



USA^{by} Jon Bonné



Photograph: Thomas Gleivenside / Clay McClachlan/Getty.com

THERE'S SOMETHING THRILLING about a birth-year wine. But it wasn't nostalgia that left me struck dumb by the 1972 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon. From a soggy, glum vintage, this was not meant to be one of the greats. Yet here it was, four decades later, alive and full of silken black fruit and earthy depth – thriving thanks to the abilities of winemaker Mike Grgich (who would soon make the Château Montelena Chardonnay that stunned the world at the Judgement of Paris), as well as Mondavi's determination to seek out top Napa Valley fruit in the early years of California's wine renaissance.

Such bottles prove what that pioneering generation knew: at its best, California's Cabernet Sauvignons and other Bordeaux-inspired wines can age with the best of the Médoc. To invoke Bordeaux is a risky thing for Americans, however. California's story line is all about the new, and in recent years its dominant style has evolved away from what

'The good news is that California again seems to be captivated by a more ageless style'

Californians sometimes called (once proudly, then disdainfully) 'claret-style'. Yet the classic Cabernets of the past – Inglenook in the 1950s or Beaulieu's Georges de Latour under Andre Tchelistcheff in the mid-20th century – remain the stuff of legend. Many endure today, despite being made without a forest of new French oak or any technology more advanced than rudimentary redwood fermentation casks.

For the long haul?

Can California still pull off such wines, in an era when even the loftiest reds are engineered to be enjoyed young? Yes, of course. But whether the bigger, high-octane wines of recent years can enjoy the same longevity is a tougher question – and a sensitive one for many winemakers in Napa.

'We've been debating for the past 15 years whether Napa Valley wines will age,' says Andy Erickson, who makes Dalla Valle and Ovid, and until recently, Screaming Eagle. 'But show me one that hasn't.'

Perhaps the more pertinent question is: how long does a Californian red need to be built for? Wines from tannin-forward vintages like 1999 and

Left: it's not just Napa that makes great Bordeaux blends - Ridge from Santa Cruz Mountains and Andrew Will from Washington are two producers worth having in your cellar

2001 are thriving; some, like the 1999 Spottswoode, are just finding their sweet spot. But it's a harder question to answer for a vintage like 1997 - a hot, high-yielding year that arguably set Napa firmly on the course of bigger and brawnier. The '97s are a complicated lot, perhaps none more so than the Harlan Estate Red, which got a perfect 100 points from US critic Robert Parker, yet remains the subject of concerns about overripeness and volatility - criticisms Parker called 'simply false'. Even the *Wine Spectator* critic James Laube said in a retrospective tasting that it 'pushes ripeness to the edge of Port'.

1997 demonstrated that superripe fruit, lower acidity and higher alcohols could pave the way to critical success. It was only after '97 (and a meagre 1998 vintage) that many of California's most successful wines crept north of 14% alcohol.

And survival isn't the same as ageing with grace. It's one thing to say that a wine has lasted 15 years, another to find it more complex and worthy of time in bottle. When I tasted a wine like the 1997 Bryant Family Cabernet Sauvignon a few years ago, I wasn't sure what value cellar time had served. It wasn't dead, but it was still so ripe and monolithic as to make me question its purpose.

By contrast, those who stuck to less-showy styles have been rewarded over time. That includes producers like Randy Dunn, whose Howell Mountain Cabernets carry such tannic load as to necessitate cellar time; ditto the hard-edged Mayacamas Cabernets (its legendary 1974 is still just starting to soften). But it also includes those such as Cathy Corison of Corison, whose adherence to brighter fruit flavours and firmer tannins reflect a style that won Napa much acclaim. 'I thought my wines could last maybe 15 or 20 years, but the oldest of them is now 25 years. They're certainly aged, but they've got lots of life left.'

