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[Linda Murphy](#)

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[Robert Whitley](#)

[Guest Columns](#)

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In the Kitchen

Critics Challenge

San Diego Int'l

Wine

Competition

Sommelier

Challenge

International

Wine

Competition

Winemaker

Challenge

International

Wine

Competition

Whitley On Wine

Wine Bytes

Franz & Lukacs

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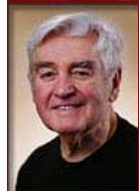
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Ch. Montelena: Napa's Classic Cabernet

By Ed McCarthy

Jul 19, 2011

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Napa Valley's greatest wine, in my mind, has always been Cabernet Sauvignon. In fact, make that California's--if not the whole country's-- greatest wine. True, I have been raving about some Pinot Noirs being produced on the extreme Sonoma Coast lately, but they are a handful of small-production wines.

Napa Valley's pre-eminence with Cabernet Sauvignon was confirmed for me by recent tastings of one of my favorite wines, Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon--for my palate, Napa's classic Cabernet.

I came to admire Cabernet Sauvignon through Bordeaux, which has always been the paragon for fine Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines. I first learned about fine wines in New York in the 1970s, and French wines were what I knew and drank. I quickly became a fan of Bordeaux, especially the Cabernet Sauvignon-based Pauillacs and St.-Juliens of Médoc on the Left Bank.

Shortly after, I came to realize that California, especially Napa Valley, was producing some especially fine Cabernet Sauvignons, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s--a time still regarded by many critics as its Golden Age. Wines such as Beaulieu Vineyards Georges Latour Private Reserve, Robert Mondavi Reserve, Heitz' Martha's Vineyard, Louis Martini, Ridge Monte Bello Vineyard, and Mayacamas Vineyards made memorable Cabs then. All but Ridge (which is in the Santa Cruz Mountains) are in Napa Valley.

The 1970s saw the establishment of many top Napa wineries. Chateau Montelena, for example, re-opened in 1972. It had been originally established in 1882, at the base of Mount Saint Helena, two miles north of Calistoga in the northern end of Napa Valley (its current location). But it closed during Prohibition. Attorney James Barrett was part of a team that bought Chateau Montelena in 1968, and completely renovated the historic property. In 1972, Barrett and renowned winemaker Mike Grgich made the first modern era Chateau Montelena wines.

In 1970 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars was founded. These two Napa Valley wineries (Stag's Leap and Chateau Montelena) became inextricably linked during the renowned 1976 "Judgement of Paris" wine tasting, when 1973 Stag's Leap S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon placed first in blind tastings with top Bordeaux wines and other California Cabs, and the 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay placed first in competition with French white Burgundies and other California Chardonnays.

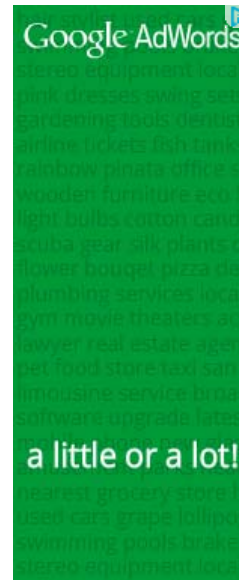
It is ironic that Chateau Montelena gained its original fame for its Chardonnay, because the winery has been primarily renowned for its Estate Cabernet Sauvignon.

The reputation of both wineries was made at that point, and both have had glorious histories since then. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars was sold four years ago to a partnership of Piero Antinori and Chateau Ste.-Michelle Wine Estates, but Chateau Montelena continues under the ownership of the Barrett family. Jim Barrett's son, Bo, has been the head winemaker since 1981.

Chateau Montelena produces two Cabernet Sauvignons, its Estate (about \$110 per bottle retail) and its Napa Valley, from purchased grapes (about \$45). Also from its estate vineyard, Chateau Montelena makes a fine red Zinfandel (\$28/\$29). Its Chardonnay (about \$45) comes from grapes in the Oak Knoll District, at the base of Mt. Veeder, in the cooler, southern end of Napa Valley. Chateau Montelena also produces a small amount of Riesling

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I have tasted three older vintages of Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon recently, the 1985, 1986, and 1991, and have found all of them to be exquisite. I was particularly surprised by the 1986, reputedly an average vintage in Napa Valley (whereas the 1985 and 1991 have been consistently rated outstanding). In fact, the bottle of 1986 Chateau Montelena I tasted was even better than the 1985, and on a par with the very great 1991 Chateau Montelena (I rated both the 1986 and 1991 "95 to 98" points).

Like all great Cabernet Sauvignon wines, whether from Bordeaux or California, Chateau Montelena needs time to develop and mature, for its tannins to soften, and take on the complex aromas and flavors of a great wine. Its 1985 and 1986 were at their peak with 25 years of aging; its 1991 is still a bit young, although a gorgeous Cabernet Sauvignon to drink right now.

