

Napa's Dazzling 2013 Cabernets

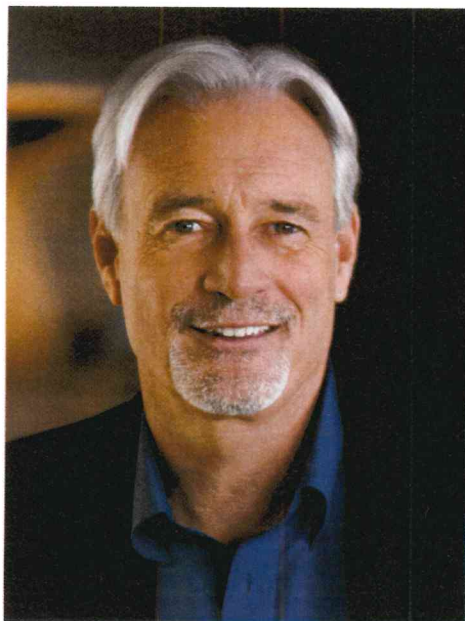
In what has become an annual rite of winter, Napa winemakers trotted out some of their rarest wines at Premiere Napa Valley in February. The trade-only event, organized by Napa Valley Vintners, includes a barrel tasting and auction where producers showcase their specialty cuvées—new pet bottlings and cellar trial balloons.

Premiere amounts to an annual physical for Napa's heavyweight champion, Cabernet. It's a chance for hard-core fans to sink their purple-stained teeth into the new vintage, assess its quality and take the pulse of the market. This year's selection mostly hailed from the next superstar vintage, 2013.

It's hard not to be enthralled by these seductive beauties. Even in lesser years, infant Napa Cabs are fascinating to taste. In great years such as 2013, they are stunning. The 2013s are uniformly plush, rich and showy, capturing what Napa can do at its best. The wines offer the exuberance and power of youth, with saturated purple-blue colors and an elaborate tapestry of dark berry flavors, deep and perfumed, all supported by firm, vibrant structures.

What's striking, one must remind oneself, is that these wines are still in barrel, a year away from release. Yet for all their density and power, they are fruit-laden wines that exhibit silky, velvety tannins. They also offer a seductive new oak accent of baked brownie and mocha, a characteristic of youth that makes them sumptuous enough to relish now. Underlying it all is an uncommon measure of elegance and finesse, part of what makes Napa Cabernet a breed apart from many regions where the grape is also a prominent player.

All of the more than 50 wines I tried impressed me as much as they did the frenzied bidders. Indeed many of the bottles were showstoppers, not only during the morning walkaround tasting—where sippers outnumbered spitters—but also at the afternoon auction that followed. Overall, 225 wines were sold at the event, mostly Cabernets and Bordeaux-style blends crafted in microlots ranging in size from five to 10 or 20 cases.



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This is the first public showing of the 2013s, and they wowed the more than 700 attendees packed into the Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena. The auction set a new record, with bidding topping \$6 million, surpassing 2014's \$5.9 million and raising nearly twice the total from 2012. Proceeds are used by Napa Valley Vintners to fund its other projects, which include Auction Napa Valley and an assortment of educational programs.

It's all geared to impress those in attendance—and it does so without fail. Top bids included wines from some of the valley's older hands, such as Shafer, Silver Oak, Château Boswell and Rombauer, as well as newer names Fairchild, Pulido-Walker and Memento Mori. Almost yearly a handful of new producers makes its presence known. Pulido-Walker and Memento Mori were both on my short list of favorites, along with Bryter Estates, Frank Family, Ideology Cellars, Pahlmeyer, Lewis, Keever and Mt. Brave.

Vintners are predictably charged up about whatever vintage they're selling at the moment, but in this case, the evidence is more compelling than, say, two years ago, when the 2011s were on display. Now mostly a distant memory, 2011 was one of the most difficult harvests on the books. Although Napa, like much of California, is in the middle of a run of exceptional vintages that includes 2012 and 2014, many vintners favor the 2013s right now—and for good reason. The strength of demand for the 2013s can be seen in the average price of \$286 per bottle paid at Premiere. This number reflects not only the high quality of the vintage but also the premium nature of these limited-edition wines, few of which will ever reach the general public.

The energy and excitement evident at this event should drown out any noise one hears from time to time about overblown Napa wines or Cabernet's imminent demise. Here, among Cabernet's true believers, there was none of the speculative guesswork about Napa Cabernets being bold and charming today but not aging well for decades. As to talk of a sea change in style, with vintners moving away from the popular exuberant expression of Cabernet to a trimmer, sinewy body, it may be happening in small measures in some cellars, but it wasn't evident at Premiere.

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