Beyond Napa

Of course, California's kinship with Bordeaux is not solely about Cabernet, or Napa. The curious thing about California being the land of Cabernet is just how much that grape's success is entangled with Bordeaux's other varieties. So to Ridge's Monte Bello. Grown in limestone and greenstone soils high above the Silicon Valley city of Cupertino, it has enjoyed relative isolation from the whims of winemaking fashion. The Santa Cruz Mountains had a Cabernet history dating back to the La Questa

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plantings of the late 1800s, but the 1969 arrival at Ridge of Bordeaux fan Paul Draper marked a shift away from pure Cabernet. Adding other grapes - Merlot and Petit Verdot - turned Monte Bello into a more complex expression of place; the 1974 Monte Bello was more than half Merlot. 'Right from the beginning,' Draper recalls, 'complexity interested me, and with my history of tasting some great vintages of Bordeaux, I felt these other varieties could give us a more complex wine.'

Still, Monte Bello remains an outlier for California. In Sonoma, Pierre Seillan's *Vérité* in the Chalk Hill area (a boutique tendril of Kendall-Jackson) has crafted ambitious blends for more than a decade, as has Peter Michael in Knights Valley. But Clos du Bois' Marlstone Bordeaux blend vanished in the mists of Constellation Brands' corporate ownership, as did most wines under the fanciful Meritage moniker. The stronghold for such wines gravitated north to Washington State, where serious Bordeaux-style blending thrives. Labels like Andrew Will, Cadence and Buty have shown the full potential of wines, especially from Merlot and Cab Franc, grown in Washington's dramatic, dry weather.

Cabernet... and not Sauvignon

California also had to accept one of its weak points in the pursuit of Bordeaux-style greatness: Merlot. Regardless of the impact of the film *Sideways*, much

Above: Dominus Estate in Yountville grubbed up its Merlot vines and replaced them with Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Many producers agree that Napa's loamy, gravelly soil is not suitable for Merlot

'Cabernet Sauvignon is king in Napa, but Cabernet Franc can be a truly great wine' **Tim Mondavi**

Californian Merlot was never very good – with exceptions such as John Kongsgaard's 1990s examples from Newton Vineyard, which remain vibrant after nearly 20 years.

These days California's leanings are more Left Bank than Right, which is a nice way of saying that Merlot is out of luck. Certainly that would explain the large empty field in front of Yountville's Dominus Estate. Where Merlot once grew, Christian Moueix (proprietor also of Pétrus, Bordeaux's most famous Merlot-based wine) decided, as others have, that the loamy, gravelly soils of the Napa benchland, while perfect for Cabernet Sauvignon, were a poor fit for Merlot. He pulled it out. Dominus, one of the most ageworthy of Napa wines, now has Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot in the blend.

Moueix is hardly alone in this conclusion. 'Merlot should play a more minor role in the blend in the warmer parts of Napa,' asserts Erickson.

Until a few years ago, Cabernet Franc remained a backbencher; too many winemakers feared critical wrath from revealing its green pepper flavours. But its rise in popularity is not entirely a surprise; 1892 reports from renowned soil expert Eugene Hilgard advised Californian vintners that 'those desiring to

produce a fine quality of Bordeaux wines should... regard Cabernet Franc with special favour.'

Many feel it is a linchpin in wines that have some of California's greatest ageing potential – Dominus is one; Erickson's Maya from Dalla Valle is another. The latter is typically at least 50% Cabernet Franc (the rest is Cabernet Sauvignon), which gives it a distinctive signature among Napa's top-tier – violets, blue fruit and a seductively spicy aspect.

Maya also underscores Cabernet Franc's possible sweet spot: Pritchard Hill, the area east of Oakville that hosts not only Dalla Valle but names like Chappellet, Ovid and Bryant Family, as well as Tim Mondavi's new Continuum estate. The area's volcanic soils seem to bring out the variety's rich, spicy side. Indeed, Maya's reputation was a key piece of evidence when Mondavi was scouting new properties. He found that many old Robert Mondavi Cabernet blends, and early versions of Opus One, had included Cabernet Franc as a secret weapon. 'It was by seeing some of the other wines we had and saying, "Why do I like this?" Mondavi recalls. 'Cabernet Sauvignon is king in Napa Valley, but I think Cabernet Franc can be a truly great wine.'

