

Wine Spectator

Nearing the Summit - 2008 Napa Cabernet Sauvignons approach 2007's stellar quality

James Laube, The Wine Spectator
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The 2008 California Cabernet Sauvignon vintage so far ranks among the best of the decade. Perhaps the only hurdle it faces in reaching the apex is that it stands in the shadow of the monumental 2007 vintage. Real differences existed between these two growing seasons, yet the end results look strikingly similar.

"Overall I think we're talking about extremely fine distinctions, the sorts of things that consumers and collectors who are really into wine will probably have fun arguing back and forth," says Elias Fernandez of Shafer Vineyards in Napa Valley. "I'd say that generally 2007's distinctiveness is in the rich density of flavor, and 2008's is in aroma, which tends to be attractive and perfumy."

Schrader winemaker Thomas Brown, who crafted some of '08's top-scoring Cabernets, sees the vintages in a similar light. "2008 will always rest in the afterglow of 2007," Brown says. "It's maybe not as consistent a vintage as '07, but the highs are certainly as high. The 2008s possess a very deep fruit core, but they also have breadth, something 2007 will have to develop over time."

It would be hard for 2008 to top 2007, and it doesn't, coming up ever so short. Of the two, 2008 was by far the trickier year. Spring frosts slashed the crop, and some vineyards suffered smoke taint from that summer's rash of wildfires.

Yet dry weather and a small crop is typically a recipe for success in grapegrowing, and the 2008 vintage for Cabernet in California bears this out, particularly in Napa Valley. The conditions translate to wines with firm, ripe, concentrated dark berry flavors and uniformly high quality. In 2007, vintners were blessed with a near-perfect growing season and a good-size crop, resulting in wines of enormous complexity across the board.

Shopping for great Cabernet beyond Napa, the most important region by far for California Cabernet, will be a hit-or-miss endeavor. There are pockets of success, but Cabernets from areas such as Sonoma County rarely approach the quality or quantity achieved in Napa. (That said, one Sonoma winery delivered one of the vintage's best Cabernets: Peter Michael, whose Les Pavots is almost always among the elite.) My overall rating for the 2008 vintage in Napa Valley is 96 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. And I've also revised my assessment of the 2007 vintage, having tasted more than 150 late releases over the past year; I now rate Napa at 97 points.

It's been a busy year since our last report on California Cabernet ("Napa's Greatest Vintage," Nov. 15, 2010). I've blind-tasted nearly 550 Cabernets in Wine Spectator's Napa office. Of those, nearly 350 are from 2008, with the lion's share coming from Napa Valley. In addition to the 2007 Cabernets I reviewed this year, there are a handful of wines from both 2006 and 2009. The latter year may hold the biggest

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surprises and disappointments among recent vintages. (An alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted begins on page 67.)

For the time being, Cabernet lovers are the beneficiaries of two excellent years. There are hundreds of outstanding wines to choose from, and with an economy that still can't seem to right itself, it remains very much a buyer's market. When comparing the elite wines from 2007 and 2008, it's a horse race with a photo finish. In most instances, wineries made better wines and in greater quantities in the earlier vintage.

"In an overall, collective perspective, I'd say Napa was slightly less ripe in 2008," says Celia Welch, the owner and winemaker of Corra, who also makes Scarecrow and other Cabernets. "But for individual sites, that means more nuances of cocoa, forest floor and floral notes, perhaps more complex wines than the very much fruit-driven 2007 vintage."

For Russell Bevan of Bevan Cellars, the nod goes to 2007, although he made two amazing 2008s from Showket Vineyard in Oakville (97 and 95 points, \$150 each). "Both the 2007 and 2008 vintages gave us rich textures and supple tannins, but 2007 had an amazing purity of fruit that separated it from 2008. The 2009s have a tangible energy to them. The pHs are lower, giving them verve and the ability to develop for many years."

