

**RECENTLY TASTED AMERICAN WINES:
LOOKING FOR THAT OLD SCHOOL RHYTHM
IN THE HEART OF THE NEW WORLD**



I drink an awful lot of American wines these days, though most of it is from the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. I really love these old school wines from California (primarily) and over the last few years I have been wondering about who might still be making wines in the style that made me fall in love with American wines back in my early days in the wine trade and which continue to drink just beautifully nearly thirty years later. Believe me, I have drunk enough American wines from the decades of the '60s and '70s to have a very good idea of just how beautiful these wines remain today, as for the most part, the stars of those two decades produced wines that were meant to age gracefully and which continue to drink just wonderfully in 2010. My recent articles on Mayacamas Vineyards and Edmunds St. John really piqued my curiosity about who else might be making wines in the more traditional style in California, Oregon and Washington, and I have been studiously trying to track down some of these wines and taste. As you have already seen (if you started reading this issue from the beginning), those continued passes through California wine country have yielded up this issue's feature on the great and completely unchanged wines of Stony Hill Vineyards. I have had some very, very pleasant surprises over the last year with other wineries and clearly there is a lot more digging to do out on the West Coast, as I have come across a fairly

2007 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Reserve

The 2007 Mondavi Fumé Blanc Reserve is a tad lower in alcohol than the 2006, but its 14.5 percent alcohol level seems to have come with a bit of residual sugar. The nose is pretty, but not as complex as the 2006 version, as it offers up scents of gooseberry, lime, cut grass and a bit of damp herb tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, round and fairly simple, with solid depth, but a distinct touch of sweetness sticking out on the moderately long finish. This is a good, solid bottle of wine, but not really up to the traditional standards of this bottling. 2009-2011. **85.**

2007 Swanson Pinot Grigio

At 13.6 percent alcohol, I would venture to say that this is a wine that should have been picked a tad sooner. The wine offers up some ripe, rather muddled aromatics of apple, melon, a touch of straw and perhaps a bit of soil somewhere down there deep. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and has a nice touch of CO₂ to try and give it a bit of lift, but this is not a particularly focused wine and it shows some heat on the finish. Really not very special. 2010-2012. **82.**

2006 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Reserve

This wine is a tad high in octane for my own personal tastes at 14.7 percent alcohol, but it restrains most of the heat on the finish and does deliver the pure and vibrant aromatic and flavor profile that used to make this one of my favorite California white wines year in and year out. The nose on the 2006 offers up a lovely mix of gooseberry, flint, cut grass, lime zest and smoky tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and focused, with sound acids and good length and grip on the finish. If this was a point lower in alcohol, there would probably not be the touch of uncovered alcohol on the finish that is evident at 14.7 percent, but for drinking over the relative near-term, this is still a pretty tasty bottle. 2009-2015. **90.**

2004 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Reserve

The 2004 Fumé Blanc Reserve from Robert Mondavi is a rather hefty fifteen percent in alcohol and really is incapable of carrying this much heat and remaining fresh and balanced. The nose offers up scents of gooseberry, green pineapple, damp grass, cat pee and flinty tones. On the palate the wine is full and a bit overripe to my tastes, with plenty of heat sticking out uncovered on the rather four-square finish. This is not a patch on the wines made here fifteen years ago that proudly wore this label. 2009-2012. **84.**

1998 Kalin Cellars Semillon (Livermore Valley)

Both semillon and sauvignon blanc have long been strong suits for Terry Leighton's Kalin Cellars, and I am hard-pressed to think of anyone in California that makes such serious and long-lived wines from these two varietals. Clearly top white Bordeaux is the inspiration for both of these bottlings, and the 1998 Semillon is an absolutely stellar wine. The wine is made of a blend of seventy-five percent semillon and twenty-five percent sauvignon blanc, with the semillon hailing from the original Wente vineyard planted in the 1880s from cuttings taken from Château d'Yquem and planted by vinous pioneer Charles Wetmore. The 1998 is the new release and it is stunning, as it jumps from the glass in a blaze of apple, fresh figs, petrol, orange peel, salty soil tones and just a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and still quite young, with a rock solid core of fruit, laser-like focus and excellent balance and grip on the long and crisp finish. Just a beautiful bottle of dry semillon in the making that

will make issues of premature oxidation with white Bordeaux much easier to accept. 2012-2030+. **94.**

