

# VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

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## RECENTLY TASTED OLD SCHOOL AND NEO-CLASSICAL AMERICAN WINES



*Rolling vineyard hillsides in the Russian River Valley in Sonoma County.*

Though the title claims that these are “recently-tasted” American wines from the old school and their inspired new colleagues, the genesis of this article actually dates back to last year when I began working on my piece on Kalin Cellars which finally appeared in February of this year. At that time, I realized that I had also accrued a lot of tasting notes on older American wines out of my cellar (and from my generous friends in the tasting groups that I participate in here in New York) in the last year or so and also had built up a sizable pile of samples from US producers who had heard of View From the Cellar and felt that their more classically-styled wines might find a sympathetic ear here. A number of these wines were from small estates that I had not even heard of previously- folks like Poe Vineyards, Knez Winery, Bravium and Kendric Vineyards, and others were from good “old school” producers whose samples were languishing in my cellar during what has been a very busy twelve months of nearly constant travel for me. After working on the Kalin piece early in this year (one of the most pleasurable periods of research I can ever recall, by the way!), I knew I had to find time to get this generous pile of samples tasted through and this article finally into a coming issue. So, when I returned from my last trip to Burgundy in early June, I reached out to many of my favorite old school producers in California and Washington for samples of their current

releases to round out the feature and got to work pulling corks on a superb array of American wines from the “traditionalist” school. Even with this issue going out a couple of weeks late, there was not time for everyone I contacted out west to send samples, so some of my favorite producers, such as Joseph Swan Vineyards and Littorai are not covered in this article, but if they send samples over the next month or two, they will certainly find their way into part two of this piece in a coming issue.

What was quite clear from the tastings I have conducted over the last several weeks is that the number of “neo-classicists” in American wine country is continuing to grow and we may well be on the edge of new renaissance in American wine, with the dinosaurs of the monster truck school of extraction, overripe fruit and over-oaked and highly-manipulated wines eventually fading into extinction and the US returning to an age-worthy and balanced style of wine that befits the legacy that was left to American winegrowers in the wines from the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. To be fair, I of course sampled very few wines from the “modern school”, as I studiously try to avoid tasting these wines if at all possible, and if one or two somehow cross my path in the course of my travels, their corresponding scores generally ensure that I do not see follow-up vintages sent along from the winery. But, I had a very interesting conversation with several collectors of these modern, cult classics, when our paths converged in Burgundy this spring, and they unanimously commented that they have been underwhelmed with most of their cult wines (of the purportedly highest pedigrees) that they have pulled out of their cellars in the last few years and which had seen more than seven or eight years of bottle age. They all spoke of finding the wines rather shriveled up in terms of fruit and far less impressive than they remembered them, with the tannins still relatively intact, but the glossy fruit of youth now gone and the wines starting to get a bit eviscerated and decidedly charmless. I opined that this is the natural evolution of wines made to show best in their youth, as these wines certainly have been, and I counseled that sending them off to auction with alacrity would be their best course of action, as this is likely to be a quite common occurrence in the years to come and eventually the goose that laid these golden eggs is going to be out of fashion.

I should note that I offered to stop by any time that they want to organize a tasting or two of their cult wines, so that we could taste them together and see how their evolutions looked likely to course over the coming years, so perhaps one day I will have a bevy of notes on medium-aged cult classics to grace these pages. But, in the interim, I have been very pleased to see how many svelte, low alcohol and soil-driven wines have found their way out of the vineyards of the western US and into my tastings in the last couple of vintages, and there really are some exciting new wines out there these days that will delight lovers of American wines from the glory days of the ‘60s and ‘70s. One of the things that was readily apparent from these tastings was that the epicenter of return to the old school stylistic paradigm, at least in California, is emphatically not Napa Valley. Far more interesting wines are coming out of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Sonoma and Mendocino Counties these days than out of Napa, and it does really seem, with a few noteworthy and truly exceptional estates, Napa is really the home of the least interesting and most over-priced wines in the entire world these days. This is a sad reality (or at least my opinion of the current state in Napa- others will no doubt quibble about my grip on

reality!) for the Napa Valley, for as the notes on the older vintages listed below will attest, Napa was once the absolute center of the universe for great American wines and the great legacy of superb wines produced here in decades past continues as a testament of just what is possible from these *terroirs* and vineyards, if the current miasma of high octane vinous fashion could be broken through and this region could return to its deep and impressive winegrowing roots. Just look at the beautifully poised and balanced cabernets produced by Cathy Corison in the heart of Napa Valley and one can clearly see that the potential of this region has not been lost to global warming or phylloxera in the last couple of decades, but to human culpability, technological naiveté and cynical greed.

