

Jancis Robinson Wine

The rise of Napa's Cabernets



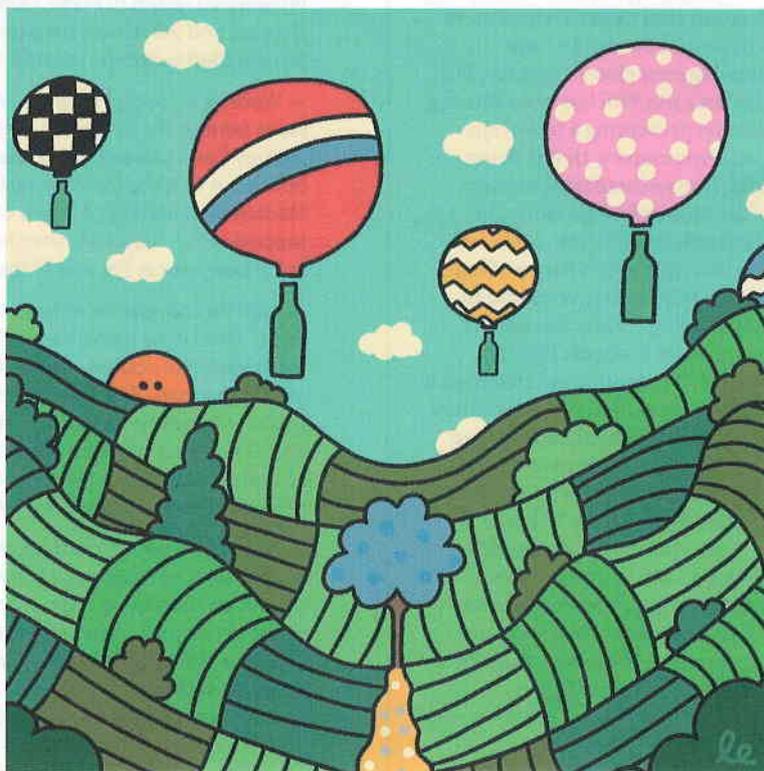
At a recent dinner in London, I sat next to a burgundy-loving leading lawyer who plans to move to northern California and already has a house in wine country. En route to the dinner I had a completely unrelated meeting with a wine-loving professor from Stanford. I spell out these details merely to demonstrate that both these men are keenly interested in wine, have a close relationship with America's leading source of it, and are not short of a bob or two.

During both encounters, the question of the price of Napa Valley Cabernet came up. When it did, both men shook their heads in disbelief and raised their eyes skywards.

The following week, I found myself tasting the latest vintage, 2014, of Harlan Estate, priced at a cool £584 a bottle to the trade – before any duty or tax is paid on it (an equivalent price for a Bordeaux first growth would be about £320). This was at a tasting put on by Harlan's long-standing UK importer, Thorman Hunt, to coincide with its annual offer of top Napa Valley Cabernets. Perhaps significantly, this was the first time Thorman Hunt had organised a tasting; in the past, it simply allocated them.

For a long time I have observed, with amazement, the rising prices of Napa Valley Cabernet. The base line for most ambitious brand owners is commonly set at \$100 a bottle and climbs steeply from there. I just assumed that Napa Valley wine existed in some sort of hermetically sealed bubble, inflated and protected by the booming California economy and the tech barons based to the immediate south of the world's most beautiful wine country.

Even better than this, from the point of view of the wine producers, is that Napa's so-called cult Cabs tend to be sold direct to consumers via mailing lists that determine how many bottles each



As imagined by Leillo

Napa Cabernet producers

In the UK we see far too small a proportion of the Napa Cabernet produced, but ever since being wooed by the glorious wines of the 1970s and earlier, I seize every opportunity to taste them. All of these producers – a decidedly non-comprehensive list – have made wines that have recently impressed me with their quality. Those asterisked offer value too.

- Accendo
- Bond
- Chappellet*
- Chateau Montelena*
- Corison*
- Dalla Valle
- Diamond Creek
- Dunn
- Frog's Leap*
- Harlan Estate
- Kapcsandy
- Matthiasson*
- Opus One
- Ramey*
- Shafer
- Staglin Family
- Stag's Leap Wine Cellars
- Spottswoode



See tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com. Retail stockists on wine-searcher.com

one is allocated (no middle man – how the Bordelais envy this!).

But demand did wobble a bit during the last financial crisis. Some wine collectors who had previously jockeyed for position on those mailing lists offered to share their allocations rather than have to pay for the whole lot. And younger wine lovers have not been as susceptible to the boys'-club sales pitch that served high-end Napa wineries so well in the past.