Chardonnay

2009 Arnot-Roberts “Green Island Vineyard” Chardonnay (Napa)

Green Island Vineyard is located at the extreme southern end of Napa, where the Napa River runs into San Pablo Bay, and this is most assuredly one of the coolest microclimates in all of Napa. The weather pattern of cool nights and temperate days produces grapes ideal for Arnot-Roberts goal of producing a low alcohol, higher acid example of chardonnay, and the 2009 weighs in at an admirable 12.4 percent alcohol. The nose on the wine offers up a very pretty mélange of lemon curd, pears, spring flowers, a nice base of soil and just a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and zesty, with a moderate core of fruit, good focus and good length and grip. The slight lack of mid-palate amplitude here suggests that this is probably produced from fairly young vines today, but the traditional style of winemaking here augurs very well for future vintages, and this 2009 is by no means a disappointing bottle to drink over the next decade. Good juice- particularly for those inclined to trade a bit of intensity for more elegance and bright, natural acidity in their chardonnays. 2010-2020. **87.**

2008 Clos Blancneau “James Berry Vineyard” Chardonnay (Sonoma)

This was my first taste of Clos Blancneau chardonnay and I was very impressed by this classy wine. The wine hails from a parcel of twenty-seven year-old vines planted on limestone soils, and weighs in at 14.1 percent alcohol in 2008. The wine is raised in only eight percent new oak, sees virtually no *battonage*, and is bottled unfiltered and unfiltered after fifteen months aging. The nose on the 2008 Clos Blancneau (which was made by Wells Guthrie, of Copain Cellars) is exceptional, as it jumps from the glass in a classy blend of apple, lime, delicate leesy tones, lovely, dusty limestone soil nuances and the faintest whiff of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, poised and very classy, with bright acids, lovely focus and truly excellent length and grip on the complex and perfectly balanced finish. Fine, fine juice. 2010-2020. **92.**

2008 Chardonnay “Cuvée Arthur”- Domaine Drouhin (Oregon)

I like the 2008 Cuvée Arthur from Domaine Drouhin very well indeed, but this is a pretty ripe chardonnay in my book at 14.1 percent alcohol, and I would have been delighted to see it a full half point lower in octane. The nose is lovely and shows no signs of excessive ripeness in its classy blend of peach, apple, gentle leesy tones, a touch of nutskin, classy soil tones and a deft framing of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a good core of fruit, nice framing acidity and good length and grip on the refined finish. This is still fairly primary in terms of aromatic and flavor complexity and a few more years of bottle age will certainly allow its secondary elements to emerge, but I wonder how graceful it will be carrying its 14.1 percent alcohol five or ten years down the road? Good juice. 2010-2020+? **91+.**

hot, with a chunky personality, little delineation and a decidedly bitter edge on the backend that makes the finish quite unpleasant. At least the wine carries its new wood pretty seamlessly. It will probably not collapse in on itself for a few years, but this is really not an enjoyable glass of wine. 2010-2014. **81.**

2006 Mayacamas Vineyards Chardonnay

The 2006 Mayacamas chardonnay is one of the best examples that I have tasted from this consistently outstanding producer. The wine offers up a superb and very pure nose of golden delicious apples, lemon, acacia blossoms, butter, lovely soil tones and a hint of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep, crisp and very long, with beautiful focus, fine mid-palate depth and excellent length and grip on the snappy and impressively soil-driven finish. As Mayacamas does not put their chardonnay through malolactic, the style here very much recalls the great California chardonnays of the decade of the 1970s. The balance here should carry this lovely wine easily for a decade in the cellar, and perhaps longer. 2009-2020. **93.**

2006 Robert Mondavi Winery Chardonnay Reserve (Napa)

I used to be a big fan of this bottling in the vintages of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it had been several years since I last tried the Mondavi Reserve chardonnay. The 2006 weighs in at 14.5 percent alcohol, but carries its alcohol well. The nose is rather restrained in its mélange of papaya, apple, buttery oak, a touch of soil and some toasty tones from *battonage*. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and reasonably complex, with solid mid-palate depth, but a slightly “stripped character” that suggests that drinking this over the relative near-term would be prudent. It is a good, solid, respectable bottle of chardonnay, but in the contest of what was once one of California’s best chards, this is marginally disappointing. A wine that tastes like it was made by a committee. 2009-2015? **87.**