The secret of Chateau Montelena's great success with its Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (and, to a lesser degree, its Estate Zinfandel) lies in its terroir—primarily, the soil and climate of the estate. Three basic soils are present on the estate: alluvial, stony and gravelly, deposited by ancient river flows; volcanic, formed by volcanic flows from Mount Saint Helena; and sedimentary, richer, loamy soil formed by the settling of an ancient sea or lake. All of these soils lend themselves to the character we can find in Chateau Montelena Estate wines.

The climate at Chateau Montelena's estate is particularly unique for Napa Valley. It's hot and dry during the growing season, with 95° F. being typical. But the vineyard's position at the foot of Mt. St. Helena (the highest elevation in Napa Valley) exposes it to cold air from the mountain peak at night, typically 45° F. in the growing season. The daytime heat allows ripening for the late-maturing Cabernet Sauvignon, while the cool nights allow the grapes to maintain the high acidity necessary for a balanced wine.

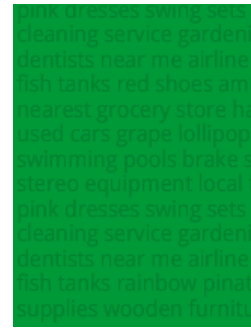
The result? Chateau Montelena's Estate Cabernet Sauvignons are rich and powerful—and yet elegant and long-lived. For my palate, it is the classic Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon: consistent, ageworthy, never too ripe, too oaky, or too high in extract—like many other, higher-priced Cabs.

Chateau Montelena is one of the few current California Cabernet Sauvignons that is a worthy descendant of the top Cabs that were produced in the 1968-1978 Golden Age of California Cabernets. It doesn't have the status or caché of the prestigious names such as Harlan Estate or Screaming Eagle—to mention just two—but that's all right with me. Chateau Montelena is a relative bargain compared to these two (Harlan Estate, average retail price, \$900+ per bottle; Screaming Eagle, \$1800 per bottle, unless you're in the tiny minority to be on the mailing list of these two wines, but even then, still expensive). The irony is that Screaming Eagle's star winemaker during its early glory days was Heidi Peterson Barrett, wife of Bo Barrett, winemaker of Chateau Montelena.

I'm not saying that Napa Valley's cult Cabernets—such as Harlan Estate and Screaming Eagle—aren't good wines. Of course they are. They are just not my kind of Cabernet Sauvignon. I'm looking for elegance and balance, rather than high extract and lots of ripeness, in my wines. To quote Bo Barrett at the recent tasting of his wines, "We don't make cocktail Cabs, high alcohol, showy, immediate-gratification wines. We make table wines." And "table wines" in the highest sense of that term, I might add. Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, with sufficient age, is an excellent wine at the dinner table, unlike many of the showier California Cabs today that overwhelm the food, and really must be consumed on their own, like a "cocktail." The only other modern California Cabernet Sauvignon that I value as much as Chateau Montelena is Ridge Monte Bello, from the Santa Cruz Mountains, which shares many of Chateau Montelena's great qualities. The main difference, to me, is that the Montebello is more of a mountain Cabernet, stressing firmness, whereas Montelena's forte is its elegance and balance.

Which brings me to the most recent tasting of Chateau Montelena wines that I attended. Its focus was primarily on Chateau Montelena Chardonnay, with three vintages presented, the current 2009, the 2000, and the 1991. All three were excellent (I rated them all in the low '90s), but my surprise was how well the 1991 Chardonnay was showing. Twenty-year old California Chardonnays are usually starting to show their age. Was it the excellence of the 1991 vintage in Napa Valley or the winemaking of the Chateau Montelena team? Perhaps a little of both.

The 2007 Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (99 percent Cabernet Sauvignon; 1 percent Cabernet Franc), the current vintage, is

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outstanding, even now a 93/94 point wine that might even reach the heights of the sublime 1986 and 1991 Montelena Estate Cabs with time. It is ample and rich, with a fine, gentle texture, soft tannins, and a long finish. In previous years, I've tasted the 2004, 2005, and 2006 Montelena Estate Cabernets; all are very good, especially the 2005. But the 2007 will probably be the best of Montelena's recent Cabernet Estate vintages.

I have come to realize that Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon should be treated exactly like a top First or Second Growth Bordeaux. No serious wine taster would dream of drinking a top Bordeaux less than 15 years old. The same is true of Chateau Montelena Estate Cab. If you are fortunate enough to own 1994, '95 or '96 Montelena Estate Cabs, you can enjoy them now, but they'll all improve, as will the amazing 1991. Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon is my classic Napa Valley Cabernet, beautifully balanced and aging gracefully.

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