

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



One of the more interesting debates surrounding the current and future look of California wines has to do with weather and the lessons it has taught the local vintners. The three vintages of 2009, 2010 and 2011 were each cooler than normal and thus encouraged the production of somewhat lighter wines in some quarters. That this weather pattern happened at a time when California wines were being pilloried in some quarters to be big, too rich, too tasty, too lacking in elegance was almost too much of a coincidence because it may have masked a trend to lighter wines in any event.

But lighter wines is what we got from many producers, and while some tasters decry the loss of depth and intensity, others have been over the moon at the emergence of so many wines with lower alcohols and higher acidities. Now comes the very regular harvest of 2012, which as we write this in late September looks to be about as normal, well-paced and free of bothersome weather as anyone could want. Except, of course, those who worry that the new vintage will see a return to what they view as the bad old days.

We have a different view, and expect to find a mix of wines that will run from the light and acidic to the full-bodied, rich and deeply flavored. What California does best is not one monolithic style but a range of styles. And while the wines in this Issue may be somewhat lighter on average, even in these cooler vintages, one can find wines that serve virtually all palates.

Pinot Noir




It is fair to say that old habits die hard, and even with the challenges of cool vintages, the Pinot Noirs in this review have not exactly turned into shrinking violets. The leading wines are attractively deep, balanced and typical of the best that California can produce whether they are generously ripe or generously acidic and tight. The common denominator is that they deliver lots of flavor and that they hail from the Anderson Valley in the north to the Santa Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley in the south.




Chardonnay




One sees a greater relatively change in the shape of California Chardonnays than in the Pinot Noirs, but even with this shift in style, it is worth noting that the shift was happening regardless of vintage variation. Acidities were rising and brighter balance was becoming part of the landscape without a great deal of change in ripeness level. Still, the very high acid style of Chardonnay has attracted a fair bit of attention, and it will be here, even more than in Pinot Noir or other varieties that we are likely to see the learnings from the current set of vintages played out—if indeed, we are going to see it at all.




Best Buys




Even as the warmth of the summer melts away, Best Buys takes a long last look at Riesling and Rosé for wines that will serve happily at tail gate parties the last of the outdoor fun-raising. An attractive collection of priceworthy Merlots is also featured this month.

87 DUTTON GOLDFIELD Devil's Gulch Vineyard 2010 Marin County. Although not a bold wine in either aroma or flavor, the preferred of the Marin County entries succeeds as a well-defined Pinot that shows nominal red-cherry-fruit and a touch of spice with a mild edge of back-palate astringency. It is balanced to firmness and constructed to keep, and its singular lack of excess makes it a very versatile wine that will match up well with foods.    \$58.00




86 DUTTON GOLDFIELD Azaya Ranch Vineyard 2010 Marin County. Smelling of fresh red cherries with a bare touch of stems and green leaves to the side, this one takes a minimal approach to ripeness, but it musters enough fruit to stay on the varietal track. It is, nonetheless, a little lean and truncated in the latter going and finish, and its slight tilt to tartness is apparent from beginning to end.    \$58.00




86 DUTTON GOLDFIELD McDougall Vineyard 2010 Sonoma Coast. Restrained to the point of being arguably a bit skimpy and fairly tight-fisted in fruit, this lean, acid-framed Pinot hints variously at dried brush and not-quite-ripe cherries, and it takes on a puckery, slightly chalky edge at the finish. That said, it is still clearly varietal, and it may yet come around with a couple of years of additional age.    \$58.00

84 ECHELON Russian River Valley 2010
From first sniff through to the finish, this one comes up short on essential fruit, and, even if showing a fair sense of body and a good bit palatal weight, it is dry and unexpressive with a trim of tea-leaf bitterness.    \$25.00

87 EDUCATED GUESS Carneros 2010
Direct, slightly juicy and distinctly cherry-like fruit is the dominant theme of this of this very likeable, well-polished wine, and, if a touch of oak lends a wee bit of sweetness, it is always muted and never threatens to be more than it should. The wine is a bit rounded in feel and balanced throughout, and, although it will keep, it is ready to go now.    \$25.00




ERATH

90 ERATH Prince Hill Dundee Hills 2010
Worth noting for its lighter step, the Erath bunch may skirt the bounds of thinness at times, but when a wine is as nicely filled up with character as this one, that extra edge of vitality is more than welcome. Its aromas run more to delicate than to power while not giving up much by way of interest, depth and varietal focus, and its medium to medium-full body and slight rounding allow it to reach for Pinot Noir texture that is sure to emerge as its youth-oriented angles smooth out.    \$50.00

