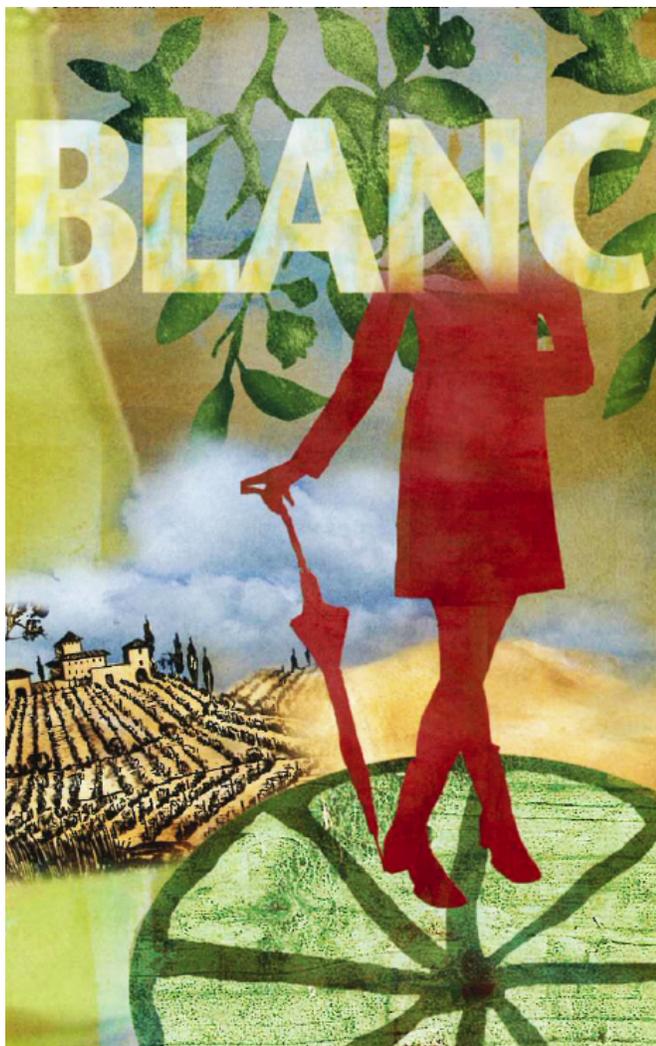


drinks

Napa's Top White

HERE'S A CLUE: IT'S NOT A CHARDONNAY.

BY KAREN MACNEIL



The other day, an East Coast friend called to ask what were the “hot” new wine regions in California. “Not Napa Valley,” he added. “Done that.”

Hmmmm, I thought. Sadly, America’s premier wine region is a little like a movie star who’s so familiar it’s almost a guarantee that nobody really knows her.

I, on the other hand, find the Napa Valley to be one of the most surprising and mysterious wine regions on earth— despite having lived there for many years.

For example, did you know that:

- Napa is one of the most geologically diverse wine regions in the world (amazingly, 6 of the 12 soil “orders” on the planet exist here).
- The valley makes just 4% of all California wine (it is, alas, a tiny place).
- The first American wine to cost more than \$100 a bottle was made here (Diamond Creek Cabernet Sauvignon “Lake Vineyard” 1987).

Okay, I admit that last item is perhaps not so surprising, but here’s one that is:

- **The best white wine made in the Napa Valley is now Sauvignon Blanc.**

For more than a decade, slowly but surely and ever so quietly, Sauvignon Blanc has crept up on Chardonnay and, in my opinion, surpassed it as *the* white wine in America’s top wine region. “**Sauvignon Blanc is beautifully suited to the Napa Valley,**” says Daphne Araujo, co-proprietor of Araujo Estate Wines. “**Compared to other white varieties, it shows off the terroir of the valley better and has a higher potential for greatness.**”

The idea that Sauvignon Blanc should reign among Napa white wine grapes is not entirely counterintuitive. The Napa Valley is, after all, well-known for its superior Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc—all Bordeaux varieties. And the leading white varieties in Bordeaux? Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, of course. Conceptually, it’s far more coherent for a winery specializing in Cabernet Sauvignon (as most Napa Valley wineries do) to also specialize in Sauvignon Blanc, rather than in Chardonnay.

It also makes sense climate-wise. It’s important to understand that

Sauvignon Blanc's status as one of the white grapes of choice in Bordeaux is not arbitrary. Like Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc needs a long, warmish growing season (think Napa) to produce exemplary grapes. Chardonnay, by contrast, is not only well-suited to cooler regions, but one could argue that the best Chardonnays are the products of very cool regions, like Burgundy and Champagne. How does it come to pass that Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon share a love of warmth? In a word: genetics. Sauvignon Blanc is Cabernet's "mother." Thanks to advances in DNA "fingerprinting" of grapevines, scientists have now established that Cabernet Sauvignon came into like water that cabbage or asparagus has been boiled in. Needless to say, Sauvignon Blanc that tastes like that is decidedly not good. In my experience, the top Napa Valley Sauvignon Blancs always sidestep any hint of vegetalness and instead lean immediately in the direction of citrus, exotic, fruity, and peppery flavors, usually with a delicate hint of herbs. That herbal tilt has a benefit when it comes to food pairing. In fact, there is probably no better all-purpose white than Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc. As every good cook knows, herbal flavors are almost always a boon to any dish. What's more, Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc generally has a discreet streak of refreshing acidity running right up the middle of its flavor. While rarely overwhelming, that acidity feels crisp and clean on your palate and is a great counterpoint to food flavors. And finally, most existence as a naturally occurring cross of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc.