Perhaps the most important barometer of whether or not Napa Valley will start to feel the gravitational pull of the wine world at large and start to rein in the excesses of the last few decades and again start to produce world class wines *en masse* will be the evolution of Mayacamas Vineyards under its new owner, Charles Banks. Monsieur Banks was of course, the founder of Screaming Eagle Vineyards, which is hardly a strong endorsement for optimism at Mayacamas, but his recent investment in Wind Gap (about as low octane and as far removed from the cult circles of Screaming Eagle as one can get) and the seeming lack of change in direction there inspires at least a little bit of hope for Mayacamas' fate under its new management. It will be an interesting time to watch Mayacamas, as Monsieur Banks and his associates have purchased one of the greatest *terroirs* in the world for cabernet sauvignon, not to mention an historical legacy of "just how to do it right" that stretches back through time to the Travers family's very first vintage in 1968, and the most prudent investment at Mayacamas would be to change absolutely nothing- not a single old *foudre* or one little line item in the *elevage* practices that made this wine such a legend for so many long years- but, one is hard-pressed in this day and age to hope for such a fantastical approach by a new ownership team. But, whatever happens at Mayacamas in the next few years will certainly serve as a prism to view the Napa Valley's long-term health as a world class wine-producing region.

But outside of the closed world of Napa glitter, there are an awful lot of great things going on in other parts of California wine country, and I would assume further afield in the best vineyards of Washington and Oregon (regions that have been on my "to do list" since I started [View From the Cellar](#) at the start of 2006 and which still find my plate too full for a proper stretch of visiting cellars, meeting winegrowers and tasting in depth to really have a firm grasp on the trends in these important regions). I hope that this coming year will find more time for me to investigate and reacquaint myself with these regions and their wines, as it is a glaring hole in my coverage of American wines- with the exception of the superb wines from Andrew Will Cellars in Washington, which I am planning a feature on in the next issue. Within California, things are really humming for those who love the old school style of winemaking, with the hotbed of Sonoma County and the Russian River Valley having now spread to Anderson Valley in Mendocino and even to Humboldt County (formerly, or perhaps still currently, far better known for other agricultural products besides pinot noir and chardonnay). And Kevin Harvey's Santa Cruz Mountain-based winery of Rhys Vineyards has certainly created an epicenter of change on its own in the few short years of its existence, firmly showing that the abomination of the "modern school" of California wine is a crisis of conscience, not of

climate change. As one sage connoisseur of neo-classical California wine commented to me while preparing this article, “just imagine how we would all feel if Kevin Harvey had purchased Mayacamas instead of Charles Banks!”

I should take a moment to mention that a great many of the wines that I tasted in preparation for this report (and which I will continue to taste for part two of this article) hail from the 2011 vintage in California, one of the coolest and potentially one of the most profound of recent memory for the neo-classicists and old school producers. I was in Napa and Sonoma in September of that year and remember vividly how a couple of well-known young winemakers were lamenting the *fin de saison* weather forecasts, which projected prolonged and heavy rain coming in before the sugars had climbed to the customarily scary Brix numbers that these young gents were accustomed to working with and which had them opining “that the 2011 vintage could be a total loss”, while the sugars were actually already sufficiently high enough to produce wines in the 13.5 percent range at the time they were lamenting the fate of the year! In notable contrast, when I wandered over later that afternoon to the Joseph Swan winery in the Russian River Valley, the grapes were already coming in and Rod Berglund was extremely upbeat about the potential engendered by this atypically cool season! Similarly, Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards opined that 2011 “could very easily be our finest vintage to date.” I guess beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Needless to say, I have been looking forward to sinking my teeth into the 2011 vintage from California for a year and a half now and was really delighted with what I tasted from most estates, as it looks likely to be one of the most cellar-worthy vintages in many, many years- at least for traditionalists.