89 ERATH Leland Willamette Valley 2010
Challenging for top honors among the Erath bunch, this young, bright, still somewhat tight offering possesses a nice look at the cherryish fruit of the variety and hints at a slightly juicier future. If somewhat rounded at the front, it turns out to be a touch on the reluctant side across the palate and seems destined for a stay in the cellar.    \$50.00

87 ERATH Estate Selection Willamette Valley 2010
If a touch light in comparison to the wine's above, this one does share their solid Pinot focus and their bent toward bright fruit and underlying energy. Medium to medium-full in body and slightly rounded in texture, it tracks well across the palate and holds nicely




in the firm finish. This style of Pinot can find happiness alongside grilled salmon and seafood pastas.    \$34.00




84 ERATH Oregon 2010
By almost any standard, this is thin, underfilled wine whose lack of character, lack of palate presence and lack of central fruit all but disqualify it from higher consideration. Its modest positives include its cleanliness, its suggestions of Pinot Noir cherries and its widespread availability.    \$19.00




85 FIRESTONE Santa Barbara County 2009
Clean and uncomplicated with clear inklings of ripeness and the heat to confirm it, this one flirts here and there with cherries, but its fruity grasp loosens and it takes a bit of vaguely woody astringency in the latter going.    \$24.00




FLOWERS

Vineyard & Winery

89 FLOWERS Sea View Ridge Sonoma Coast 2010
Nicely composed, youthfully fruity yet somewhat restrained in the frequently seen style of wines from western Sonoma, this wine speaks to lively yet quietly juicy cherry and ripe strawberries with a touch of a lean, mineral edge attached. It is medium-full in body weight and somewhat supple to start before finding a tight, grippy texture from mid-palate to finish. More promise than it is fulfillment at the moment, this one seems sure to reward a few years in the cellar.    \$65.00

88 FLOWERS Sonoma Coast 2010
Medium volume aromas of cherries and tart plums are joined by a hint of wild flowers and wisps of minerals and dried brush. The wine is medium-full in palate impact and somewhat supple with a rounded, glycerin-smooth texture before turning a bit stiff and reluctant at the end. Like its cellar mate, it will benefit greatly from a few years forbearance.    \$45.00




88 FONTES PHILLIPS La Encantada Vineyard 2009 Sta. Rita Hills. Juicy, well-ripened, cherry-like fruit is met by lots of fine firming acidity here, and the wine is as well-structured as it is rich. It is arguably still a bit simple even if quite generous, yet its subtle hints of tea, toast and herbs suggest that a little more complexity is in the offing with age, and it is guaranteed to grow for a several years on the strength of its balance rather than brawn.    \$47.00




87 FRANCIS COPPOLA Reserve Dutton Ranch 2009 Russian River Valley. Pinot's slightly woody traits are given extra emphasis here, but they are balanced by a good measure of ripe-cherry fruit. The wine is fleshy and full-bodied and sports a bit of last-minute heat, and its weighty style argues for service with slightly heartier foods.    \$35.00



FREEMAN

VINEYARD & WINERY




87 FREEMAN Russian River Valley 2010
This clean and rather mild-mannered Pinot arguably treads the line between being delicate and a just little too light, but even if we might wish for a bit more fruity substance, we do like its focus and fine sense of balance. It smacks of strawberries and raspberries and shows but a bare kiss of oak, and it will be at its best if enjoyed in its youth and matched up with appropriately milder foods.    \$44.00

in the nose, and subdued elements of ripe apples just manage to keep pace on the palate. The wine is medium-full-bodied and slightly rounded in feel, and, while it is always a bit richer than it is distinctly fruity, that richness makes it easy to like and directs it to successful service with the likes of roasted chicken or grilled salmon steaks.    \$28.00

85 CASTELLO DI AMOROSA Reserve 2010

Bien Nacido Vineyard. Santa Barbara County. Despite its "reserve" status and prestigious source, this slender and slightly citrusy wine is a bit short on Chardonnay richness and depth. It is firm to the point of being stiff and ungainly at the moment, and it is a little too thin and dilute at its heart to convince us that it has the right stuff to age.    \$38.00




84 CLOS DU VAL Carneros 2010

It may find favor with those who steadfastly adhere to the less-is-more school, but we find this clean and varietally vague wine to instead be sparse and thin with a lightly woody veneer, an overly chalky finish and far too limited with regard to essential Chardonnay fruit.    \$25.00




86 CLOS LA CHANCE Murphy's Choice 2010

Santa Cruz Mountains. Straightforward ripe-apple fruit is the main message of this rather frontal effort with a modest touch of oak lending a kiss of sweet spice. The wine is clean, but it is also fairly simple, and, while it is rounded and easy to gulp, it is not one that conveys much in the way of real depth, and it will be at its best if enjoyed young.    \$35.00




