

COOKING & EATING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



Savoring Napa's Most Reliable Cabernets

I DON'T GET MANY story ideas at cocktail parties. (I'm usually too busy wondering when I can leave.) But at a party a few months ago, a man asked me a question that I thought deserved not just an answer but an entire column: "What are some of the most reliable Napa Valley Cabernets?"

My questioner had tried many Napa Cabs over the years but hadn't found one that he consistently liked. They didn't taste the same from vintage to vintage, he said. One year was good, another much less so. Were there producers whose wines were consistently good? There were, I assured him. Here is my answer, in much longer form.

There are more than 400 wineries in Napa today, about three times as many as there were 20 years ago. The five wineries I've highlighted aren't the only reliable names in Napa, of course, but they have all made top wines for many years. On my trip to Napa a few weeks ago, I tasted Cabernets all the way back to 1978 and discovered, along with some truly great bottles, lots of good reasons why loyal customers buy their wines over and over again.

Araujo Estate

There were only two serious buyers for the Eisele vineyard in 1990. Bart Araujo was the one who made the seven-figure deal—to the consternation of the second man, who told Mr. Araujo it was the only decision he'd ever regretted.

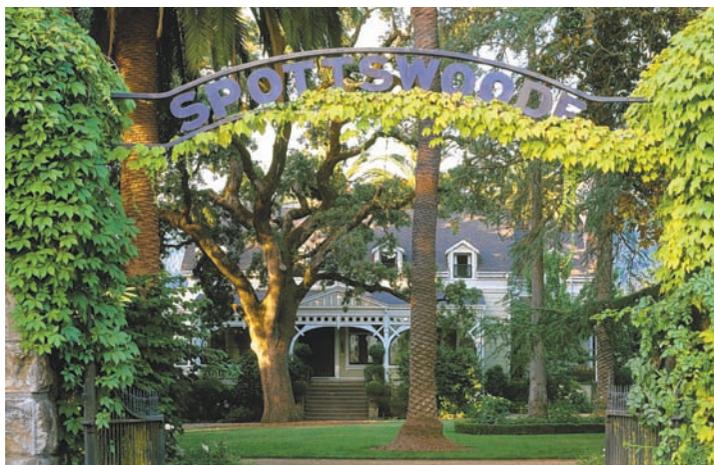
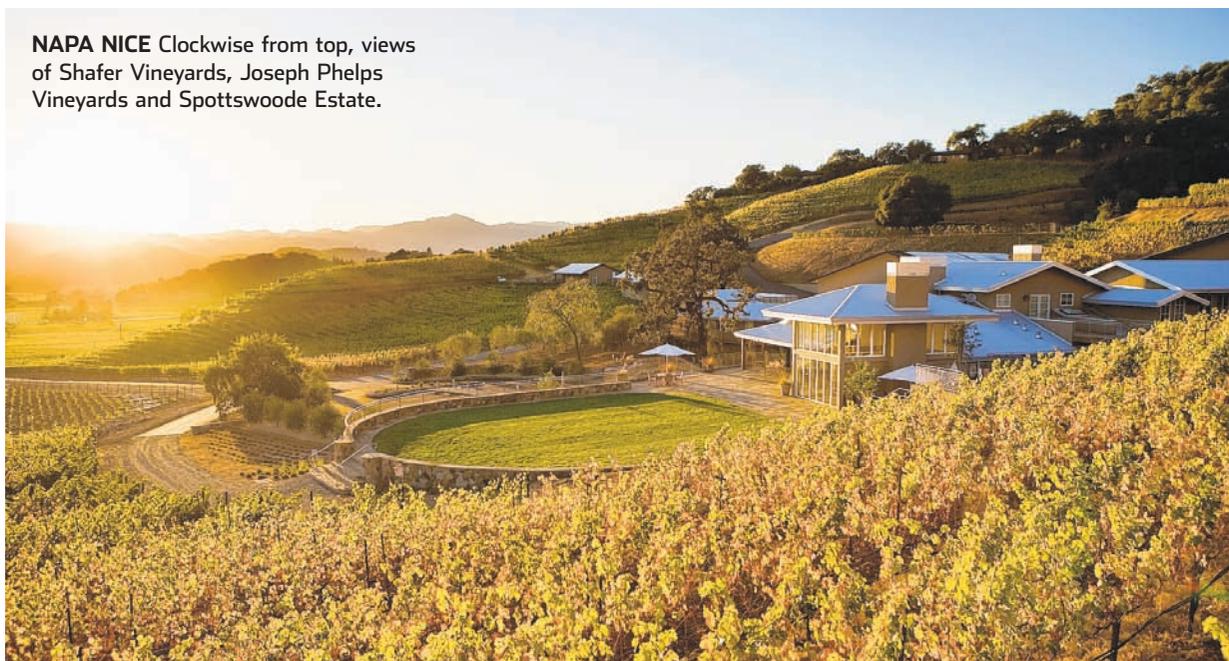
Mr. Araujo and I were sitting at a table facing eight bottles of Araujo Eisele Vineyard Cabernet when he related this story, joined by his wife, Daphne, and winemaker Françoise Peshon. Ms. Peshon has been producing the much-praised wines since 1993, although she stepped down recently and is grooming her replacement, Nigel Kinsman.