When one considers where the most exciting traditional styles of wines are blossoming in California wine country, it is not surprising that the varietals that are experiencing the most important renaissances are pinot noir, chardonnay and syrah. It is a pity that cabernet sauvignon producers have generally not kept pace with the ever-increasing number of top estates turning out truly impressive, old school-styled pinots and chardonnays, and if there are new Young Turks out there working with cabernet in Napa Valley (obviously, David Jeffrey’s fine new project of Calluna Vineyards in Chalk Hill is in Sonoma is outside of this lament for the fate of Napa cabernet), I have yet to cross paths with their wines. So for fanciers of this varietal (which remains my absolute favorite in the state for long-term cellaring, despite the ever-increasing number of outstanding and quite obviously ageworthy examples of pinot noir and syrah emerging with each passing year), it remains the old school producers who need to be searched out, including Heitz Wine Cellars, Ridge Vineyards, Mayacamas Vineyards (at least for the next couple of releases, while the Travers’ wines are still in the pipeline- we will see what the future brings here), Corison Vineyards, Philip Togni and Stony Hill Vineyards (yes, Mike Chelini’s fine touch extends now to this varietal and the new release of Stony Hill cabernet is truly stunning) and a handful of others, such as Ritchie Creek Vineyards. I should note that I also really loved the 2011 Snowden Vineyards cabernets that I tasted for this report, which gives me more hope for Napa, but it remains to be seen if this lower octane style at the winery is simply a result of the style of the vintage or represents an important shifting of gears here. Over in Sonoma, Calluna Vineyards’ 2010s certainly demonstrate that it remains possible to make low octane, stunning cabernet-based wines



these days and one does not have to be part of the Woodstock Generation to have learned how to make great, restrained and ageworthy cabernet-based wines in California. And, in a theme that I will be exploring in detail in the next issue, Chris Camarda up in Washington state's fine Andrew Will Cellars has been making excellent Bordeaux-inspired blends for many years, but his new releases are the most exciting wines I have tasted from him in many, many vintages, as they are decidedly lower in octane than recent releases (most in the thirteen percent range!), pure and beautifully structured wines that show that one can find great wines for the cellar from these varietals further afield than Napa, Sonoma and Santa Cruz.

However, when one starts to wander into the realm of chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah, there are so many superb choices out there these days for traditionally-styled, old school and ageworthy bottlings that it is almost a full-time job to keep up with all the good things going on with these varietals. It is not only the old school estates like Stony Hill Vineyards, Kalin Cellars, Heitz Wine Cellars, Littorai, Joseph Swan and the like who are producing truly cellar-worthy examples of chardonnay these days, as I tasted some absolutely stellar young examples from the likes of Rhys Vineyards and Porter Creek Vineyards that also looked built for the long haul, and with more medium-term cellaring potential, there was a lot to like from folks like Wind Gap and Poe Vineyards in the realm of chardonnay. With syrah, and keep in mind that I have not yet received samples from one of the very best producers of this varietal, Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St. John, there are some absolutely stellar, truly low octane and soil-driven examples hitting the market from folks like Copain Wine Cellars, Wind Gap, Porter Creek Vineyards and Rhys Vineyards. A lot of these examples have very classic Northern Rhône-inspired aromatics and flavors, but are synthesized onto more medium-full and very transparent palate formats that strike one as much more structurally akin to pinot noir than traditional wines from the likes of places like Hermitage or Cornas. It is a very inspiring and classy style that I suspect will find a broader and broader audience in the years to come, once the memory of American "monster truck" syrahs of recent times fades to the background.

