. Better in 2022 but why wait?
<b>Region</b>	<b>California</b>	<b>98</b>	
<b>Vintage</b>	<b>2014</b>		
<b>TOR CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY HERB LAMB VINEYARD 2014</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Score</b>	This shows such refinement and sexiness at the same time. Full body, ultra-fine tannins and incredible length. A wine to age for a long time but why wait? Balance and harmony says it all.
<b>Region</b>	<b>California</b>	<b>97</b>	
<b>Vintage</b>	<b>2014</b>		
<b>TOR CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY MELANSON VINEYARD 2014</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Score</b>	Very solid and dense with a reserved and focused palate. Full body and beautiful tannins. Mountain-fruit character from Pritchard Hill. Like a square peg in a round hole. Tight! Drink in 2021.
<b>Region</b>	<b>California - Napa Valley</b>	<b>97</b>	
<b>Vintage</b>	<b>2014</b>		
<b>TOR CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY BLACK MAGIC 2014</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Score</b>	A refined and silky wine with white pepper, dark fruit, rose petals and walnuts. Hints of plums. Medium-to full-bodied, fine and fresh. A beauty. Love it. Drink or hold.
<b>Region</b>	<b>California - Napa Valley</b>	<b>96</b>	
<b>Vintage</b>	<b>2014</b>		
<b>TOR CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY OAKVILLE TIERRA ROJA 2014</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Score</b>	Aromas of blackcurrants, red fruit, rust and tile. Medium to full body and firm and chewy tannins. A solid and powerful wine. Needs at least five years to soften.
<b>Region</b>	<b>California</b>	<b>95</b>	
<b>Vintage</b>	<b>2014</b>		