

Lessons from Napa in the trickiest of years



Scott R. Kline, Special To The Chronicle

Winemaker Tadeo Borchardt in the Neyers Ranch in Conn Valley, the source of one of the 2011 vintage's great successes in Cabernet.

Square peg. Square peg. Square peg.

Couldn't get that out of my head during my recent tastings of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

After all, Napa Cab is the benchmark by which

California wine is measured. And here I had arrived at the 2011 vintage, as round a hole of a year as you could expect - one of the coolest in recent memory, and a particularly tough one in Napa.

I have discussed 2011 in the past. A tricky year for California, perhaps, and yet with silver linings. White wines, for instance, and Pinot Noir - which can shine when handled in a delicate way.

Then there is Cabernet. More than any other, that grape, especially from Napa, lives and dies on magnitude. There is still greater economic incentive to make Napa Cabernet in a high-beam style than with any other wine.

Napa is where cult wines were born. It thrives on wines crafted by, and often for, the rich and powerful. Wines of strength. Wines of intent. Wines that F. Scott Fitzgerald might have conceived as a character worthy of partying with Gatsby. They can stand up and swagger on their own.

Mere analogy? Consider a new entrant, made by Thomas Brown, one of the masters of Napa's swing-for-rafters style.

It's called Swagger.

Of the many things needed to craft a modern Napa wine, the one sure requirement is California's blessed double summer. And 2011 did not deliver that, even if it started out mild enough. From June onward, true summer never quite came. In October, rains and a humid spell that in many cases brought mold provided a grim finish to a messy year.





Craig Lee, Special To The Chronicle

Left-right: 2011 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon, 2011 Neyers Cabernet Sauvignon, 2011 Saddleback Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon as seen in San Francisco, California on Wednesday June 11, 2014.

Historically, the logical move might have been to accept Mother Nature's lean deal, to make wines showing a subtler, less swaggering side of Napa.

But a stride this confident can be hard to break. Hence what my recent tastings revealed: wines with the expected high ripeness, extraction and oak that are today's norm, but without a core of flavor to support it.

A mountain of technical data backed this up: the usual ripeness levels, often from harvests that stretched into November; the usual doses of oak; the usual cooked-fruit flavors, although this time with far less concentration to back them up.

But this was not a usual year. And so many wines seemed to have been squeezed, through the modern wonders of cellar technology, to offer more than nature had dictated. Designed like a Maybach, powered like a Fiat. Quintessential square pegs in round holes.

If I'm sounding harsh - and I am - it's because of the flip side of Napa's ambitious coinage. Ambitions and expectations are enormous. But the valley is not only blessed with amazing soil and climate; it also has been gifted with cash, winemaking talent and speed-dial advice rivaled only by the titans of Bordeaux. To hear the frustration voiced in Napa about 2011 resonates a bit like Tiger bemoaning a windy day at the Masters.

It need not have been this way. There are many 2011s that succeeded beautifully, reminiscent of some of Napa's finest wines in Napa. Typically that happened when vintners read the vintage early and aimed to craft what they knew they could, rather than make wines to someone's grand 100-point blueprints.

You could see it in sugar levels that, on occasion, landed closer to the standards of the 1990s. You could find greatness without oak, in wines for instance like those from Dominus, which managed its usual power without more than its standard 40 percent new oak.

You could see great results in a range of styles, like the accompanying wines I've highlighted from Larkmead and Saddleback, Neyers and Stony Hill.

Others, too, that I tasted along the way. A 2011 from John Kongsgaard, grown in a 30-year-old parcel high on Atlas Peak - full of black currant and all the green olive tones you could expect from Cabernet.

Or one from Mayacamas Vineyards, a wine alternately loved and lambasted through the years for its

tough-as-nails style. When I tasted a protean version of the 2011 Mayacamas from cask last year, made by Bob Travers before he sold the property, I exulted in all its classic qualities: red plum more than black, menthol and pine. And more than anything: a completeness to its tannins.

Notice how many of these positive data points come from Napa's experienced hands. Not to dismiss new talent, but there was valuable perspective to be found from winemakers who both perfected Napa's earlier style and survived gnarly vintages like 1998.

The verdict on 2011 is hardly fixed. Some wines still waiting in the wings - I'm thinking of the 2011 Inglenook crafted by Philippe Bascaules that marked a dramatic shift in that winery's approach (<http://is.gd/1UNcRc>) - show tons of promise.

And yes, some lack the soft edges that the modern Cabernet drinker, fixated on young wines, demands. But if the recent spate of Mayacamas retrospectives are any indication, Cabernet lovers may be rediscovering the pleasures of patience.

What I detect in the best 2011s is a wink back toward many of the things that have made Cabernet so beloved - more than anything its savoriness and durability. I know that when it comes to flavors in Napa Cabernet, the word green has four letters. But the best bottles I tasted displayed the botanical flavors and smells that are a part of this grape's soul: tobacco and dried sage and eucalyptus. Round pegs, round holes.

There's a broader topic under the surface here - the return of Cabernet as Cabernet. I'll save that for another day soon. For now, consider the best of the 2011s as a sign that California can still make what people once loved: complex, interesting Cabernet that does more than just swagger.

2011 Neyers Vineyards Neyers Ranch Conn Valley Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$48, 14.1% alcohol): This bottling off Bruce Neyers' organically farmed property in eastern Napa found a pitch-perfect expression in the hands of winemaker Tadeo Borhardt. Here's how 2011 could succeed. An oregano-like herbal side frames its meaty structure and subtle blackcurrant fruit. It finds that great Cabernet balance of sleekness and dense flavor - and by current Napa economics, it's a downright bargain.