The variety has become Erickson's secret weapon too, not just for his clients' wines, but also his own. He and his wife Annie Favia make a blend, Cerro Sur, under their Favia label, that adds a dose of Cabernet Sauvignon to fruit from 35-year-old

Right: Harlan Estate, whose 1997 Cabernet received fulsome praise from US critics, yet has since been criticised for overripeness and inability to age



Bonné's top Bordeaux-style blends from the USA



Dominus, Napa Valley 2008

★★★★★ 19.5pts/20

E90–E92 (in bond) **Averys, Corney & Barrow, Private Cellar, The Wine Society**

Now 30 years old, this venture is a Californian classic. But the real success is how Christian Moueix, proprietor of Pétrus, so fine-tuned his approach with Cabernet while turning his back on Merlot. The 2008 is 83% Cabernet Sauvignon,

13% Cabernet Franc and 4% Petit Verdot. While oak may be Napa's mainstay, Dominus sees just 40% new barrels, leaving its fate more to a relentless focus on sorting and the Napanook vineyard's sublime soils. A sweet floral edge enlivens creamy blackberry, sandalwood and gravelly mineral, with well-robbed tannins that only appear at the finish. For all the flesh, this has long-lived savoury nuance. **Drink:** 2013–2028. **Alcohol:** 14.1%

Ridge, Monte Bello, Santa Cruz Mountains 2008 ★★★★★ 19.5

E115 Berry Bros & Rudd, Imbibros

Ridge has long created a Californian classic



that broke all the rules – a Cabernet-based wine grown not in Napa but on greenstone- and limestone-rich soils in the remote corners of the Santa Cruz Mountains, aged not in French oak but American. (Though Paul Draper asserts Bordeaux's use of French oak is a post-World War I turn.) The Merlot comes from plots on heavier soils. It accounts for 28% of the 2008 which, coming after

two drought years, shows great meatiness. Amid the youthful oak toast is black tea, anise, cedar shavings and bright currant, plus an intense mineral energy and beautifully finessed tannins. **Drink:** 2012–2030. **Alc:** 13.3%

Continuum, Napa Valley 2008 ★★★★★ 19 N/A UK www.continuumestate.com

For his own next chapter after the sale of his family's winery, Tim Mondavi departed the valley floor to Pritchard Hill, east of Oakville. Continuum has gained refinement as Mondavi shifted fruit sources from famous To Kalon to more mountain estate parcels, adding more Cabernet Franc. The 2008 is

70% estate fruit, predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, with 17% Cabernet Franc, plus Merlot and Petit Verdot. Dried-flower and smoked tobacco aromas give it a distinct perfume, with bright huckleberry to match rich cassis. A tremendous density of fruit. **Drink:** 2012–2028. **Alc:** 14.9%

Andrew Will, Ciel du Cheval Vineyard, Red Mountain 2008 ★★★★★ 18.5

E41–E49 AG Wines, En Primeur, Slurp, Wine Bear, Winedirect

Chris Camarda named his label, based on tiny Vashon Island near Seattle, for his two sons. Camarda is a key figure in Washington's Bordeaux-styled success. And his work with the esteemed Ciel du Cheval site on the moonscape of Red Mountain shows a special talent for Right Bank-styled efforts, with Merlot and Cabernet Franc accounting for 66% of the mix (Cabernet Sauvignon makes up the rest). It's not shy; the Taransaud oak shows its robust strut. But the fruit is alluring and tangy, with savoury caraway, lilies and green tea, and a mineral energy, all of which mesh seamlessly. **Drink:** 2013–2022. **Alc:** 14.5%



Cabernet Franc vines from Napa's Coombsville area. 'For whatever reason,' Erickson says, 'the combination gives a much more distinctive wine.'

Former glories

The good news is that California again seems to be captivated by a more ageless style, to the point that Francis Ford Coppola recently reclaimed the Inglenook name, intending to guide his Rubicon Estate label back toward its cellarworthy legacy.