2003 Mayacamas Vineyards Chardonnay

Despite only being $\frac{1}{4}$ of a percent higher in alcohol than the lovely 2006 chardonnay (14.5 percent versus 14.25 percent for the '06), the 2003 does not carry its ripeness with the same skill, and loses just a bit of focus and delineation on the backend from its very ripe style. The bouquet is complex and enticing, as it offers up notes of ripe peaches, pear *confiture*, acacia blossoms, a touch of orange and a delicate base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and long, with sound acids and good length, but without the precision that one usually expects from a Mayacamas wine. This is still a very good bottle of chardonnay in a riper style, but it would be even better at a slightly lower octane. 2009-2013. **88.**

1995 Kalin Cellars “Cuvée LD” Chardonnay (Sonoma)

Kalin’s Cuvée LD chardonnay hails from the Long Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley, which is one of the coolest sites in Sonoma, due to morning and late afternoon fog patterns. The vineyard is planted with the Wente Clone of chardonnay, which as the article on Stony Hill shows, is probably California’s finest chardonnay clone. The 1995 Cuvée LD is a superb bottle of chardonnay that offers up a complex aromatic mélange of fresh nutmeg, pears, tangerines, lovely soil tones, a touch of cardamom, lemon oil and a judicious framing of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very classy, with fine focus and balance, a lovely core of fruit, bright acids and superb length and grip on the very refined finish. Classy juice. 2010-2025+. **94.**

1994 Kalin Cellars “Cuvée W” Chardonnay (Livermore Valley)

This has long been Terry Leighton’s oldest vine bottling of chardonnay, as he makes this from one of the Wente family’s oldest vineyards, which was planted with cuttings of chardonnay they brought back from Corton-Charlemagne very early in the history of post-prohibition California viticulture. The 1994 is the current release, and it is a terrific bottle of chardonnay, as it offers up a deep and complex bouquet of buttered pears, apples, salty soil tones, fresh nutmeg, lemon zest and just a hint of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and wonderfully refined, with a slightly herbal streak through it that only adds to the complexity, excellent mid-palate depth, sound acids and truly exceptional length and grip on the perfectly focused finish. Just a terrific bottle of mature chardonnay with years and years of life still ahead of it. 2010-2025. **94.**

Pinot Noir

2009 Kutch Vineyards “Falstaff Vineyard” Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast)

Falstaff Vineyard is one of the coolest sites in the Sonoma Coast, and besides this lovely bottling produced by Jamie Kutch, Rhys Vineyards has produced pinots from this vineyard and released them under their Alesia label. The 2009 barrel sample of Falstaff from Kutch Vineyards showed very fine potential, as it offers up a complex and vibrant nose of black cherries, Sonoma herb tones, woodsmoke, cola, a touch of youthful stems and an elegant touch of spicy wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, focused and nicely coiled, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the finish. This is a slightly more fruit-driven style of pinot, but it is impeccably balanced and should prove to be excellent. 2013-2030. **89-91.**

2009 Kutch Vineyards “McDougall Vineyard” Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast)

The 2009 McDougall Vineyard bottling is one of the pinots that Jamie Kutch is the most excited about in this vintage, and based on this barrel sample, it is very easy to see why. The nose is deep, complex and a bit more “serious” than in the very stylish Falstaff Vineyard bottling, as it jumps from the glass in a blend of plums, black cherries, raw cocoa, cola and a fair bit of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with lovely focus and balance, ripe tannins and very good length and grip on the finish. This is a very stylish and well-balanced bottle of Sonoma pinot, and while it does not possess the mineral drive of top bottlings from the Santa Cruz Mountains, its plush texture, lovely balance and classy complexity should make it a very captivating bottle at maturity. 2015-2035. **92-93+.**

2008 Pinot Noir- Domaine Drouhin (Oregon)

The 2008 “regular” bottling from Domaine Drouhin is really a lovely example of the vintage, with a classy and restrained style that offers up a lovely synthesis of Willamette Valley fruit and Burgundian sensibilities. The wine weighs in at 13.9 percent alcohol, which is a tad on the ripe side for my palate, but seems to be pretty much where ripe pinot in Oregon falls these days. The nose on the 2008 is lovely, as it offers up a really complex blend of cherries, a bit of quince, gentle notes of chocolate, fresh herbs, roses, woodsmoke, a whisper of new oak, a nice base of soil and a bit of orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush, with a bit of heat poking out on the backend (at least to my sensitive, old world palate), but with lovely focus, fine complexity and very good length and grip on the modestly tannic finish. Just a