

NAPA VALLEY VINTAGE 2008

FROM EXTREME TO SUPREME

TEXT: Jukka Lötönen PHOTOS: Pekka Naikkilä

A group of ten or so wine experts excitedly awaits the revelation of fifty foil-wrapped wine bottles. Consisting of sommeliers, winemakers, wine auctioneers and wine writers, the group has spent the last four hours at the table, blind-tasting the top Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons from 2008. Generally speaking, opinions are very positive. In contrast with the Napa Valley Vintage 2007 tasting last year, the wines have much more distinct styles; this is due to the exceptional weather conditions of 2008, which forced producers to use all the tricks in the book to guarantee grape quality.



The harvest in 2008 was very different from the norm in Napa Valley: Mother Nature turned the year into a real thriller, which gripped producers from the beginning all the way until harvest time.

The year began in stormy conditions: the valley was buffeted by downpours and storm winds. These then gave way to an agonisingly long dry period. The spring's rainfall only reached sixty per cent of the average, and went down in history as one of the driest springs in Napa Valley. Due to the mild and dry weather, the vines' growing season started earlier than ever. The early budding turned out to be crucial, however, as the month-long dry period in the spring was followed by destructive sub-zero night-time temperatures. This was not just on a few isolated nights, but went on for a whole month. The long night-time frosts had a devastating effect on the sprouting vines, cutting harvests by up to one third.

During the long frost period, producers pulled out all their tricks to protect the vines. Some vineyards in the valley have large fans, which were used intensively throughout the spring. Areas that did not have fans used sprinklers to water the vines so that the water would freeze on the buds and shield them from the icy cold. The flowering season which suffered from a long dry spring season, led to below-average fruit formation. The summer started off cool and remained so until late August. As a result, the grapes developed slowly and became intense and concentrated. In the late summer, ripening was accelerated by a one-week heat wave, which was followed by dry weather during the harvest. Although the harvest was smaller than usual, the grape quality was excellent.



VINTAGE 2008 CONCLUSION

The year 2008 reminded Napa Valley producers of the climate conditions their European colleagues often battle. The wild weather put the vineyards to the test and required more measures than usual to ensure an optimal harvest. Due to the exceptional weather conditions, the terroir played a significant role in shaping the character of the resulting wines. Some of the influencing factors were soil quality, vineyard-specific weather patterns, the age of vines and the farming methods used. After the extensive 2008 Napa Cabernet tasting, there were no great qualitative differences, however, as the wines at the tasting all represented some of the best that these top producers have to offer. Although the scores ranged between 86 and 96 points, the differences will even out through longer ageing, as the wines will reach their optimum drinkability within 10–15 years. It was wonderful to note that a great deal of the wines were characterised by a seductively succulent fruitiness, which made many of them enjoyable already – more than half of the wines have scored 90 or more points, despite their young age. Whereas the great 2007 vintage contains very refined and long-lived wines, the 2008 wines charmed tasters with their open and generous style, even though their best days are still far in the future.



THE 2008 NAPA CABERNET SAUVIGNON TASTING

1-20

Ranking		Points
1	Dana Lotus Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	96
2	Maya	94
3	Colgin Tychson Hill Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	93
4	Gargiulo Vineyards Money Road Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon	93
5	Colgin IX Estate Cabernet Sauvignon	93
6	Gargiulo Vineyards OVX G Major 7 Study	93
7	Shafer One Point Five Cabernet Sauvignon	93
8	Screaming Eagle	93
9	Harlan Estate	92
10	Dariouh Signature Cabernet Sauvignon	92
11	BOND Pluribus	92
12	Dana Helms Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	92
13	Checkerboard Vineyards King's Row Cabernet Sauvignon	92
14	Notre Vin Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon	92
15	Blankiet Estate Paradise Hills Proprietary Red	91
16	Dalla Valle Cabernet Sauvignon	91
17	Staglin Family Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	91
18	Caymus Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon	91
19	The Maiden	91
20	Pahlmeyer Proprietary Red	91

21-50

Ranking		Points
21	BOND Melbury	91
22	Dominus Estate	91
23	Continuum Estate	91
24	Joseph Phelps Backus Vineyard	91
25	Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon	91
26	Stag's Leap Cask 23 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon	90
27	The Matriarch	90
28	Chappellet Signature Cabernet Sauvignon	90
29	Opus One	90
30	Hourglass BlueLine Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	90
31	Inglenook Rubicon	90
32	Chappellet Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	90
33	Araujo Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	90
34	Vineyard 29 Cru Cabernet Sauvignon	90
35	Joseph Phelps Insignia	90
36	Roam	89
37	Darius II	89
38	Inglenook Cask Cabernet	89
39	BOND Quella	89
40	Realm Cellars Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	89
41	Hourglass Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon	89
42	Stag's Leap S.L.V. Estate Cabernet Sauvignon	89
43	Scarecrow	88
44	Colgin Cariatid	88
45	Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon	88
46	BOND Vecina	88
47	Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	88
48	Stag's Leap Artemis	88
49	BOND St. Eden	87
50	Stag's Leap FAY Estate Cabernet Sauvignon	86

FINE VINTAGE

THE BEST NAPA CABERNET 2008

The challenging vintage of 2008 put the Napa vintners in a position whereby the understanding of the terroir factors of their vineyard site proved to be critical. Only by understanding the terroir of each plot of vines was each wine producer able to make the necessary decisions in the vineyards concerning the supporting of the vines during their growth cycle, thereby helping them to produce the best quality fruit.