Although Bordeaux may provide some of the philosophical and practical rationale for growing great Sauvignon Blanc in the Napa Valley, the truth of the matter is that Napa Sauvignon Blanc is completely different from its Bordelaise sister. To begin with, it's more generous—it has a fuller body, a fleshier mouthfeel, and a riper core of fruit—while maintaining the clean purity for which Sauvignon Blanc is esteemed. Also, Napa Sauvignon Blanc is usually all, or nearly all, Sauvignon Blanc, while in Bordeaux the flavors of Sauvignon Blanc are usually tamed by a considerable amount of Semillon. Interestingly, when another variety is blended into Napa Sauvignon Blanc, it's often the highly aromatic variety Viognier. Part of what makes the Sauvignon Blancs from Araujo and Duckhorn distinctive, for example, is that they all include Viognier.

But the comparison between Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc and Bordeaux is just one of many. How do Napa's Sauvignon Blancs stack up next to others—especially to the triumvirate of outrageously styled Sauvignons from New Zealand, South Africa, and the Loire Valley of France (Sancerre and Pouilly Fume)?

I think of it like this: If New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is an attractively irreverent 25-year-old woman with mismatched earrings, stiletto heels, and a not-so-discreet tattoo, Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc is a young Katherine Hepburn—still a lithe wild and impetuous to be sure, but with a softer, gender appeal.

That said, what all Sauvignon Blancs share (no matter where they are from) is a sense of greenness. "Green" of course, is a good thing in the world of Sauvignon Blanc flavor, but over years of tasting, I've come to see that green has important nuances. It's these nuances that help me when I'm trying to remember how Sauvignon Blanc A is different than Sauvignon Blanc B. For example, green can be fruity, like green figs or honeydew melon; citrusy, like lime; herbal, like sage or spearmint; or vegetable, like snow peas.

It's important here to distinguish between vegetable-like (a good thing) and vegetative or vegetal (not so good). The latter two terms imply a dank, stewed flavor—rather like water that cabbage or asparagus has been boiled in. Needless to say, Sauvignon Blanc that tastes like that is decidedly not good. In my experience, the top Napa Valley Sauvignon Blancs always sidestep any hint of vegetalness and instead lean immediately in the direction of citrus, exotic, fruity, and peppery flavors, usually with a delicate hint of herbs.

SIX SAUVIGNONS TO SIP

Here are half a dozen commendable Sauvignon Blancs from Napa Valley, from everyday sippers to bottles for savoring on special occasions.

BERINGER SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

This wins in the "can't-beat-it-for-the-price" category. Pretty melon and spearmint aromas. Clean, fresh, slightly limey flavors. Solid and dependable.

DUCKHORN SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

One of the nicest Sauvignons from Duckhorn in many years. Just a hint of something slightly exotic in the aroma (is that the Viognier peaking through?) followed by a spicy green fig flavor and a texture that's relatively soft for Sauvignon Blanc.

ST. SUPERY SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

I drink gallons of this wine all year long. The 2003 is one of the wildest. New Zealand-esque Sauvignon Blancs that St. Super/ has ever made. Sassy and zesty with a bold grassy note. Great with all sorts of vegetable dishes.

ARAUJO "EISELE VINEYARD" SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

If the Napa valley has a "First Growth" Sauvignon Blanc, this is it. Beautifully complex spiced pear, mineral, green fig, lemongrass, and green tea aromas and flavors. Thoroughly seamless and elegant. Extremely long finish. Pricey, but aristocratic.

CROCKER & STARR SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

Aptly described by the winemaker as "Margarita mix sans tequila." Edgy and minerally with a fabulous piercing acidity and loads of citrusy green flavors.

RUDD SAUVIGNON BLANC NAPA VALLEY 2003

Sweet green pea and spearmint aromas. Pure, fresh, and precise citrus, lemongrass, and green peppercorn flavors. Crisp, classic, and captivating.

That herbal tilt has a benefit when it comes to food pairing. In fact, there is probably no better all-purpose white than Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc. As every good cook knows, herbal flavors are almost always a boon to any dish. What's more, Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc generally has a discreet streak of refreshing acidity running right up the middle of its flavor. While rarely overwhelming, that acidity feels crisp and clean on our palate and is a great counterpoint to food flavors. And finally, most Napa Sauvignon Blancs are exposed to either no or very little oak while being made. (Some of those that are fermented in oak are fermented in barrels that remain thankfully untoasted—that is, the staves were bent by steam rather than by fire, in order to minimize overtly toasty, sweet, oaky flavors in the wine.) The lack of oaky flavors in Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc is important because such flavors make many foods taste dull and muted.

So there it is: a wine true to and reflective of its place. A wine with the potential for greatness. A wine with loads of pure, clean flavor. A wine that's dynamic but not blowsy or over-the-top. A wine that loves being married to food. What else could you want?

A decent price?

Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc has that too.