

March 2007

Wines from California.

Discover the next big thing to shake the wine world, after the stars of Hollywood...

Back in 1976 at a blind tasting in Paris, French, Italian, Spanish with their identities hidden were judged by professional French tasters, the winners in each categories were wines from the Napa Valley, it was the first time in history that American wines had won out over European wines in a formal tasting and it shocked both France, Italy, Spain and the Americans. From this point on new world wine became a real challenger to the old world.

Wine laws in America are a little more relax than those in Europe, ie: the grape variety stated on the label must contain a minimum of 75% of that grape in the bottle, if it state a vintage then it must contain 95% of that grape. The Napa Valley is surely the best known of the American wine regions, here the Cabernet Sauvignon holds court, producing one of the best red in California, but other regions produce excellent Chardonnays, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and of course the indigenous Zinfandel grape. Extending over 1000 kilometers from North to South, California produces around 90% of America's top wines.

Regions within California have both cold and hot climate, generally the better areas take advantage of the ocean breezes and the cooling effect of the early morning fogs. The other regions in California producing great wines are Carneros producing superb Pinot Noir and Chardonnays and Sonoma County (which includes the Russian River and Alexander Valley) producing mainly Cabernet sauvignon, Chardonnays, merlot and Zinfandel. Mendocino County, Santa Barbara Santa Cruz, Monterey and Sacramento also produce a various range of enjoyable wines.

In order to purchase reasonably priced wines from those regions, avoid labels marked "Single vineyards" or "Estate bottled", instead look for wines that say "Napa Valley" or "Napa County". Older or more established wineries often sell their wines at lower prices than small or new boutique wineries. California has been sought after from all the big wine producers of the world, like Baron Rothschild (from Mouton-Rothschild) teaming up with Robert Mondavi back in 1979 to launch Opus One.

The Robert Mondavi Winery is the biggest in America making around 25 million bottles from Napa Valley and Carneros and another 60 million bottles from the woodbridge winery where the grapes are bought from central Valley and North Coast areas.

Napa valley is one of the most prestigious and expensive wine growing areas in the world.

Californian wines are often ready to drink on release, as the tannin levels in reds and the acidity level in whites are usually in balance from the point of the harvest, it has also been blessed with a string of fine vintages, but some estate however are making wines which will keep up to 30 years if cellared correctly. (Cabernet Sauvignon wines are matured in American oak for up to 3 years and for a further 2 years in bottle.

Some of the wines I enjoy from California are:

For Cabernet Sauvignon/ Merlot : Stag's Leap, Frog's Leap and Peter Michael Winery

For Chardonnays: Beringer, Au bon Climat, Frog's Leap

For Sauvignon Blanc: Matanzas Creek, Beringer

For Pinot Noir : Etude, Au Bon Climat

My wine selection:

Stone Cellars Zinfandel, Beringer £6.50 orders.chippenham@berkmann.co.uk

Flagrant aromas of ripe raspberries with blueberries and pepper on the palate

Angels Creek Merlot £7.95 contact@tw-wines.com

Au Bon Climat Chardonnay £12.15 contact@tw-wines.com

Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon £16.50 orders.chippenham@berkmann.co.uk

Xavier Le-Bellégo
Forbury's restaurant