



Two Great California Cabernets: A Newcomer & an Oldtimer

Posted by Fredric Koeppl

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Geography counts, in war and in wine. The locations, the microclimates or terroirs where the cabernet sauvignon grape achieves greatness are few, though the grape is grown around the world. The Left Bank communes of Bordeaux qualify, of course, though there cabernet sauvignon is blended with merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot. Small pockets of Tuscany; parts of the Yarra Valley and Coonawarra in Australia; Maipo and Aconcagua in Chile (potentially); and California, where the modern wine industry was defined by the success of wines based on the cabernet sauvignon grape, and not only based but in many cases made completely from cabernet. California's wine regions are incredibly diverse and varied, and cabernet sauvignon is grown, for good or ill, throughout the state. The most appropriate areas, however, remain the Alexander Valley and Sonoma Valley in Sonoma County; Oakville, Rutherford and Stags Leap and the mountain vineyards of Napa Valley; Paso Robles and Santa Cruz.

This brief survey serves as prelude to examinations of two wonderful wines, one 98 percent cabernet sauvignon, the other 100 percent varietal, and both second release wines for their labels. The first is fashioned from a vineyard in a rather obscure area of Napa Valley, the second from high elevation vineyards on the western side of the Mayacamas range.

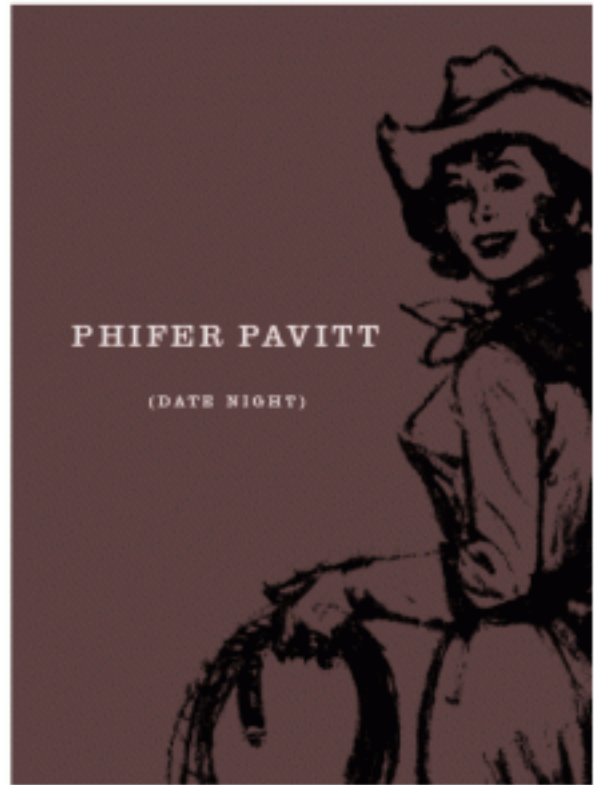
Sometimes you take a sip of wine into your mouth and think, "Oh, yes. This is real. This is it." Such was my reaction to the first release of the Phifer Pavitt "Date Night" Cabernet Sauvignon, the 2005, and such also was my impression of the second release, the 2006. The grapes derive from the all-organic Temple Family Vineyards in Pope Valley, a small and lightly populated appellation north of Howell Mountain in the extreme northeast of the Napa Valley. Though shoe-horned into its famous neighbor, as far as the federal viticultural boundaries are concerned, geographically, Pope Valley faces the opposite direction, draining away to the east and Lake Berryessa. Pope Valley is home to the Dollarhide Ranch, which supplies St. Supery with cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc grapes, and, coincidentally, to the must-see folk-art environment, Litto's Hubcab Ranch. The Phifer Pavitt winery itself, owned by Shane Pavitt and Suzanne Phifer Pavitt, is on the Silverado Trail near Calistoga. Winemaker is Ted Osborne.