87 COUNTER PUNCH Sta. Rita Hills 2009

If showing a nice touch of sweet oak right from the start, this wine is a bit tight with its fruit. Its limits, however, seem more those of youth than anything else, and attractive suggestions of fresh apples, citrus and minerals gradually emerge with a brief bit of coaxing. It is quite firm in balance and takes on a slight acidic bite at the end, but there is fruit at the finish, and it will benefit from a year in the bottle.    \$38.00




86 DARIOUSH Napa Valley 2010

There are times that we very much like a big, oaky Chardonnay as long as it is well-filled with fruit, but this one is all about size and lavish spice, and it comes up short on the fruity substance to be fully complete. Its muted suggestions of ripe apples are swept aside and simply overwhelmed by oak as it crosses the palate, and its shortfall in fruit leaves it a little too coarse, hot and dry at the finish.    \$43.00

84 DRY CREEK VINEYARD Foggy Oaks 2009




Russian River Valley. Pushy oak takes a central role here and imparts a distinctly charry aspect to both the wine's aromas and flavors. Fruit, on the other hand, is modest at best, and its lack leaves the wine dry, somewhat hollow and slightly toothpicky by the time that it ends.    \$20.00

90 DuMOL Russian River Valley 2010

Obvious oak leads the way in the nose here and fruit lags a bit as toast and sweet spice take center stage, but the wine's very deep and layered flavors are nicely proportioned and every bit as fruity as they rich in oak. Fairly big-bodied, slightly oily to start and then firm and quite well-balanced, this one hits all the right marks in terms of richness, structure and length. It is thoroughly enjoyable now, but given the choice, we would set it aside for another year or two yet.    \$50.00

84 EBERLE Paso Robles 2011

Clean and constrained in positive fruit with an uneasy fit of acid and high ripeness, this bottling is not wanting for weight, but it




is always more about feel than flavor, and it wanders away to coarseness and heat at the end.    \$20.00

87 EDUCATED GUESS Napa Valley 2010




Lightly citrusy, gently oaked and keyed on fresh, green apples in the nose, this wine surprises by being riper and richer once in the mouth, and its generous flavors deliver more fruity depth than expected. It is slightly supple in feel and nicely balanced, with very good finishing length, and, if it could do with a little more complexity, it is an unqualified bargain at the price.

GOOD VALUE    \$19.00

88 FLOWERS Sonoma Coast 2010

A little less expensive than its mate below, but a little more open at this point and likely to stay that way for some time now, this well-balanced, nicely fruited wine takes green apples for its focus and layers in a rich note of crème brûlée oakiness. Medium-full in body and hinting nicely at suppleness and a touch of glyceriny roundness, this one will drink well now with grilled white fishes and will likely mature into a wine that can equitably handle the richer white wine dishes.    \$40.00




87 FLOWERS Camp Meeting Ridge Sonoma Coast 2010

Not without its own charms, but harder to like now and over the next several years, this wine leads with impressively toasty first impressions but finds its mineral-tinged, green apple fruit on the somewhat reluctant side in both nose and mouth. High acidity and a stiff feel on the palate that carries into the lemony finish further hold the wine back, and while, there are building blocks here for the future, that future is years away and must be viewed as something of a gamble.    \$58.00






FROSTWATCH

91 FROSTWATCH Bennett Valley 2009

Although it begins fairly tight and rather backward in the nose, this well-filled effort delivers far more in the mouth than billed. It is full and weighty with a good range of ripe-apple and spice flavors that hint here and there of butterscotch. Fine, somewhat nervy acidity comes into play after a rounded, slightly oily start, and, while in some ways forward and tasty right now, the wine nonetheless has a sense of reserve that bodes quite well for a few years of keeping.    \$30.00

83 JOSEPH JEWELL Russian River Valley 2011




Skimpy suggestions of tart apples struggle to make their ways past a slightly chemical, matchstick element in the nose here, and the wine follows suit in the mouth with a mild burn to its finish and far too little fruit.    \$22.00

88 LINCOURT Steel Sta. Rita Hills 2011

Here is the successful unoaked Chardonnay that actually tastes like the grape from which it made, and its fine combination of brightness and persistent, very buoyant young fruit make it an example well worth emulation. It is medium-full-bodied and is balanced to crispness, yet it achieves a real measure of inviting richness as only well-made Chardonnay can.

GOOD VALUE    \$18.00

83 LONGWOOD Napa Valley 2010

Quite pale in appearance, fairly stunted in fruit and overlain by a faintly matchstick scent, this very plain and fairly small-hearted wine fights unsuccessfully to muster much in the way of interest or richness, and its rounded beginnings give way to heat and acidity hardness at the finish.    \$35.00