Lou Kapsandy Sr, who took over the State Lane vineyard once used as a key piece of Beringer's Private Reserve Cabernet, decided after tasting old Inglenook and Georges de Latour wines to stop blending his estate cuvée, and instead make an all-Cabernet wine that would 'continue the glory of what Napa Valley used to make'. (That said, he planted Merlot vines just a few kilometres from Dominus for a Right Bank-inspired wine.)

For Napa Cabernet to take even tentative steps back toward a more ageworthy style is welcome. Recently, Tim Mondavi and I had a 1994 Robert Mondavi Reserve. After 45 minutes, we watched it blossom with tremendous flesh and beefy, minty depth. It was a style lauded upon release, then slammed a few years later after the ripe '97s had changed the conversation. Mondavi took the brunt of that criticism. Now he's rebounded, embracing the durability of Cabernet and the virtues of a blend.

To me, that's an auspicious sign for California's love affair with the timelessness of Bordeaux. Or, as Mondavi told me later: 'I've been around here long enough to do what I think Napa Valley can do best.'

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Favia, Cerro Sur, Napa Valley 2007 ★★★★★ 18

N/A UK www.faviawine.com

This is a husband-wife partnership of Napa stars. Andy Erickson has Dalla Valle, Staglin and Screaming Eagle on his winemaking resumé, and Annie Favia's 11-year stint with vineyard guru David Abreu has made her one of the area's top viticulturists. When left to their

own preferences, they craft blends like Cerro Sur, a mix of mostly 35-year-old Cabernet Franc from Rancho Chimiles in eastern Napa, with some Cabernet Sauvignon from the

cooler Coombsville area. A spicy note of Mexican chocolate mixes with deep blue fruit and a high-toned profile. **Drink:** 2010-2020. **Alc:** 14.8%



Matthiasson, Napa Valley 2007 ★★★★★ 18

N/A UK www.matthiasson.com

In his spare time, vineyard consultant Steve Matthiasson is

creating a new style of Napa white, a mashup of Friuli and Bordeaux. But he's also out to prove that Napa is still a place for nuanced reds. This has 45% Merlot from the alluvial Oak Knoll area, plus Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec. Subtle and perfumed, with plushness and charred wood accents, and a surprising tannic heft from what Matthiasson calls 'Cab-like Merlot'.

Drink: 2012-2019. **Alc:** 14.5%

Kapcsandy Family Wines, Endre, Napa Valley 2008 ★★★★★ 17.5

N/A UK www.kapcsandywines.com

Lou Kapcsandy escaped Hungary in the 1950s, came to America and, while building a Seattle construction business, fell in love with Bordeaux. In 2000, he bought Beringer's old State Lane vineyard in Yountville, and replanted with help from consultants Helen Turley and John Wetlaufer. Kapcsandy's goal: to make wines in the tradition of Tchelitcheff-era Beaulieu and other greats of Napa's part. His second wine, Endre, 50%



Cabernet Sauvignon, with 25% Merlot (Cab Franc and Petit Verdot make the rest) is subtle and loamy, with great berry fruit, dried sagebrush and perfect acidity. A precise and grown-up wine. **Drink:** 2012-2018. **Alc:** 14.1%

Moone-Tsai, Hillside Blend, Howell Mountain 2008 ★★★★★ 17

N/A UK www.moonetsai.com

A new effort from an interesting partnering of notables: Mike Moone, who co-founded Luna Vineyards and Silverado Partners, one of California's larger vineyard concerns, with MaryAnn Tsai (Luna's president) and her husband Larry. They tapped current Napa wunderkind Philippe Melka to make the wines, purchasing fruit from a range of sites. They prefer to talk Cabernet, but this wine is evidence of Merlot's possibilities (it's 84% Merlot), especially when grown on Napa's rugged Howell Mountain. Raspberry lift signals Merlot; cinnamon and intense structure come from the mountain; and stylish oak is Melka's signature. **Drink:** 2012-2019. **Alc:** 14.7%

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