

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



One of the constants in the Connoisseurs' Guide lifecycle over the past couple of decades has been our active and enthusiastic sponsorship of and participation in the Zinfandel Festival here in San Francisco every January—and never mind that this year's days' long event runs over into early February. For us, it is a January event because of the effort we put into preparing for the several activities that make up the Festival, including the production of this, our Annual ZAP Zinfandel Issue. There will be hundreds of wineries pouring at a series of events that start with wine and food pairings on Thursday night, January 31, and conclude with the Grand Tasting in which acres of space inside San Francisco's handsome display space, The Concourse, gets transformed for the better part of a week into Zinfandel country.

The Zinfandel Festival is the magic work of ZAP, better known as Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (www.zinfandel.org), an interest group that formed for the protection of old vines and the advancement generally of the variety. No other single grape has such a formidable organization behind it. And no other grape has ever borne the monicker, California's grape. Almost all of the other grapes grown successfully in California earned fame and fortune first in Europe. Not so for Zinfandel. It is a European grape of Mediterranean origin, but its fame and fortune belong to us. And because of the ZAP Festival, January is now known around these parts as "Zinfandel Month".

Zinfandel

The ZAP Festival Grand Tasting is typically the first large-scale introduction to the Zinfandel vintage about to come into the marketplace. Often wineries bring barrel samples of those soon to be released wines, and they also pour their current vintages. For Zinfandel, the next new vintage will be 2011, a cold, wet, long vintage that comes with a mixed reputation at best. And even though we have learned over the years not to judge a vintage until we taste the finished wines, this year we are alive with anticipation at getting our hands on wines that will have challenged the winemakers. To be sure, this Issue also has a smattering of 2011s included in its ranks, and some of them, most notably the Seghesio Sonoma County 2011 and the Bedrock 2011s have shown themselves to be quite successful. But there are a handful of others that have turned out less well-stuffed than in the past, even when they have comparable levels of ripeness. Fortunately, the wines of 2010 have turned out better in many cases than was expected of that cold vintage—and this Issue offers plenty of exciting choices.

Chardonnay

We taste so many Chardonnays during the year that it takes something special to really catch our attention. The wines in this Issue have done that. Not only are there lots of very good, highly rated choices, but there are wines from producers who were not previously in the Chardonnay sweepstakes. Read on for the excitement coming from Pinot Noir producer, Merry Edwards, from new kid on the block, Ram's Gate, and from the tiny but soon to be very famous, Sandhi. The kicker to this story is found at the other end of the price spectrum in the rather large number of Good Values that have also emerged.

Best Buys

In this month's search for outstanding value, we have continued our focus on red wines. It is winter, after all, and warm and savory is likely to be the order of the day. In order to keep you in reds that will thrill your palate and your pocketbook, we have scoured out a selection of priceworthy Cabernet Sauvignons, Pinot Noirs and Rhône reds.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON



There is no question but that Cabernet Sauvignon remains one of California's brightest stars, and the number of outstanding bottlings is impressive to say the least. Sadly, success has come at a price, and finding good values is far more difficult than simply finding very good wines. That does not mean, however, that fine Cabernet is only an occasional indulgence, and the price of admission is not always a splurge. The 🍷 **DRY CREEK VINEYARD Meritage Sonoma County 2008** (\$28.00) is generous, complex and wonderfully supple offering that proves the point, and the well-structured 🍷 **BELLA VETTA Ami's Vineyard 2008** (\$35.00) similarly delivers lots of varietal interest and depth. The 🍷 **ROTH Alexander Valley 2010** (\$29.00) is dense, impressively concentrated effort that has plenty of potential for aging, and the more accessible 🍷 **EDUCATED GUESS Napa Valley 2010** (\$20.00) is as good a Cabernet as will be found at the price. The outgoing, 86-point **LOUIS M. MARTINI Sonoma County 2010** (\$18.00) is long on honest Cabernet character and marks another success from this perennially successful label, and both the similarly scored, nicely balanced **BEAULIEU Napa Valley 2010** (\$20.00) and the juicy, easy-to-taste **J. LOHR Seven Oaks Paso Robles 2010** (17.00) earn a place on the roster of good, affordably priced efforts.

RHÔNE VARIETIES

Last month's pick of the good value lot focused on Syrah including the outstanding 🍷 **DIERBERG Syrah Santa Ynez Valley** (\$34.00) as well as the wonderfully polished, 90-point 🍷 **OJAI VINEYARD Syrah Santa Barbara County 2009** (\$28.00) and the complex, impressively layered 🍷 **SANDLER Syrah Connell Vineyard Bennett Valley 2009** (\$20.00), and the three remain at the head of a very good class. But fans of Rhône varietals would be well advised to check out a few of Syrah's kissing cousins. The savory, deeply filled 🍷 **TABLAS CREEK Côtes de Tablas Paso Robles 2010** (\$30.00), made from Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre and Counoise, is a remarkable wine whose combination of richness, range and fine balance makes it one not to be missed, and keep an eye out for the polished and fruity 🍷 **BROPHY CLARK GSM Santa Ynez Valley 2009** (\$16.00). The generous 90-point **MIRO Grenache Cuvée Sasha Monte Lago Vineyard High Valley 2010** (\$20.00) reminds just how good local Grenache can be, and both the buoyant 🍷 **BOONY DOON Grenache Clos de Gilroy Central Coast 2010** (\$18.00) and the energetic 🍷 **JOEL GOTT Grenache Alakai California 2010** (\$18.00) afford plenty of pleasure at a modest cost.



PINOT NOIR



Our cellar is crowded with newly arrived Pinots, and we are well into our tastings for the February issue of CGCW, but a handful of noteworthy values deserves mention while they still remain on retailers' shelves. The deep and delicious 🍷 **BLACK KITE Kite's Rest Anderson Valley 2009** (\$42.00) is an outstanding example from a very fine year, as is the impeccably balanced 🍷 **RUSSIAN HILL Russian River Valley 2009** (\$33.00), while other favorites that hit the mark for both value and high achievement are the vital, firmly built 🍷 **SIERRA MADRE Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley 2010** (\$40.00) and the rich and very well filled 🍷 **KORI KW Ranch Santa Lucia Highlands 2010** (\$38.00). The vigorous and vital 🍷 **STEPHEN ROSS Santa Lucia Highlands 2010** (\$25.00) and the eminently fruity 🍷 **EDUCATED GUESS Carneros 2010** (\$25.00) are still hard to beat among those bottlings priced at \$25.00 or less, and the surprising 🍷 **BONTERRA Mendocino County 2010** (\$16.00) reminds that tasty, varietally true Pinot can still be had without breaking the bank.

CONNOISSEURS' SERIES



Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs' Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS' SERIES wine-of-the-month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month are:



🍷 **Olson Ogden Syrah Unti Vineyard 2009**, 🍷 **Olson Ogden Syrah Alder Springs Vineyard**, 🍷 **Francis Ford Coppola 54% Syrah/46% Cabernet Sauvignon "Eleanor" 2009** and 🍷 **Francis Ford Coppola Zinfandel Directors' Cut "Cinema" 2009**.

For more information about CONNOISSEURS' SERIES, please call the California Wine Club at 1-800-777-4443 or visit www.cawineclub.com/conseries