

Wine Spectator

2005 California Cabernet Retrospective: Hit and Miss at Age 10

A long, cool growing season and a huge crop created challenges, but seasoned vintners came through with sumptuous wines

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The 2005 Napa Valley Cabernet vintage at age 10 has proven to be a bit of a roller coaster. Many of the wines are very, very good, but there are many others that show the imbalance of a supersized crop, with mixed tannin levels. Of the 164 Cabernets from the 2005 vintage I recently tasted blind in *Wine Spectator's* Napa office, 41 earned 90 points or more, with a total of 112 rated very good or better.

The classic-scoring wines a decade later come from familiar names, and offer a glimpse of how the 2005 vintage could really shine. Schrader Cellars has a pair at 95 points, both from Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville (Old Sparky and CCS), along with Shafer Hillside Select. All three are deliciously pure, deep and layered, displaying the kind of vibrancy and finesse that bodes well for the future.

The second tier of wines also stars veteran Napa vintners whose experience paid off when managing 2005's huge crop. Castello di Amorosa was a relatively new producer that year, but owner Dario Sattui, of the V. Sattui winery family, has been working Napa harvests since the 1970s. Like the Schrader T6, the Tor Clone No. 6 comes from Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard, a longtime proven source for some of Napa's top Cabernet grapes. Tor was another relative newcomer in the 2005 vintage, though owner Tor Kenward already had nearly three decades as a senior executive at Beringer under his belt when it opened.

Nearly a dozen wines hit the 93-point mark, including Arietta H Block, Beringer Private Reserve, Carter Coliseum Block, Corra, Lewis Reserve, Phifer Pavitt Date Night, Pride Reserve, Rubicon, Scarecrow and another pair from Schrader.

The successes of the vintage show rich, extracted flavors and polished tannins. Those that missed the mark, however, are drying out, leaving hard-edged tannins that straddle dryness and fading fruit.

The 2005 growing season was cool. It started late and ended late, saved by an Indian summer. "The secret in 2005 was dropping fruit," said Kenward.

For those who faced challenges in 2005, crop and berry size were culprits, vintners said. The more grapes hanging, the more challenging it was to achieve uniform ripening and, in turn, graceful textures. The size of the yield left many wineries scrambling to find enough fermentation tanks to hold the crop. Those who thinned aggressively in 2005 emerged winners.

"Even with a great deal of green harvesting, we still saw tonnage up 20 and 30 percent," said Elias Fernandez of Shafer. For those who'd weathered it, the enormity of the 1997 vintage gave vintners a reference point for how to manage the size and flow of the 2005 crop. And most wineries ended up with more bulk wine than usual.

“Given how big the berries were in 2005, people overbled their tanks in an attempt to gain instant concentration,” Thomas Brown of Schrader observed. “We did bleed a bit, maybe 5 percent max, on any given lot. What we’ve found as we’ve watched the wines develop is they definitely started out medium-bodied but have concentrated a bit more with every tasting.”

Tasting wines as they age is the best way to assess vintages and the value of cellaring them. Napa Cabernets are known to age well and also show well early on. If there is a disappointment with the 2005 vintage, it comes from the number of wines that haven’t benefited from a decade of aging. That’s worth remembering when you consider whether to lay wines down or not in the future.

Reviews and tasting notes for all wines that scored very good or outstanding are listed below.

2005 California Cabernet Retrospective

TOR Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Clone No.6 2005

Score: 94 | Release price: \$125 | Current price: NA

Aging beautifully, this is full-bodied, rich and flavorful, with tiers of blackberry, black cherry, currant, licorice and dusty, gravelly earth. Maintains a smooth, mocha-laced presence and ends with tannins that are ripe and supportive. 2005 California Cabernet blind retrospective (September 2015). Drink now through 2020. NA cases made.—J.L.