Every February, the Première Napa Valley auction offers unique lots of wine to the trade in aid of the Napa Valley Vintners. In view of the devastation caused by last October's wildfires, an increase of generosity among bidders had been

'I have had the pleasure of tasting six vintages of Harlan Estate recently... some are extremely good'

anticipated – not least because the 2016 vintage that dominated the lots is particularly highly regarded. But this year the average price per bottle fell, for the third year running (though it was still well over \$200, so will presumably translate into something approaching \$300 retail).

Is the fact that Don Weaver – the Harlan Estate director in charge of somehow allocating the annual production of about 20,000 bottles – hosted tastings in London this year another sign that the Napa Cabernet market may be slightly softening?

With the exception of the tiny-production Screaming Eagle, darling of the extrovert bidders at charity wine auctions, Harlan Estate is the leader of the pack as far as Napa Cabernet pricing is concerned.

The owner, Bill Harlan, is effectively the local squire and probably the most astute ►

◀ businessman in the whole of the Napa Valley, so you can be sure that the pricing of Harlan Estate has been far from casual ever since the first commercial vintage, 1990, was launched – his opening salvo in a stated determination to make Napa Valley's first growth.

I asked Don Weaver about the current price level. "I've been having to justify the price my whole working life at Harlan – even when it was \$65 a bottle," he replied, smiling.

Richard Lashbrook of Thorman Hunt told me that they sold the 1994 vintage that put Harlan on the map (US wine guru Robert Parker gave it 100 points) at £41 a bottle. So who in the UK buys this sort of wine? Uncorked, the wine shop that is slap-bang in the middle of London's financial district, has apparently sold every vintage ever made, hand-selling it to much the same end consumers, typically American lawyers resident in the UK.

Noel Young has a particularly personal and successful wine business in Cambridge (the English one). He has been offering Harlan Estate for years without having tasted it, so welcomed the chance to see what all the fuss was about, while reporting that some of his Harlan customers – typically well-heeled relative newcomers to wine – have fallen by the wayside, deterred by the remorselessness of the price increases.

I have had the pleasure of tasting six vintages of Harlan Estate recently and another three-dozen

highly regarded Napa Cabernets. Some of them are extremely good; only the prejudiced would reject them as too sweet and too alcoholic (the besetting sins of Napa's less glorious examples).

If to those used to buying wine in Europe they seem poor value, Californians would presumably respond citing Napa Valley grape prices of \$20,000 to \$50,000 a ton, bolstered by land prices, local taxes and increasing pressure on the Mexican vineyard labour force in the Trump era.

In any case, the world's two epicentres of Cabernet greatness – Napa and Bordeaux – are drawing ever closer together. Bill Harlan's son Will has been touring Europe presenting a new Napa Cab, Promontory, that is being sold, like an increasing number of ambitious foreign wines, via the Bordeaux market. And there has recently been a flurry of high-profile Bordelais investment in Napa Valley. LVMH has bought into Colgin; François Pinault snapped up Araujo and renamed it Eisele Vineyard; the Wertheimers of Chanel bought St Supéry; and the owners of Ch Pontet-Canet in Pauillac acquired the wine estate of the late actor Robin Williams.

These purchases come with substantially increased direct access to American consumers for their French wines – ideally, presumably, those who can afford the likes of Harlan. **FT**

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MY ADDRESSES — PORTO, PORTUGAL

MAX GRAHAM, RESTAURATEUR



Whenever I return to Porto, I am overwhelmed by how it manages to develop and yet remain the same. Cobble streets, baroque churches, azulejo-tiled buildings provide a timeless backdrop to a buzzing

— Walking through Praça dos Poveiros, I often head for **Casa das Tasca** famous for its *sandes de pernil* (roast pork sandwich) served with creamy Serra cheese. Porto is well known for its sandwiches and one of all is the *francesinha* (above right), Porto's answer to the French *steak and ham*, consisting of layers of meat; steak, ham, two types of cheese topped with a fried egg, smothered in melted cheese and covered in a spicy beer sauce. For one of these, I always go to **Capa Negra**

— With its abundance of fresh fish, the Atlantic influence is great in Porto. One of my favourite lunch spots is **Salta o Muro**, a no-frills restaurant that sources its fish from the docks of Matosinhos (a 10-minute walk across the road). Then there is the **Esplanada Marisqueira Antiga**, a market Matosinhos institution that serves some of the best seafood in the city. It's a great place to try *percebes* (goose barnacles). **Praia da Foz** offers stunning views of the Atlantic and a perfect setting for a cold glass of *vinho verde* and share a *cataplana* (seafood stew).

— For dinner, one of my favourites is **Cafeina**, offering modern Portuguese cuisine with a Portuguese focus and a comprehensive wine list with a focus on the Douro region. Over the past few years, there has been a wave of exciting new restaurant openings, experimenting with local produce. Among these are **Euskalduna Studio**, where a 10-course menu changes with the season, and **Mito**, with a sharing concept of small and innovative small plates, including soft-shell crab *bao* buns.

Max Graham is the owner of Bar Douro in London Bridge

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