The legendary Eisele vineyard, in the northern end of Napa Valley near Calistoga, has been planted for more than 100 years, though it was entirely replanted two decades ago, as were most Napa vineyards, in part due to a phylloxera insect infestation. There have been Eisele-designated wines for more than four decades from a range of wine makers, starting with Ridge Vineyard's 1971 Eisele Cabernet, followed by the Joseph Phelps Eisele Cabernets of 1975 to 1991. But never mind all the winemaking talent, said Mr. Araujo: "The vineyard is the constant."

Our tasting began with the still-vibrant 1992 Cabernet and I found, as we tasted wines from the 1990s to 2008 (the current release), an unmistakable connective thread. The texture was rich but supple, with notes of cassis and dark berry fruit along with a savory, herbal edge. "People have described our wines as having weight without heaviness," noted Mrs. Araujo, and the characterization was apt—the wines were dense yet remarkably lithe. The greatest change was the price: The 1992 cost \$40 a bottle when it was released in 1995.

Favorite Vintage: 1997 Cabernet, \$125 on release. A lush yet elegant wine drinking beautifully now.

NAPA NICE Clockwise from top, views of Shafer Vineyards, Joseph Phelps Vineyards and Spottswoode Estate.



Clockwise from top: Russ Widstrand; Mr. J. Wickham; Thomas Heinser

Current Vintage: 2008 Cabernet, \$295. Refined, graceful and very young.

**Joseph Phelps Vineyards**

Every winemaker I visited wanted to know where else I had been. I usually gave a vague answer: "With your peers," and more often than not, they guessed Phelps, a notable Napa Cabernet producer since the early 1970s.

The Phelps Insignia, the estate's flagship red, is a Cabernet-dominant blend that has been produced since 1974 (released in 1978). In the early years, the Insignia was made from grapes sourced around the valley—it was only about 10 years ago that Phelps switched to making Insignia from their own estate fruit. I wondered if this change might be detected in the wines. The Phelps team put together a selection of Insignias that stretched from 1978 to the not-yet-released 2009 Cabernet.

The wines consistently showed the same dense fruit, supple textures and notes of black currants and spice, though the 1984 and 1987 had faded somewhat. The younger wines were still dominated by the oak (100% new French) but one wine, in particular, stood out: the 1994 Insignia—dense, rich and astonishingly youthful—a truly outstanding wine. "The 1994 Insignia was our turning point," said proprietor Bill Phelps. "It was the year that put us on the map."

Favorite Vintage: 1994 Phelps Insignia, \$70 on release. A full-bodied, generous, gorgeous wine that manages to taste remarkably youthful as well.

Current Vintage: 2008, \$200. Very concentrated and tannic—needs time.

**Philip Togni Vineyard**

My directions to Philip Togni vineyard noted that the winery was a mere 4.8 miles from downtown St. Helena. They didn't mention that the trip was straight up a hill—or rather, a mountain. Philip Togni, an English expat who has been making wine in Napa for about 50 years, clearly likes being at a remove from the rest of the Valley. His Spring Mountain Cabernets, which have an almost cultish following, are also quite different from those of his peers—fiercely tannic and concentrated and surprisingly low in alcohol (under 14%).