In the realm of pinot noir, the American wine scene has never been awash in so many outstanding possibilities, and I say this without even having had the pleasure to really get my feet wet with Oregon pinot noir in an embarrassingly long time now. But sticking to the American regions with which I am quite familiar with these days that specialize in pinot noir and are doing some absolutely stellar work, there are literally dozens of world class producers who have shown a mastery for this varietal and have delved into the variations of *terroir* that are available throughout the varied state of California. Wines from the likes of producers such as Rhys, Kalin Cellars, Porter Creek, Joseph Swan, Copain and Littorai are really stunning testaments to just what is possible when pinot noir is planted in the right places in California and produced in such a way as to maximize its varietal purity and transparency of soil signature. Newcomers (at least to me) such as Poe Vineyards, Kendric Vineyards, Knez Winery and Bravium show that this varietal is really coming of age in several different regions of California, and today, pinot noir is really far more interesting in general than is cabernet sauvignon as a genre in the state for those interested in more traditionally styled wines. In preparation for this report I was really delighted to become reacquainted with a producer such as Napa-based

El Molinõ as well, whose wines I had been very impressed with back in my sommelier days and which I had not tasted in a long time. As the notes below will attest, it is not a prerequisite to have vineyards in the coolest AVA's such as Anderson Valley, the Sonoma Coast or the Santa Cruz Mountains to still make very, very good pinot noir (though I do note that El Molinõ has begun producing a small lot of Sonoma Coast pinot noir as well in recent times). And this of course is only the producers whose paths I crossed paths with during the last year, and there are plenty of other really good estates whose wines I have not tasted in a couple of years and who are really doing great work with pinot noir.

While most of the discussion has focused on the red wines from the US, there are some really good things going on with white wines as well these days, as more and more producers seem to be backing away from the overripe, overtly oaky and heavily *battonaged* styles of white wines- particularly chardonnays- and moving back towards a more restrained and balanced style that shows fine promise of aging with style and grace. Of course, produces such as Mount Eden, Stony Hill and Kalin Cellars have always made long-lasting and classic styles of chardonnays and been widely recognized for this fact, but the new releases from folks such as Rhys, Copain and Wind Gap seem to indicate that the number of chardonnays made for serious cellaring is growing. Then there are the old school producers such as Heitz, Forman and El Molinõ, who have always made chardonnays that cellar well- though they are not necessarily renowned for their white wines' longevity. I was very, very happy to taste through a small vertical of El Molinõ chardonnays for this report and was simply stunned with how well a wine like their 1991 chardonnay continues to drink twenty-two years out from the vintage! So good things are happening out west with this varietal as well- and, again, I note that I am only up to date with what is going on within a small slice of the California "traditionalist" wine scene and I imagine that equally exciting things are happening further north in Oregon and Washington on the white wine front.

I fully anticipate doing a second part for this report in the next issue, as there are several wineries that I contacted about samples and who did not have a chance to send them out in time for this article, and there were others that I did not yet reach out to as the pile of samples started to really pile up in my cellar and time began to run short for getting out this issue even remotely close to the original deadline! I also received a lovely vertical from Chris Camarda at Andrew Will Winery in Washington state that I could just not get to in time for this issue, so I will be doing a feature on his wines in the next issue of the newsletter as well. But, I hope that the notes below will attest to just how much good, old school wine is now coming out of the best addresses on the west coast of the United States these days, and it is certainly starting to look like the sad days of the 1990s and early 2000s are starting to recede in the face of more and more producers seeking to turn back the clock to the styles of wines that once made California famous. I apologize in advance for so many citations of the alcohol level of the wines in the notes that follow, but the reality is that it is a key indicator to the style of wine one will often find on the other side of the cork (when it has not been "watered back" dramatically to make the octane look good on the label, even if the flavors and aromatics remain undeniably scorched by notes of *sur maturité*) and it is important to know what an American wine's

focused, with a fine core, lovely acids and a long, complex and slightly heady finish. This is far more precise than the riper 2010 and has clearly shown that it has the ability to age well, but it is still just a touch over the threshold of balance with its 14.3 percent alcohol and shows a bit of backend heat that keeps down the score a bit on what is otherwise an outstanding bottle of mature chardonnay. 2013-2020. **87.**

**1996 El Molinõ Winery “Napa Valley” Chardonnay (Rutherford)**

The label on the 1996 El Molinõ actually says “Napa Valley” on the front label, but the back label notes that the grapes come from the winery’s Rutherford vineyards. This is still a tad lower in octane than the 1998 (14.1 versus 14.3 percent) and the wine is correspondingly more precise and vibrant as a result. The bouquet is really beautiful for a seventeen year-old chardonnay, offering up a complex blend of apple, pear, fresh nutmeg, a touch of *crème patissière*, lovely Rutherford soil tones and a very stylish base of buttery new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely ripe, with a good core, crisp acids, lovely focus and balance and a long, classy and still bouncy finish. This lovely wine still has plenty of life in it! Fine juice. 2013-2020+. **92.**