Some wines that were almost impossible to find a few years ago due to tight allocations and the free-spending era are now available. Many vintners have either cut prices or had their wines discounted, creating opportunities. Factors such as increased competition and slow sales have clogged inventories, leading to more affordably priced outstanding wines.

Great vintages create a rising tide effect, lifting quality at every level. This usually means good quality among value wines, too, which is the case in both 2007 and 2008. Astute buyers should find excellent deals (though not steals) from all the recent vintages back to 2006. Wines in the 88- to 92-point range (very good to outstanding) offer some exciting buying opportunities; they are often overlooked and underappreciated.

For example, those seeking to stretch their Cabernet dollars will want to zoom in on excellent 2008s from Napa such as Pedemonte (92 points, \$26), Ramey Claret (92, \$38) and Buehler Estate (91, \$35). From Sonoma, look for the 2008 from Sebastiani (91, \$34) or Sojourn Home Ranch Vineyard (90, \$39).

Value-priced 2007 bottlings from Napa producers include Peter Franus (92, \$40), Bennett Lane Maximus (92, \$35) and Turnbull (91, \$40). Sebastiani Secolo (92, \$35), a Sonoma County blend, is also worth seeking out.

In August, as global stock markets plunged and surged yet again, the economic uncertainty raised the question of whether consumers would be aggressive or passive buyers-and at what prices. Producers of the highest-end Cabernets (those selling for \$150 a bottle and more) have definitely felt the economic pinch, though few have lowered their suggested retail prices. Price reductions are more likely to be found on a market-to-market basis, or through select Internet sales, where a wine is discounted for a few hours or a day. Those wine lovers who have waited years to buy tightly allocated Cabernets such as Harlan or Screaming Eagle may find buying opportunities for these and other wines that were unavailable just a few years ago.

Peter Michael's Les Pavots 2008 (98, \$175), a Bordeaux blend grown in Sonoma's Knights Valley, north of Napa, is one of the stars of the vintage. Winemaker Nicolas Morlet describes 2008 as the warmest

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year since 2002, though not as hot as that earlier vintage. The 2008, he says, "is a neoclassic style of Les Pavots," and it shows in telltale traits of density, concentration, polish and finesse.

Napa Valley's Schrader Cellars also vies for top honors in 2008, with two wines scoring 98 points: the Beckstoffer To Kalon (\$175) and Beckstoffer To Kalon MM VIII (\$400), or "Old Sparky," which is a magnum-only selection of the winery's best eight barrels.

Another six bottlings earned 97-point ratings, including two more from the Beckstoffer To Kalon vineyard: the Tor Clone 4 (\$350) and Schrader RBS (\$175). In the same rarified air, at 97 points, are Bevan Showket Vineyard Double E's Cuvée Oakville (\$150), Schrader Rutherford GIII Beckstoffer Georges III (\$175), Araujo Eisele Vineyard (\$290), representing that winery's best showing since the 1999, and Bryant Family Vineyard (\$325), a perennial winner. Another dozen wines hit 96 points, including Continuum (\$150), Favia La Magdalena (\$120), Futo (\$225), Harlan Estate (\$500), Scarecrow (\$225) and a pair from newcomer Carte Blanche (\$95 and \$125).

Of the dozens of 2007 Napa Cabernets released over the past year, Darioush Darius II (96, \$225), Seven Stones (95, \$175) and Hall Mount Veeder Segassia Vineyard (95, \$145) are the top scorers. They, along with many other highly rated Cabernets, show off the vintage's range and depth of flavor. **Phifer Pavitt Date Night (94, \$75)**, Seavey (94, \$95), Chimney Rock Elevage (93, \$78), Terlato Galaxy Napa-Sonoma (93, \$75) and Honig St. Helena Bartolucci Vineyard (93, \$75) all sell for less than \$100.

