

# Is Napa Valley Cabernet falling back to Earth?

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Sunday, April 12, 2009

Given where the market for expensive wine is right now, you'd think it would be time to scoop up deals on primo Napa Cabernet.

The primo part is right, at least for the 2005 vintage still largely found on shelves. The deals part? Not so much.

Our recent Chronicle tasting of about 40 Napa Valley Cabernets in current release, almost entirely from the 2005 and 2006 vintages, had its ample share of highlights, which we'll get to in a moment. But deals were a bit harder to come by, which is our tasting was geared toward more affordable, accessible wines.

To sample this cross-section, I was joined by two panelists: Nicole Burke, wine director at Epic Roasthouse in San Francisco; and Cezar Kusik, a wine consultant at Fourcade & Hecht Wine Selections who previously was wine director for Rubicon restaurant. Both have sold more than their share of Cabernet.

Let's start with the good news. The 2005 vintage was fantastic for Napa Cabernet, with high yields and a moderate growing season that warmed in the home stretch, allowing for even, steady ripeness and late picking dates.

By contrast, 2006 was a rollercoaster: a wet, cool spring; summer heat spikes that presaged an early harvest; then an extended temperate summer that lengthened the growing season, perhaps past the point of wisdom. It was a vintage that revealed winemaking talents and shortfalls.

Those that did it right made gorgeously ripe wines, like the 2006 Tor Kenward Cimarossa Vineyard, which showed plenty of depth despite a huge structure (15.1 percent alcohol). But many expensive 2006s tasted like they'd been pushed to the limit of ripeness, with too much jam, too much oak, too much extract. Some seemed confected more than made.

Both of our panelists pointed out that the plusher, more heavily fruited style remains a big sell in restaurants - especially those of the steak-friendly variety. Even in that context, however, many examples were too lavished with oak to want to drink. If recent claims of winemaking restraint are true, we might have to wait until the 2007 vintage to see it. Certainly the alcohol levels and thick gobs of fruit didn't give much indication.

It's no surprise, then, that many 2005s are still in the market, especially given the near-stagnant pipeline for high-end wine. It seems many restaurants and retailers are thinning their inventories and not acquiring a whole lot more. With a slow market for expensive wine, and an uneven vintage sitting in the wings, these may not be the cheeriest of times along Highway 29.

But if the top end of Napa Cabernets faces a headwind - and I suspect there's a limited number of tears to be shed on that front - there's clearly an opportunity for less expensive labels to get some exposure. We found at least a half-dozen under \$50 wines that are worth drinking now. This essentially dials back price tags to when Napa wines felt like more of an affordable luxury.

Among the names in this cheaper category, we found a mix of familiar and new. The 2006 Napa Valley bottling from Buehler followed its consistent quality tradition for this more basic effort from largely purchased fruit. Conn Creek, the longtime brand owned by Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, offered solid value, as did wines from Trinchero and Chappellet. On the other hand, the 2007 The Table - can it possibly be time for 2007s yet? - from newly unveiled Once Wines, a sister entity to the Evening Land Vineyards project, shows exceptional winemaking (from Sashi Moorman of Stolpman Vineyards) for under \$30.

If you're still hunting 2005s, there is no shortage of good wine to stock up. Looking back to our tasting last November, we found standouts from Corison, Round Pond, Caymus and more. And in coming months, you're likely to find the 2005s at ever more discounted prices.

I often point out to Cabernet producers that they should remember how much competition exists around the world - never more than at times like these, when the pride of place meets the humility of the pocketbook. So to find affordable quality in the Cabernet mother lode that is Napa Valley strikes me as a truly hopeful sign.

As to those who can't or won't adjust their prices to the current reality - yes, even in a realm where over 60 tons of Cabernet sold last year above \$20,000 per ton - an Icarus moment may not be far off.

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