2011 Larkmead Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70, 14%): Harvested in late October and finessed by Andy Smith and Dan Petroski, here's another pitch-perfect take on the vintage, structured but not heavy. Dusty, full of dried verbena and a floral aspect, like lilacs, with brilliant juiciness to the red fruit -

currants and plums, with fine tannins and smooth licorice flavors.

2011 Philip Togni Vineyards Tanbark Hill Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45, alcohol n/a): Who could better finesse a vintage like this than Togni? His regular 2011 is fantastic, but while it ages, the second wine from younger vines shows an equal mastery, full of roasted plum and rosemary, and the fresh, brambly fruit and dense tannins that mark his Spring Mountain site.

2011 Matthiasson Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60, 13.7%): Our current Winemaker of the Year has been determined to make his mark with Cabernet. This second vintage shows how his belief in Napa's earlier charms succeeded in a year where it paid to plan for less ripeness. The structure is more finessed than Napa typically managed a generation ago, but in the same spirit - floral tones and chopped thyme on the nose, pretty plummy fruit, chicory and birch bark.

2011 Stony Hill Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60, 13%): If Stony Hill's Cabernet can be contentiously lean at times, 2011 was a vintage tailored to fit - old-school winemaking put to perfect use: short fermentation, mostly old oak and an 18-month stay in bottle before release. It's actually more full-fleshed than some previous releases, with Darjeeling tea, dried mint, red currant and sweet cherry fruit, and a beefiness that hints at heft without actually being heavy.

2011 Dominus Estate Napa Valley Red (\$149, 14.5%): You will not find this to be the most intense, or long-lived, of Dominus vintages. But leave it to Christian Moueix and his team, with their Bordeaux perspective, to adapt to 2011. It is absolutely seamless, with dark plum and cassis fruit, a dusty aspect, graphite and red-fruit juiciness on the finish. Its relative delicacy is balanced by a complete purity of flavor.

2011 Saddleback Cellars Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$68, 14.5%): From the heart of Oakville (with a small dose of Carneros Cabernet Franc), veteran Nils Venge shows a suave Napa expression. Disregard the maple-syrup sweetness that appears on first sniff (there's 70 percent new oak) and focus on the balance of violets, coffee, graphite and pretty currant fruit, and skill evident in its big, savory structure, balancing juicy flavors and a green-olive accent.

2011 Antica Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55, 14%): Leave it to the Antinori family, and winemaker Nate Weis, to master a vintage like this from the 1,800-foot Antica site near Atlas Peak. True to style, it leads with a sanguine mineral tang, plus sweet cassis fruit, dried marjoram and a stylish dose of oak. Subtle but densely built for the long term.

2011 Vineyard 29 Cru Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$54, 14.5%): This second label from Chuck and Anne McMinn, made by Philippe Melka is defined by a sultry, tarry Cabernet presence - kalamata olive, tobacco and dark stones, and juicy, full-bore blackberry fruit.

2011 Von Strasser Rudy Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$26, 13.5%): In 2011, Rudy von Strasser used a good dose of fruit from his Diamond Mountain estate in this total steal of an everyday Cabernet. Let's call it right size for the vintage, and ready to drink: full of dried herb and green olive, juicy blackcurrant and plum, with a good dose of mountain tannin.

2011 Convexity Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55, 13.5%): A second winning effort from Steve Matthiasson, this one made for a set of investment partners using fruit from the Red Hen and Vare sites in southern Napa. A savory dried-mint and bark aspect, and riper cassis fruit than you'd expect. Fine-boned and in the lithe, early '90s Cabernet style.

2011 Brandlin Estate Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60, 14.5%): This longtime label, now run by Cuvaision, managed a great snapshot of the Brandlin family's historic plot. Give it air to mellow the camphor and oak notes that come first - 22 months in 50 percent new oak - and find juicy mulberry and currant fruit, plus black olive, and a classic Veeder vitality to the tannins.

2011 Continuum Estate Napa Valley Red (\$175, 14.7%): Tim Mondavi and his team relied on long Napa experience to finesse a ripe, polished style, although that style might overstep the fruit. If you're going full bore, here's how you do it, with solid doses of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot blended in. Sultry oak opens it, with cassia, cured tobacco and the classic roasted-fruit notes of Pritchard Hill (98 percent from the estate). Luscious, savory and showing a hefty structure.

2011 Joseph Phelps Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65, 14%): A more vibrant style than I've tasted from Phelps in a while. Evocative of years past - and at more than 15,000 cases harvested from all over Napa, a sign of quality at scale. It's smoky, almost meaty, in its aromas, with lots of fresh plum and coffee. Well-suited to the vintage.

2011 Cliff Lede Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70, 14.3%): The Lede team found a great polish to their Stags Leap fruit, with warm oak (59 percent new) wrapped into cassis fruit and a distinct floral fragrance.

2011 Scribe Outpost East Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$66, 14.2%): A robust effort from the

eastern Napa property held by the Mariani brothers' Sonoma label. Just 30 percent new oak, although the wood shows itself, along with roasted oregano, rich plummy fruit and a leathery character.

2011 Cameron Hughes Lot 418 Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25, 14.4%): Here's Hughes, the value-wine negociant king, doing what he does best - in this case hunting down a bit of surplus Oakville on a budget. Mild and quintessentially dusty, with a branch-like herbal side and pleasant raspberry fruit.

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