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PHIFER PAVITT
Date Night
Napa Valley

Date Night 2006 is not merely profound but profoundly huge, and I don't mean in an overwhelming sense — the alcohol content is 14.7 percent — but huge in vibrancy and resonance, tremendous in its presence and immediacy. Though the wine on the surface is placid and approachable, one feels in the depth a sense of implicit turbulence, that “tiger burning bright, in the forests of the night,” though a more appropriate feline, considering the wine's opacity, would be a black panther. Macerated black currants, black raspberries and plum distinguish a bouquet that rests lightly on notes of briars and brambles and that gradually unfurls hints of ancho chile, bitter chocolate and potpourri. What feels like an infinite mesh of finely-grained tannins envelopes every principle here while sharing the power, triumvirate-wise, with slightly spicy, slightly toasty oak — these are nuances — and vivacious acidity. (The wine spends 17 months in French oak barrels, 65 percent new; the wine contains two percent petit verdot.) A few minutes in the glass allow a dark tide of graphite-like minerality its encompassing influence. Obviously there's terrific emphasis on structure here, but that composition does not bury the effect of luscious black and blue fruit flavors. Not surprisingly for a wine of such dimension, the finish brings in earthiness and an element of austerity that do not diminish the wine's innate suppleness and elegance. Drink now through 2016 to '18. Production was 275 cases. Exceptional. About \$75.



Most winemakers under the age of 40 in California need to take lessons from Dick Arrowood, who, since he started in the wine industry in 1965, probably will not object to personifying the “old-timer” of this post's respectful title. That initial job was at Korbel Wine Cellars, while Arrowood was in college. From Korbel, he went to the old United Vintners and then to the old Sonoma Vineyards (which did not acquire the name Rodney Strong until 1984, when Strong sold the company he had founded). Arrowood was hired as the first winemaker for the fledgling Chateau St. Jean in 1974, and over the course of 26 years he produced a glorious roster of cabernet sauvignon wines, memorable single-vineyard chardonnays and sumptuous late-harvest rieslings and gewurztraminers. In the meanwhile, Arrowood and his wife Alis started Arrowood Vineyards and Winery in 1985. Now the situation becomes complicated, as it often does in the 21st Century world of bankruptcies and acquisitions. Arrowood sold his winery to Robert Mondavi in 2000. When Constellation



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acquired Mondavi in 2004, Arrowood was part of the deal, but the conglomerate sold Arrowood in 2005 to the Legacy Estate Group, which owned Byron and Freemark Abbey. Shortly thereafter, Legacy filed for Chapter 11 and was snapped up, in 2006, by Jess Jackson, which is how Freemark Abbey, Byron and Arrowood are part of Jackson Family Wines. Dick Arrowood remains as winemaker at the winery that still bears his name, while also running his pet project Amapola Creek, owned solely by him and his wife.

The point is that Dick Arrowood has spent a lifetime making excellent wine in Sonoma County; there can be few people who know the intricacy and the potential of its microclimates better than he. Amapola Creek, consisting of 20 acres of certified organic vineyards, is located on the western slopes of the Mayacamas mountains, which separate Napa and Sonoma counties, where the terminating foothills add heft to the Sonoma Valley appellation.

The Amapola Creek Cabernet Sauvignon 2006, Sonoma Valley, is the second release of this wine. The first impression is of beautiful balance and integration, of a sort of vast poise that casts a veil of expectancy over the experience. The intoxicating bouquet weaves cassis and black plums with smoky licorice, caraway and black olive and then deepens with briars and brambles and dried porcini. This is, frankly, a stupendous wine, confident and purposeful and packed with grainy, velvety tannins and spicy, burnished oak from 26 months in new and used French and American barrels. Yep, readers, that's a lot of wood, yet there's no trace of toastiness, no hint of stridency about it; all is calibrated for a character of monumental equilibrium that reaches down to the wine's very roots and origin. On the other hand, whatever the wine's present seductive qualities — and let's just call it gorgeous — in terms of structure it could use a year or two to ease its buttons a bit, let's say 2012 or '13 to drink through 2020 or '22. The alcohol content is 14.7 percent. Production was 996 cases. Exceptional. About \$80.