"I think you need to be site specific to get down to vintage preferences," says Tor Kenward of Kenward Family Wines, who makes several Cabernets under the Tor label. "All our '07s were great out of the blocks, and still adorable. Our '08s from Beckstoffer To Kalon and Mast Vineyard are more Rubenesque, rounder, fleshier, more concentrated than the '07s. That said, our Howell Mountain Cabernet site was better in 2007 and 2009." Beckstoffer and Mast are both western sites, while the Howell Mountain vineyard, Cimarossa, lies at an elevation of 2,100 feet.

"Overall my first impressions were that the fruit profiles [in 2008] were darker and more brooding than in the 2007 vintage, which seemed more generous, with flashy red fruit," recalls Brian Brown of Round Pond in Rutherford. In terms of tannins, 2008 was harder and a bit more angular compared with 2007, he adds.

Despite vastly different starts to the growing seasons, veraison, when the grapes begin to turn color and darken, occurred at about the same time both years. But 2008 was the warmer and hotter year, winemakers say, with more days above 90 degrees. Once underway, harvest went smoothly and evenly through October, before two days of heavy rain in November, which delayed picking but didn't undermine quality.

"What I remember the most about 2008 are the killer frosts we experienced on back-to-back nights in April," says Dave Guffy, winemaker for Hess Collection on Mount Veeder. "Temperatures dropped into the 20s. Frost protection was hit and miss."

"As morbid as it sounds, I'm a huge fan of the frost vintages," says Kirk Venge, Nils Venge's son, who now oversees winemaking at the family's eponymous winery. 2001 and 2002 were both frost years, and nature did a wonderful job of thinning, cutting the crop by 15 percent to 25 percent or more, he says. In 2008, the frost cut yields by 30 percent to 100 percent, "but where the strong survived, it was awesome."

"I feel my 2008 may be slightly better than the 2007," says Jayson Woodbridge of Hundred Acre, which produces two Cabernets. "The ripening weather and duration in 2008 were virtually perfect. The fruit

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developed huge and complex flavors very early and just continued to develop all the way through September and October. The fruit was massive, elegant and extremely complex. I cannot say enough good things about this vintage."

Enthusiasm continues to build for 2009, despite the fact that most vintners consider it the most challenging of the past three years. The vintage was progressing beautifully right up until a series of storms drenched the vineyards in October, splitting the harvest into two parts-pre-storm and post-storm.

"2009 could have been one of our all-time great vintages had it not been for the warm mid-October storm," says Kenward. "The vineyards that reached complete maturity levels before the storm made extraordinary wines-big, dark, and that in many cases will exceed both '07 and '08. I have tasted some excellent wines picked after that storm, but the cooler sites with very low sugars pre-storm will be the weak reference points. In 2007, we coasted across the finish line. 2008 and 2009 made us work much harder for the prize."

"2009 is a different beast," admits Brown. "This vintage returns us to more structured wines. It is no doubt going to be remembered for the Oct. 12 deluge, but [the year] is really all about drought. The big upside to dry weather is it got us off to an early start. The resulting wines are a bit more structured and grippy than most expected, but they have great balance and don't really lack for anything. They will, however, require a bit more patience than the two years that came before."

Corra's Welch believes the 2009s will be somewhere between the '08s and '07s in style. "I think the 2009s have a slightly fuller structure [à la 2007], and show the complexity, the breadth of sensory attributes of the 2008s," says Welch. "I've just completed my bottling of the 2009s, and was very pleased with the wines."

"I'm still thinking 2009 may be the vintage of the decade," says Shafer's Fernandez. "It was a lengthy, cool, mild summer, which allowed the fruit to hang under near-ideal conditions for a long, long time. Add to that, throughout our vineyards we saw looser clusters of smaller berries. Looseness means that each individual berry has greater access to air and sunlight," he explains. "The ripeness we saw on the crush pad is translating into great aromas and flavors in the wines."

At this point, however, the 2007 vintage is the best overall, edging out 2008 ever so slightly. 2009 will be the most variable, yet if winemakers are correct in their assessments, the best wines could be extraordinary. All in all, it's a bounty for lovers of California Cabernet Sauvignon.

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