Given the results of our tasting, we may conclude that the best Napa Valley wine producers succeeded in that challenge incredibly well: the quality of the wines is great – if not excellent. While all the tasted wines will reach their optimum drinkability after 10 to 15 years, there were a number of surprises according to the wines' current 'enjoyability'. The winner of the best Napa Cabernet 2008 is a Napa Valley newcomer, Dana Estates, whose Lotus single-vineyard wine charmed us with its opulence, depth and elegance.

1. DANA LOTUS VINEYARD CABERNET SAUVIGNON

THE QUALITY OF THE WINE

Out of the three Dana Estates-owned vineyards, the Lotus vineyard, located on hillsides of St. Helena, stands at 1200 feet above sea level and boasts a beautiful panoramic view of the Napa Valley floor. This steep hillside vineyard is spread over the rocky, low-yielding soils and has western exposure. Thanks to the influence of the afternoon sun, the wines show ripe and rich fruitiness while the three to twelve inches of fractured grey bedrock soil generates the wines' marked mineral structure.

"This is incredibly dry, well-drained soil that has very low water holding capacity and in dry, warm vintages it reflects an outstanding level of grape ripeness," Cameron Vawter, the winemaker at Dana Estates, points out.

THE VINTAGE 2008

"2008 proved to be a tremendously challenging vintage, yet it ultimately produced some of the best wines of the decade. The vintage characteristics were defined primarily by the strongest La Niña spring for two decades," Vawter continues.

According to Vawter, the dry La Niña winter and an unusually warm March led to the earliest bud break on record for many of Dana Estates' vineyard blocks:

"This seemed like a good thing until temperatures plummeted in late April and gave us the worst frost season in over thirty years. We used our frost fans for 32 nights during the spring. The frost, combined with some cool bloom temperatures, led to a very uneven veraison. This vintage was like no other vintage that I have experienced. A vintage is really made up of winter rains

to fill the soil profile, the spring's ability to dry the profile, summer's ability to hold constant and then September's warmth to either push ripening or allow it to happen slowly."

Vawter then goes on to say that the previous generation of Napa winemakers has compared the 2008 vintage to the spring of 1972, when the last really serious frost was experienced in the valley. However, apart from spring, he outlines that 2008 was actually a very dry, hot vintage.

"It had more heat spikes than any recent vintage. These heat spikes actually stunt a grape's ability to ripen, and this is one reason the vintage boasts such purity and great acidity. The ripening was very rapid, preserving much of the freshness," he explains.

WINEMAKING PHILOSOPHY

The winemaking practices are based on site-oriented wine production, the philosophy is adapted from Burgundy and organic farming plays a critical part. "Organic farming allows the vineyard to truly express itself and not rely on input after input from man. The site is irrigated minimally and dry farmed whenever possible, in order to highlight the expression of both vintage and vineyard. In winemaking, the fermentation takes place in concrete vats under the influence of indigenous yeasts," Vawter says.

According to his experience, the concrete tanks enhance the terroir focus, along with the fruit characteristics of the wine, and soften the chunky tannins discreetly. The fermentation process takes place exclusively with native yeast and bacteria. Sulphur additions are kept to a minimum. The wines are aged in French oak barrels for 24–27 months. Furthermore, no fining or filtration takes place.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Dana Estates is owned by South Korean wine lover Mr. Hi Sang Lee, who first fell in love with wine more than 40 years ago, when he lived in New York. In the early 1990s he founded Nara Cellar, a wine importing business in South Korea. In 2006 he opened Podo Plaza, a cutting edge food and wine centre in Seoul that contains a wine bar, retail store, wine academy (WSET) and cooking school (Japanese Culinary Institute).

Through his import business, Mr. Lee has been responsible for bringing the world's most sought-after luxury wines to the Korean market, including Harlan, Shafer and Colgin, and has increased awareness and appreciation for world-class wines in his home country.



The import business has regularly brought Lee to Napa Valley for more than ten years, allowing him to develop an understanding of luxury wine production and form close relationships with the people whose wine he imports. These relationships were integral to him bringing his dream of creating his own wine brand to fruition: Lee was able to acquire coveted vineyard land and gain access to some of the most talented people in the industry. Mr. Lee purchased the Helms Vineyard and the winery in 2005, which is listed as one of the "ghost wineries" of the Napa Valley and was originally built by H.W. Helms, a German vintner, in 1883. The purchase of Hershey and Lotus vineyards took place in 2006.

Owner: Hi Sang Lee

Founded: The winery located in Rutherford Bench was originally founded by a German vintner, H.W. Helms, in 1883. Dana Estates was founded in 2005 when Mr. Lee bought the old H.W. Helms estate.

First Vintage: 2006

Location: St. Helena (Lotus Vineyard)

Vineyard size: 4.81 acres

Average age of vines: 14 years

Production: 291 cases

Vineyard management: Philippe Melka, Cameron Vawter and Silverado Farming

Winemaker: Cameron Vawter

Market Price: \$325