The Togni operation is tiny, composed of three Tognis (Mr. Togni, his wife and daughter) and the three vineyard workers I saw piling into their car. After a quick look over the Valley the three Tognis and I went into the tasting room/cellar that was half-buried, hobbit-like, under a hill.

Mr. Togni had put out bottles from the early 1980s to the present day (the 2009 vintage). Each wine, save the rather faded 1987, was dense with brambly fruit and bound together with almost ironlike tannins that clearly required years to unwind. Even the 1997,

a notably generous, accessible vintage, was a wine that would need another 10 years, according to Mr. Togni, who holds 100 or so cases back each vintage and releases them 10 years later when he thinks they are ready to drink. What wine would he drink today? "The 1991—if I could afford it," replied Mr. Togni, who hasn't raised his prices in years.

Favorite Vintage: 1991 Cabernet, \$300. A few bottles are still available at the winery. It's a beauty that's actually still maturing and finally coming around.

Current Vintage: 2009 Cabernet, \$95. Impenetrable tannins. Put it away for at least 20 years.

**Shafer Vineyards**

Elias Fernandez and Doug Shafer have a huge advantage over most winemaking teams:

They've been sharing the same memories for nearly 30 years. They don't just get along—they practically finish each other's thoughts. When Mr. Shafer would mention a year, Mr. Fernandez would respond with a descriptive snapshot. "A really pretty year—we upped the new oak for the first time, from 50% to 100%," Mr. Fernandez said of 1991.

We were sitting in Shafer's airy tasting room in the Stag's Leap district of the Valley, with four decades' worth of Shafer Hillside Cabernet on the table—starting with 1978 vintage and ending with 2007, the winery's 25th-anniversary bottling.

"We were making wine by the num-

bers in the 1980s," said Mr. Shafer, "but by the '90s we were starting to figure it out—and paying more attention to the vineyard."

The earlier wines didn't reveal a lack of winemaking talent—the 1978 Cabernet ("when we didn't have a winemaker," said Mr. Shafer) was still bright, as was the 1985. But it wasn't until the 1990s that the frame really filled out, showing the characteristic density and sweet, ripe fruit characteristic of the Hillside vineyard. The 2001 wine perhaps showed Hillside style at its best—at 11 years of age it was still youthful with lots of lush ripe fruit and fine-grain tannins.

The Shafers have "shut down" their mailing list for Hillside Estate Cabernet but the wine can be found in restaurants and retail stores. The current vintage is \$225 a bottle.

Favorite Vintage: 2001, \$175 on release.

The 2001 vintage was an easy one, said Mr. Fernandez. And this sweet, ripe Cabernet is certainly easy to like.

Current Vintage: 2007, \$225. The 25th-anniversary bottling—a super-concentrated, powerhouse Cabernet.

Spottswoode Estate

Spottswoode Estate was one of the relatively rare all-women operations in the Napa Valley, until proprietor Mary Novak and her daughter Beth Novak Milliken elevated Aron

Weinkauff from assistant to full winemaker. Rosemary Cakebread, Spottswoode's winemaker from 1997 to 2006, has remained an ongoing consultant.

Ms. Cakebread joined Ms. Novak Milliken, Mr. Weinkauff and me at 9:30 a.m. to contemplate nine vintages of Spottswoode Cabernet and discuss 30 years of winemaking, starting with 1984. "I chose the vintages that really represent our vineyard and what we're doing," Ms. Novak Milliken explained.

The two wines from the 1980s (1984 and 1987) were remarkably fresh, showing bright cherry fruit and snappy acidity. The 1997 was aromatic and lush, as was the 2001 which was beautifully balanced, perhaps the most harmonious wine of the moment. ("Eight to 10 years is the sweet spot," said Ms. Milliken Novak). And yet all of the wines showed the same elegance, bright acidity and polished fruit.

Favorite Vintage: 2001, \$90 on release.

Beautifully balanced, well-integrated tannins, vibrant fruit—all in all, pretty perfect.

Current Vintage: 2009, \$145. Trademark Spottswoode elegance and finesse. To be released this fall.

"The land ultimately trumps any individual," Ms. Cakebread said, echoing Mr. Araujo—an observation that could be a perfect coda to this column. A wine can only be consistently great if it comes from a place of "structural integrity," as Ms. Cakebread says—and if it's made by winemakers who allow that intensity to show.

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