**1993 El Molinõ Winery “Napa Valley” Chardonnay (Rutherford)**

Like the 1996, and the 1993 El Molinõ chardonnay also says Napa Valley on the label, but it too hails from the domaine’s long-standing chardonnay vineyards in Rutherford. The cork was a bit crumbly on this wine, and it shows a bit more advanced on the nose and palate as a result- though still with plenty of drinking interest. The nose is decidedly deeper-pitched in its mix of peach, orange, a touch of new leather, nutmeg, Rutherford soil tones and a nice dollop of browned butter. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a good core of fruit, lovely mature complexity and still very good length and grip on the well-balanced finish. I have a strong suspicion that this wine is even better than this sample and that the wine is slightly advanced from the crumbly cork, but even in this state, it really is a lovely glass of wine and far from declining. 2013-2016. **89+?**

**1993 Kalin Cellars “Cuvée LD” Chardonnay “Stealth Cuvée” (Sonoma)**

Over the years, Kalin Cellars has released a few “Stealth Cuvées” which are small lots of old vines that are aged for an extended period (even by the Leightons’ very “old school” approach to release dates!) prior to being let out of the cellar for Kalin initiates around the world. The stealth bottling of 1993 Cuvée LD (which Terry and Frances Leighton have dubbed “Le Darryl” for a longtime Kalinite who helped with a decades’-worth of harvests here and loved the style of Puligny’s grand crus) hails from the Jasper Long hillside vineyard in Dry Creek. This vineyard was also the source of the original ’93 LD released several years ago, but this very limited bottling (less than eighty cases were produced in total) was vinified to highlight the character of the ’93 vintage in a manner reminiscent of a Puligny grand cru. It was raised in fifty percent new wood and spent an extended period of twenty-four months aging on its fine lees prior to bottling and has been resting comfortably in the Kalin cellars since early 1996. The wine is absolutely stunning, soaring from the glass in a vibrant and very complex blend of pear, fresh apricot, orange zest, fresh nutmeg, salty soil tones (that are very reminiscent of mature Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet- just in case Darryl was curious), a hint of iodine and a lovely base of buttery oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and magically complex, with grand cru intensity and sophistication, a rock solid core, bright acids and stunning length and grip on the seamless and laser-like finish. This is an utterly



stunning bottle of chardonnay at its apogee of peak maturity, but in true Kalin fashion, it still has decades of life ahead of it! 2013-2030+. 96.

**1991 El Molinõ Winery “St. Helena- Napa County” Chardonnay (Rutherford)**

Again, a different labeling iteration, but grapes from the same vineyards in Rutherford as all the other El Molinõ chardonnays tasted for this report. The 1991 El Molinõ chardonnay is the lowest octane of all of these lovely wines, tipping the scales at 13.8 percent alcohol and the wine has really aged beautifully. The bouquet is a mature and complex constellation of buttered pears, tangerine, sea salts, “Rutherford Dust” soil tones, dried flowers, a bit of cardamom and a gentle base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and *à point*, with superb mid-palate depth, excellent focus and balance and a long, bright and complex finish. At age twenty-two, the 1991 El Molinõ chardonnay is in full bloom, but it still has years and years of life in it! A superb bottle and a pleasure to taste. 2013-2020+. 92.



***Sauvignon Blanc***

**2012 Heitz Wine Cellar Sauvignon Blanc**

The team at Heitz has not been making sauvignon blanc for many years yet, but from the very first vintage they have shown a real touch with this grape and the 2012 is another fine bottle. The bouquet is deep, bright and unabashedly sauvignon in its blend of gooseberry, grapefruit, a lovely base of grassiness, pretty soil tones, a dollop of petrol and a topnote of lime blossoms. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and focused, with a fine core, crisp acids and fine length and grip on the ripe and zesty finish. This is a